



EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION – BUILDING A BETTER JAMAICA

Presented by

MRS. LORNA GOLDING

Wife of the Prime Minister of Jamaica

**Patron & Chair, Jamaica Early Childhood Development Foundation
to**

The Women's International Forum at the United Nations

Friday, April 16, 2010

Greetings [All protocol observed]

I bring you greetings on behalf of my husband the Honourable Bruce Golding, Prime Minister of Jamaica and the Jamaican people.

I am very pleased to be invited to speak with you today to share with you my work in support of early childhood education in Jamaica as you gather to discuss the topic of Women and Children. Children's issues are very near and dear to my heart especially as a mother of three, and for two years now, a grandmother.

While my interest in the development and education of children comes from very personal experiences, I have become so passionate about these issues that I recently went back into the classroom as a student to pursue formal studies in early childhood education! With tremendous family support, I hope to complete my studies soon and to put that knowledge to work for the benefit of my fellow Jamaicans.

How did I Get Here?

In 2008, moved by a desire to support the efforts of my husband to build a better Jamaica, and my own passion and concern for the fortunes of young children, I launched the Jamaica Early Childhood Development Foundation. I was motivated by memories of my own experiences rearing children and the efforts of my husband and I to nurture our children by creating an environment filled with love, one that encouraged learning and which helped to build the confidence and awareness of our children in themselves and the world around them. Today, we are proud parents of three exceptional adults.

But it was perhaps the birth of my first grandchild in early 2008 that brought those memories back even more vividly. Each day that I watch him grow it becomes even clearer to me that ALL Jamaican children must be afforded access to the same kind of safe, healthy and nurturing environment to support their growth and total development.

The Jamaican Situation

Like many countries, Jamaica has its fair share of economic and social challenges which can and have had adverse effects on the development and education of children. One issue which we are still trying to grapple with in Jamaica is the concept of gender equity; which is the distinction in the treatment and socialization of men and women, which starts from birth.

So profound are these distinctions, that in the early childhood years from zero to eight, we have seen a trend of young girls entering the formal school system far more prepared than their male counterparts to handle the new

rigours of school. Several factors have been suggested as reasons for this phenomenon. For example, girls tend to be more closely supervised; they are expected to be more disciplined; they are usually given greater responsibility for chores and other tasks in the home; and, they are usually not allowed to leave the home or yard.

Professor Elsa Leo-Rhynie, a distinguished Jamaican scholar on gender issues has pointed out that:

"There is a gender difference in terms of the danger against which they [boys and girls] are being protected. In the case of girls, it is sexual assault, sexual involvement and the possibility of pregnancy; for boys it is crime, including drugs. There is, however, a symbiotic relationship between the yard and the street for boys - the street is expected to toughen and prepare the boy for survival, which is an extension of the teaching being given in the yard. The street has nothing to offer girls besides danger and disgrace."

With greater protection and efforts towards their development, it is not difficult to see why Jamaican girls would be more prepared than boys at the beginning stages of the formal education process.

These gender distinctions and inequities in the treatment of girls versus boys are rooted in our historical past. In fact our education system was imported from our colonial past and for a long time did not reflect philosophies about male and female social roles consistent with Jamaican norms and history. Nonetheless they had an impact on educational policy and determined educational practice.

There are other issues which challenge the development of young children, not the least of which is the circumstance of poverty faced by some of our people. Children raised in poverty tend to complete less education than those from more financially capable homes. Oftentimes, children from poorer homes are exposed to poor nutritional practices and so not only are their parents faced with the difficult costs of their education but even when they are sent to school regularly, their nutrition practices are so poor that learning becomes difficult if not impossible.

The Jamaica Early Childhood Foundation

As a mother, I have been very concerned about these issues. In establishing the Jamaica Early Childhood Foundation I have tried to support and promote the provision of improved services and resources for all Jamaican children, regardless of gender or background. The Jamaica Early Childhood Foundation has a vision that one day every Jamaican child will have equal opportunity to develop their full potential to contribute positively to their country's development.

Although girls and boys show relatively similar competencies when tested on entry to primary school, girls are seen to embrace the ethos of the school room and see it as a viable route to social mobility and independence. It is no wonder that education is increasingly seen as a female pursuit.

