

**David Lawrence**  
**Keynote Address for the**  
**Strengthening Families Training Institute**  
**Boise, Idaho**  
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Ladies and gentlemen, believe me: It is good to be here.

Just five days ago, I was serving on a three-member investigative panel, appointed by the state secretary of Florida's Department of Children and Families, to look into an absolutely horrific case involving an 11-year-old little girl named Nubia Docter, starved, doused with chemicals and murdered. We issued our report and our recommendations, and I can only ask that something good come from this tragedy. It just makes me weep. So, too, do I weep for 8-year-old Robert Manwill of Boise and the little Crossley twins of Coeur d'Alene.

So it is especially good to be with you, even on a day 20 degrees colder than it is in Miami.

I arrive here a deep admirer of the work of Prevent Child Abuse America and the work you do in Idaho. Your mission is my mission.

Yes, I know times are tough here, just as they are in Florida. I read of tearful testimony in your Legislature about cuts to Medicaid and public education. Like you, I do not surrender. Never will. We know what children – all children – need, and we are obliged to do everything we can (each of us/all of us) to give them the best possible chance to be successful in school and in life.

**I do not come here to preach...and certainly won't tell you that where I live is doing better than you are by children; indeed, we have bigger challenges most days than you do. I realize full well you know way more than I about the 25,000 babies born in Idaho each year. I also know that whatever our differences, we are in this together, with quite similar challenges. They are, in fact, "American" challenges.**

**For anyone who might think, "This is about those children, not my children," I would respond: How very foolish. How very wrong. How immoral in God's world. Ours is an increasingly connected world. If we want – and want for our children and grandchildren – a community and country full of optimistic, contributing people, we cannot hide from those who will grow up to do us, and themselves, great harm. Believing in all children, we help all of us. If we want the brightest future for communities and country, then we must be mindful of how everyone is doing. If we want safe and secure neighborhoods, if we want less crime, if we want more people to grow up to own homes and cars, and more people to pay the basic costs of societal well-being, then we should know of the quite extraordinary evidence of the power of early investment and the power to grow children who dream and have a real chance to achieve those dreams. The French author Victor Hugo told us way back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: "He who opens a school door...closes a prison."**

**What you want for children, I want for children. The principles that raise children – that is, the right blend of health and education and nurturing and love – are no different in Boise and Idaho than they are in Miami and Florida. Yes, we are surely different places. I live in a county – Miami-Dade County – with almost a million more people than the total of everyone who lives in all 44 counties in the whole state of Idaho. The makeup of our population is – and this won't surprise you – a good bit different from the "Gem State." I look up Idaho, and I find a state comprised of about a million and a half people – 85 percent non-Hispanic white, maybe 11 percent Hispanic, perhaps 2 percent Native American and a sprinkling of other origins. Only about 5 percent of Idahoans were born in another country. Now I turn to Miami-Dade, almost 2.5 million people – 60 percent Hispanic (about**

half of that Cuban), 22 percent African American or black (not necessarily the same in a community of tens of thousands of people from Haiti and other Caribbean populations), and 18 percent non-Hispanic white. And if you wonder what the trend lines are in the place where I live, only 15 percent of the 34,000 babies born each year are non-Hispanic white. Meanwhile, 52 percent of the people in Miami-Dade were born in another country; it's the highest percentage of any urban area in the nation. The heart of my message this morning is this: We in Miami face challenges of culture and race and language, yet we have found a way to come together on behalf of children – all children.

You have before you an optimistic sort, a glass-half-full sort of guy, someone who believes that life is short, that we are given by God the privilege to serve. You have before you someone who is not saving up my energy to use in the next world. How could I when there is so much for each of us, for all of us, to do?

It is in that spirit that I recall the words, going back three-quarters of a century now, of the playwright and social reformer George Bernard Shaw, who reminded us of “the true joy in life: Being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one, and being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I am of the opinion,” he wrote, “that my life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live, it is a privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die,” he said, “for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no ‘brief candle’ for me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it to future generations.”

