



# Early Learning in Libraries:

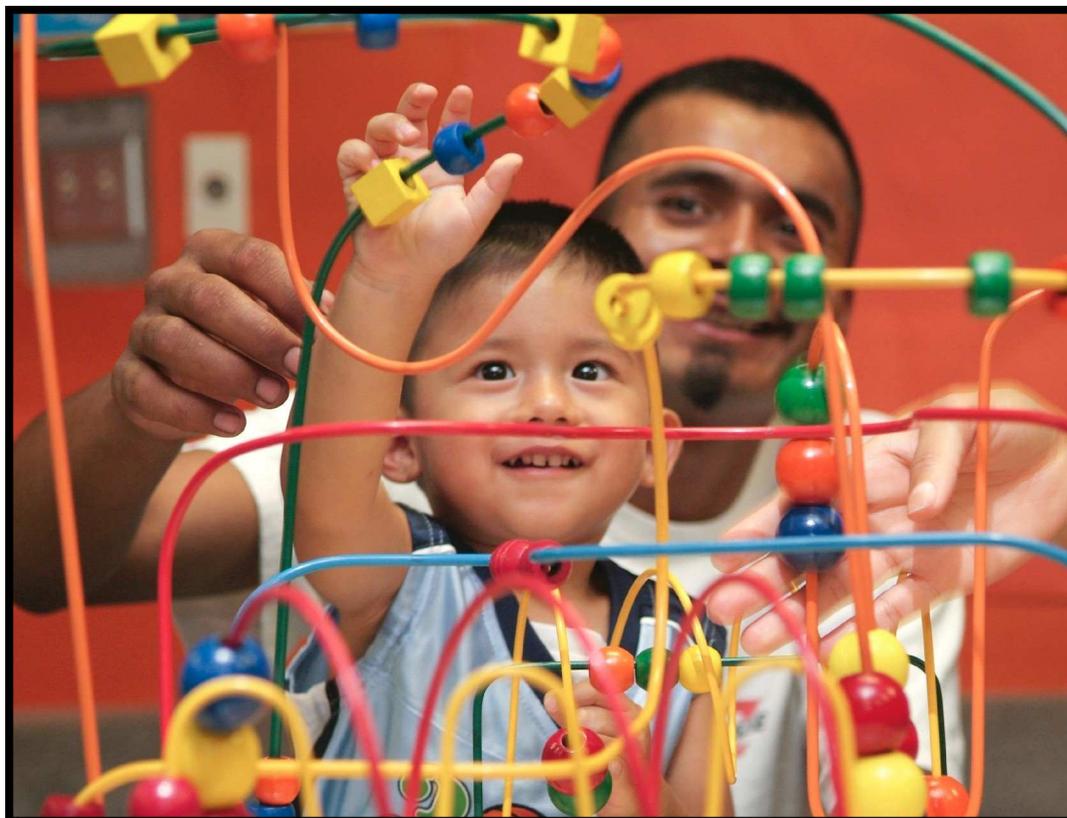
A California State Library Impact Report



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## INTRODUCTION

Early learning has become a national priority, offering public libraries the opportunity to highlight their role as well-established informal early learning systems, essential to meeting this national commitment. Libraries, large and small across California – from Shasta County to San Diego County, serve millions of young children each year. However, only with continued focus and support for this role can libraries ensure excellence and consistency across the state.

