

# Family Literacy in Canada: Profiles of Effective Practices

*edited by*  
Adele Thomas



**SOLEIL**



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Profiles of Effective Practices**



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Table of Contents

Table of Contents . . . . . i

**Acknowledgements . . . . . iii**

**About the Authors . . . . . v**

**Introduction . . . . . 1**

**Overview of Perspectives on Family Literacy:  
Research and Practice . . . . . 5**  
    Adele Thomas and Sharon Skage . . . . . 5

**Family  
Literacy  
in Alberta . . . . . 25**

**Books For Babies . . . . . 27**  
    **Mary Peterson and Shannon Palmer . . . . . 27**  
    Learning and Parenting Skills . . . . . 33  
    . . . . . Elaine Cairns and Lauren MacKenzie  
    33

Prospects Literacy Association . . . . . 45  
    Ruth Hayden and Maureen Sanders . . . . . 45

<b>Family Literacy in British Columbia</b> .....	53
Families in Motion	
Chilliwack, British Columbia .....	55
Barbara Bate .....	55
Family Literacy in Manitoba .....	71
Book Bridges .....	73
Beverly Zakaluk .....	73
Family Literacy and Victor Mager School .....	83
Jan Smith .....	83
Family Literacy in Newfoundland .....	93
The Fun and Learning Centre of the Fogo Island Literacy Association . . . .	95
Della Coish .....	95

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**Beverly Zakaluk, Ph.D.**, is a professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba. She is a recipient of the Lieutenant-Governor's medal for Literacy and was nominated in 1977 for the University of Manitoba Award for Excellence in Graduate Teaching. Her most recent research is a report on "the Excel Project: The effectiveness of a wireless, laptop computer-based intervention on the biography writing of grade 4 students." She is internationally known for her work on readability.



# Introduction

As family literacy programs have developed, practitioner efforts are increasingly devoted to many activities that serve to keep programs going from year to year. Recruitment, fundraising, proposal writing, program evaluation, materials development and program resource management are all necessary to maintain family literacy programs, although these activities are in addition to other routines required for instructional planning and interaction with families. As a consequence, there is usually little opportunity for practitioners to reflect or report on their family literacy program experiences outside their own settings or communities. Provincial and national adult or family literacy conferences and newsletters have been one means of sharing concerns and ideas with a wider audience, while the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD) also provides electronic access to information about literacy initiatives across Canada and beyond.

There is a continuing need for documentation of family literacy program development in order to understand the dynamics of working with families in different communities. As interest in family literacy increases, new program planners should be able to benefit from the experience and resources of others who have already engaged in problem solving about program delivery and working collaboratively with families and community partners. Successful family literacy program implementation has often resulted in novel approaches to community collaboration, family involvement, and practitioner training. Nevertheless, at the present time there is little written corroboration of family literacy program development in Canada, and little is accessible to a wide audience of literacy practitioners and family resource professionals.

This volume is an attempt to bring together a sample of family literacy programs that represents the range of family literacy approaches in different communities across Canada. Rather than a survey written in one voice by someone relatively unfamiliar with specific programs, the present volume is written in the many voices of practitioners who have been closely involved in the establishment and maintenance of family literacy programs. These practitioners have taken time to reflect on the nature of their literacy work with families and the challenges they and their program participants have encountered.

When the idea of practitioner case studies of family literacy was first raised, it was decided to convene an advisory panel of family literacy practitioners, representing a broad base of geographic regions and cultural communities. The job of the advisory panel was to establish criteria for selecting family literacy programs and to identify a pool of possible programs from which final selections could be made. It was determined that, where possible, programs would be selected, based on criteria for:

- community partnerships. Evidence that program sustainability had been accomplished through community collaboration;
- a “track record” in family literacy. Evidence that programs were in operation more than three years, in order to reflect implementation of evaluation strategies and challenges to program survival;

- geographic and cultural representation. Program inclusion should reflect the geographic and cultural diversity of Canada;
- unique approach to family literacy program delivery. The program is a model that can be adapted by other practitioners or has developed an innovative approach to family literacy.

During our initial planning, francophone literacy associations expressed their eagerness to develop a companion document for family literacy, which would reflect the distinct approaches developed within francophone communities. Consequently, the present volume refers primarily to anglophone programs. At the same time, a national Aboriginal literacy program study is currently under way (Globensky, 1998) to document and analyze Native literacy programs in order to provide provincial and national perspectives on Aboriginal literacy and make recommendations. In view of this current work and the limited information available on Aboriginal family literacy initiatives, the reader is directed to the Globensky study for detailed perspectives on family literacy in Native communities.

Twelve programs from eight provinces are included in the volume. All of the practitioner–authors have been centrally involved in program operations and in directly working with families. In addition to discussion about the early development of programs and aspects of working with families, all practitioners have sought to provide analysis and reflection on aspects of the community context for family literacy, the nature of obstacles faced, as well as suggestions and strategies for maintaining family literacy programs.

The range of family literacy approaches is notable. Programs range from a focus on parent-child interaction through oral language and story telling, play-based programs which encourage parent-child shared reading, to programs which cater to caregiver only groups in workshops featuring children's literature, writing, and parenting. In addition, programs with broad-based community involvement for family literacy have been included to examine the process of collaboration in school settings and community agencies.

Three programs were selected from Alberta. *Prospects Literacy Association* was chosen as an example of a literacy organization that made a major commitment to family literacy, managing a variety of collaborative family literacy projects. *Books for Babies* is an example of an all-volunteer program involving families at the birth of their children. *Learning and Parenting Skills* is a workshop-based program which has developed practitioner training materials and participant materials adapted for learners with English as a Second Language.

The *Families in Motion* program from British Columbia is community based program which includes four components: adult education, early childhood education, parent group time, and parent-child interaction. It is an example of the benefits of early community involvement and collaborative planning.

From Manitoba, *Book Bridges* represents a family literacy workshop series offered in many communities, supported by facilitator training and a community support network. *The Victor Mager School* family literacy program is an example of one school's vision for meeting the needs of families and of

commitment to providing a wide range of literacy services that meet the needs of all family members.

*The Fun and Learning Centre* of Fogo Island, Newfoundland is a program that demonstrates the power of community and volunteer efforts to raise awareness of the importance of family literacy and to develop a family literacy program, run for and by families themselves.

In Nova Scotia, the *Learning Together* program of the Hants Shore Health Centre is an example of provincial support and community collaboration. The Hants Shore Health Centre is outstanding in its commitment to literacy development, as part of its mission to promote the health and well being of community members. At the same time the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture has provided program development and training resources to enable communities to offer family literacy workshop series with resources and booklets for family participants.

Ontario has two of the oldest running family literacy programs in the country. *The Parenting and Family Literacy Centres* of the Toronto District School Board is a model of multi-cultural, school based, parent-child drop-in centres that provide family literacy training in a parenting context. *The Parent-Child Mother Goose* program is an oral language program for families of young children, that has been replicated in many communities across Canada. A report of a *Mother Goose* adaptation, *Rhymes That Bind*, is included as a companion article to Celia Lottridge's analysis of the *Parent Child Mother Goose* program.

As family literacy has received substantial support in Quebec, the *Learning With My Child* program is a model of a school board's support for family literacy and the development of an extensive volunteer program to assist families in the school-based literacy development of their children.

From Saskatchewan, the *Come Read With Me* program is an impressive provincial-wide network of family literacy workshop offerings from a pool of over 200 potential family literacy facilitators, utilizing a train-the-trainer model. In preparing this manuscript, discussions with practitioners often revolved around the complex issues that are involved in attempting to assist families in literacy development. As Nickse and Quezada (1994, p. 211) noted:

Literacy improvement is only one goal in the lives of families in need of assistance in a myriad of other areas. Literacy practice does not thrive in a vacuum, or in families beset with social, emotional, economic problems. Increasingly, developers of literacy programs are becoming aware that literacy improvement cannot be separated from the constellation of other factors that impinge on families' well being, such as poverty and its effects, quality of parenting, and communication with schools... Programs are being developed with the realization that literacy is a slender thread that binds many issues together. Family literacy programs place an emphasis on the enjoyment of literacy, as well as such functional aspects as its importance to children's school achievement and adults' success in finding work in a worsening job market.