But do I get down sometimes? Yes. Too often, especially in these toughest economic times of my lifetime, I see gathering the dark clouds of pain and hatefulness that sometimes threaten to smother us all. We saw such horrifically in Tucson. We see it nightly on TV talk shows where people earn big money by eviscerating other people.

**I worry these days about both community and country. Worry about the deficits we are piling up, built from the ethos of unchecked greed and got-to-have-it-now mentality. Worry about the loss of self-discipline and the rise of anything-goes-permissiveness. Worry about the uncivil nature – and frequently hateful words – of public discourse, aided and abetted by the lousiest economy most of us have ever seen. Worry about the diminishing appetite for good journalism, and how many people – especially young people – simply are so little informed about public life and public policy. I believe so strongly that only an informed citizenry can keep this republic.**

**I worry about education in every way you might define “education.” The future of Idaho and Florida – indeed, our country’s future -- clearly will depend on growing more and better educated people. To underscore this, I quote a report, issued just 15 months ago by a group of senior retired generals and admirals. “75 percent of young people ages 17 to 24 are unable to enlist in the military because they fail to graduate high school, have a criminal record, or are physically unfit.” How alarming. Three of every four. Is this not a national security issue?**

**Look at the reality closer to home. Look at Idaho, for example: Almost one in five children living below the federal poverty level...more than 50,000 children without health insurance...almost one in four Idaho children not graduating from high school...the 30 percent of children entering school who are really not ready for school...the one in seven children in fourth grade who cannot read at minimally proficient levels...the 15,000 reported instances of child abuse and neglect. (Just imagine what is not reported.)**

**It brings to mind what the famous doctor Karl Menninger said more than a half-century: “What we do to children, they will do to society.”**

**How could all this be in a state that is truly a “gem”? This beautiful place of swift-running waters, snow-bedecked mountains and deep canyons. Blessed by weather milder than most Americans would imagine. A place that goes back in human times almost 15,000 years, but a state only these past 120 years. A state of food and farms, technology and tourism, wheat and wood. A state that can produce**

the likes of Pappy Boyington, William E. Borah, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Frank Church, Philo Farnsworth, Ernest Hemingway, Chief Joseph, Barbara Morgan, Sacajawea and Lana Turner is at least a mighty interesting place. Idaho has endured its full share of challenges, but embodies the wisdom to learn from the past and focus on the future.

I am before you this morning making the case for a “movement” to embrace all children and everyone’s child. The same principles of health and education and nurturing that have raised our five children, and now our grandchildren, are the same principles that every child needs. A “movement” is about everyone’s child – never “those” children, always “our” children. The Civil Rights Movement ultimately was not about a segment of our population, but rather about an American sense of decency and fairness and opportunity for all. Similarly the Women’s Movement was ultimately about all of us.

Our work in building a “movement” for the early childhood years begins with a moral imperative because we are all God’s children. But we must turn quickly to the practical: We know from science that 90 percent of brain development occurs during the first five years of life. Ninety percent. We also know that the early childhood years can set the tone and path for all of one’s life. (One quick piece of national research: If a hundred children leave first grade not really knowing how to read, by the end of fourth grade 88 of those 100 still are poor readers or cannot really read at all.) Surely that is a wakeup call for the imperative of high-quality early investment.

We live in a nation where 90 percent of children go to public school, and that percentage is even higher in Idaho. The teachers in Idaho’s 347 public elementary schools know, I promise you, that a great chunk of entering students are really not ready to learn; these teachers see so frequently the tragedy of the first-grade student who already feels like a failure. Just think of the difference it would make to children entering formal school, and to their teachers, to have children really ready to learn. The early years are that important – in some ways the most vital growing years of a child’s life.

