

Nicholas Kristof

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I'm away on book leave, but a few people are helping to keep this newsletter busy in my absence. Today's author is Jennifer Garner, actress and activist on behalf of children. I met Jen years ago while filming the documentary "A Path Appears" and was deeply impressed by her passion for early childhood interventions and her smart advocacy for Save the Children. — Nick



By Jennifer Garner

Not everyone knows that I grew up one generation and one holler removed from poverty.

My mom grew up dirt poor with a passel of siblings and no electricity or running water in Dustbowl Depression Oklahoma. She managed somehow to get herself educated — the only member of her family to go to college. Eventually, Mom and Dad landed with my sisters and me in Charleston, W. Va., where we grew up middle-class surrounded by generational rural poverty. The kind where kids' shoes are cut along the front to let their toes grow.

These kids are up against enormous odds, and they're not all as lucky as my mom ended up. But what I have observed is that sometimes the smallest piece of the puzzle is what changes the whole enterprise.

Through my work with Save the Children over the past 10 years, I have had the great privilege of visiting families from Alligator, Miss., to Quinault Indian Nation in Washington State. I want to give you an idea of what these homes look like so that you can really understand what kids living in rural poverty are up against.

Imagine living in a home devoid of books and toys, where the only source of heat is an open oven door, where pipes freeze with each cold snap. Mobile homes are particularly susceptible to roach infestation. Children become numb to roaches crawling over their legs. Walls are empty. There is no happy sound of a toddler babbling.

Add in other risk factors such as food insecurity, drug abuse, neglect and even a lack of diapers, and that baby's brain stops growing, stops multiplying neurons and setting itself up to learn. If 90 percent of brain growth happens in the first five years, there's very little we can do to make up for it.

But home visits can change all that by helping expectant parents prepare for the arrival of their baby, and then teaching them to read, talk and sing to their baby — activities that build bonds and ensure healthy development. That bond between Mom, Dad and baby is critically important — and so is the bond with home visitors, especially in the rural communities. Kids' eyes light up when they see their visitor — books and toys in tow.

According to the Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman, the rate of return on investments in high-quality early childhood development for disadvantaged children can be 13 percent per child, per year, because of improved outcomes in education, health, sociability and economic productivity.

Children don't vote. They don't make political contributions. That's why it's so important that those of us who have a voice speak up for them and support programs like Early Head Start and Head Start, and Save the Children's home visitation model.

Just like my mom, these kids all have potential — to go to college, to escape the cycle of poverty and to provide the opportunity that my sisters and I were so fortunate to receive. What could be a better investment than that?