



CITY OF SOUTH BEND

PETE BUTTIGIEG, MAYOR

Office of the Mayor

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HONORING CASA DE AMISTAD GOOD SHEPHARD MONTESSORI CHIARAVALLE AWARD DINNER

I'm honored to spend some time with you this evening. Montessori is close to my heart, because it is a way of teaching that formed me.

Recently, my staff got a hold of a picture of me when I was a five year old student standing in front of the Montessori school that I was attending at the time. I am a little taller now, and I like to think my fashion has improved, but the haircut is still pretty much the same. I need to get to the bottom of how that got leaked, but it did help to remind me of my time as a young Montessori student.

Now I find myself at the tender age of 31, assigned to be the caretaker of our City of 100,000 people. And I am moved by this invitation to share a few thoughts on the stake that our whole community has in the well-being of children.

One of the many joys of this job, which happens to be the best job in the world, is that it brings frequent opportunities for the company of children.

My first rewarding mayoral interaction with a South Bend child began before I had even been elected. After I had become the Democratic nominee, a twelve-year old somehow got hold of my email address and sent me an email asking for a stop sign to be added in his neighborhood. I wrote back something along the lines of "thanks for writing kid, but I haven't even won the election yet. If I win, remind me and I'll see what I can do." Sure enough, the day after the election, I got a note congratulating me on winning before going on, "now I would like to get to the matter of the stop sign." We ran it by the traffic engineers and found that he had a point, and the sign went up during my first few weeks in office.

Let me share some of the ways I have been touched by children just in the last few days. On Monday, I found myself at the Robinson Center, where a committee of ten or so students presented to me a plan for improving conditions at a park near where they live.

Tuesday, I hosted an event in my office acknowledging the sacrifice of military children and joined a nationwide declaration of April as the Month of the Military Child. We handed out care packages to the kids, since we have done a better and better job of acknowledging the sacrifice of



service members but still often neglect the needs of their families. It was a chance to think of Milton's words, "they also serve who only stand and wait."

The other day I was comparing notes with a fellow mayor at a conference. He told the story of visiting a school to read to third-graders and getting a follow-up note a few days later full of questions about the mayor's office and the city. The part that stuck with him was the end of the note: "PS: Please don't write in cursive."

Sometimes I will have the pleasure of reading to kids, or talking to them about the job. It's particularly amusing to be with kids in the first or second grade, some of whom haven't totally hit on the distinction between my job and the presidency. I get a lot of questions about my limousine, and have to decide whether or not to tell them about the dented light green Taurus I drive, lovingly referred to by my staff as the "chick magnet."

Kids have a magical effect on us, and that is what I want to talk about.

It is almost impossible to discuss children without recourse to some of the most well-worn clichés in English vocabulary. Most of those are some variation on the statement "the children are our future." Like most clichés, the reason this has come to be said so numbingly often is that it is so thoroughly true. The emotional well-being, physical health, literacy, preparedness, and quality of life of our children is a more or less direct window into the future that our community will know a generation hence. And it offers a perfect readout of what our future is going to look like.

President Kennedy said that "The future promise of any nation can be directly measured by the present prospects of its youth."

So how are we doing in securing the future for our children?

I often stress that our administration focuses on three things. Making sure the basics of life are easy, securing the benefits of good government, and creating jobs.

It's not difficult to see why investing in good government makes our city more sustainable and efficient for a future generation, or why job creation today plants seeds for fruit our children will be able to reap. But I want to dwell for a moment on what I mean by taking care of the basics.

Municipal government is not in the business of raising children. But we are in the business of making it easier to raise children. We provide roads to get you and your child to school. We provide clean, safe drinking water that every family needs in order to live. And we take responsibility for public safety in our community.

John Dewey said the state "gives the individual members of valued associations greater liberty and security. It relieves them of hampering conditions which if they had to cope with personally would absorb their energies in a mere negative struggle against evils."



This is particularly true when it comes to public safety, the most fundamental thing that any government owes its citizens.