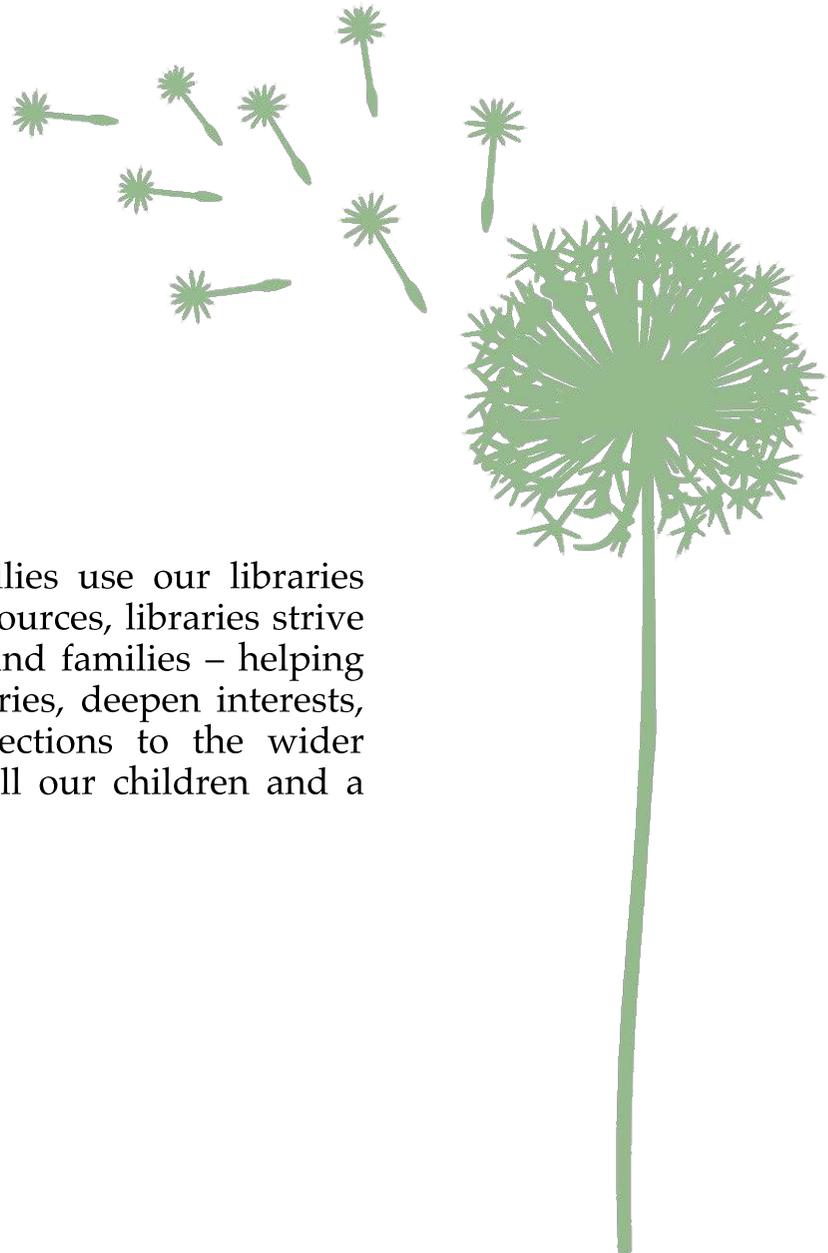
The California State Library's Early Learning with Families (ELF) initiative is designed to support the continued evolution and advancement of library services to young children and families – helping to create services that are child-honoring and family inclusive while equipping library staff with the training necessary to effectively and empathetically meet the needs of the families in their communities. Building upon individual library innovations and leadership, the ELF initiative helps to bring best practices statewide.

More than 124 library systems currently make up the ELF initiative. What follows are a few first-hand accounts from the field of how this initiative has contributed to a better understanding of young children and families, and how that increased understanding has informed library services – from very specific changes in spaces, programming, collections, and community partnerships to broader changes in staff attitudes, knowledge and practices.

*Suzanne Flint*  
Library Programs Consultant  
ELF Initiative, CA State Library



Millions of young children and families use our libraries every day. As trusted community resources, libraries strive to excel in their services to children and families – helping these youngest citizens make discoveries, deepen interests, expand knowledge, and build connections to the wider world – ensuring the well-being of all our children and a promising future for the nation.





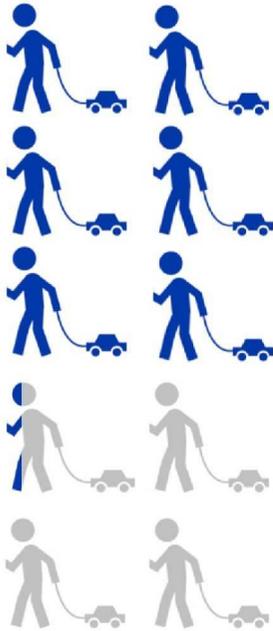
## CONTRA COSTA COUNTY LIBRARY

For the Contra Costa County Library, the Early Learning with Families Initiative has been revelatory and revolutionary. The excellent and timely professional development opportunities have reoriented and refocused our staff, while the generous funding for furnishings and equipment has transformed the landscape of our children's library spaces for tens of thousands of weekly visitors.