**Listen to just these two sentences from an important book called “Disrupting Class” by Harvard professor Clayton Christensen: “A rather stunning body of research is emerging that suggests that starting...reforms at kindergarten, let alone in elementary, middle or high school, is far too late. By some estimates, 98 percent of education spending occurs after the basic intellectual capacities of children have been mostly determined.”**

**Now listen to these words from the book, “The Scientist in the Crib: Minds, Brains and How Children Learn”:** “What we see in the crib is the greatest mind that has ever existed, the most powerful learning machine in the universe. The tiny fingers and mouth are exploration devices that probe the alien world around them with more precision than any Mars Rover. The crumpled ears take a buzz of incomprehensible noise and flawlessly turn it into meaningful language. The wide eyes that sometimes seem to peer into your very soul actually do just that, deciphering your deepest feelings. The downy head surrounds a brain that is forming millions of new connections every day.”

But let us back up a bit. Why, pray tell, is a “reformed” journalist speaking with you this morning? What do I bring to this table?

**First, the journalism part of this. I loved newspapering so much, as reporter-editor-publisher, that I missed not one day of work in 35 years at seven newspapers. On call 24 hours a day. Yes, I did have vacations and days off, but when I was supposed to be there, I always was. I led a life where I came to know an extraordinary number of people – really good people (some known, some mostly unknown) to rogues and rebels and even despots. Interviewed Fidel Castro for 5 ½ hours...talked with Pope John Paul II about Miami and Cuba...interviewed the President of these United States on Air Force One...rode through the barrios of Lima, Peru with President Fujimori driving...ate dinner with the Queen of England...and had a chance every single day to make a difference in my community and country.**

**Fifteen years ago, when I was still publisher of The Miami Herald, an especially good man, Lawton Chiles, then the governor of Florida, asked me to take a two-year civic assignment as a member of his Commission on Education. There were six task forces, and somehow I was hornswoggled into chairing the one on “school readiness.” I**

had never thought about this subject before (though I do believe my five children were raised according to what I came to understand as the principles of high-quality early development, care and education – that is, the right blend of health and education and nurturing and love). What I learned so energized me that I decided to retire at the age of 56 and devote the rest of my life to this cause. And so I have.

Now, if you came to know me, you would know that I have my full measure of insecurity – always nervous about what I might not be able to do – accompanied by a willingness to think I just might be able to do some things. In the words of the late baseball philosopher Dizzy Dean, “Braggin’ ain’t braggin’ if it’s true,” and it is in that spirit that I want to share with you some sense of what we have been able to accomplish in Miami and Florida:

- No. 1: Led the drive to pass a constitutional amendment so that every 4 year old in Florida can attend prekindergarten for free. Today 160,000 children are in that program.
- No. 2: Passed a dedicated funding source for children – an extra \$109 million invested this year alone in early intervention and prevention. Just imagine this: The people of one American county, my own, agreed to raise their property taxes to give children a better start in life and in school. That means millions invested in higher-quality child care, higher-quality after-school care, and health teams in 130 public schools. Now you might say to me, “Of course, people would vote for this. They love children.” And I would respond, “Yes, people do love children, but that’s not why this happened.” Indeed, the first time this was tried was back in 1988 when then State Attorney Janet Reno and others led a campaign to help children. A central focus of their pitch was helping at-risk children in the most disadvantaged areas of the community. Yet it failed, 2-1. Fourteen years later I led a campaign that acknowledged some children and families clearly need more help, and ought to get that help...but I argued that this was about all children. In 2002 we raised the money, had a political strategist, and we passed it overwhelmingly. Here in Ada County, you folks passed a levy to protect land for recreation in the foothills surrounding this city. If you could do that, couldn’t you contemplate a campaign that would raise the dollars to protect children? (Tomorrow, you will have the

**opportunity to imagine and construct a community that nurtures and prepares children – cradle to college. Is there not the wherewithal here to figure out how to invest in that?)**

■ **No. 3: Started in Miami-Dade with 17 accredited – meaning some evidence of brain-stimulating – child care sites, and now have more than 400. We also have a quality-rating system underway in more than 600 early care and education centers. In Idaho you are embracing quality child care with a QRIS that incorporates an impressive strengthening-families component where child care professionals partner with parents to prevent child abuse and to build stronger families.**

■ **No. 4: Offer a job-embedded master’s program, using a combination of online teacher and University of Florida on-site professors, in dozens of elementary schools.**

