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PLIGHT OF YOUNG CHILDREN: EXTENSION'S COMMITMENT

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When families are strong, stable, and loving, children have a sound basis for becoming caring and competent adults Government, in partnership with private community organizations, [should] develop and expand community-based family support programs to provide parents with the knowledge, skills, and support they need to raise their children ("Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children," final report of the National Commission on Children, 1991)

Poor children and families in America are all of us--white, black, brown, hard working, two-parent and single-parent families, mothers struggling to get adequate child support, fathers and mothers struggling to earn decent wages as well as the minority of poor who depend on welfare It is time to honor our pro-family rhetoric with action (Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children's Defense Fund (CDF), speaking about the CDF report "Child Poverty in America," 1991)

No sector of the United States is void of comment about the status of American children. The examples above are from federal government and a child advocacy group. Educators, service providers, employers, and families themselves all fear for our children's well-being, and consequently, the Nation's future. The concern is well founded¹.

Infant mortality in the United States is 10 deaths per 1,000 live births, worse than 19 other industrialized nations of the world. Many children who do survive lack the quality of life that supports optimum development.

Premature birth and low birth weight infants have nearly 10 times the risk of severe developmental problems such as blindness, deafness, and retardation and two to three times the risk of having problems in school. Such births are most often associated with

late or no prenatal care, inadequate maternal weight gain, poor nutrition, and smoking and substance abuse.

Reported child abuse and neglect is up 10 percent since 1989. Children from families whose income is less than \$15,000 are five times more likely to be mistreated than those from higher income families.

Poverty is a way of life for about one in four children under age 6. Poor children often lack basic needs such as adequate nutrition, acceptable housing, and enriching educational opportunities. They are at increased risk of poor health, poor nutrition, educational under-achievement, illiteracy, developmental delays, ultimate social deviance, child abuse and neglect, and inadequate child care.

Early intervention has been well established as a critical factor in successful programs for at-risk children. These programs work through parents and focus on outcomes of success, productivity, and self sufficiency rather than failure and frustration. Such preventive education is cost-effective. It is estimated that for every dollar spent on prevention, \$3-4 is saved in crisis intervention and treatment programs.

Practical Response to an Urgent Problem

Strengthening the American family, the backbone institution of a healthy Nation, has long been a goal of the Cooperative Extension System (CES)². Programs in money management techniques, child care provider training, wise nutrition choices, family communications, parent effectiveness, and youth self-esteem have helped families not just survive, but thrive.

As our Nation transitions to a new century, issues faced by all families, but especially those of limited resources, drive economic, social, and political agendas. Early in the 1990s, Extension Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture (ES-USDA), the federal partner in the CES, recognized the need for increased commitment to limited resource families³. A report called *Reaching Limited Resource Audiences* outlined 13 recommendations for Extension target audiences, programs, and staff training and development⁴. Many of these recommendations are embodied in the CES National Initiative, *Plight of Young Children*, which began in September 1991.

Extension's Commitment

Via the National Initiative, *Plight of Young Children*, the CES is dedicating resources and

expertise to the educational needs of limited resource families with young children, prenatal to five. Targeting the young child recognizes the importance of the early years for optimal development, school readiness, and lifelong success. The vision:

One generation of children, raised to be physically, intellectually, socially, and emotionally prepared for school and life. . . . These children will become the first link in a new chain of hope for a positive future ("Plight of Young Children: A Recommended Agenda for the CES," Washington, DC: ES-USDA, September 1991, p.6).

The CES recognizes this vision cannot be reached alone. To be successful, preventive education must be backed by supportive policy intervention and linked with caring communities. The CES has a 77-year history with the core subjects of this Initiative--money management, nutrition and health, and parenting.

From this experience, Extension educators have learned the following.

- Families that achieve financial goals, regardless how small when measured in dollars, feel an increased sense of control over their money and their lives.
- Prenatal care and good nutrition during pregnancy reduces the likelihood of low birth weight and premature births.
- By understanding early developmental changes, parents can revel in their children's actions rather than be frustrated by them.

What is different about this new Initiative for Extension is not the subject matter, but the approach. It requires collaboration at the community level to provide comprehensive programs that are client-centered. Each of these components is critical for behavioral change among limited resource families⁵.

Collaboration. This means putting Extension in the leadership role as a catalyst for change. By building coalitions, at local, state, and federal levels, there is a bridging of traditional, professional, and bureaucratic boundaries among organizations and agencies.

Examples of linkages that have been formed at the federal level are with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Healthy Start, Head Start); U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service (e.g., Food Stamps, Day Care Food Services, WIC); and the Internal Revenue Service. At the state and local levels, agencies, organizations, health care providers, banks and credit unions, employers, and churches often are involved.

Community-based. This characteristic is crucial for coalition building in behalf of families with young children. It also is an appropriate term for the program delivery location. Programs are centered in facilities that are familiar, comfortable for, and frequented by limited resource families with young children (e.g., homes, schools, community centers).

Comprehensive. Limited resource families must have access to comprehensive programs including such topics as money management, nutrition and health, and parent education. "Comprehensive" does not mean that one program, or even one organization, offers everything, but that there is an easy method for pinpointing the major need and directing the family to the right place.

Client-centered. The family, in concert with an Extension educator, determines its needs and goals. A teacher-learner partnership is formed with the family to define how, when, and what education is done *with* them rather than *for* them.

