

Children need love and commitment

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Department of Education Commissioner

I assumed the duties as Alaska's commissioner of education on April 2. I brought with me a fair number of ideas about education that have become a part of me through experience first as a student, then as a teacher, as a college professor, as a director of education in the Bureau of Indian Affairs, as a deputy commissioner in the U.S. Office of Education and now as commissioner in the State Department of Education.

One of the problems we as educators have is that we want to tell all that we know in as short a period of time as possible. I will resist that temptation to tell all and try to focus on a couple of ideas I feel very strongly about.

These ideas, if transferred into action, could make a significant difference on how well Native students do in school.

My grandmother, Sitguay, once told my sister and me (when as young children we were playing near her house one day) that we needed to stop and take time to eat properly — that the children of Justna (my sister) would be strong and smart only if she took care of herself.

My grandmother pointed out that Justna must eat well and that playing hard would make her strong (and her children would be strong).

She spoke the truth, with the wisdom of generations behind her. Experiences of her mother, her mother's mother, and so on down the line, had shown that in order to have healthy, intelligent children, a young girl must begin preparing herself at an early age.

Today we recognize the accuracy of my grandmother's statement. Nutrition experts and other scientists recognize the value of good diet and exercise for developing a strong body within which to develop intelligent and strong babies.

The harmful effects of alcohol, smoking, drugs and poor diet on the development of a young fetus are well known. The brain grows at an exceptional pace during this period of development, and we must do everything we know to do to help it along rather than retard its growth. *It*

never gets another chance.

Once that critical period is past, and a youngster is born, there is much we as parents can do to support our children's overall development. The first thing we can do is to feed them good, healthy food. Initially, it is milk our youngsters require.

As our children grow, we must give them the other basic foods they require for healthy growth and development (not the "junk food" that so many find it easy to give to keep youngsters quiet).

The second thing of importance is to express the love and concern and commitment shared by family members. It is important that children learn from parents and other family members the intimacy of the family experience.

The third item of importance that we can do immediately after birth is to talk with — not at — our children in order to encourage richer language skills and to help them learn the joy of human communication. As parents, we can do this as a special focus before they start school. It will be invaluable in the development of our relationship with our children as they get older.

This first language for our young should be the language that we as parents feel most comfortable using.

It is important that we be able to describe and interpret the world through our eyes for our children with the greatest depth possible in our own language. As our child's primary educator, this helps to develop the great potential of a child's cognitive development.

There are other things that we can do in the areas of physical development, social and cultural development, mental and spiritual development. The important thing is to do them with youngsters and to set an example.

They see what we do, not necessarily what we tell them. We must take the time to play with our youngsters,

let them explore and challenge their curiosity to let them know that they are important and that there are things we expect of them.

We must be prepared to spend time with them. It is critical we do these things while our children are very young. It makes all the difference in the world. They are our future.