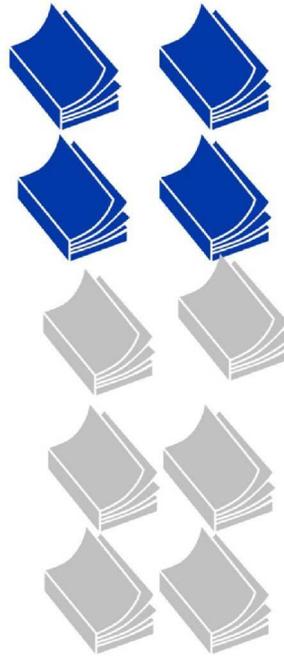
As the manager of the Office of Early Literacy for our library system, I have seen the immediate effects of the State Library's investments in our staff and spaces. Our funding support from ELF went directly to communities of high need, where text-rich environments for learning through play are scarce or non-existent. For example, the ELF funds have transformed the experience of libraries like Baypoint and Pittsburg, who serve large numbers of children under age 5 who live in poverty. Story times attract many of these families, but the new equipment and furnishings have enticed them to stick around. A whole book could be filled with anecdotes like this from Contra Costa County alone. Still, it would fall short of expressing the profound impact that the ELF funding and the complimentary training opportunities have had on the communities we serve.

