

**Jennifer Garner, Artist Ambassador, Save the Children's U.S. Programs
Testimony, Senate Subcommittee on Children and Families
November 18, 2010**

Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the Subcommittee, I am honored to be here today to testify about the power of investing in early childhood education.

I am proud to be a member of the team at Save the Children's U.S. Programs and I want to acknowledge my partner in all this work, Mark Shriver, who is the head of U.S. Programs.

If you have children under six like I do, reading them *Baby Bear, Baby Bear, What Do You See?*, listening to Mozart or playing Candyland is probably as elemental to your daily child-rearing routine as feeding them carrots or changing their diapers.

However, for millions of American parents struggling with the recession or affected by the poverty crisis that the Census Bureau recently revealed to be at historic levels, these kinds of activities are often financially impossible or they simply take a backseat to keeping a family fed and clothed.

Denying children early education activities robs them and their families a brighter future and locks the American cycle of poverty into place.

Indeed, stimulating toddlers with reading, music and games provides them with the foundation for the next two decades of their education.

Ninety percent of our brain growth occurs between birth and five years of age. Thus, the words a toddler hears, the music that makes them tap their feet and the games they play actually nourishes and builds their minds.

Feed toddlers properly and their brains will be pumped up and ready for their K-12 education. Deprive them of this stimulation, and they're not ready for school, which is proven to lead to increased high school dropout rates, higher levels of incarceration and unemployment.

Some very smart and visionary leaders, including Mark's father, Sargent Shriver, understood the value of early childhood education and created Head Start in 1965, which was followed up three decades later with Early Head Start.

Still, Early Head Start reaches only five percent of eligible children, and only about half of the eligible population of three-to-five year olds receive Head Start services. Even paired with private preschools, only three out of five preschool-aged kids are enrolled in some sort of childhood education.

That means two out of five pre-school aged Americans are being denied a lifetime of success.

That's two out of five too many.

This should come as no surprise, as just 14 percent of our public education investment is directed toward children five and under.

Simply put, it should be a right for every single toddler to be enrolled in a high-quality, early-education program. In addition, every parent should be armed with the tools they need -- books, music and games -- to be the best parents they can be and keep their children stimulated at home.

There is action being urged right now by Save the Children's U.S. Programs and our partners at the First Five Years Fund that can begin to make a difference.

First, I hope Congress will act immediately in this November session to fully fund the Child Care and Development Block Grant and Head Start in the Fiscal Year 2011 budget.

If we don't take this action now, nearly 300,000 children could lose their early learning services.

We also need to make a down payment on the Early Learning Challenge Fund, an \$8 billion proposal to promote innovative models for early childhood education, by providing the \$300 million the Senate Appropriations included in next year's spending bill.

These funds will go a long way to supporting innovative programs like the ones we run at Save the Children's U.S. Programs.

Our Early Steps to School Success early childhood education program operates in almost 100 of the poorest communities in America, including my native home of West Virginia.

Through these programs, we go into homes and work directly with parents and have achieved extraordinary results. Paired with our in-school literacy program for elementary aged kids, we are putting some of the most vulnerable kids on a path to success.

In fact, I am proud this morning to announce brand-new results from our programs.

- Children in our literacy program improved their reading skills as much as if they attended an additional four months of school.
- The number of children reading at or above grade level nearly doubled after they participated in our program.

- 64 percent of children showed significant improvement in their literacy scores.
- Children in our early education program scored right in line with the national average on key vocabulary tests, despite risk factors, and scored significantly higher than children in Early Head Start.

These numbers are particularly impressive given the extraordinary challenges faced by the kids in our programs. Far too many of them come from homes where unemployment, poverty and even parents who are incarcerated are prevalent.

The Brookings Institute estimates that a deep and truly serious investment in early childhood education would add \$2 trillion to the Gross Domestic Product within a generation. This would be an incredible return on investment that would, in the future, help solve many of the problems our nation is struggling with today.

There is a decades old and very robust debate about the role of government in helping families living in poverty. But three year olds don't even have bootstraps to pull on.

Now is the time to give every American child an equal start in life.

Thank you for inviting me here today and I am very pleased to answer any questions that members of the Subcommittee may have.