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**Angie Garling's Comments to the Assembly Select Committee
on Youth Violence Prevention, June 1, 2007, Oakland, CA**

Thank you to Assemblyman Swanson's Office and Committee members for having the broad vision to invite someone from the early childhood field to speak on youth violence prevention.

What I'm going to do during my time is:

- Summarize a growing body of evidence on the science of early childhood, including early childhood exposure to violence;
- Recommend four best practices/innovative programs to keep in mind as policymakers;
- Tell a story about four year old Marshaun.

The Science of Early Childhood and Early Childhood Exposure to Violence:

To talk about the science of early childhood I'm going to focus on the report, From Neurons to Neighborhoods and its newer relative, The Science of Early Childhood Development (www.developingchild.net). The National Academy of Sciences and the National Scientific Council at Harvard commissioned these reports, bringing together the nation's leading neuroscientists, developmental psychologists, pediatricians and economists to synthesize over 1,000 studies on early childhood development. There should be a one page summary of their findings and recommendations in your packets.

Here is a quote from the Executive Summary: "Although there have been long-standing debates about how much the early years really matter in the larger scheme of lifelong development, our conclusion is unequivocal: What happens during the first months and years of life matters a lot, not because this period of development provides an indelible blueprint for adult well-being, but because it sets either a sturdy or fragile stage for what follows."

Here is one of their core concepts of development:

- Child development is a foundation for community development and economic development, as capable children become the foundation of a prosperous and sustainable society.

To illustrate this point, one of the studies they analyzed was the Perry Preschool Program, where a group of three year olds from low income families in Ypsilanti Michigan received intensive preschool services for two years. The program consisted of a 2.5 hour per day program and a 1.5 weekly teacher home visit. They have followed Perry Preschool children through age 40, and these children have shown substantial achievements over their control group peers, including greater literacy, higher graduation and employment rates, less delinquency, less teen pregnancy and higher incomes. They estimate the rate of return for a program like this is 16%.

Here is a second core concept of development:

- Toxic stress in early childhood is associated with persistent effects on the nervous system and stress hormone systems that can damage developing brain architecture and lead to lifelong problems in learning, behavior, and both physical and mental health.

To illustrate this point, Dr. Bruce Perry, a nationally recognized child psychiatrist who studies the effects of child trauma on brain development, points out a significant difference between older and younger children: very young children are intimately connected to their primary attachment figures, while older children can exist more independently from their caregivers. When these crucial primary relationships are disrupted by repeated violence, or by neglect, the child is trapped in a chronic, biologically driven “fight or flight” state.¹ This predisposes the child to depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, psychopathology and violent and impulsive behavior in later life.² This type of child, or a child continually preoccupied with threats of danger, must always be concerned with self-protection, and they don’t have the calm and curiosity to explore the larger world. AND, children who are inhibited from exploration do not learn effectively.

A child who witnesses violence may be more negatively affected than one who has been physically assaulted.³ A longitudinal study in Minnesota found that behavior problems among both boys and girls at age 16 were most strongly related to partner violence exposure during the preschool years.⁴

To give you an idea of how many children we’re talking about, in Alameda County alone, hundreds of children under the age of five are referred to social services for abuse or neglect every year.⁵ Even more young children witness violence in their community and in their homes. An Oakland Police Department survey (2000) found that 54% of the children in domestic violence households were five years of age or younger.⁶

Four Best Practices/Innovative Programs for Policymakers to Consider to Prevent Youth Violence:

1. Quality Early Care and Education (ECE)

- **Quality ECE can -- and does -- address family and parent needs as well as children’s needs.** This provides a more "organic" forum for tackling problems at a younger age that can lead to violent behavior later on. If, that is, there are enough resources to do such work. The current reimbursement rate for some of our top quality subsidized programs is woefully inadequate, and over 200,000 children across the state are on a waiting list to receive subsidized child care.
- **Quality ECE plays a vital role in early identification and intervention.** Child care providers see children usually every day, more than any other professional in a child’s life. They are much more likely to spot a developmental delay or a behavioral issue and refer families for additional screening services.
- **Quality ECE is a place for kids to feel safe.** These programs offer a respite for children who may be experiencing stressful or violent home and community environments.

2. Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation

Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation helps with early identification of kids, and can give teachers and parents insight and tools to prevent children from retriggering trauma. Teachers have said that with their consultation service they will intervene differently with particular children. Walter Gilliam recently conducted a study on preschool expulsion rates, which are shockingly twice the rate of K-12 expulsion rates. Early childhood mental health consultation has been found to significantly reduce the rate of preschool expulsions. There is a one page summary of California’s preschool expulsion rates in your packets.

Success Story: Through Safe Passages, a local Oakland organization dedicated to violence reduction, 1,627 children and families received mental health consultation services in 2005-2006, while 236 families received Parent-Infant-Psychotherapy sessions. Our local First Five also funds ECMH consultation, serving an average of 2,000 children per year.

3. Second Step Violence Prevention Curriculum

Second Step is a curriculum for children preschool age on up. The preschool curriculum uses puppets like Impulsive Puppy and Slow Down Snail, so children can learn to talk about their emotions and resolve conflicts.

Success Story: Second Step is currently taught at 55 early childhood centers and emergency family shelters throughout the city of Oakland, reaching 5,750 children last year. A recent evaluation on the effectiveness of

early childhood mental health consultation and Second Step training, shows that after the intervention children's reports of anger, aggression, anxiety and withdrawal decreased, and their prosocial behavior increased.

4. Police Roll Call Training

A local group of early childhood advocates wanted to address the number of police calls, mostly for domestic violence, made to homes with young children under five. They developed an easy reference card for officers to keep in their chest pocket that they can refer to when they encounter very young children in the home. It has tips like, get down to the child's level, speak softly, remember that your gun may be at a child's eye level, and list all babies and children as witnesses in the police report.

Success Story: As of June 2006, 400 Oakland Police Officers participated in trainings and received cards.

Marshaun's Story:

Marshaun is one of thirteen children born to an alcoholic mother, and has been raised since infancy by his grandparents, Ernestine and Leroy. At a young age, he began exhibiting aggressive tendencies and developmental delays. With limited resources, his grandparents were at a loss for how to take care of him, and their relationship began to fall apart.

At four years of age, he was referred by his pediatrician to a local social service agency, Jewish Children and Family Services of the East Bay. Rebecca, one of their early childhood mental health consultants, began meeting with Marshaun and his grandparents at their home on a weekly basis. She also helped get him enrolled in a preschool program through the local school district. She encouraged Ernestine and Leroy to recognize the meanings behind Marshaun's behavior, and to have more fun play time together.

Little by little, his grandparents are finding ways to give Marshaun what he needs, and they are now actually enjoying spending time together. The process has been so transformational for the family that they've expressed a desire to share it publicly, in order to help others. Recently Ernestine said that she's been passing on some of her new relationship-building techniques to her neighbor, who happens to be struggling in her relationship with her own five-year-old son.

Marshaun had a great preschool teacher who knew a lot about child development and really helped him. Unfortunately he started only three months before the end of the school year. Marshaun is now in a special education kindergarten program. Now, may not have to spend the rest of his school career in special education, but you have to wonder, if he had spent more time in preschool with a good teacher and receiving additional supports, he would have been better prepared for kindergarten and later success in life.

I know that you as policymakers have a lot of tough choices to make. And I hope that I've communicated to you today that quality early childhood education IS youth violence prevention. Thank you for your time.

¹ Perry, 2001.

² Singer et al., 1995; Diamond & Muller, 2004; Buckner, Bassuk & Beardsely, 2004; Farvery et al., 2005; Wolfe et al. 2003; Perry, 1997.

³ Sheeringa & Zeanah, 1995.

⁴ Yates et al. 2003.

⁵ Survey performed by the Center for Social Services Research at the University of California at Berkeley in 2003 from July 2003 to June 2004, found that 758 children ages 1 to 5 years in Alameda County were referred one or more times to social services for child abuse and neglect.

⁶ The Link to Children, personal correspondence.