

White House Convenes Conference on Childhood

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President and Mrs. Clinton met with a dozen researchers and child experts April 17, to explore child development issues at the *White House Conference on Early Childhood Development and Learning: What the Newest Research on the Brain Tells Us About Our Youngest Children*.

Spotlighting recent research findings, especially those dealing with the period from birth to age three, the conference featured two APS Fellows among its participants. Pamela Kuhl, who discussed how children learn language, and Deborah Phillips, who addressed the effect of child care on early development.

In announcing the event, President Clinton expressed hope that the conference would make the latest scientific research more accessible and understandable to the general public. "Our goal is to take this information and explore how it can be translated into everyday actions and activities involving children," he said.

In the morning session of the conference, the Clintons, Kuhl, and Phillips were joined by experts discussing topics including prenatal services, brain growth and development, child health, and the cognitive, emotional, and social development.

The afternoon session was highlighted by discussions of model programs from across the country that are supporting parents and enhancing early childhood development.

"We're excited that so many people will be able to take part in this event," said the First Lady. "We all have a role to play in making sure parents have the tools they need to do the best job they can. We believe this conference can make a valuable contribution. "

In addition to her participation in the conference, Kuhl had been personally invited by Mrs. Clinton to join her in a *Today Show* broadcast from the White House to kick off the event.

Eager to Learn

According to Kuhl, chair of the Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences at the University of Washington, infants are born to learn. "One of the most striking characteristics of human beings is their passion for learning," she said in a paper she presented at the conference. "Signs of language learning occur in the first months while the infant is still in the crib."

Additionally, the first sign of language learning that occurs does not involve words or grammar, but the phonetic units of language- the consonants and vowels that make up words. This process, she indicated, may mirror learning at higher levels of language.

“I like to refer to infants as ‘Citizens of the world’ at birth,” she said. “Newborns are ready to acquire any of the world’s languages.”

Regardless of where on the planet a child is born, it will pass through the same timetable of language development milestones, regardless of the language they learn to speak. This infant “Citizen of the World” becomes what Kuhl refers to as a “Culture-bound Language Specialist” when he or she discovers the specific sound structure used in their particular language.

“American English doesn’t use the same set of sound contrasts as Japanese,” said Kuhl, who is vice president of the Acoustical Society of America. “Mastery of the sound system of language involves an intricate mapping of the speech infants hear. We previously thought that this mapping began with the learning of words, but recent research confirms the fact that learning begins in the first six months of life.” But while this capacity for language learning is vast in infancy, it begins to narrow as the child passes through puberty, indicating that secondary language learning would be more usefully taught at a young age, rather than at the high school/junior high age when foreign language instruction usually begins.

Additional research highlighted by Kuhl includes studies that indicate infants imitate what they see people do and say.

“Laboratory studies show that after short periods of listening to simple sounds, very young infants will begin to duplicate the sound patterns they hear,” she said. “Speaking to an infant seems to prompt them to take turns and talk back. Infants thus master the give and take of conversation very early in life.”

This emphasizes the important role parents and caregivers have in speaking out loud to infants. “Natural language input to children in normal social context causes language development, and infants like the interaction,” she said. “We should acknowledge our role in this, and the central importance of the social context, and take pleasure in the fact that we are causing our children’s brains to change and their minds to develop.”

Who’s Watching the Kids?

According to research funded by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 80 percent of US infants experience some regular non-maternal child care by the time they reach 12 months, and most of these children experience child care by their fourth month. Recent developments in society, including the growing presence of women in the work force, limited availability of family leave, and welfare reform, indicate that many more children- including infants-spend much of their preschool life in child care settings.

Deborah Phillips, a psychologist at the Institute of Medicine, addressed some of the issues associated with early development and child care. While research on child care has affirmed that placing a baby in child care does not interfere with the mother-infant attachment relationship, she said, the quality of that child care—especially in infant care—can affect the early development of that child.

“The quality of the child care environment significantly affects the cognitive, linguistic, and social development of young children,” she said in her conference statement. “We’ve known this for a while

with respect to 3- and 4-year-olds; now we know it about infant and toddler child care.... Young children, including babies, thrive in child care when it is of good enough quality.”

That quality, she said, depends on the caregiver; “Children show significantly better cognitive, language, and social development ... when they are cared for by adults who engage with them in frequent, affectionate, responsive interactions—who are attentive, know how to read the baby’s signals and respond appropriately.”

Touching on what Kuhl said, Phillips noted that “language stimulation appears to be an especially critical aspect of these caregiver-child interactions It may be especially true for infants and toddlers who are so utterly dependent on their adult caregivers to meet their needs.”

In describing the importance of quality in child care and in achieving this quality, Phillips stressed the importance of small adult-to-child ratios in child care situations; training and education of care givers; and the stability of care givers in terms of staff turnover. “Wages predict turnover—it’s that simple yet we pay child care workers among the lowest wages of any workers in this country,” she said.

“Employers, government, and parents themselves all share a responsibility for meeting the needs of America’s children for high-quality child care,” said Phillips. “Parents need real choices, starting with the choice about when to start using child care— a matter of family leave policy. Parents also must be able to avail themselves of high-quality child care. This requires that parents know what to look for, how to look for it, know what questions to ask, have the time to look for it, and then, equipped with all of this, have real options of high-quality, affordable arrangements to choose among.”