At the policy level, this means adding South Bend's voice to those who believe that Washington should pass common-sense reforms favored by the vast majority of Americans, such as universal background checks for gun purchases. And it's disappointing to see that the Senate could not get this done last night.

But we can't wait for Congress to solve problems as complex as violence, which is why we are investing so much attention and effort in the Anti-Violence Commission.

The Commission is based on a three-pronged approach, enlisting the moral voice of the community, presenting a credible law enforcement consequence if destructive acts continue, and providing social services for those who are willing to change. The model has shown success in communities from Indianapolis to Portland, and it can work here.

The work of this commission is based on a proven approach, but its success is really determined by the ability of different leaders in this community to work together. Not only is it chaired by Police Chief Ron Teachman and Rev. Eddie Miller of the Board of Public Safety, but it also brings together our leading foundations, hospitals, pastors, social services, schools, and others. This initiative is based on the power of all of us collaborating. All of us working on a single, urgent problem, without regard to power, ego, status, and turf. All of us working toward a single purpose. All of us working, in other words, the way a child would expect us to work together on something really important.

Which brings me back to the other cliché often used about children. I mentioned the one you hear most: the children are our future. But this other cliché is about what children mean for our present. The other one, also used so often because it is so true, is this: "I learn more from the child than she learns from me." What parent, teacher, hasn't said this at some point?

The stories I shared earlier about reading to kids, watching them grow, seeing the programs they engage in, getting letters from them—I have learned from them. And it isn't that we learn facts from them—after all, they know no facts that they did not pick up from adults. But they teach us—morally. I'd like to invite you to reflect for a moment on this fact, something we all seem to know, that interacting with children makes us better people. Why is that?

Part of it, no doubt, is that they see the world as it ought to be. They understand justice before they understand injustice. In fact they absolutely cannot understand injustice. We do. And understanding it brings us dangerously close to accepting it. "It's not fair!" comes the refrain of the aggrieved child. And to us it is not much of an argument, but to her it is the only argument that matters. And does she not have a point?

They understand friendship but they cannot understand intolerance. I routinely find myself in classrooms that are more or less evenly divided among white, African-American, and Latino



kids. No one has told them that there is supposed to be tension over this, and so they don't experience any tension over this. They know each other based on their personalities, their emerging character, the way they treat each other. Does their perspective not make more sense, fundamentally, than ours?

They understand play. The classicist Edith Hamilton, explaining why Greek civilization stood out among the ancients, said that even if none of their writings had survived, "the fact that they were in love with play and played magnificently would be proof enough of how they lived and how they looked at life. Wretched people, toiling people, do not play. . . . The Egyptian did not play. . . . 'Solon, Solon, you Greeks are all children,' said the Egyptian priest to the great Athenian."

Children understand that we live more fully when we give room for play. That play is no less real than work—perhaps more real because it comes from deeper within. And encountering children compels us to remember this. We do ourselves and those we care about no favor when we immerse ourselves in work to the point that we forget the meaning of play.

Perhaps in no field more than that of politics, there are daily reminders that we live in a grown-up world, sinful and broken. It is full of jealousies and intrigues and meanness that we sometimes call childish, an unjust term because a child would not indulge such nonsense for very long. It suffuses our political, economic, and social lives.

We are better when we surround ourselves with children because their lack of understanding of the evils of our world calls into question our understanding, an understanding that verges on acceptance. We must be more like children in our determination not to accept the brokenness of the world. We must be more like children by cultivating in us the childlike faith that anything broken can and should be mended, and that the mending is for us to do.

Let us be half as good, half as just, half as capable as a ten-year-old thinks we are, and we will be so much better than we are. Let our decision-makers, our managers, our lawyers, our CEOs, and yes, our elected officials, be as grown-up as our children believe grown-ups ought to be, and we will have come a long way.

We are right to think that we must focus our energies on improving life for our children, who are our future. But we would do well every day to pay closer attention to what the perspective of children can do to enlighten our attitudes, our moods, and our decisions in the present.

Thank you.

—Mayor Pete Buttigieg