*Patrick Remer*  
Senior Community Library Manager  
Office of Early Literacy

# Library Impact



**60%** of the 342,667 programs offered by CA libraries in 2014 were for children under age 11.  
(State Library 2014)

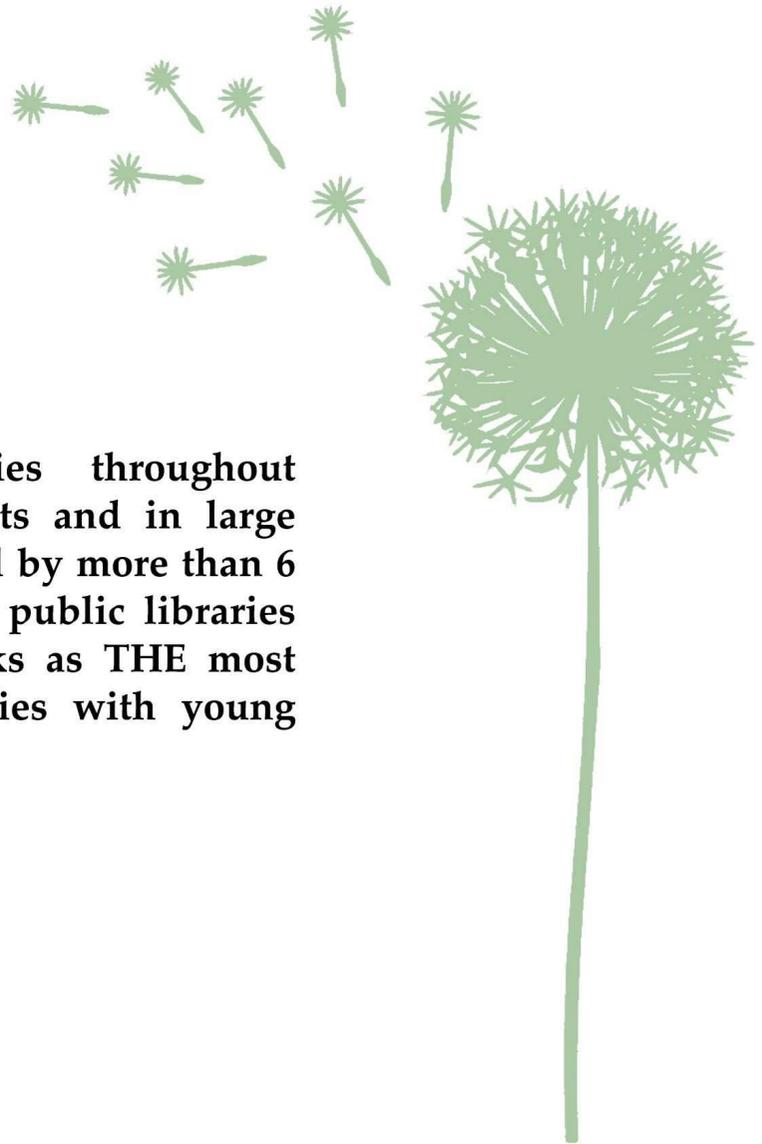


**41%** of ALL items circulated in CA libraries are children's materials.  
(State Library 2014)



**85%** of Americans believe libraries should offer early literacy services for children.  
(Pew Research 2015)

**In 2014, 1100 public libraries throughout California, in small rural hamlets and in large urban municipalities, were visited by more than 6 million young children.<sup>1</sup> In fact, public libraries were second only to public parks as THE most frequented destination by families with young children.<sup>2</sup>**



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<sup>1</sup>CA State Library 2014 Statewide Statistics Report

<sup>2</sup>Applied Survey Research, 2013 School Readiness Studies

# CHILD HONORING



**“The scientific evidence on the significant developmental impacts of early experiences, caring relationships, and environmental threats is incontrovertible. Virtually every aspect of early human development, from the brain’s evolving circuitry to the child’s capacity for empathy, is affected by the environments and experiences that are encountered, beginning in the prenatal period and extending throughout the early childhood years.”**

*From Neurons to Neighborhoods:  
The Science of Early Childhood Development*

A 4-year-old boy who has struggled with English as his second language, found a tiny spider in the library. He called me over excitedly saying, 'Library lady, library lady, look a spider! Do you think the spider would like to have a house?' He spent the next 30 minutes building a house for the spider with blocks, all the while telling me about the house, its layout, his reasons for building the house this certain way, and how the spider was going to use the different parts of the house. This is what I learned from ELF – that imagination, language, and motor skills can be fostered just through the simple act of building a house for a spider in the library.

*Children's Librarian, Yolo County Library*





## EL DORADO COUNTY LIBRARIES

The Early Learning with Families (ELF) Initiative has transformed El Dorado County Libraries in the most remarkable ways. We are proof that it is possible to go from virtually nothing to a rich and dynamic early childhood education leadership role in our county and state. Through the support of the ELF Initiative, El Dorado First 5 and the El Dorado County Office of Education, El Dorado County Libraries are now an integral component of the early education system for our young families. We provide developmentally appropriate, research-based programs and we host family engagement programs, in collaboration with a multitude of health and human services agencies, to provide vital information on available services for young families while also offering community play groups that reduce social isolation. These are truly miraculous accomplishments – all achieved during times of severe county financial constraints but made possible because of robust collaborative partnerships with ELF and our local early learning stakeholders.

ELF has also fostered opportunities to collaborate with Folsom, Placer County, Rancho Cucamonga, Sacramento, San Francisco, San Diego County, and Tehama County libraries, to name just a few, through ELF partnerships, trainings and workshops. We are especially looking forward to providing the library Touchpoints training to our staff and some of these neighboring systems as part of the ELF community of practice.

We are dedicated to supporting the young children and families in our community, and ELF has made it possible for us to do that so well!

*Carolyn Brooks*  
Branch Manager



**“As astronauts and space travelers children puzzle over the future; as dinosaurs and princesses they unearth the past. As weather reporters and restaurant workers they make sense of reality; as monsters and gremlins they make sense of the unreal.”**

*Gretchen Owocki, Early Childhood Educator*





## SAN RAFAEL PUBLIC LIBRARY

After catching the ELF bug, San Rafael Public Library Children's Services decided to revitalize our preschool programming by providing STEAM programs to preschoolers and their families. The community response was overwhelmingly enthusiastic with our Saturday morning STEAM events filled to capacity. Our programs have greatly benefited from the addition of process-based creative and sensory activities, all inspired by information shared through the ELF Initiative. Another very useful resource is the ELF Pinterest board with its multitude of activities, organized by topic and age group. Thanks to ELF not only for the inspiration but the practical ideas and resources!

*Margaret Stawowy and Jill Harris*  
Children's Librarians

# FAMILY INCLUSIVE



**“Parents, grandparents, and siblings have a significant role to play in children's development and in cultivating an enjoyment of learning.”**

*The National Literacy Trust of the United Kingdom*



After running errands all morning, it's great to come to the library and spend time talking and playing with my children. Who would have thought my young children would be welcome in a library, but they definitely are and the library has become part of our family's regular routine.