A chapter has been included in the volume to address some of the broader issues which face family literacy practitioners, by focusing on some relevant

historical background on the family literacy movement, definitions of family literacy, and research on families and literacy and family literacy intervention.

It is hoped that this volume will foster further dialogue about family literacy practice and encourage discussion about future directions of family literacy in Canada. It is clear that the different approaches presented have provided significant literacy benefits to families involved in these programs. At the same time, the reflections and experiences of practitioners also indicate that many issues related to family literacy practice have yet to be adequately recognized or systematically investigated. The environment for family literacy practice is positive and optimistic for the future, just as the parents we work with are hopeful for their children's futures.

### Reference

- Nickse, R. & Quezada, S. (1994). Collaborations: A key to success in family literacy programs. In D. K. Dickinson (Ed.), *Bridges to literacy: Children, families, and schools* (pp. 211-235). Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers.

# Overview of Perspectives on Family Literacy: Research and Practice

*Adele Thomas and Sharon Skage*

In the last decade of the twentieth century, while there is consensus that literacy is fundamental to a nation's economic and social development, there are continuing challenges to society's ability to support the literacy development of its citizens. Technological advances have led to increased work-related literacy demands and expectations for higher levels of literacy attainment. At the same time, concern over persistent difficulties in reducing poverty has implicated literacy, in considering both causal factors and attempts at solution. Appreciation of the importance of literacy has given rise to new approaches in literacy practice and research.

Family literacy unites research and practice from several fields of study and social service, including sociology, psychology, and education. Trying to represent the scope of family literacy is a daunting task. It may be compared to trying to capture a wide landscape with a single camera shot. As the lens focuses on one part of the scene, another part of the landscape disappears from view, and the integrity of the picture is lost. A view of family literacy, from the perspective of adult literacy, often focuses on adult literacy learning in terms of adult literacy levels, career development and economic opportunities of the adult family members, and reforming adult education. When the family literacy perspective shifts to the child, the role of the family becomes central in questions related to early language and print experiences at home and the acquisition of literacy, parental support and school readiness, or later school achievement of children. Nevertheless, partial images of family literacy can distort our understanding of family literacy as a multi-faceted, interactive, social process which shapes ways of thinking for both adult and child. Such narrow views may also limit understanding of family literacy as a social movement based on social equity and empowerment of families.

Partial images of family literacy have appeared in public policy and literacy practice. Public awareness campaigns that focus on family literacy may find it difficult to project a vision of the potential for literacy development of both adult and child through family literacy activity, as they proclaim reading readiness or school achievement benefits for child. Adult educators may be convinced that they have family literacy programs, whenever they have added childcare to complement traditional adult basic education or upgrading programs. Such views do not take full advantage of the dynamic literacy interaction of the family as a unit, nor do they build on this interaction as the basis for adult and child literacy learning. Being forewarned about the difficulties inherent in conveying the complex dynamics of family literacy, we

will attempt to review some pertinent literature on research and intervention and identify some current issues facing family literacy practitioners and policy makers. It is hoped that a critical review will contribute to clarifying some guiding questions and directions for future family literacy practice and policy.

### What is family literacy?

The term “family literacy” was first coined by Denny Taylor in her 1983 study which explored the social context of the home as a key factor in the literacy development of young children. Neither in the initiatives and studies that predate Taylor’s work, nor in the broad range of family literacy activities that have taken place since, is there a single, commonly-accepted definition of what the term means. It has been used to indicate:

1. interest in the way literacy is used within families,
2. the study of relationships between literacy use in families and children’s academic achievement, and
3. the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs to facilitate the literacy development of families (Tracey, 1995, p. 281).

Many definitions of family literacy have been suggested during the fifteen years that have passed since Taylor’s (1983) study was published (Morrow & Paratore, 1993; Taylor, 1997). The variety evident in these definitions mirrors the diversity of programs and activities that take place in order to match the diverse cultural contexts of the families who participate. Two common terms are frequently encountered.

**Family literacy** refers to the many ways families develop and use literacy skills to accomplish day-to-day tasks and activities. Examples of family literacy might include writing a note to a child’s teacher, sharing a bedtime story, making shopping lists, and using a recipe. As well, adult reading and writing for different purposes at home, and literacy-related adult discussions typify family literacy, where adults may be literacy role models in the home (Barton, 1997).

**Family literacy intervention** refers to a broad spectrum of initiatives which recognize the influence of the family on the literacy development of family members and try to support families in literacy activity and in accessing literacy resources. There are many types of family literacy projects; a few examples include storytelling or reading circles, parenting sessions with shared reading, homework clubs where parents participate, adult education using family experiences or children’s literature, and book bags for parents and babies.

References to *family* in definitions of family literacy usually assume some essential aspects which relate to the structure, function, and development of the family unit (Bailey & Simeonsson, 1988). Structure of the family refers to relationships among family members and the extent to which those relationships determine how the family deals with daily tasks. Socio-cultural influences in the last two decades have significantly altered our views of what families should “look like.” Today, there are many combinations of caregivers and children and it is likely that many children will live in more than one type of family before reaching adulthood (Canadian Council on Social Development, 1997).

In addition to family structure, the functional aspect of families refers to the responsibilities assumed by family members, that contribute to the adaptation of individual members and the family as a unit. Among functions specific to the family, affection, guidance, education, and socialization have been identified, along with caregiver roles of teacher, money manager, health care provider, disciplinarian (Bailey & Simeonsson, 1988). The extent to which various family roles are adopted by individual caregivers is unique to each family.

Developmental characteristics of families refer to the formative stages of the family unit through childbearing, childrearing, the launching of adult children and the later life of adult caregivers. These progressive changes in family life are also affected by a variety of social, economic, and cultural factors which affect family adaptation and individual differences in families. Given the complex characteristics involved in defining family, when used in conjunction with family literacy, the trend toward broad definitions of family literacy serve to avoid value judgments and over-simplification about what should be considered typical for families.

## Historical Background

The first family literacy programs, aimed at supporting families in their literacy development, began in Israel, the United States, and England in the 1970's and 1980's. By the early 1980's family literacy programs were also beginning to appear in Canada. Among the first documented programs in this country were the inner-city parenting centres established by the Toronto School Board in 1981, *J'apprends avec mon enfant* in Montreal in 1983, and Bookmates in Winnipeg in 1984. By 1997, family literacy programs could be found in all ten provinces and the territories. Libraries, schools, churches, health units, and community centres are just some of the places where families have found support for their literacy development.

In addition to local programs and activities, provincial and national projects have taken place to raise awareness of the importance of literacy in the family, as in the *Literacy Begins at Home* campaign undertaken by Canada Post Corporation and ABC Canada. This initiative not only succeeded in raising awareness of family literacy through its unusual and attractive postage stamp, but it also raised money for distribution to the country's family literacy programs.

Support for family literacy in Canada has come from a number of special interest groups and family literacy organizations. In a 1992 report by Darville on the status of adult education in Canada, family literacy received only passing mention, in referring to the appearance of a family literacy interest group in Ontario. The Family Literacy Interest Group of Ontario (FLIG) was founded in 1988 to identify issues related to family literacy and to advocate for funding of programs. FLIG's activities included presentations, hosting several provincial family literacy conferences, publishing a manual on family literacy, and providing support and information to practitioners throughout the province. The organization ceased its operations in 1995, when provincial adult education funding was withdrawn.

Another provincial family literacy organization, the Family Literacy Action Group of Alberta (FLAG), was formed in 1993. FLAG was an ad-hoc committee made up of individuals who saw the potential of family literacy for preventing the cycle of low literacy skills and for strengthening the family. In its four years of activities, FLAG provided support to practitioners and interested agencies through information, networking, and publication of resources. It also worked to promote and celebrate family literacy through participation in public forums, workshops, and conferences.