Boys seem to find the skills they need to survive in the tough gang-influenced life of the inner city urban areas in particular. These skills are readily obtained on the streets through male role models, who may be involved in the drug or gun trade, and who do not encourage or support the idea of continuing education.

The absence of male role models in the home to counter these influences makes it increasingly difficult to dispel the macho male identity which persists among male youth. It's important to note that 49% of households in Jamaica are headed by women.

All these factors have affirmed the Foundation's view that early stimulation practices must be directed at ALL children so that both boys and girls are afforded the opportunity for holistic development. The JECF is a strong proponent of early stimulation practices. A large part of our fundraising efforts have targeted early childhood institutions that are engaged in these practices with a view to promoting the social, nutritional, physical and psychological development of children between the ages of zero to eight years.

Some of the projects we have supported include the expansion of libraries, establishment of nutrition programmes, creation of computer labs and expansion of resource and technology centres without regard for gender, background, physical or mental ability.

One particular project that is dear to me is conducted at the Hope Valley Experimental School in St. Andrew, Jamaica. The Hope Valley School has a programme where both disabled and able-bodied children learn together.

It is a great example of the principles supported by the JECF that is, equity and opportunity for all children. Happily, the Jamaica Early Childhood Foundation was able to provide much needed financial support to the Hope Valley Experimental School to expand their library and nutrition programmes.

We have also supported projects that aim to increase the environmental awareness of young children. Particularly, we have assisted in the

establishment of vegetable gardens at several schools. These gardens have provided the children with great lessons in nature and the environment and received participation from both boys and girls. But, more than that, these garden projects help to build self confidence as the children recognize their own important role in the growth of their gardens regardless of their gender or social circumstance.

The JECF and the National Plan

The work of the Jamaica Early Childhood Foundation is really part of a bigger network of independent support programmes. Organizations like ours feed into the national effort to ensure the successful education and development of all Jamaican children. We are really like a resource partner to the Government and hence we have similar goals and visions.

Indeed, the Government of Jamaica recognizes a very fundamental principle behind much of the work that we support and fund. Children learn best and fastest during their early years and therefore we must ensure that they have the right start, the right way at the right time. In fact, the Jamaican Government recently developed and adopted a National Strategic Plan (NSP) for Early Childhood Development to guide Jamaica's approach to early childhood education over the five year period 2008 to 2013.

The NSP is being implemented by the Early Childhood Commission. This Commission was established by an Act of Parliament and is mandated to coordinate all programmes, plans and activities related to early childhood development.

The National Strategic Plan focuses on five strategic areas:

- 1) Effective Parenting Education and Support
- 2) Effective Preventative Health Care
- 3) Early and effective screening, diagnosis and intervention for “at risk” children and households
- 4) Safe, learner centred, well-maintained early childhood facilities
- 5) Effective curriculum delivery by trained early childhood development practitioners.

The Jamaica Early Childhood Foundation affirms the importance of these focus areas. In our own capacity, we have begun to look at projects that target these specific areas. One such initiative related to the Parenting Education and Support component is the role of grandparents and particularly grandmothers in the early development of children.

The Jamaican situation is such that young children are increasingly being reared by grandmothers because their parents leave the community or even the country in search of work and opportunities for financial advancement. Additionally, the increase in children and adolescents bearing children of their own has created grandmothers, who are now much younger than they used to be. It means that, even while these young grandmothers are in the process of raising their own children, they are being called on to take up the responsibility of “grand-mothering” their grandchildren.

As a grandmother, I recognize the important role I play in my two year old grandson’s life, whenever, I visit or spend time with him. The JECF will be looking at programmes that include grandmothers within the parenting net. We will be supporting those aimed at educating and guiding these

grandmothers, in their efforts to offer surrogate support to Jamaica's young children.

Conclusion

Excellencies, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, my country has its challenges, but we are committed to the growth and development of our nation.

It starts with our children.

Children who receive the right stimulation tend to be healthier, happier and better students and eventually productive and educated citizens. Their total development is a benefit to the society as a whole by way of decreased levels of crime and violence, a more productive and educated labour force, decreased dependence on social services and greater levels of employment and productive enterprise.

I am committed to doing my part through the Jamaica Early Childhood Foundation and other avenues to assist in ensuring that all Jamaica's children are given the right start, the right way at the right time, right now.

I thank you for your kind attention. It was my pleasure to have addressed you at the Women's International Forum at the United Nations. May God bless you all!