*Parent, South San Francisco Public Library*



## FOLSOM PUBLIC LIBRARY

Real transformation has taken place at our library thanks to the ELF Initiative! Before ELF our library did a good job of serving young children but because of ELF our library now does a great job serving not just young children but also their parents and caregivers.

ELF funding has enabled our library to fine tune and increase developmentally appropriate activities for our youngest patrons. Resources purchased include toys and supplies that engage children and help them develop the building blocks of early literacy. Our library has also developed into an excellent resource for parents and caregivers. Since participating in the ELF Initiative, our library has seen an increase in program attendance and in enriched interactions between parents, grandparents, caregivers and children.

ELF workshops have provided wonderful opportunities for staff to network, exchange ideas, and expand their skills. As a result, we now have a team of staff at all levels trained to better serve young children, their parents and caregivers. We are indebted to ELF for providing resources and support to better serve our young children and families!

*Lisa Dale, Library Manager and  
Debbie Centi, Youth Services & Outreach Coordinator*



This play area in the library was a very pleasant surprise. Before I felt I was better off leaving my 18-month-old son at home when I brought my 3-year-old daughter to the library because I didn't want my son to cut our library time short due to his restlessness. But having a play area keeps him entertained and my daughter also enjoys it, so now I can bring them both to enjoy the library.

*Parent, San José Public Library*



## COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES PUBLIC LIBRARY

As parents face growing challenges in raising their children, libraries are now often the institution parents turn to for help in navigating these challenges. The Early Learning with Families (ELF) Initiative has been instrumental in supporting efforts at the County of Los Angeles Public Library to help parents become more confident caregivers. Through ELF, our library has implemented multiple Family Place and Early Learning programs, and provided many of our staff with training in early childhood development and literacy. Programs such as these and the support offered through the ELF Initiative are absolutely critical in helping to ensure our library's early learning impact.

*Debbie Anderson, Youth Services Administrator*



# SKILLED & EMPATHIC STAFF



**“Creating environments where children can learn through play is not a simple thing to do consistently and well...The role of the adult is critical...The adult designs an environment with hands-on, concrete materials that encourage exploration, discovery, manipulation and active engagement of children.”**

*Jane Hewes, Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development*

## **SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY iSCHOOL**

Because of the ELF Initiative and conversations between the CA State Library and Dr. Sandy Hirsch, Director of the iSchool at San José State University, the school's youth services career path now includes an early childhood literacy class. For the instructors at the iSchool who teach the class, the relationship with ELF has been extremely valuable. By attending ELF regional meetings, the instructors identified a wide variety of topics to include in their class curriculum. One of the most enjoyable benefits of this collaborative partnership has been connecting our students with library staff in the field who have shared their ideas about how early childhood library services are evolving. It is our hope that our relationship with ELF continues long into the future.

*Beth Wrenn-Estes, Instructor*

## SAN FRANCISCO PUBLIC LIBRARY

Through the ELF Initiative, our staff have benefited from professional development and resources to expand, educate, and enhance our traditional early literacy efforts. While children have always been welcome at San Francisco Public Library, we now envision the whole family when making strategic decisions about space design, programming and partnerships. Our staff have become active participants and leaders in the ELF community of practice. We were thrilled by the invitation to host the first Touchpoints for Libraries training as part of this initiative. This training brings a strengths-based approach to building relationships that inform and, in turn, better support parents and caregivers. It holds great promise for our frontline children's services staff and eventually our entire system. As City Librarian, I value the leadership from the CA State Library, helping to elevate our early literacy impact with enhanced services that support young families and the health of our future generations.

*Luis Herrera, City Librarian*





## RANCHO CUCAMONGA LIBRARY SERVICES

ELF is a valuable movement connecting libraries to each other and inspiring the cross-pollination of innovative ideas. ELF also plays a critical role in highlighting the latest research and best practices on such topics as early learning, child development, and family engagement. For many library staff, ELF training regarding child development is the first and only exposure they've had to such information and it greatly enhances their ability to serve families. For example, the research shared about the importance of play in young children's lives went on to inspire Rancho Cucamonga Library Services to develop our own Play and Learn Islands.

ELF has also helped to create a community of practice amongst librarians across the state, inspiring family-friendly library spaces, programs, and services. Thanks to ELF, libraries are continually evolving and improving their services for the children and families of our communities.

