

Edward Zigler, Ph.D.
Senate Testimony
February 12, 2002

It is an honor to be invited back to the Senate, and to share my expertise with this committee. I am the Sterling Professor of Psychology at Yale University. I also head the Psychology Section of the Yale Child Study Center and direct the Bush Center in Child Development and Social Policy. I have authored some 30 books and over 600 scholarly papers, the majority dealing with topics pertinent to children's development and learning. In the area of social policy, I have worked with every administration, both Republican and Democrat, since Lyndon Johnson. I served in Washington during the Nixon Administration as the first director of what is now the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, and as Chief of the United States Children's Bureau. I was one of the planners of our nation's Head Start program and a recent spin off, Early Head Start. Over the program's 36 years, I have become known as both its best friend and its most vocal critic.

Of late there have been criticisms that Head Start is not doing a very good job teaching literacy to its young students. I will offer my suggestions on that point in a moment. First, let me state that I concur that the ability to read is absolutely essential for an individual to have a successful life. I therefore applaud President and Mrs. Bush for the impetus they have provided to assure that every child in America will be a successful reader. However, as someone who has studied the growth and development of children for some 45 years, it is my responsibility to point out that reading is just one aspect of cognitive development, and that cognitive development is just one aspect of human development. Cognitive skills are of course very important, but they are so intertwined with the physical, social, and emotional systems that it is myopic, if not futile, to dwell on the intellect and exclude its partners.

Think about what goes into literacy. Yes, it involves mastery of the alphabet, phonemes, and other basic word skills. But a prerequisite to achieving mastery is good physical health. The child who is frequently absent from school because of illness, or who has vision or hearing problems, will have a difficult time learning to read. So will children who suffer emotional troubles such as depression, attention deficits, or post traumatic stress disorder. And think about motivation. A child's curiosity and belief that he or she can succeed are just as important to reading as knowing the alphabet. Phonemic instruction by the most qualified teacher will do little for a child who suffers from hunger, abuse, or a sense of inferiority.

I am urging that we broaden our approach to literacy by focusing on the whole child. We must also broaden our understanding of when and where literacy begins. I've heard a lot of preschool-teacher bashing lately, but in reality, literacy begins much earlier than age four. It begins with the thousands of loving interactions with parents after an infant is born. It begins as a child develops a sense of self-worth by realizing that his or her accomplishments, whether they be learning to roll over or to recite the alphabet, are important to significant others. It begins with sitting in a safe lap, hearing a familiar bedtime story. Eventually the child will want to emulate the parent and read too. Reading, then, begins with meeting the child's physical, social, and emotional needs, followed by exposure to more formal literacy skills.

This broader view was recently endorsed in the wonderful new book, [From Neurons to](#)

Neighborhoods, where the finest child development thinkers in the country pointed out the importance of emotional and motivational factors in human development. This statement corrected a short-coming of my field for the past 50 years – namely an emphasis on cognitive development to the exclusion of personality and motives, which are so central to the burgeoning new discipline of emotional intelligence. The President is correct in his recent championing of the child’s character. Piece by piece, then, the President is discovering the whole child – recognition that has been one of the great strengths of our nation’s Head Start program.

Head Start is an early education program, but it is also a physical and mental health program. It is dedicated to involving the parents, who, after all, will have a greater influence on the child’s learning than any other source. The new Early Head Start program in fact emphasizes parent-child interactions, the very place where literacy begins. Senator Kennedy realized the importance of the years zero to three some time ago and was the one who made Early Head Start a reality. Since then, it has grown from 17 sites to over 600.

You have all heard recent reports that children are graduating from Head Start with few prereading skills. Yet a sizeable literature shows that they are ready for school, and even the recent FACES evaluation of Head Start shows good progress, including literacy, in kindergarten. Do I believe that Head Start should do more to promote literacy? Most definitely. The new performance standards are moving the program toward more defined curricula with specific goals for literacy and related skills. But Head Start needs the resources to carry out these plans. If we want well-trained teachers who can implement sound educational programs that send children on their way to reading, we simply have to pay them more than poverty level wages. And if we want to draw more low-income parents into their children’s learning, we need to expand Early Head Start.

Shoring up the quality of Head Start can have an impact far beyond its target population. Head Start is a model program whose success in promoting school readiness has fed the movement toward universal preschool. Head Start quality standards are beginning to filter to child care settings. A lot of research has shown that most child care in this nation is poor to mediocre. Yet millions of infants and toddlers – the very ages when literacy begins – are spending their days in such places.

In sum, if we want a nation of readers, we have to look beyond teaching phonics. We have to look at the whole child, the parents, and at all of the people and experiences that make up the child’s early learning environment.