Many of Canada's provincial literacy organizations have played a key role in the growth of family literacy. For example, the Saskatchewan Literacy Network took an early interest in promoting and supporting the development of family literacy projects in that province. Some provincial departments of education have also played an important role, as is the case in Nova Scotia. In Quebec, school boards have been at the forefront of family literacy research and program delivery.

A number of conferences have also served to provide a forum for discussion and dissemination of work on family literacy. In 1994, the *Celebrating Family and Community* conference was hosted in Saskatoon by the Saskatchewan Literacy Network and the Saskatchewan Council for Educators of Non-English Speakers. In the same year the *National Conference on Family Literacy* was held in Ottawa, sponsored by the National Ad Hoc Family Literacy Group. A national symposium on family literacy, *L'alphabétisation familiale en français*, was held in Aylmer, also in 1994.

Family literacy in Canada has received special federal attention and support throughout its development. The National Literacy Secretariat (NLS), formed in 1988, has taken the mandate to promote literacy as an essential component for a learning society and to make Canada's social, economic and political life more accessible through literacy development. Over the years NLS has provided funding for several innovative projects that have moved the practice and study of family literacy forward. In 1997-98 family literacy was given special recognition as a priority for funding, along with workplace literacy and research.

In the next sections of this paper, we review Darville's (1992) comprehensive report on the status of adult literacy work in order to locate family literacy within the wider context of public policy and planning for adult literacy in Canada. By reviewing some of the critical concerns which Darville identified, family literacy practice and policy issues may be further clarified.

### **The Use of Literacy Statistics**

The Darville report drew on the adult literacy statistics of a national survey of adult literacy (Statistics Canada, 1991). The survey affirmed that about one third of the adult population experienced literacy difficulty, when the aim was to enable adults to use reading and writing in unfamiliar or complex situations. Similar results have been found in the International Survey of Adult Literacy Skills (IALS) (Compton, 1996; OECD & Statistics Canada, 1995), using more complex assessment procedures, based on a view of literacy as a broad set of skills used in a wide range of settings.

While literacy statistics do not reveal the many ways in which individuals and families cope with literacy demands in everyday life, they can be influential factors in molding public policy. Just as the IALS results focused public policy attention on workplace literacy education, similar effects may occur for family literacy. Results of the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) (Ross, Scott, & Kelly, 1996) identified trends in children's physical, social and emotional development, based on five broad indicators of family life, economic security, physical risk, community resources, and civic vitality. NLSCY results confirmed that family income is one of the key influences in affecting children's well being. One quarter of children from low-income families were verbally delayed, compared to one sixth of children from middle-income families, while parental depression was reported in nearly 20 percent of low-income families, compared to eight percent of middle-income families. With respect to family literacy, assessment of home literacy practices was limited to respondent report and recollection. While results derived from such techniques may be overestimates, the majority of parents appeared to take an active role in preparing their children for school and reported reading to children at least a few times a week.

With respect to school-age children, teachers reported that two-thirds of their students had parents who were "very involved" in the children's education. At the same time the NLSCY results indicated that children whose parents had little interest in their schooling were seven times more likely to have repeated a grade than children whose parents placed great importance on education.

The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth may be one factor in growing public awareness of the negative effects of child poverty and support for family literacy intervention. In the last few years, shifts in public policy related to children and families have been noted (Canadian Council on Social Development, 1997).

Quebec announced several reforms, including an increase in the number of childcare spaces and reduction of childcare fees; consolidation of the family allowance program to increase the allowance for low-income families; extension of parental leave provisions, and an increase in social housing units and subsidies for low-income workers. In British Columbia, a new Ministry for Children and Families was established in 1997, consolidating parts of five other ministries. It coordinates 20 regional operating agencies that provide multi-disciplinary, community-based services for child welfare and safety.

In 1996, Saskatchewan received formal recognition from the Child Welfare League of Canada for their province-wide strategy to support the well-being of children and families. Since 1993, that province's *Action Plan for Children* has included initiatives in childcare, education, health, and social housing. Provincial funding has been allocated to pre-kindergarten education in 26 schools, a mothers' support program, and teen-parent infant centres. In Alberta, the Early Intervention Program of the Commissioner of Services for Children has provided funding to family literacy initiatives in some regions of the province.

### **Funding Base for Literacy Intervention**

Darville's (1992) historical overview included a summary of funding support for adult literacy efforts and noted a steady increase at local levels by school boards, community colleges, libraries, voluntary and community organizations, as federal support for adult basic education ended in 1985.

Adult literacy work more nearly fit the provincial mandate for education than the federal mandate for job training. Although adult literacy was generally a low priority in child-centred education ministries, some provincially-funded programs were begun. School districts and community colleges developed or supported literacy programs in a number of provinces. Community colleges were generally more active in British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan. School districts were more active in Ontario and Quebec, although unevenly, without central policy. Educational institutions in the Atlantic provinces had only minimal involvement, often confined to the purchase of materials for volunteer groups.

Many literacy organizations were developed outside the educational system. "Community-based" programs were most numerous in Quebec, as groups populaires en alphabétisation. In Ontario cities, a number of literacy programs with autonomous boards were developed, sometimes in conjunction with settlement houses or libraries. In several other provinces, programs outside educational institutions were begun by volunteer bodies, libraries, and community centres. Laubach Literacy Councils were developed in the Maritime provinces (the first in Lunenburg in 1970), anglophone Quebec and Ontario; in 1981 Laubach Literacy of Canada was organized autonomously from its American parent. Frontier College, which had throughout the century placed "labourer-teachers" in the hinterlands, shifted its emphasis to the "urban frontier," and to programming – often literacy programming – with poor people and ex-offenders. (Darville, 1992, pp. 15-16)

As noted in the recent survey of family literacy projects across Canada (Thomas & Skage, 1998), and based on the descriptions of family literacy program development contained in the present work, a continued emphasis on local support for programs with a variety of partnerships and funding sources has been the pattern for family literacy. It seems clear that family literacy practice has evolved from adult literacy work and policies developed over the last two decades.

### **Increased Public Awareness of Literacy**

Advocacy and lobbying efforts by adult literacy organizations contributed to increased public interest, as the economics of literacy and worker productivity became part of the public dialogue and led to new governmental initiatives to support adult literacy at the end of the 80's.

Since 1985, every province and territory has seen some increase in literacy activity. However, literacy work in different provinces and territories is differently and unevenly developed. Governments have shaped their involvements in literacy with different adult education traditions, and with different financial resources. Although data is very scant, one might wonder if the extent of literacy programming isn't roughly in inverse relation to the numbers in any province or territory who have limited literacy. Indeed, it is not the number of people with limited literacy that determines the extent of programming. It is rather the financial resources that a government

commands to address literacy, and the ways that these resources are claimed by political forces, and managed by parties in power and by civil servants. The devolution of financial responsibility to the provinces likely means that the uneven development of literacy programming across the country will increase, barring some off-setting renewal of regional equalization. (Darville, 1992, p. 25)

Echoing adult literacy efforts, family literacy programming has also developed unevenly across provinces, with a focus on short-term, volunteer efforts in many areas. Even in provinces, such as Alberta and Ontario, where a relatively large number of family literacy projects have been identified (Thomas & Skage, 1998), many of these projects have had to operate outside provincial adult literacy funding, because adults-only criteria were stipulated for program qualification.