Expected Outcomes

Extension's educational agenda for children seeks to ensure a healthy infancy; increase families' competencies in basic nutrition, money management, and parenting; and build communities supportive of children and families. Specific, measurable outcomes are to:

- reduce infant mortality;
- decrease incidence of low birth weight babies;
- reach a family financial goal (e.g., savings for an emergency);
- become more effective parents;
- improve school success by at-risk children;
- engage in more parent-school-community interaction;
- heighten awareness within communities about the critical needs of children and their families; and
- form public policy coalitions in behalf of children and their families.

Successes

Preventive education for families with children pre-natal to 5 does make a difference. The programs described below all have resulted in behavioral change for parents and positive effects for their young children. It is the goal of *Plight of Young Children* to give each family access to programs similar to these. Cross-referrals among programs in the same community makes the outreach comprehensive.

Program Showcase: Money Management

In Illinois, Extension collaborates with the Internal Revenue Service to produce a workbook called *The Easy Way to Prepare Your 19xx Individual Income Tax Return*. Training is provided to Extension paraprofessionals and volunteers, plus representatives from housing authorities, school parents groups, church groups, libraries, women's shelters, Salvation Army, and community action groups.

Then the message is taken to low income taxpayers. The objectives are to increase awareness of the responsibility to participate in the income tax system, to recover refunds and credits (i.e., Earned Income Credit) due them, and to make good decisions about the use of extra disposable income.

For a 1991 impact study, 248 participants in the taxpayer program were surveyed. Of the 83 percent who said they would receive a tax refund, 163 reported the amount. It totaled \$111,851 or an average of \$600 per person. This figure is more meaningful when one knows that 65 percent of the participants have an annual income under \$6,000.

Through this program, there has been a significant impact on the economic well-being of the families and their communities. Families have been able to pay bills, continue their education, obtain vocational training, improve their housing, and establish savings accounts. Feeling a greater sense of control over financial affairs encourages confidence in other household responsibilities, including child rearing.

Program Showcase: Nutrition and Health

The *Have a Healthy Baby* Extension program in Indiana strives to reduce infant mortality and decrease the incidence of low birth weight babies. Via videotapes and experiential learning, high risk pregnant teens and adults learned about the need for early prenatal care. They see the effect of certain life style choices, such as eating behaviors, smoking, and use of alcohol and drugs, on the unborn baby.

Programs are conducted in clinics, community centers, homes, schools, churches, and agency offices in groups or one-to-one. Collaborating agencies include March of Dimes; Women, Infants and Children (WIC); Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Coalition; National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health; well-baby clinics, and schools.

Data have been collected on more than half of the 1,168 women reached with the program. Of those 619 pregnancies, 2.58 percent resulted in low birth weight babies. The Indiana average is 6.6 percent.

Program Showcase: Parent Education

Minimizing abusive and/or neglectful behavior toward children and increasing a child's potential for healthy development are the goals of the *Parent Education for Adults and*

Children of Hunterdon (PEACH) Extension program in Hunterdon, New Jersey. The approach combines parenting classes, individual consultations, and parent discussion groups for at-risk families.

Referrals comes from Family Court, Catholic Charities, Community Mental Health, Youth Services, and Women's Crisis. Impact data shows 90 percent of participants increased their confidence in parenting after participation in the program. A comment from one parents says it best: "I look at my daughter with a different eye--I look for positives, not negatives."¹

Summary

People are this country's greatest resource. To neglect the critical needs of families, especially those rearing tomorrow's workers, leaders, and parents, could bring a 21st century marked by deeper societal and economic problems than those experienced today.

Through efforts of the National Initiative, *Plight of Young Children*, Extension teaches skills to parents that positively affect the early years of their children. The cornerstone of the Initiative is access by limited resource families with young children to a comprehensive educational program. Core subjects are money management, nutrition and health, and parenting. Other characteristics of this effort are its emphasis on collaboration and coalition-building at the community level, the client-centered approach, and delivery through trained paraprofessionals and volunteers from the families' communities.²

Endnotes

¹For a review of the statistics and trends related to status of American children, see the Cooperative Extension System White Paper, *The Plight of American Children: Prenatal to Age Five* (Washington, DC: Extension Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, May 1991, 17 pp). The 26-page paper summarizes research by a team of experts in family resource management, nutrition, and human development. It includes an extensive reference list.

²The Cooperative Extension System (CES) is a national, publically funded organization with a mission of helping people improve their lives through an educational process that uses scientific knowledge focused on issues and needs. This public nonformal educational network combines the expertise and resources of federal, state, and local governments. The partners in this unique system are:

- the Extension Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, DC;
- Extension professionals at land-grant universities throughout the United States and its territories; and
- Extension professionals in nearly all the Nation's 3,150 counties.

³The *Reaching Limited Resource Audiences* report (see Endnote 4 for citation) defines limited resource families as those with "limited income and/or limited education struggling to maintain supportive environments."

⁴The report, *Reaching Limited Resource Audiences: Recommendations for Extension Action in the 1990's* (Washington, DC: Extension Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, April 1991, 17 pp.), was prepared by the Limited Resource Audiences Committee, Chaired by Ruth Allen, Ph.D., Cornell University. Copies are available from Home Economics and Human Nutrition, ES-USDA, 3444-S, Washington, DC 20250-0900. Quantities are limited.

⁵For a more thorough examination of Extension's work with limited resource families, see the discussion paper *Extension Family Programs in a New Era: 10 Critical Questions* (Washington, DC: Extension Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, November 1992, 12 pp.).