*Angelica Trummell, Children's Services Supervisor*



## **SAN DIEGO COUNTY LIBRARY**

San Diego County Library is dedicated to providing the best possible services to our customers. As a result of ELF trainings, our staff have learned new ideas and trending topics in child development, early literacy, the importance of play, and allowing children the freedom of self-expression. As a result of ELF support, our services have evolved and we now provide higher quality services – including parenting workshops, early learning Discovery Zones where families can enjoy together the process and practice of early literacy, as well as process-oriented art activities and self-directed play opportunities. Knowing there is support from the State Library through the ELF Initiative, the San Diego County Library has been able to pursue and expand services for our young children and their families.

*Susan Moore, Deputy Director and  
Anna Hartman, Program Services Department Youth Specialist*

# COMPASSIONATE COMMUNITIES



"When we strengthen families, we ultimately strengthen the community. Our goal is that parents everywhere feel confident in their parenting role and form strong, resilient attachments with their children. To achieve this, we as (service) providers must be eager to see every parent succeed."

*T. Berry Brazelton, MD*





## ONTARIO CITY LIBRARY

Ontario City Library is committed to lifelong learning, starting with the very young. The Early Learning with Families and Family Place Initiatives have brought a family-centric worldview to our library. Through ELF our staff have learned that children play and learn through self-directed exploration. Toys have become synonymous with learning, and we continue to broaden the ways in which we serve young ones and their families. We are constantly challenging ourselves to provide the best early learning resources for our community and the ELF Initiative has helped us to do just that.

*Courtney Saldana*  
Youth Services Supervising Librarian  
Ovitt Family Community Library



I felt so isolated before coming to the library. I didn't know any other moms with young children until I discovered the play centers at my local library. Now I have several play dates lined up with families I met at the library.

*Parent, South Lake Tahoe Public Library*

Two of our most rural and isolated libraries were able to create developmental play centers in their libraries because of ELF. For the first time parents were able to connect with other parents in impromptu support groups, while their children played together.

*Staff, El Dorado County Library*

To Whom It May Concern,

We really appreciate the new toys in the free play area. The toys the library offers provide the kids with more opportunities to share and develop a team work spirit. We had actually planned to move. When we see [sic] what your library has done for our kids, we changed our mind and will be staying in Monterey Park City. We are proud of the library.

*Comment card from parents, Monterey Park Bruggemeyer Library*





## SAN JOSÉ PUBLIC LIBRARY

The Brazelton Touchpoints training (made possible by the ELF Initiative) has offered our library a strengths-based approach to working with families and understanding child development. Although simple in concept, the approach can be challenging to implement. But with practice, it has been entirely worth the effort. It has had powerful outcomes for our library. By gradually incorporating strengths-based assumptions into our interactions, staff have improved their encounters with families, and they've even reported feeling more optimistic about working in public service.

*Madeline Walton-Hadlock, Early Education Manager*

The ELF initiative is honored to support the work of library staff across California. Thanks to all who contributed to this book and to everyone who works tirelessly each day to bring dedication, passion and commitment to their work — making libraries such transformative places for young children and families.



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**It takes a village to raise a child.**  
*African Proverb*





"Every dollar invested in quality early childhood programs produces a 7–10% per annum return in better education, health, social, and economic outcomes for the nation."

*Professor James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economics*

"Study after study shows that the sooner a child begins learning, the better he or she does down the road...So let's do what works, and make sure none of our children start the race of life already behind. Let's give our kids that chance."

*President Barack Obama, State of the Union Address, February 12, 2013*

"Adults need children in their lives to listen to and care for, to keep their imagination fresh and their hearts young and to make the future a reality for which they are willing to work."

*Margaret Mead, Cultural Anthropologist*

"When children pretend, they're using their imaginations to move beyond the bounds of reality. A stick can be a magic wand. A sock can be a puppet. A small child can be a superhero."

*Fred Rogers, Children's Television Host*

"Early experience lasts a lifetime. It shapes our sense of self and how we see others; it also shapes our sense of what's possible, our emerging worldview. The impressionable early years are the most vulnerable. In this time of unprecedented worldwide social and ecological change, we must redesign society to meet the priority needs of the very young."

*Raffi, Children's Musician*

