

## Simple Truth By Sherry Cleary

Every day in the life of a young child matters. Every kindness makes a difference. Every meaningful experience contributes to a foundation of security and every strong relationship builds the capacity for future relationships. But for many children in this country and in this state kindness, meaningful experience, and strong supportive relationships are scarce. And while children living in poverty are at greater risk, all children deserve the best.

There's an irony to all of this. Quite some time ago I was at a convention and the keynote speaker, whose name and identity have long since escaped my memory, pointed out to the middle-aged audience that it would take two children starting kindergarten that very autumn to pay the costs of each of our social security coverages once we retired. She further pointed out that IF we knew those two children, even if we just knew their names, we would see to it that they had not just adequate food, shelter, and protection, but we would see to it that they had everything they could possibly need including a world class education. But then she pointed out the obvious- that we didn't know their names... so we would just go about our daily lives, completely un-invested in their futures. It was a stunning statement of our culture in these United States.

And it was a pitiful commentary on our political will. How immediate does the reward have to be to motivate one to do the right thing? How personal does the issue have to be before a society takes a tangible action? And what are the criteria for societal decision making?

Not too long ago I was visiting a legislator. In anticipation of the message we were about to deliver, requesting his support for legislation that would serve children well, he stated that everyone who visited him wanted something and then he asked whether we wanted him to fund kids or bridges. It was a staggering question. The only correct answer is – **both**; but a better answer points to the fact that the questions are always difficult when one is an adult. Because when one becomes an adult (s)he realizes that there is always more than one correct choice. And adults are entrusted, by nature, to act in the best interest of children as well as the rest of the society. This public will works for many other things. Child advocates often point to the number of new sports stadiums that have been built or the costs of military forces in the country. And while its true that public and political will were at play in these and other cases, does it have to be an *either or* proposition?

The best answer is that a society needs many things to work in order for its people to thrive. We don't choose one over the other. The charge is to provide for all of the needs of a society – but all too often the needs of children fall to the side. The attitude displayed in this legislator's office was problematic and inherent in why we've not made the progress children so desperately need.

You can be part of the solution, or part of the problem. It's really as simple as that, even in a world where very little is easy. Young children need excellence at every juncture, at every turn. And each adult needs to contribute to a culture where the welfare of children is not sacrificed at the first inconvenience. There can be no compromise in the allocation of resources, policies, and practice where children are concerned.

In order for children to thrive, they need adults who care deeply for them; they need to be safe and healthy; they need experiences that are rich and stimulating and tailored to their abilities and interests. They need secure loving families (in all the varied ways that family is defined), great schools with a well-trained and dedicated workforce, and communities that are committed to them. Children need relationships and challenges that are commensurate with their developmental needs. In past generations, families lived near their extended families and drew upon their experiences, their generosity, their support, and their unconditional love to raise their children. The phrase, *it takes a village to raise a child* has long been affirmed by sociological studies. But now, more than ever, the extended family is a thing of the past. Many grandparents work longer and retire later. In many cases, young parents move away from their hometowns to pursue careers in other places. The globalization of our economy and thus, culture, has all but insured the extended family as extinct. When families have access to excellent early childhood settings those settings have been shown to function as extended families, providing support and guidance to young parents, and the kind of "second generation" nurturing that resembles the love and attention children once got from family and their closest neighbors.

Professionals in well-run early childhood programs support families and demonstrate high expectations of the children that attend. The teachers provide respectful environments where the development of each child is assessed and curriculum is structured to capitalize on the strengths and gains the children are most ready for. Well-prepared professionals know how to work with children as young as 6 weeks to provide the nurturance, stimulation, and responsiveness that maximizes development of the brain, the body and the social-emotional domain. As children age, the teacher makes insightful assessments of each child and designs environments and activities that scaffold the learning. The child's natural inclination to inquire, analyze, process and engage in the scientific process is affirmed and (s)he develops a lifelong sense of himself/herself as a learner. Children who are enrolled in programs of excellence are reinforced in their natural tendencies to persevere and solve problems.

A society that has its youngest citizens as its top priority is richly rewarded. Research has shown time and again that the investments made in young children are returned exponentially, evidenced by less crime, less remediation, higher graduation rates, increased earning capacity (and therefore a higher tax base), and a more motivated and productive workforce, to name a few. And, of course, there's our social security... But really, isn't the privilege of knowing we are doing the right thing by insuring excellence for our children enough – I think it's a simple truth.

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