Darville (1992) noted that public discourse tended to emphasize economic benefits and worker productivity gains in adult literacy promotion, while such discussions downplayed the role of poverty and motivations for social equity. Although the immediate effect of this public attention was a higher profile for adult literacy, it raised new concerns about how literacy programs would be conducted and how adult literacy would be viewed. Darville listed three frequently raised concerns:

- 1) Practitioners have often decried the tendency of media coverage and advertisements to depict people with low literacy skills as social outcasts and incompetents, unable to participate in work or in politics, living in a state of shame and terror. This distortion of “illiterates” in media coverage may do more harm than good. (In some awareness activities, it should be said, there is now conscious concern to design messages to elicit respect for the knowledge and determination of learners, rather than pity for their deficiencies).
- 2) It sometimes seems that the discussion of literacy and productivity is a way of blaming ordinary workers for economic difficulties, or blaming the schools, and not seeing economic troubles as the outcome of management decisions and government policies.
- 3) Literacy workers often have a profound practical understanding of the relations between illiteracy and poverty, and often understand literacy as a means of assertion against poverty. This understanding is very seldom carried forward into the media. (Darville, 1992, p. 21)

Similar concerns have been raised about public policy for family literacy (Auerbach, 1995; Grant, 1997). Use of deficit-based language in family literacy, that focuses on poor families as culturally deprived and perpetuating a cycle of illiteracy, is in contrast to research which identifies the homes of poor, undereducated families as having many rich literacy practices and supportive family values. At the present time, while there is an on-going, active dialogue among family literacy practitioners on this issue, it would appear that there is a heightened sensitivity to the concerns raised in relation to the deficit approach. Nevertheless, Darville’s caution about co-option of a literacy agenda for political purposes and short-term goals remains very much alive for the family literacy movement. We will return to the issue of deficit notions of family literacy in a later section.

## Research on Family and Literacy Development

The family is where literacy begins and where the foundations of literacy are learned. The conviction that the family's literacy influence is critical is based on the view that, rather than a set of skills, literacy is a way of thinking, learned through communication in families (Goelman, Oberg, & Smith, 1984; Heath, 1983). How do families support the acquisition of literacy by young children? Are there identifiable parent-child activities, however informal, which are associated with literacy development? Or is the family's literacy influence mainly a generalized one of creating positive expectations for literacy achievement? What are the effects of home literacy practices on subsequent school-based literacy attainment? What are the effects of home literacy practices on adults? These questions have been the subject of a great deal of research over the last decade, and the following, brief review will highlight research that has had implications for family literacy practice.

### Focus on Child Literacy Development

Early research (Sulzby, 1985; Teale, 1986; Wells, 1981, 1986) documented a wide range of the literacy practices among families, regardless of social status. Some families rarely engage in sustained conversation with children, do not model reading, or provide children with easy access to print materials. On the other hand, other families are avid readers themselves, actively involved in their children's play and leisure activities, and routinely read with them. Research by Snow and her colleagues (Snow, Barnes, Chandler, Goodman, & Hemphill, 1991) and that of Purcell-Gates (1994, 1996) is of particular interest, because their work was designed to avoid social class bias by studying only low income families and their children, in order to identify different patterns of family literacy experiences that might be related to later school-based literacy accomplishment.

Both researchers found variability in frequency and range of home literacy experiences. Snow and her colleagues were interested in aspects of oral language and literacy achievement with children up through grade four, based on several years' observation in home and school. Purcell-Gates focused her investigation on family reading and writing over one year of home observation, and assessment of children's reading and writing achievement through grade one.

Snow's research group (Snow, et al., 1991) developed a profile of the "family as educator" which included five components:

- *the literacy environment of the home* - parents' own interest in reading, and the provision of literacy materials in the home;
- *parental teaching* - frequency and manner (negative or positive) of interactions in such activities as reading with children and participating in homework;
- *parental education* - educational attainment levels of parents;
- *opportunities to learn* - ways parents promote children's learning by increasing access to other people and activities, using extended family members, exercising control over leisure time, and having a variety of personal interests;

- *parental expectations* - stated expectations for children's school success.

In classifying observations of parents and their children within this framework, Snow's aim was to identify how families might differ along the five components, and how these differences might affect children's later reading attainment. Overall, this family profile accounted for between 45 and 60 percent of child reading achievement, while school factors accounted for the remainder. The family's influence on children's school achievement was shown to be at least as strong as school influences, with families who rated highest in the profile components having children with increased reading achievement. The Snow research presented examples of parents who were confident about their own literacy and who, even if not avid readers themselves, encouraged their children's reading. Although poor and struggling to get by, these parents were using literacy to both solve problems in their family life and to pursue personal goals. Such parents presented positive models of competence for their children who came to school well prepared for reading and writing achievement.

It has become clear that parent-child interaction is the foundation of the literacy development in children. Conversation is at the centre of reading to children and providing books for them. "Book talk" and storytime provide opportunities for parent-child dialogue as much as for exposure to print. The Snow (1991) research suggests that the ways in which a parent speaks with a child may have as much to do with later reading achievement as actual time spent reading to a child.

In a similar vein, Purcell-Gates (1994, 1996) was interested in how specific family experiences with print influenced later school-like literacy for children. Her findings further supported conclusions that parents who read themselves and who read frequently with their young children teach specific things about print. Their children come to school well prepared to read, compared to youngsters in homes where parent-child reading is infrequent and parents themselves engage in little or no reading.

Identifiable print literacy learning occurs at home for preschool age children through supportive interaction with adult caregivers. Some elements of this learning include:

- a view of reading and writing as enjoyable,
- understanding of the uses for print,
- knowledge of the structure of stories in books,
- general thinking and question skills related to dialogue about books,
- letter and word knowledge.

### **Focus on Adult Literacy Development**

Traditional, teacher-centred, adult literacy education has been characterized by low reading achievement gains, continued low employment after program, poor attendance rates, and poor ratings by adult participants of program satisfaction (Malicky & Norman, 1993). Alternative, student-centred, participatory approaches to adult education stress situating literacy in a meaningful context in people's lives and using literacy in the exercise of individual personal control and choice (Fingeret & Jurmo, 1989). In this

context, family literacy has been part of the movement to restructure adult education and expand innovative approaches that build on learner ethnic, religious, and cultural history.

In this approach, content, instructional processes, literacy learning objectives, and evaluation strategies have been transformed to support and facilitate individual learner goals. As family literacy intervention has increased in the last decade, the variations in program have proliferated, in response to community and participant goals. Family literacy programs may be classified according to a scheme adapted from Nickse (1991) which identifies four types of learner participation:

1. *Parents and Children Together (direct participation of adults and children) -*

Literacy instruction is offered to both parent and child and both are seen to be the primary beneficiaries of the program.

2. *A Focus on Parents (direct adult/indirect child participation) -*

Adults are the primary participants in training which includes ways in which parents may develop children's literacy at home, while children are assumed to receive indirect benefits.

3. *Parent Involvement (indirect adult/direct child participation) -*

The focus is on the child's literacy development, with adults enlisted to provide program support.

4. *Community Family f adults aLiteracy Support/Resources to the General Public (indirect participation ond children)*

Little or no direct literacy instruction is offered. Both adults and children are invited to participate in literacy activities as part of the general public or use resources either for enjoyment or to support parenting. Events such as library shared story time, or "celebrate literacy" activities in shopping malls are examples.

In considering *Parents and Children Together* programs, this category has been considered the most "intensive" of family literacy program types, and more successful in raising adult literacy levels than traditional ABE programs (Philliber, Spillman, & King, 1996). This category includes the Kenan model, probably the most widely use format for school-based programs which target adult education and early childhood education together. Tailored to the requirements of individual communities, the model consists of four components: adult basic education, early childhood education, parent training, and time for parents and children to play. Adult retention rates have been reported to be significantly higher in programs which offer childcare and parent support, compared to regular ABE classes, and the longer learning time accounted for significant increase in reading levels of adults. With approximately 100 hours or six months of program participation, significant gains have been documented in parent-child home reading, visits to libraries, literacy materials in the home, and child literacy activity. Parent book reading with children increased by nearly 70 percent to about once a day (Mikuleky & Lloyd, 1995). Longitudinal program evaluation studies have provided evidence that family participation in such programs is also associated with:

- Increases in the developmental skills of preschool children in readiness for academic and social school success;

- Gains in the educational level (attainment of GED) of parents of preschool children through basic skills instruction;
- Positive parent perceptions of confidence within the school setting and ability to be an advocate for the child with respect to expectations for school success; Improvement in parent-child interaction through planned opportunities;
- Improvement in parenting skills of adult participants.

