

Testimony on the Need to Retain The Commission on Children

By Joan Barbuto, 136 Ridgeland Circle, Wallingford, CT

I am Joan Barbuto, co-president of the Connecticut Coalition on Child Development Education, and we are appalled that Governor Rell wants to eliminate the Commission on Children. Children are our most precious and most vulnerable resource, and the citizens of this state deserve all the help they can get to make sure our young people get the care and education that they require. The Commission has been doing this for years, and their work needs to continue.

I began the Connecticut Coalition for Child Development Education 10 years ago, and we have been trying ever since to get Connecticut to provide education in child development, child safety and parenting skills to all students in our schools, the parents of tomorrow. Research has shown that such education can help prevent child abuse and neglect and teen pregnancy and prevent behavioral, emotional and substance abuse problems in the next generation of children.

Although our coalition over the years submitted six bills, they all died in committee, and nothing was happening until Elizabeth Brown and the Commission on Children came to our aid. Liz helped us bring major organizations into our Coalition, and instead of a membership of about 30 people, we now have 15 organizations supporting us, including the Connecticut PTA, The Mental Health Association of Connecticut, the Connecticut Department of Children and Families, The Connecticut Association for Infant Mental Health, and Prevent Child Abuse Connecticut. Liz and the Commission also helped us organize a well-attended Forum in the Legislative Office Building to explain to legislators, school superintendents and staff, and any interested citizens why educating our young people about child development and safety and parenting skills is so important. We brought in experts in the field, including Dr. Kyle Pruett, director of the Yale Child Study Center to testify to the importance of this. This year the Commission also helped our coalition with advice on submitting a bill, and our bill, Proposed Bill 53 would "require that instruction in child development, child safety and parenting skills be included in the health curriculum in high school and the family and consumer sciences curriculum in middle school. Such instruction shall emphasize the needs of children from birth to age five..."

Much has been found out within the past decade about brain development in young children, and how the types of experiences they have in the first years of life determine what neurological circuits in their brain will become well developed, and which will grow weaker. If they live with stress, for instance, the stress response in the brain is likely to be more intense and more easily triggered and may remain switched on in susceptible people (from an article on depression in Newsweek Dec. 8, 2003, p. 69) What can cause excessive stress in a small child? Obviously, physical abuse and neglect, but also certain parenting practices, such as frequent criticism and sarcasm, threatening to leave a child because he won't behave, frequent use of hitting as a means of discipline, making the child feel guilty about normal emotions like fear and anger, instead of

acknowledging and naming these emotions and helping him talk out why he feels as he does, and then helping him handle these emotions. In infancy, not responding promptly to a baby's cries and answering his needs, and not holding and cuddling him can do severe emotional damage, researchers have found. A baby needs to be cuddled and his needs attended to in order to develop the ability to love and trust. Children deprived of this do not bond to a significant adult; they grow up with severe emotional problems and may even become sociopathic.

Parents and potential parents must learn the needs of children at various ages and how best to fulfill them, and the positive parenting techniques they can use to guide their child's behavior at various ages. We also need to teach parents and parents-to-be how to promote their child's social and emotional development in his first few years because it is on this that school readiness is based. He must know how to follow directions, control his behavior, take turns, have manners, understand and control his emotions and recognize emotions in others, empathize and interact well with others if he is going to succeed in school, much research has shown. (Goldman, *Emotional Intelligence*).

Parenting is the most important job most people will do in their life because it determines the character of the next generation and the quality of our society. Yet few people get any education for it. Even though some high schools have family and consumer science courses which teach child development and parenting skills, a survey by our co-president found only 8 percent of students statewide take this elective course. In Wallingford, when I was on the Board of Education, we were able to get 20 classes in child development, child safety and parenting skills to sixth and seventh graders at no additional cost because they were taught by family and consumer science teachers, who were already there, and they just revised their curriculum to include this information.

The Commission on Children has been a great help to us in trying to get other school districts to include child development education in their curriculum also. The Commission has been a major force in looking out for children's welfare and promoting the kind of education our young people need so they can best succeed in school and in life. Don't stop their important work!