

Developing Energy Reserves for Children, Families and Communities

Anyone who watches the news on TV, reads a paper or puts gas in a car knows that we're running out of time for mining and processing fossil fuels for energy. Currently, the United States consumes 25% of the world's oil yet we own only 3% of the world's oil reserves. Even if we were able to extract all of the potential oil within U.S. land and water rights, it would take 10-20 years to go online and would at most double our oil reserves, leaving our nation using two-and-a-half times as much oil as we could ever produce. The math adds up to unaffordable prices at the pump, increasing indebtedness as a nation, and rapidly disappearing natural resources even if we could continue to afford to pay for them. Politicians and policymakers are awakening to the reality that our only hope for survival and growth rests with investing in research and technology to develop new non-carbon emitting fuel sources to supply our energy demands and free us from our growing indebtedness to foreign wealth and interests.

So what's this got to do with children and how we safeguard their future? Actually, the same storm cloud of limited resources and rising demand will strangle our ability to give kids the fuel they need to grow healthy. Our children, of course, require different fuels if they are to grow to be productive taxpayers who contribute to their community's prosperity and security. Children need safe neighborhoods, stimulating schools, loving and stable families, healthy environments, places to play, adult supervision, secure shelter, healthy nutrition, clean clothing, access to healthcare and a sense of personal pride and dignity.

Just as our nation's domestic oil reserves cannot keep pace with our population's energy requirements, our community's human resources are becoming unable to keep pace with the increasing number of children and families who, lacking the essential building blocks for health and well-being, develop physical disabilities, poor health and behavioral or emotional disorders. A vicious cycle is developing in Hillsborough and throughout America as families strain to pay their bills during the current and likely to be long-term economic recession, with its depressing effect on jobs and earnings. More and more parents are coming up short of funds to cover family expenses and short of time to supervise, enjoy and motivate their children. For the first time in decades, children from almost every community, rich or poor, are growing up without a foundation for healthy development, school readiness, academic success and safe social choices. Compounding these problems, our fragile economy collects less public revenue to help families get a leg up when needed. Pretty soon, our financial and human resources will reach the limits of our ability to treat the needs of vulnerable children.

Then again, it doesn't take an economic crisis to drain away the resources families and communities need to raise healthy children. No society, no matter how rich, has enough money to treat the problems it creates. The cost of letting stress build to the point that demands long-term intervention is generally 3-6 times more expensive, and equally less hopeful, than investing in the relatively basic supports that all families deserve in the effort to raise healthy, happy and motivated children. In order to thrive, all children need four assets above all:

A network of close social relationships with family, friends and neighbors that helps them feel connected, valued and respected;

A safe, secure place to live, some degree of privacy, healthy food, and financial security to purchase essential goods and services, including healthcare;

Stimulating interactions at home and high quality education beginning during early childhood;

A clean, non-toxic environment where the water, soil and air quality is healthy and where children have access to safe and green places to play.

Chances are, when these resources are provided, children will also develop pride in their personal, familial, cultural and ethnic identity. And when a child develops a positive identity, she or he is also likely to grow to feel healthy self-respect and dignity. Self-respect and personal dignity are the best stress reducers and, therefore, the most basic foundations for the healthy physical, emotional, behavioral and social development of children.

So we can continue to pay 3-6 times as much for the relatively small number of high-priced specialists to try to undo the damage done by sending off to school children whose brains and nervous systems suffered the consequences of poor nutrition, limited transportation, fear, isolation, insecurity and toxic neighborhoods. Eventually, however, we will exhaust our money and our experts. Alternatively, we can decide to protect all our children for the much cheaper price of creating vibrant, safe, clean and stable neighborhoods where residents find work that pays a livable wage and where citizens care to protect and enhance the area's assets and network of relationships. Giving families and children basic supports and tools from the outset helps get them started on the road to independent living and shared responsibility for the well-being of family and community. Let's plant these simple seeds and grow the new organic fuel sources that will power our children to thrive and our communities to prosper.