In the *Focus on Parents* category, parent training is a response to the understanding that parents often need assistance to develop strategies for parent-child literacy interaction. Based on work with low income parents, (Edwards, 1991; Toomey & Allen, 1991), research noted that a range of parent knowledge and interaction skills, as well as parent confidence, have been developed through participation in coaching experiences for shared reading. In the present case studies, the Book Bridges and Learning and Parenting Skills programs are excellent examples of the *Focus on Parents* model.

Parent training programs have been implicated in the deficit debate in family literacy (Auerbach, 1995). It has been argued that middle class trainers using direct instruction approaches to teach the “right way” to read with children may undermine the values and self esteem of adult participants whose cultural and ethnic backgrounds differ from that of the instructor. Edwards (1994) has responded eloquently and strongly in favour of training parents in book reading interaction with young children. She noted that low income, immigrant, and minority parents recognize the importance of literacy and of reading to their children, and want to learn about strategies and techniques that will enable them to effectively guide their children’s literacy development. Both viewpoints have been valuable in sensitizing trainers to the need to offer parent training workshops which respect the backgrounds of participants. Training approaches which use culturally relevant books and materials, encourage discussion, and build on personal family experience have been successful in parent training.

### **Issues in Family Literacy Practice**

As the number and variety of family literacy programs has increased, many questions have been raised on a number of issues related to community partnerships and interagency collaboration, staff development, appropriate family literacy involvement, documenting program effectiveness, and family literacy research. The following sections present varied perspectives on these issues, as a focus for future research and policy development.

#### **Community Partnerships and Interagency Collaboration**

Literacy and family literacy are undeniably interwoven with other types of individual, family, and community development. Increasingly, integration of community services is seen to be a key strategy for family literacy program development. In an analysis of interagency partnerships for coordinated services to children, Crowson and Boyd (1993) noted that parental involvement is recognized as a vital link in ensuring the wellbeing of children and families. In order to engage parents more actively in aspects of decision-making about child and family education and welfare, it is necessary

to simplify and improve access to services for families. Families should be able to view social and educational services as resources available in a holistic, community context. Integration of family services is a way to make community resources more accessible and responsive to family needs.

The move toward partnerships in family literacy also reflects this trend toward collaboration in services for children and families (Knapp, 1995). Terms such as interprofessional collaboration, coordinated services for children, family support, and school-linked services all refer to attempts at integration and collaboration in program delivery. The impetus toward partnership is usually driven by practical considerations to maximize resources and capitalize on services already in place. Collaboration may range from relatively low-intensity cooperative efforts among different professionals to highly integrated organizational arrangements. Some of the outcomes of collaboration include enhanced referral of families, co-location of services, enhanced communication and information sharing, pooling of resources, joint planning and execution of services, and a reconceptualization of services offered to families.

While there are many benefits of collaboration, such efforts also involve costs, some of which may be unanticipated. Partnerships require a significant investment of time, effort, and resources to develop and maintain the partnership itself. For many family literacy programs operating on a limited budget, participating in a community partnership often means additional staff time and responsibility without remuneration. In addition, there may be little time devoted to cooperative planning or to evaluation of community partnerships.

While a community partnership may provide access to resources and expertise that will benefit the family literacy program, there may be philosophical or methodological differences between the family literacy program and partner agency that will pose problems. Goals, objectives, and mandates of the agencies and groups in question must be compatible. There may be potential for conflict, if the family literacy program forms alliances with groups or agencies that hold assumptions about literacy that conflict with the program. One such view would be that adults with low literacy are a drain on society and pose a threat to their children's well-being.

Finally, some practitioners object on principle to partnerships formed to procure donations to support operations, seeing them as fundraising and detrimental to efforts to secure stable, ongoing funding for family literacy, on an equal footing with other educational programs.

### **Staff Development**

Although the situation varies in provinces and territories across Canada, there are very few training and professional development opportunities for family literacy practitioners. Training is often associated with special projects, offered over a short term, and not necessarily related to needs identified in individual communities. Several practitioners in Canada have obtained training at the National Center for Family Literacy in Louisville, Kentucky. Nevertheless, this costly training is restricted to the particular four-component Kenan model, which is not dominant in Canada, as it is in the United States.

While there are some opportunities for training in different approaches, as indicated in the cases presented in this volume, there are currently few sources of formal or informal professional development related to establishing a program and improving services. While conferences and summer institutes may provide infrequent opportunities for networking and support, many programs operate in relative isolation, with practitioners having limited contact or opportunity to share experiences and expertise. Reflecting the adult literacy situation in Canada, the question arises regarding certification and minimum qualifications to ensure high quality programs. While practitioners agree on a desire to have the best programs possible, there are no easy answers in determining standards or accreditation. The diverse nature of family literacy programs and philosophical approaches make the issue of standardized training and qualifications exceedingly complex.

There has been some movement toward development of standards for family involvement within teacher preparation programs. This area may be beneficial in considering a framework for professional training in family literacy. A brief summary of this work is presented here.

Researchers with the Harvard Family Research Project (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider & Lopez, 1997) have developed a model of professional teacher training in family involvement, based on recent educational reforms and policies which emphasize changing relationships among families, schools, and communities. These researchers envision changes in teacher preparation to meet requirements for increased involvement of parents in schools and increased responsibility of schools in providing community and social services for diverse families.

While reviewing school barriers to family involvement and noting a lack of information sharing, technical assistance, and limited resources for such training, the research group has proposed a framework as a starting point for training in family involvement. The Shartrand, et al. (1997) model focuses on the attitudes, knowledge, and skills that are needed to work with families in a variety of school contexts. While centred on school-based interactions between parents and teachers, there are many aspects that can be adapted for family literacy training. The following overview is presented in order to highlight some aspects of a family involvement training framework which may be applicable to prospective family literacy training models.

Table 1 summarizes seven categories of relevant knowledge in family involvement training. Training may target one or several categories of family involvement knowledge. However, the framework recognizes that attitudes and skills are also the focus of training and identifies four approaches to training in family involvement. These approaches include:

- 1) a functional approach that describes the roles and responsibilities of teachers (literacy practitioners) and caregivers in promoting student achievement (child literacy);
- 2) a parent empowerment approach based on the strengths of disenfranchised families;
- 3) a cultural competence approach that makes the school (community literacy organization) an inclusive, respectful setting where diversity is welcomed; and

- 4) a social capital approach that builds community support for education (literacy).

**Table 1**  
**A Knowledge Based Framework for Family Involvement Training**

Knowledge Base	Goals
General Family Involvement	To provide general information on the goals of, benefits of, and barriers to family involvement To promote knowledge of, skills in, and positive attitudes toward involving parents
General Family Knowledge	To promote knowledge of different families' cultural beliefs, childrearing practices, structures, and living environments To promote an awareness of and respect for different backgrounds and lifestyles
Home-School Communication	To provide various techniques and strategies to improve two-way communication between home and school (or families and literacy practitioners)
Family Involvement in Learning Activities	To provide information on how to involve parents in their children's learning outside of the classroom
Families Supporting Schools	To provide information on ways to involve parents in helping the school, both within and outside the classroom
Schools Supporting Families	To examine how schools can support families' social educational, and social service needs through parent education programs, parent centers, and referrals to other community or social services
Families as Change Agents	To introduce ways to support and involve parents and families in decision making, action research, child advocacy, parent and teacher training, and development of policy, programs, and curriculum

To illustrate the way the four training approaches are combined with family involvement knowledge categories, Table 2 presents an example of the framework applied to one knowledge category, Families as Change Agents.

