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Global Caregiver Summit Keynote

Her Majesty, Excellencies, and Partners - thank you for having me. It is an honor to be here.

Here's an analogy that is simple, but also true: children are like seeds. How they grow depends on the conditions in which they develop. And those conditions are most powerfully shaped by the caregiving they receive. From the moment a child comes into the world, their parents and caregivers can provide the psychological equivalents of growth-giving light and water. They can foster the healthy development that is just ready and waiting to unfold.

What does this look like at home?

Let's picture – or, if you are a parent yourself – remember the experience of being awakened in the middle of the night by a crying infant. It's easy to imagine—and to understand—a parent who feels so overwhelmed in this moment that they ignore the infant's cries or become angry with the baby.

But we can also imagine a caregiver who scoops that baby up, cuddles her gently, and coos or sings until she becomes peaceful again. How does this interaction support that child's growth? The parent is letting that baby know that she is lovable – that she deserves tender, responsive care. The parent is showing that child that other people are enjoyable – that they can be attentive and kind. And the parent is teaching that baby that relationships can and should feel safe and supportive.

This is what we call *secure attachment* – and we know from decades of research that secure attachment leads to everything we want for our citizens. Securely attached children learn how to love: when they become adolescents and adults, they are far more likely to have strong, positive relationships with people both inside and outside their families. And securely attached children get to be curious about their world because they were raised with a safe, reliable base they can return to. This helps them engage with school and to reach higher levels of academic achievement.

Now let's skip ahead in time and picture a six-year-old who, while running through the home, knocks over and breaks a cherished decorative vase.

It's easy to imagine a parent who becomes upset and strikes that child as a form of punishment.

But we can also imagine a parent who feels angry—but keeps their composure. They take a breath, check that the child is not hurt, and then say something like: *"I know that was an*

accident, but you still need to make things right. Running in the house isn't safe, and now something we care about is broken."

The parent may ask the child to help clean up the pieces, to apologize, and to contribute in some age-appropriate way to repairing or replacing the damaged vase.

This is using what we call *authoritative, non-violent discipline* and it keeps the loving connection between caregiver and child in place, even during challenging moments. Research tells us that children raised with this kind of discipline come to understand that conflict can be managed without violence. They are more likely to exercise self-control, to have empathy for others—and, as adults, to be law-abiding citizens who can manage disagreement without resorting to aggression, adults who become the backbone of a healthy democracy.

Now let's fast-forward to adolescence—and to a story from my own teenage years.

One day when I was thirteen my mother asked me to get some carrots ready to go into a soup. I peeled and cut them, put them in the pot, and then walked away—leaving the peels in a pile on the counter, the cutting board dirty, and the knife sitting in the sink.

My mother found me and explained that while, technically, I had done what she asked, I had not done a *good* job. To do a job well, she explained, was to do it from start to finish. She made it clear that she could not praise my work, and that I should not feel good about it myself, until it was done *completely*. Then she sent me back to clean up the peels, wash the board and knife, and put them away.

In that moment, my mother was teaching me how to work. While keeping our warm connection at the center of the conversation, she cultivated my understanding of the importance of holding myself to high standards and following-through.

Science backs up my mother's approach. Research tells us that adolescents raised with this kind of clear, calm expectation-setting are more likely to become conscientious adults with a strong work ethic, the very qualities that lead to the educational attainment, industriousness, and human productivity that drive economic growth.

In short, our caregivers shape our citizens and, with that, our countries.

So, who is ensuring that they are using the attachment-fostering, research-backed parenting practices that benefit everyone?

In truth, some parents just know what to do – either because they were, themselves, raised in families that provided abundant emotional warmth alongside high standards for behavior – or because they have come to these healthy parenting practices intuitively.

Other parents—who also love their children very much—fall back on how they were raised, even if their own parents were at times harsh or neglectful. Or they allow anger and frustration to guide how they respond to the inevitable challenges that come with having and raising children.

Now, here's some really good news.

We know—unequivocally—that parents can learn new ways of responding to their children. Quality parenting is a skill, and, like all skills, it can be taught. And when caregivers learn what research tells us about how best to care for children, the outcomes for their children improve.

How do parenting programs accomplish this?

First, they educate adults about normal, expectable child development. They help parents understand that *all babies cry*, and that *all* children sometimes do things they should not do, like knock over vases. And they remind parents that teenagers, by definition, are *still learning* how to become the people their families, workplaces, and communities can count on.

Second, effective programs reduce child maltreatment by teaching parents positive, non-violent discipline strategies that help children grow up to become conscientious, ethical, non-violent adults.

Third, parenting programs help parents and caregivers enjoy their children every step of the way. When parents are encouraged to delight in their children—to help them explore the world and to take pleasure in watching them play—their own stress goes down, their patience goes up, and their connection to their child becomes stronger.

Remarkably, parenting programs aren't just good for children—they measurably improve adult mental health as well. When parents are given clear guidance about what is developmentally normal, practical tools that work, and reassurance that they are not alone in their struggles, rates of parental depression, anxiety, and stress decline. In short, when they are helped to feel competent in their homes and connected to their communities, their well-being improves too.

Never has the research been so clear about the kind of caregiving that brings out the very best in all of our citizens. Using this science to provide high-quality programming for parents and caregivers won't only build the health of our nations now. It will leave a lasting legacy that will be passed down for generations to come.