

**2011 Leadership Institute:
Dr. T. Berry Brazelton**

[Applause]

Dr. T. Berry Brazelton: Over 40 years ago, I worked with Ed Zigler and Julius Fritzman to develop a program for underserved children. We knew that public schools were failing them. We understood the importance of starting before kindergarten to give these children a head start. We knew that if we started earlier and addressed the overwhelming issues that they faced, they would be better prepared for school. Since then, studies have proven that in less than two short years, Head Start can significantly improve children's readiness for school. [Applause]

By the 1990s, we were able to use these successes and the science of early brain development to push Congress to fund an earlier start: Early Head Start. [Applause] And you who've been working with Head Start and Early Head Start programs must be so proud of these enormously successful programs. Yet, I see several big challenges ahead. The first challenge is to expand Early Head Start so that all families who are eligible for Head Start can get the earliest possible start. [Applause] The second challenge is how Head Start can help K through 12 schools, communities, and families do everything they can to further their children's progress after Head Start ends. [Applause]

You all know that some families are not involved in your programs, and some struggle to be involved with their children's learning. Often, their children do not make as much progress as those whose parents are deeply engaged in their lives. That's why Head Start leaders decided to offer more help to programs to reach out for parents. Children model and learn from parents on their -- as their most important and lifelong teachers.

When parents feel confident, they can fulfill this role; their children will have the motivation and self-esteem they'll need to succeed. When parents feel that they are part of their children's Head Start program, their children will be more available for learning there. We need to prepare parents to become strong leaders and advocate for their children's health, development, education, and to bring these skills to their children's public schools and to every agency in their communities. [Applause]

One of the goals I think is the most important is to be -- empower all parents to feel so competent and so sure of themselves that they will demand high-quality schools for their children, just like middle-class parents do. [Applause] And instead of having their children fail after the third grade, they'll go on to succeed and go right on to college. [Applause] With this new assurance, parents will insist on direct access to information they need in order to know when their children are learning and when they're not. With parents like these, children will develop their own sense of competence and the resilience they'll need. The dream is to bring every Head Start family the strategies that the 25,000 families I've worked with have taught me how to engage and empower.

First, program staff can use children's behavior as their most powerful language for engaging parents. Head Start can describe a child's meaningful behaviors without judging them; then they can ask parents what meaning they have for these behaviors. This way, parents will realize that program staff know that parents are the experts on their children. It's a powerful way of setting the stage for caring, lasting relationships between program staff and parents. [Applause] And it is in this relationship that we'll be able to share our excitement about a child's progress and our concerns about a child's delays or setbacks. It is in this relationship that we can make decisions together with parents based on the information that we now share about them.

In our work at the -- at the Children's Hospital in Boston, we start right from the first, with the newborn's behavior as our language to make our relationship with parents. For instance, if you hold a newborn baby up like this, with his head here and his bottom here so he's looking up at the sky, then start talking to him -- "Hi, how are you doing?" -- at that point, the baby stops moving, his face gets like this, and he turns to your voice and he leans towards you. And it's so exciting that now I've put a mother over here and I'm over here, and we both talk. And any baby worth its salt will turn to the mother's voice. And at that point, she grabs her baby and says, "You know me already," like it was a miracle. [Applause]

And if I can get macho types like you or you or you or you to stand up over here and we both talk, 80 percent of babies choose their father's voice instead of mine. [Applause] And the other 20 percent, I tip their heads. [Laughter] And at that point, every father grabs his baby and says, "You know me already," like it was a miracle. [Applause]

So... If we really want to capture fathers, we know how to do it. This relationship is also critical to stressed and isolated families. They will be better able to be the kind of parents they want to be when they can unload their burdens with us and when our relationship with them helps them know they're not alone.

I want to give you an example of how I use this behavior to -- to start up a relationship with a parent. Let me describe what I did with a mother who came into my office the other day with her nine-month-old baby, right at the peak of stranger anxiety. All of you know about stranger anxiety and how a baby worries about any new stranger that comes in. And so, this mother with her nine-month-old baby walked in like this -- because I've become so visible, mothers either love me or hate me, and I can't tell which. And as she walked in like this, I said, "Isn't she lucky to have you to cling to? Look at her hands; she's clinging to your chest. She's got her legs wrapped around you. And when I talk about her, you look down at her. Aren't you having a great time?"

And at that point, this -- she began to relax, and so the baby began to relax. And the baby looked up at me and went, "Pfft." [Laughter] And I thought, "Wow, this is it!" And so, then I did something that I hope all of you are aware of: don't ever look a small baby in the face. If you do, you'll get just what you deserve: a screaming baby. [Laughter] And so, I looked just past her; and because she couldn't stand

that I wasn't looking at her, she started going like this. So I went like this with her, and at that point she looked up at me and her face brightened and she went, "Pfft." [Laughter]

And so she held out her arms to me and let me take her, and she took -- I took her, and she clung to me and looked up in my face, and I went, "Pfft." [Laughter] And she put her hand up and felt my mouth, and she went "Pfft" back. And the mother said, "You really like babies, don't you?" [Laughter] And we had a relationship; and she began to tell me things she'd have never told me any other way. These are just a few examples of the way we can build strong relationships with parents, and to empower them to advocate for their children long after children have graduated from Head Start.

A final challenge is to prove, by well-planned and carefully documented research, that our efforts to collaborate with parents are making a difference in their child's outcomes and their ability to advocate for quality public schools and strong communities. Then, we can justify a head start for all children who need it in this country. Together, with families living in poverty, we and they can give their children the future that we all wish for all children. [Applause]

We have a lot of work to do, but it will be worth it to them and for all of us. Thank you for all that you do for children all over the country.