**Table 2**  
**Attitudes, Knowledge, and Skills for Family Involvement Training**  
**Based on Four Approaches – Families as Change Agents**

<b>Functional Approach</b>	<b>Parent Empowerment</b>
Skills in supporting and involving parents as decision makers; action researchers, advocates  Skills in sharing information to help parents make decisions  Skills in sharing leadership with and transferring it to parents  Skills in interacting with parents on an equal footing	Skills in promoting political empowerment for parents through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocating shared decision making in schools</li> <li>• Informing parents of governance roles in the school</li> <li>• Recruiting parents to sit on boards and councils</li> <li>• Preventing parents’ voices from being overridden in meetings</li> </ul>
<b>Cultural Competence</b>	<b>Social Capital</b>
Skills in encouraging all parents to run for seats on school councils  Knowledge of importance of providing translators at school council meetings  Knowledge of the importance of having teachers from various cultures be present on councils to make all parents feel welcome	Attitude that shared decision making is an essential ingredient to establishing and maintaining a common set of core values  Skills in negotiating differences and conflicting opinions  Skills in involving parents in design of curriculum that represents shared values  Skill in co-development of mission statement in council meetings that represents shared values

**Appropriate Family Literacy Involvement**

Some of the most common concerns about family literacy programs relate to ensuring that programs are accessible to a wide range of economically disadvantaged parents, and address relevant literacy needs of families. Family literacy programs face significant challenges before they get started, if issues relating to participant accessibility have not been addressed. Funding for child care and transportation is usually critical to maintaining attendance. Other barriers to program access include inappropriate advertisement which tends

to reach people already active in supporting their children's literacy development; offering programs at inappropriate times (for example, spring and fall in rural areas); offering predetermined programs that do not interest parents; and using locations which may be initially perceived as intimidating.

Concerns about adequate health care, nutrition, housing, and other social needs are also family literacy issues in considering barriers to program access. In particular, women often assume family role responsibility for education, but face these barriers and others associated with low income, time to learn and engage in literacy with their children, and lack of support from other family members and friends. Women also cite isolation, low self-esteem, and difficulty in seeking assistance among the perceived barriers to program participation (Seaman & Popp, 1991).

Directly related to the issue of program relevancy is the question of whose literacy we are trying to promote. There is considerable debate and discussion regarding the merits of promoting school-like literacies as bridging activities that prepare young children for formal education. In his work with the Sheffield Project in England, Peter Hannon (1993) concluded that, despite trying to identify and respond to parent's interests, the project offered school literacy which did not fit naturally into the lives of families participating in the project. "There is nothing necessarily wrong with this provided that we are aware of it and prepared for the possibility that alien literacy practices, however sensitively introduced, may not take root permanently, if the family, community or work environment encourages something else (Hannon, 1993, p.7)."

One answer to the question, "Whose literacy are we trying to promote?" is found in the view that programs should identify, respect, and further develop the literacy skills already present in families, even if they are different from school-like literacy (Morrow and Paratore, 1993; Taylor, 1997). Such programs are developed as supplements to, not as correction of literacy behaviours and interactions that already exist in families. Such a view claims that when programs build on the strengths and skills of the participants, the benefits gained are much more likely to be retained.

### **Documenting Program Effectiveness**

The field of family literacy is complex, based on diversity of families served and the settings of different family literacy projects. It has been difficult for programs to establish explicit evaluation procedures, based on this complexity and on the fact that programs seldom build evaluation into program design. On the other hand, programs uniformly appreciate the importance of being able to document program success and have seen the benefits of using evaluation results to raise public awareness of the need for family literacy intervention and for fundraising purposes. Nevertheless, the level of program evaluation in family literacy often amounts to little more than testimonials.

Alternative methods of assessment for program evaluation have been developed to flexibly accommodate assessment of outcomes determined relevant by program participants and staff (Holt, 1994; Thomas & Fisher, 1996). Concerns about selection of outcomes by which to judge program success centre on different perceptions of what counts in family literacy. While

emphasis in adult development programs may judge success by employment and completion of training, family literacy programs in an adult setting may identify regular attendance in the program rather than employment as a priority. In addition, when partners are involved, there are also different expectations regarding what is considered useful information on enrollment, literacy achievement and other outcomes, by which to justify partner funding or resource sharing.

There are also issues of training involved in discussions about program evaluation. There seem to be little systematic assistance provided to practitioners in developing evaluation procedures as part of program development and little training to enable practitioners to make informed decisions about evaluation for their individual, diverse settings. Learner-centred, alternative approaches to program evaluation require skills and an understanding of evaluation as a shared communication process of goal setting. These skills are not easily acquired without training and access to technical assistance.

Weiss and Jacobs (1988, pp.8-9) have raised concerns about the lack of standards or effective practice guidelines which have implications for family literacy program evaluation:

The lack of emphasis in the past on program processes and implementation also has left the family support and education field short on cross-program knowledge gleaned from program practice. This lack is acute now that state and local policy makers want not only data on outcomes, but detailed information about how to design and implement programs. More emphasis should be placed on efforts to collect and share practice-based information about implementation issues such as staff recruitment; training and supervision; outreach strategies; staff turnover and burnout; use of volunteers; and meshing evaluation and service delivery needs.

The present volume has presented practitioner reports on the process of family literacy program development in different contexts, and it is hoped that this information can provide a foundation for further discussion about aspects of effective practice in family literacy.

### **Family Literacy Research**

Future policy decisions regarding family literacy will increasingly depend on research. Nevertheless, there is no coherent strategy in place for developing a Canadian research base in family literacy. At the present time, program design and practices are only loosely related to a research base, and community-based implementation decisions often appear fragmented, because local program developers have little access to program evaluation results of similar programs.

There are several areas of family literacy where research is urgently needed as a basis for future policy and program planning. The National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (Human Resources Development Canada & Statistics Canada, 1996) and the International Adult Literacy Survey (OECD & Statistics Canada, 1995) have established a foundation for observing the literacy achievement of Canadian children and adults, along with family factors associated with literacy. Nevertheless, there has been little study of the specific ways that families influence the literacy development of all of its

members. Questions remain about the relationship between caregivers and children around literacy activities at home that have a bearing on program content in family literacy programs. We still do not understand how the interaction between parents and children affects literacy learning. Questions about different methods parents use in literacy interaction with children and the effects of training in parenting skills on the literacy skills of adults and children remain unanswered.

Canadian family literacy intervention has been characterized by relatively short-term, low intensity programs. Additional research with high intensity program models similar to Even Start or the Kenan model developed by the National Center for Family Literacy would allow for a greater range of program options from which to develop a research base on family literacy effectiveness.

Since there is a lack of research on collaboration in family literacy, there are several areas that would benefit from study. As a perceived effective strategy in program implementation, it is important to understand the conditions that lead to successful collaboration and the benefits that result for program delivery. Since neither the process nor the outcomes of collaboration are understood, it would be necessary to document the nature of collaboration in a variety of family literacy settings and examine how collaboration leads to improved family literacy services or enhanced support for families.

The issue of dissemination of research findings is as much a concern as the need for further research. Without more access to critical analysis and discussion of family literacy initiatives, practitioners may miss innovative approaches and resources which have been developed elsewhere. Aside from journals and occasional conferences, there is no mechanism for widespread dissemination of research findings to practitioners.

The National Institute for Literacy, has set up a listserve to promote dissemination (email: [nifl-family@literacy.nifl.gov](mailto:nifl-family@literacy.nifl.gov)). NIFL-Family provides an international forum to raise questions, discuss issues, and share information about family literacy. Topics include recruitment, parent-child interactions, parent information, home visits, adult learning, early childhood learning, program integration, assessment and evaluation, collaboration, and technology. As this volume was being prepared for publication, it was learned that the National Adult Literacy Database has also entered into discussions for the development of additional family literacy networks.

The work presented in this volume illustrates the beginning of steady growth in family literacy intervention across Canada. As an attempt to present detailed descriptions of different approaches in family literacy, it is clear that the work presented illustrates benefits for families and children. Nevertheless, it is necessary to build on the beginning stage of family literacy development by addressing the questions raised in this chapter about how to improve programs, document program success, provide staff development, and conduct research that will guide future program and policy decisions.

