

**Closing Address by President McAleese
World Forum on Early Care and Education
Europa Hotel, Belfast**

June 19, 2009

Good afternoon everyone and thank you very much for that warm welcome. I know that delegates to this Forum have travelled from all over the globe to be here and now, after a week of learning and lectures, discussion and debate, the events are coming to a close and you are preparing to depart.

I hope that you have been stimulated and invigorated and that lasting friendships and productive collaborations have resulted from all the many interactions that have taken place during the past few days. I wish you well on your journeys home and Godspeed. I hope you have enjoyed the hospitality of my home city, that you all feel that you have had a very special few days and, of course, that you will be back to visit us again.

I would like to begin by thanking Siobhan Fitzpatrick of Early Years for her kind invitation to give the closing address to your Forum. Siobhan has been a formidable and relentless advocate for children for over 20 years now and she was instrumental in bringing this wonderful, international gathering to Belfast. The same commitment to the same vocation has brought each one of you here in this 10th anniversary of the World Forum and 20th anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The writer Cynthia Ozick once said, "What we remember from childhood, we remember forever - permanent ghosts, stamped, inked, imprinted, eternally seen." My granny, who had eleven children and sixty grandchildren put it more tersely "What's learnt in childhood is engraved on stone". When the headstone on my grandfather's grave was put up, it carried a small misprint which we were told was engraved so deeply in the granite that the only solution was to do it all over again and put up a new one. We don't get that chance with our kids, we get one go around.

We have learnt a lot on this island about the permanent ghosts of childhood - the bad engraving on children's lives that left them scarred for life.

So many young lives were blighted here by sectarian and political bitterness that was taught in the home and reinforced in the community. We have seen, in recent days, the outworking of racism and the misery it can inflict on the innocent. The cruel stories of institutional abuse of vulnerable children described in the recent Ryan Report south of the border demonstrate just how long-term is the damage done in childhood. It robbed them not only of the loving childhood they should have had but acted like a wrecking ball through their later lives, leaving a landscape of broken relationships, mental ill-health, under-achievement and sheer, appalling waste.

There is some good news on the horizon though and that is the human capacity to change, to shift gear and to walk a new path. Today the people of this island have taken ownership of

their problems, they have faced into the painful and shameful dark side of their pasts, acknowledged the pain they caused and set their faces towards healing, reconciliation and amendment. Those who fought for Irish freedom in 1916 issued a Proclamation in which they set out their ambition that Ireland would become a place which cherished all its children equally. It was then and it remains a noble ambition. We have made an important start in removing the obstacles which lie in the way of making that ambition real.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva, acknowledged in its 2nd report on Ireland that significant and real progress had been made for children in developing a range of truly child-focused services. We now have a Children's Ombudsman and a dedicated Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs within the Irish Government. These developments have significantly raised the profile of children's needs and they have ensured a much greater level of integration of the wide range of services and personnel who impact on the lives of children. A few months ago, the Irish Government launched a new Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme, designed to provide a year's free pre-school for every child and a new framework of principles and standards to ensure that, as pre-school services become more broadly available, they will also be operating to higher standards of care and education.

In preparing that Scheme we were grateful to get help from Northern Ireland, a sign of the changed culture of these times when good neighbourliness and partnership have replaced the bad old days of mutual mistrust. Children, in particular, will be major beneficiaries of that new culture. They have the chance to grow up in a political and social environment that is very different from any previous generation, one with peace, shared government, growing trust and a coherent effort at bridging old divisions with mutual respect. They also have a chance to grow up in a place where their life's chances are considerably better than those of most other children on the planet.

Half of all female children born in Ireland today will live to be one hundred. Half of all children born in Africa will be lucky to see fifty. Every child here will be able to go to primary and secondary school and on to College if they want. One hundred million children in the world today never get to primary school. Children here are growing up in a world that is wise to the fragility of those early childhood years and their critical importance.

We know they are not always safe in their own homes for quality of parenting is a lottery, but we can help improve parenting skills, challenge attitudes to unreasonable punishment, encourage supportive environments, for the child that is praised and loved, not overindulged or brutalised has a good chance at a good life.

We can promote the vigilance of neighbours, friends, teachers, health care and social work professionals who interact regularly with children, so that the space for people to wreck those children's lives is closed down. We are wiser today about the many ways that children's lives can be helped or hindered and they are no longer a voiceless constituency.

But they still need champions and advocates to promote their interests and protect their potential. The advances we make here in terms of understanding childhood and getting the

most from it will benefit not just the children of this island but of the world, for information shared is not information halved; the mathematics are the reverse.

I stood in a school many thousands of miles away from here some years ago and heard a teacher tell me proudly that if the children were more than five minutes late for school they were sent home. Some children walked three hours, crossed dangerous rivers and ravines to get there. They walked on empty stomachs and returned to homes where parents had died or were dying from AIDS.

In the classroom there was a huge sign stretched from one wall to the other. In print about a foot high it read - the following are slow learners. I found myself hoping the slow learners could not read but knowing that some spoilt kid was already mocking and bullying the tired kid, the dyslexic kid, the hard-of hearing kid, the autistic kid and it could be a generation of suffering before a child-centred pedagogy turned that school into fun rather than fear. By sharing our store of experience and knowledge we can shorten that suffering, help change that culture which once prevailed here too but is now thankfully the distant past.

We get one go around with our kids. Engrave well and their little lives have a chance to blossom as they should. Engrave badly and the scars last a lifetime. You are here because you believe with a passion in getting those early years right. I am here because I want you to know how important your message is, how vital your voices are, how needed your wisdom, expertise and intuition. I hope this Conference has helped to recharge your batteries, refocus your efforts, rekindle your imagination about the road-map we need to follow to get us to a world that cherishes its children and equally.

There is no more precious and important vocation than yours. May Belfast have helped you to believe that even more firmly than you did when you started.

Thank you