

Written Testimony of Jennifer Garner
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For the House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies Hearing
“Investing in the Future- Early Childhood Education Programs at the Department of Health and
Human Services”
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Thank you, Chairman Cole, Ranking Member DeLauro, and Members of the Subcommittee for inviting me to testify today on the importance of early childhood education. I am thrilled to be here to talk about an issue that is very important to me.

When I started with Save the Children nine years ago, the thought of early childhood education being part of a national conversation was very far off in the distance. My mom grew up dirt poor, with ten siblings, no electricity or running water in dustbowl depression Oklahoma. She managed to get herself educated – the only member of her family to go to college. Eventually my mom and dad ended up with my sisters and me in Charleston, West Virginia where we grew up middle-class, surrounded by generational poverty. The kind of poverty where kids’ shoes are cut along the front to let their toes grow out because they can’t afford new shoes. The kind of poverty where my friends from first grade didn’t make it to second grade when I did; didn’t make it to third grade when I did and somehow disappeared off the face of the earth in my reality. I grew up one generation and one holler removed from poverty.

Awareness and gratitude are pretty powerful motivators and they have driven me to think about big things, like how did my mom get out and how do we help the kids like the ones I grew up with? So I sought out the organization that I believe has done the most to help kids get out of generational poverty, Save the Children.

The experiences I have had with Save the Children—entering trailer park communities that are surrounded by trash, plastic sheets instead of windows, oven doors open for heat, that are

infested with pests, that does not have sound or joy—I am privileged to be allowed into these homes and to be accepted where families could just feel shame for the conditions they live in. When we walk into these homes, the silence is suffocating. The children are not babbling, they are not crying, they are not making any sort of sound; their senses are dulled. Their mothers and fathers are so overwhelmed by the stressors of living in poverty – food scarcity, lack of adequate shelter, abuse, drug addiction, etcetera. They do not have the capacity to look outside themselves and provide their babies with the support they need like singing, reading, or loving. These parents have also not had the modeling of appropriate behaviors to teach their children. They sit their child in front of a television and the child silently has their mind go to sleep.

With the brain growth that takes place between birth and five, we are doing these children a great disservice because they have absolutely lost the chance to ever make it ahead in life. If you are growing up in poverty, many times, you are a year and a half behind your peers developmentally.

The answer is starting earlier. I applaud the efforts around the nation to expand access to kindergarten and pre-school, but challenge all of you to do more for the newborns and the children in the space of zero to three years old.

In the past few years, I have visited many states, including Representative Fleischmann's Tennessee and parts of California that I know would be familiar to Representatives Lucille Roybal-Allard and Barbara Lee.

One of my favorite stories comes from California, where I visited a family living in a concrete home in the heat of the Central Valley. When I walked into the house, there was a little boy who was eleven months old. He did not react to me at all. He was sitting in front of the

television watching Oprah. The mother looked overwhelmed, depressed and exhausted, and I could understand why. This little boy was stagnant.

The Save the Children coordinator brought things for the family, including a backpack full of books, a log for the mother to track her progress on reading, and a ball. The boy had never seen a ball before. Imagine your child's look when they saw their first ball! The boy looked at the ball and then looked at his mom. The coordinator told the mom to roll the ball to her son. The mom did and he looked at the ball and made a noise! The coordinator told the mom, "He is talking to you." The mother disagreed, but the coordinator said, "This is speech! This is a connection and you need to repeat back his noise." The mother did and all of a sudden, there was a babbling conversation between the mother and her son. I saw the light switch go on for that little boy that day. Because we visited that mother, a connection was made and every day got a little bit brighter for that boy, and we built on that connection week after week. With that connection, that little boy had a chance to go to kindergarten ready to learn.

And that is why we are here today, to talk about the need for the federal government to provide the funding and opportunity for all children to enter kindergarten ready to learn. As Congress considers ways to help families break the cycle of poverty, I would call for a significant investment in high-quality early childhood education. Not only do early childhood programs provide our next generation with a strong foundation for future success, they also allow parents to enter the workforce knowing that their children have safe and nurturing opportunities.

Unfortunately, the statistics right now are not great. Early Head Start, which offers care, support, and opportunity through center-based programming, as well as home visiting, only serves 5% of eligible children. And Head Start, which offers a wide-range of services including

health and dental care, family engagement, and work support for parents, serves less than 45% of eligible children. I would ask the Subcommittee to continue to strongly support both Early Head Start and Head Start, with the goal of increasing Early Head Start access to 10% of eligible children over the next four years. That is just a drop in the bucket but it is important progress.

In addition to these programs, Save the Children strongly supports Child Care and Development Block Grants (CCDBG). These grants help parents afford child care while looking or training for work. But this program also needs significant investment; an increase of almost \$1.2 billion above current funding levels to ensure providers can implement the new requirements included in the bipartisan reauthorization of CCDBG, while not reducing the number of children they serve.

Finally, Preschool Development Grants have helped states improve the quality of or access to preschool for more than 150,000 children. I ask the subcommittee to continue to fund this program so that the 32 states that did not receive grants the first time through may expand and improve their pre-k programs as well.

I understand that Congress faces many difficult choices, especially when it comes to funding decisions. There are many competing priorities and many worthy causes. But many Members of Congress often suggest that we need to cut spending in order to protect our future generations from an increasing deficit. I would argue that we need to *invest* in future generations to ensure that all children have an opportunity to succeed and that the United States can continue to be a land of opportunity, not just for those born in the right zip code, but for all children, including those who still live in West Virginia where I grew up.

Thank you again for this opportunity to testify and I look forward to answering your questions.