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## Family Literacy in Alberta

While a large segment of adult education is provided through Alberta Vocational Colleges, volunteer efforts and community literacy organizations are noteworthy for family literacy development. In this section, three distinct approaches to family literacy are presented from different organizational settings.



# Books For Babies

*Mary Peterson and Shannon Palmer*

## **Beginnings of Books for Babies**

When 1990 was declared International Literacy Year by the United Nations (UNESCO), it served as a summons to action, recognizing that widespread illiteracy severely hampers the economic and social development of individuals and nations. In Canada some alarming statistics were quoted: a 25% functional illiteracy rate, a 30% high school dropout rate, and one in five children living below the poverty level. In response to this concern, the Canadian Home and School Parent Teacher Federation received funding for a national project called Literacy in the Information Age. The *Books for Babies* family literacy project originated as a result of a challenge, from the coordinators of the national association, to encourage provincial and local home and school organizations to formulate community-based literacy initiatives. The Cardston and District Home and School Association accepted the challenge to determine what type of literacy project might best benefit our community.

Many different organizations and groups within the community were contacted relative to their literacy concerns: schools, health and government officials, nonprofit organizations, and business leaders. It was the general consensus that many children entering the school system could be better prepared for their school experience if exposed to more language-based activities in the home from birth. Often children entering grade one lacked the level of listening and speaking skills that contributed to success in the early grades. It was felt that teachers who try to help children catch up often do not succeed. On the other hand, research was cited which suggested that young children who have been read to from an early age and who have parents who model literate behaviour have a better chance of academic success upon reaching school age.

It was determined that the best approach would be preventative, beginning at birth, in order to raise awareness of the importance of literacy with parents of newborns. While the concept of *Books for Babies* was not original to us, we hoped to offer parents an incentive to start reading with their children from day one. Adapting some of the basic ideas to our own community needs, the *Cardston Books for Babies* family literacy project began operation at the Cardston Municipal Hospital on January 1st, 1992.

## **Community Profile**

The Town of Cardston is a farming community in Southern Alberta with a townsite population of approximately 3500 people. Several small bedroom communities of three to five hundred people are served by the project, as they use the Cardston municipal hospital for their maternity needs. Significant for the project is the fact that the community of Cardston borders on the southern

edge of the Blood Indian Reserve As a result, many native parents and children are involved in the project. There are also several Hutterite colonies in the Cardston area which make use of the maternity ward at the Cardston Hospital. Approximately two hundred babies are born each year at the Cardston Municipal Hospital.

### Community Partnerships

Many of the groups that we initially contacted about literacy concerns became our community partners in the *Books for Babies* project. We had representation from the Cardston School Division, the Adult Literacy Council, Cardston Municipal Hospital, Chinook Health Unit, Standoff Heath Unit, Cardston Public Library, and Town of Cardston.

The main source of funding for the Cardston *Books for Babies* family literacy project has been the town of Cardston Family and Community Support Services. Yearly contributions have been provided by the Cardston School Division (now Westwinds Regional School Division) through the Adult Literacy Project, as well as the Native Parent Advisory Committee. The Blood Tribe Counseling Services, in conjunction with the Standoff Health Unit, have provided a Native component to our bookbags in the form of a simplified Blackfoot language coloring book.

Several individual home and school parent associations, community service groups and individual businesses have contributed intermittently to the project. Of special significance to the success of the project is our volunteer contributions. Project coordinators, those involved in the production of the bookbags, those who present the bookbags at the hospital and those who help with follow up and evaluation are all volunteers. This has certainly helped with the financial requirements by keeping the project up and running.

### Program Objectives

The primary objective of *Books for Babies* is to contribute to family and community well-being by enhancing literacy development within families beginning at birth and continuing through preschool years, so that each child has a greater opportunity to become a self-directed, lifelong, independent learner. Support objectives include:

- to promote reading as a family activity;
- to involve education and health care professionals, volunteers and community service groups in a preventative, community-based literacy project;
- to support the work of schools and ;
- to respect cultural differences as native children/parents participate in *Books for Babies*.



Some expectations for *Books for Babies* include:

- effective interaction between parents and children;
- increased language development in preschool children;
- awareness and appreciation of books by parents and children;
- a foundation for successful learning in school;
- greater family solidarity.

## Program Components

### *Phase One*

*Parent-child* packets are presented by volunteers to parents of newborns at the Cardston Municipal Hospital. The volunteers explain both the project and the importance of reading to children from birth. They show the parents what is included in the packet and encourage them to begin using it right away. Each packet consists of a *Books for Babies* canvas bookbag, with a pink and blue teddy bear that is hand-stenciled by volunteers. Included in the bookbag are three carefully chosen children's books appropriate for birth to two year old children.

One of the problems when the project first started was finding quality books for this age group. In the last few years there has been an increase in books that are appropriate for very young children. The criteria used when choosing books for the project include: quality, simplicity of concepts, durability and multicultural sensitivity. Each of the three books in the bookbag is a durable picture board book with minimal words and concepts. Some of the books focus on animals, shapes, colors, numbers and nursery rhymes. Photograph books with pictures of babies are also popular. Many of the books are interactive books, where children are asked to touch their nose, make a noise like a dog, and so forth. Because of the multicultural backgrounds of many bookbag recipients, books feature different nationalities of children.

Other items in the *Books for Babies* bookbag include:

- A simplified Blackfoot language coloring book. All parents receive this component whether they are Native or non-native;
- Two brochures: One is a *Books for Babies* brochure describing the project, its benefits, how it works, and acknowledging supporters of the project. The other brochure is produced by the American Library Association, entitled "*Born to Read - How to Raise a Reader.*" It includes excellent ideas on sharing books, when to share, how to share, as well as a list of good books to share. Some of their book suggestions have been included in the bookbags;
- Four parent information sheets: two produced by the Canadian Home and School Parent Teacher Federation are entitled "*Parents Are Teachers Too*" and "*Tips For Guiding TV Viewing.*" The third sheet, called "*Babes in the Library,*" was produced by the local public library to encourage parents to use that facility with their children. The fourth sheet describes the Cardston adult literacy program, in the event that some of the parents who receive the bookbag are interested in developing their own literacy skills.

In 1992 every mother of a newborn at the Cardston hospital was given a *Books for Babies* packet. Since then only those moms who have not already

received the bookbag are given the entire bookbag. Second-time moms are given a new book to add to their home library along with the two information brochures.

### ***Phase Two – Follow Up Activities***

With the success of *Books for Babies*, interest in family literacy has continued. The Cardston and District Home and School Association has been able to offer additional presentations for families with preschoolers. Volunteer activities at the local hospital included presentations of *Read to Me*, a 13 minute video produced by the International Reading Association. In addition a *Books for Babies* Newsletter has been published and a *Books for Babies* section has been opened at the Cardston Public Library. Health Unit personnel have taken on responsibility to include *Books for Babies* discussion and follow up/referral, as moms bring babies to the health unit for immunizations.

### ***Phase Three - Evaluation***

Informal evaluations take place as volunteers at the hospital visit with parents about the project. It has been possible to communicate with second- and third-time moms to share how they have used the *Books for Babies* bookbag materials.

Longevity is one of our greatest indicators of success. We are in the seventh year of operation, and funding remains in place. Our original community partnerships continue to support the project. Probably one of the most impressive statistics is the number of families who have received bookbags in our area. In the first six years of operation approximately 700 bookbags were given out and 275 additional books were given to second-time moms and their babies.

Informal evaluations have been beneficial to document how parents react to receiving *Books for Babies* bookbags and to share how the project has increased awareness of the importance of literacy in the lives of young children. This is one advantage of volunteers in a small community. One has access to a network of participants to determine the success of the program. Therefore accountability to sponsoring agencies also occurs more quickly, as the community hears about the impact of the program. Such accountability was built into the program from its inception, along with yearly financial accounting and reports to sponsors.

