

The latest in gifts that last a lifetime

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By Bill Frist and Orin Levine

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Think it's impossible to find a child a hot, new gift for a modest price? If you're hunting for one of those trendy electronic hamsters, you might be out of luck. But take heart: \$10 or \$15 can still go a long way — and even save a child's life.

New vaccines at those prices can prevent the two biggest killers of young children — pneumonia and diarrheal disease. As a nation we have a great opportunity to extend a spirit of generosity to the world's children with the highest risk of dying.

In a season when gathering with family is a joyful tradition, reflect on the nearly 9 million families that lost a child under 5 this past year to preventable and treatable diseases.

Almost all these families live in the developing world. Unfortunately, they didn't have access to the new vaccines or the even less expensive treatments — like antibiotics or oral-rehydration fluids — that have been around for years. Yearly, pneumonia and diarrhea kill nearly 4 million small children. Preventable neonatal infections and malaria are the other major killers.

AIDS, the focus of nearly three-quarters of current U.S. global health funding, accounts for less than 3 percent of these child deaths worldwide. It's truly inspiring that over the past several years the United States has granted 2 million people living with HIV and AIDS a new lease on life through access to drug treatments. Amazingly, for just a fraction of the \$5.7 billion we'll spend fighting AIDS this year alone, we could deliver life-saving services to tens of millions of children who lack access to basic health care.

We can do both.

We would dramatically reduce the number of children who die needlessly each year.

The United States already has an admirable track record in saving children's lives. We've helped make measles and tetanus vaccinations and life-saving oral rehydration therapy widely available around the world — preventing millions of child deaths. In Bangladesh, Nepal, Mozambique and Ethiopia, broad-based, U.S.-funded programs have been integral in cutting child mortality rates by more than 40 percent since 1990. These programs work, and they have shown that making affordable and effective health interventions available can save lives, even in very poor countries.

Such scientifically proven, remarkably cheap options include oral rehydration solution and zinc, low-cost drugs to treat pneumonia and malaria, and breastfeeding counseling. Add the new vaccines for pneumonia and diarrhea to the mix and we now have the tools to achieve revolutionary reductions in under-5 deaths.

In May, President Obama pledged to emphasize basic health care for mothers and children as part of his new global health initiative. But he didn't ask for much more money this past year, and last week Congress approved only a modest \$54 million increase for maternal and child health care, as well as \$400 million more in AIDS and malaria funding that will in part benefit children.

Using figures published in The Lancet medical journal, experts estimate that \$1 billion in increased funding for child and maternal health could save 1 million children's lives a year. U.S. leadership would inspire other wealthy nations to join the cause. And, by working with developing nations to ensure health interventions reach children and families on the margins, the U.S. would help those countries strengthen their national health systems to improve the children's health for generations to come.

Let's encourage President Obama to be as bold in exercising U.S. leadership on global health as he has been in responding decisively to the global hunger crisis. In this season when children anxiously await their gifts and we their smiling faces, Americans can all be part of the greatest gift for children everywhere — the chance to survive and thrive.

ABOUT THE WRITERS

Former U.S. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, a physician, is the chairman of Save the Children's Survive to 5 campaign. Orin Levine is executive director of the International Vaccine Access Center at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

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