**I could tell you more, but that is not the point of this morning’s gathering. What I want to do is what I promised to do – that is, tell you about building a “movement” – to be specific, The Children’s Movement of Florida.**

**For these past 26 months I have worked, with many others, to create The Children’s Movement of Florida. This past September we rallied support from one corner of Florida to the other – from Pensacola all the way to Key West -- and 15,000 Floridians showed up. We now communicate regularly with more than 160,000 Floridians We received enormous coverage in Florida, plus a major piece on CNN. The Tallahassee Democrat called this “unquestionably a first for Florida, bringing children’s issues to the forefront of political discussion.”**

**Tens of thousands of Floridians have seen this video – and now you will, too. It’s just four minutes and 15 seconds:**

## **SHOW VIDEO**

**We preceded the launch with 19 months of work and statewide polling so we could know for sure what children’s issues the people of Florida would most support. Those polling results, blended with advice from experts and community leaders on the needs of children, led us to a first focus on five issues: Health insurance for all children, screening and treatment for children who may have special needs**

such as autism or cerebral palsy, fixing the quality of Florida's pre-K program, and high-quality best-practice parenting and mentoring skills. (Nothing is more important, I note, than a caring, knowledgeable parent.) Thus far, I have met with the governor, the Senate President, the House Speaker and a full range of legislative leadership. Our aim is not a one-year legislative wonder, but rather it is about building something enduring, long-term and sustainable – and the power to insist on a real change in priorities. Our bipartisan steering committee is comprised of 27 distinguished Floridians. The Tampa Tribune called it “a cause both conservatives and liberals should rally behind.”

Our aim is to make our state's children the No. 1 priority for decision-makers in Florida. The needs and the futures of children deserve to be at the front of the line when lawmakers and others make decision; that is not the way it is now. For one example, could it possibly make sense that we cannot get even \$3,000 for a slot in the state's prekindergarten program in which 160,000 4 year olds attend...yet we pay upwards of \$51,000 to incarcerate a juvenile? My state's ultimately irrational policies often inflict real harm on children. The way our government spends the people's money literally threatens the economic future of our state. Keep doing things the way we do, and we will have a state simply unable to compete in a 21<sup>st</sup> century global economy. And I will bet that you could sometimes say the same for Idaho.

In a state of wisdom, children would be our state's, and yours, highest priority – higher than roads, higher than prisons, higher than anything.

We have ample research to tell us that a dollar invested wisely in high-quality early childhood programs can save at least seven dollars down the road -- money we won't later need to spend on police and prisons and prosecution...and all sorts of educational remediation. Why, then, would we possibly settle for anything less than affordable, high-quality basics for all children in their earliest learning years (the same quality basics you would want for your children and your grandchildren)? Why would we not want this for all children? This is a thought neither "radical" or "socialist." Indeed, it is a most “American” thought. It is, in fact, the “the American dream.”

**You have before you an old-fashioned American, remembering what I learned in eighth grade civics about our country's promise and commitment to equity. Our lifelong challenge is to live up to that.**

**The lessons of history are laced through with struggle. Pain always accompanies progress. It is how America achieved democracy itself. And suffrage. And moved toward racial and gender equity. And "invented" public schools. And arrived at Social Security, and Medicare. All had enemies. Ultimately, most Americans came to accept these as fundamental for everyone. Are we not a good enough people to make sure every child has the quality basics?**

**If I have seemed a tad evangelical today, it is because I am. We do toil at the side of the angels, even if we are not ourselves angelic. We are people with the passion to do good. Sometimes we might feel pleased with progress, but none of us should ever be satisfied that we have done enough. We can rest when we enter the next world.**

**None of us will "save" this world. But we can surely "save" many people. Then those you help, upon succeeding themselves, have the opportunity to contribute to better lives in that next generation, and the generations to come.**

**The wisdom of the sages and the ages is with us. I quote Proverbs, verse 22, chapter 6, where we learn: "Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it."**

**Let us not fail the children. May God bless all of us and everyone's child.**

**Thank you.**