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# OPINION

## Boosting Brain Power in Early Childhood

### Simple and fun activities to share

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

What if boosting a toddler's brainpower was as easy as turning on a light switch? In fact, "Flip the Switch" is one of the simple activities suggested by Vroom, an initiative that provides creative tools and materials to help families turn daily interactions with children into "brain building moments."

On one side of an electronic "flashcard" Vroom describes this idea for children between six months and two years old: "Before leaving the house today, let your child be the one to turn off the lights. Help them flip all the switches and talk about how their actions turn the lights off for darkness and on for light."

On the reverse side Vroom explains the "brainy background" behind it: "This game teaches your child about cause and effect. When one of you hits the switch, your child will observe how the lights turn off and on. Have a conversation about what is happening so they learn some new words too."

Vroom, an initiative of the Bezos Family Foundation, is one of a number of initiatives across the country focused on empowering parents to boost early childhood brain development. The first five years of life are



the time of greatest brain development. Early nurturing interactions with caring adults form the basis of a healthy brain foundation. The strong case for increased federal investments for quality child care and other early childhood programs is bolstered by the great local work supporting families and communities in building healthy brains during children's earliest years of life.

A baby is born with a brain 25 percent as large as an adult brain. Researchers at the Institute for Learning and Brain Science at the University of Washington tell us that by the time she reaches her fifth birthday, her brain is already over 90 percent of the size of her mature brain. That startling period of growth in size is mirrored by the growth in neural connections needed to learn how to process information and build skills.

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University reports that in the earliest years of a child's life more than one million of these connections are formed every second, with simpler connections paving the way for more complex ones. These early connections build the foundation for children's future health, education and behavior.

Every time adults respond appropriately to a young child's calls for attention, they are helping build and strengthen neural connections and supporting the development of a strong brain foundation. The Center on the Developing Child refers to this quality

parent-child communication as "serve and return" interactions and says the absence of them is a "serious threat" to a child's development.

Following a 2011 conference by Dr. Ron Ferguson devoted to discovering what parents need to know to help eliminate skill gaps already evident at age two, an advisory committee of researchers came up with five "basics" all parents should practice with their children to support healthy brain development: Maximize love and manage stress; 2) Talk, sing and point; 3) Count, group, and compare; 4) Explore through movement and play; and 5) Read and discuss stories.

The Boston Basics Campaign is being infused throughout the Boston community — engaging health care providers, places of worship, libraries and museums, barber-shops, early childhood centers, and schools to ensure parents are saturated with information about how to support their child's brain development wherever they go.

Boston Basics demonstrates the potential for private organizations and government partners to come together in support of young children in a community. The Black Philanthropy Fund was instrumental in investing time and resources to lead the campaign, which is now being expanded to a number of other cities.

"Too Small to Fail," a joint initiative of the Clinton Foundation and the Opportunity Institute, launched the excellent public

awareness and action campaign "Talking is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing," which uses books, parent videos, text messaging, and social media to share fun and easy ways for parents and caregivers to boost their child's early brain and vocabulary development. There are now "Talking is Teaching Word Gap" campaigns in dozens of cities across the country.

Just as the latest research shows that investments in quality early childhood programs generate an average annual return of more than 13 percent on every dollar invested, every effort made in boosting young children's brainpower — including the thousands of simple, fun, and free activities parents and caregivers can weave into everyday life — benefits all of us later on.

These important community initiatives are essential but cannot make up for needed public investments in programs that support children's early development. High-quality child care and other early opportunities are out of reach for too many children and families that need them but are also critical for further strengthening children's early brain development.

Healthy early child brain development is not a partisan issue. Congress should embrace the evidence and make the investments needed today to guarantee every baby has a strong start to ensure a strong America tomorrow.

*Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund.*

## Pleasing Wealthy Donors and Wall Street Corporations

### Why Congress wants to cut your health care

BY CHUCK COLLINS

Members of the House GOP were in a hurry on May 4 to pass their bill to gut Obamacare. They rushed it through before anyone even had a chance to check its cost or calculate its impact on people's access to insurance.

Their urgency, however, had little to do with health care. The real reason for the rush? To set the table for massive tax cuts.

Indeed, the House health plan would give a \$1 trillion boon to wealthy households and pave the way for still bigger corporate tax cuts to come, as part of the so-called "tax reform" they're pushing.

Meanwhile, dismantling the Affordable Care Act will cause up to 24 million people to lose their health coverage, according to the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office. (Though even that estimate is based on the less ex-

treme version of the bill that failed to pass in April. The new plan may be even worse.)

Why would a GOP politician support an unpopular bill that fewer than 20 percent of voters think is a good idea? Why risk angry constituents showing up at town hall meetings?

Put simply, to please their wealthy donors and Wall Street corporations. For complex legislative reasons, repealing Obamacare's taxes on the rich first will make it easier for them to slash corporate taxes next.

As the "tax reform" debate begins, prepare for sermons about how cutting taxes for rich and global corporations will be great for the economy. Slashing the corporate tax rate, we'll be told, will boost U.S. competitiveness.

But if Congress were really concerned about the economy, policy wouldn't be driven by tax cuts. The real parasite eating the insides of the U.S. economy isn't taxes, billionaire investor Warren Buffett explained recently, but health care.

In fact, taxes have been steadily going down, especially for the very wealthy and global corporations. "As a percent of GDP,"

Buffett told shareholders of his investment firm, the corporate tax haul "has gone down." But "medical costs, which are borne to a great extent by business," have increased.

In 1960, corporate taxes in the U.S. were about 4 percent of the economy. Today, they're less than half that.

As taxes have fallen, meanwhile, the share of GDP spent on health care has gone from 5 percent of the economy in the 1960s to 17 percent today.

These costs are the real "tax" on businesses. As any small business owner can tell you, health care costs are one of the biggest expenses in maintaining a healthy and productive work force.

Yet the GOP bill will weaken health care coverage and regulation, which will increase costs and hurt U.S. companies.

U.S. employers, remember, must compete with countries that have superior universal health insurance for their citizens and significantly lower costs. While health care eats up 17 percent of the U.S. economy, it's around just 11 percent in Germany, 10 percent in Japan, 9 percent in Britain, and 5.5 percent in China.

No wonder Buffett concluded that "medical costs are the tapeworm of American economic competitiveness."

Buffett observed that the House health care bill would give him an immediate \$680,000 annual tax cut, a break he doesn't really need, while only allowing that tapeworm to bore deeper.

For all its limitations, the Affordable Care Act has expanded coverage and the quality of life for millions of Americans. It's also put in place important provi-

sions to contain exploding health care expenses, slowing the rise of costs.

The GOP plan to reduce coverage and deregulate health care will take us in the wrong direction. That's a pretty poor bargain for yet another tax cut for the richest Americans.

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