## **Successes, Challenges, and Changes**

When the *Books for Babies* program first began, we were using the maternity nurses and assistants at the hospital to do the bookbag presentations. We found that, regardless of their enthusiasm for the project, they were simply too busy with their regular duties. We obtained permission from the hospital administration to use volunteer presenters and this worked much better. Volunteers have more time to visit with moms, to explain the project, and to discuss the benefits of literacy and reading to babies from birth.

Our project has been replicated in several other small communities in Alberta. Each has adapted the *Books for Babies* concept according to community needs and available funding. It is important to note that all of the adaptations

have paid coordinators, while utilizing volunteer help. As far as we know, Cardston *Books for Babies* is the only completely volunteer project. Nevertheless, it probably would be unrealistic to expect volunteers to adopt this program in rural areas without taking care of basic expenses, such as mileage and travel time. During the first three years of *Books for Babies*, we were overly ambitious about the kind and amount of follow-up activities that we could provide. We sponsored a preschool workshop, but it was not well-attended. Initial discouragement and recognition that there was already a high level of parental involvement in our community prevented a second try. We decided to concentrate on workshops through the health units in reaching a wider range of parents.

The *Read To Me* audio-visual presentation was initially made available at the local hospital, at Cardston video rental outlets free of charge, and at the public library. Because no video machine was available on the maternity ward at the hospital, the benefits of the video were not achieved. We finally purchased a VCR for the parents' lounge on the maternity ward of the hospital and found that this was much more successful in promoting parent-child reading as a follow-up to the bookbag presentation.

We felt that a newsletter would be a valuable follow-up in order to present various aspects of family literacy, suggestions for children's books and learning toys, parent comments on *Books for Babies*, pictures, and volunteer recognition. However, after three years, the amount of money needed for postage became onerous. We tried putting a *Books for Babies* column in the local newspaper as an alternative, but this was too time-consuming. If a volunteer could be found to handle this aspect of the project, this would be a valuable follow-up activity.

Changes in staff at the health units, both in Cardston and on the Blood Reserve, pose challenges for health unit follow-up. In some communities, where a *Books for Babies* project is adopted, it is operated by the local health unit. There is considerable value in presenting *Books for Babies* as part of a prenatal program where parents will have more energy and time to discuss their comfort with the bookbag materials. *Books for Babies* postnatal participants could then be tracked, when moms bring the babies for immunization. It has been difficult to monitor this type of health unit follow-up, when health nurses are not involved in the presentations.

In summary, program development and implementation of *Books for Babies* has been extremely successful with only a few minor changes. An audio-visual presentation has now been included in introducing bookbags. Although originally planned follow-up activities continue to be worthwhile, the limiting factors of time, funds and volunteer commitment have prevented consistent implementation. Informal evaluations continue to be our source of feedback and determination of success.

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# Learning and Parenting Skills

*Elaine Cairns and Lauren MacKenzie*

## Introduction

Mary was struggling with her own literacy and feared that she could not help her child with her literacy problems. Zu Zu, a young, single mom, was concerned about her underweight, premature child, who would not eat. Margaret, a mom who goes to school, was having separation problems. During the weeks that these moms participated in the *Literacy and Parenting Skills (LAPS)* program, they had the opportunity to develop strategies for solving these problems, as well as to gain literacy skills that encouraged them to continue to learn and grow.

“The key to successful literacy acquisition is the extent to which literacy is rooted in and integrally related to issues of importance in learners’ lives.” (Auerbach, 1992, p. 9). What is significant to parents? Opportunities to discuss parenting strategies, to compare notes with others who are raising families, and to develop new skills are attractive, even compelling for many parents. This is the cornerstone of a new literacy program, *Literacy and Parenting Skills (LAPS)*, designed to engage parents in meaningful discussion about family life while increasing their comfort level with their literacy skills. *LAPS* encourages parents to address their literacy deficiencies in an environment which acknowledges the many literacy strengths that they do have, building on them in ways that remind them that they are capable and competent.

## Program Philosophy and Objectives

Statistics Canada released survey results indicating that 42% of Canadians over 16 years of age have serious difficulties with literacy skills affecting both their work experience and level of income (Statistics Canada, 1996). These astonishing figures suggest that efforts to attract these Canadians to literacy programs need to be increased. To that end, the *Literacy and Parenting Skills* program was developed with the following objectives in mind:

- to provide strategies to enable parents to model strong literacy and language skills within their home settings, so as to break the generational cycle of literacy and to improve children’s language development;
- to develop appropriate low-literate materials which focus on issues of concern to ESL and low literate parents;
- to increase the literacy (reading and writing) levels of parents; to provide effective strategies to parents to improve communication and discipline in their homes;
- to compare traditional methods of transmitting the topic information with methods that explore the cross-cultural nature of parents’ roles;
- to increase the comfort level of parents when addressing literacy issues within their homes; to ensure the commitment and involvement of families

by basing the program on relevant topics selected with participant input to maintain ongoing feedback as an integral part of the program and make adjustments accordingly.

## Background

In the spring of 1993, research was conducted to determine the extent to which literacy resources required to serve families were available. In particular, it was important to identify educational materials that dealt with parenting topics, such as positive discipline, anger management, and how to build self-esteem in children of low-literate parents and/or those with English as a second language. The search identified parenting manuals but identified the following limitations:

- parenting topic choices were either too limited or relevant topics were at too high a competency level;
- the literacy level of handouts was usually too high or not written in simple English;
- the approach taken was often condescending and/or judgmental.

In the fall of 1995 proposals to the Alberta Language Training Department - Advanced Education and the National Literacy Secretariat were accepted to create manuals for low-literacy parents and to develop a cross-cultural manual for ESL populations.

## Development

A team of writers came together to work with the project managers in order to identify the needs of at-risk parents, the topics to be covered, the format and structure of the manuals, and also to begin the writing process. Parenting advocates, literacy specialists, and ESL experts participated in this process. Periodic meetings were conducted to review the progress, the activities chosen, and the overall format.

When the draft materials were developed, pilot workshops were conducted at various Women-In-Need family drop-in centres, an Adult Basic Education class at the Alberta Vocational College, Sasmis Immigration Services in Medicine Hat, and at the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society family program in Sacred Heart School and Victoria School (Calgary Public School Board). Detailed feedback from facilitators identified strengths and weaknesses of the program. Additional ESL and literacy consultants reviewed the manual to ensure that the ESL manual utilized a cross-cultural methodology and that it was culturally sensitive.

Next, the project managers rewrote the 19 sessions, finalized the resource materials provided regarding the facilitation of the manuals, and established the format. General resources and children's book titles were added which corresponded to topic areas. Graphics and cartoons from Lynn Johnston's *For Better or For Worse* were added to the package. The final edit of the manuals was completed and in November of 1996 a celebration was held to honor all those who participated in the development of the *Learning And Parenting Skills* manuals. Distribution began at the Alberta Teaching English as a Second Language Conference in October of 1996, followed by another distribution in March, 1997 at the Literacy Coordinators of Alberta Conference.

Two manuals (MacKenzie & Cairns, 1995) are now available to literacy and parenting coordinators throughout Alberta: an English version and an English as a Second Language version. Both address issues of concern to families from diverse cultures and are intended to be tailored to the specific needs of participant groups. Tables 1 and 2 contain examples from the “Facilitator’s Guide” for suggestions and handouts to encourage discussion among families from diverse cultures and families with English as a second language.

**Table 1**  
**Facilitator’s Guide - Encouraging Cultural Diversity**

***How to Teach Our Values and Traditions to Our Children***

“Values and traditions are very important to all families. We all hope that our children will learn important cultural and family values from our teachings and we hope that they will include many of our traditions in their lives when they become adults.”

“We also know how important it is for our children to feel comfortable and to be successful in Canada. We hope that they are able to find a happy balance between the two cultures so that they can feel good about themselves.”

***Activity***

- Working in groups of three, discuss ways that you are teaching your children about your country of origin, your culture and traditions.
- Choose a recorder to write down and share your ideas with the larger group.
- Write down useful ideas you might want to try on *Handout VT-2 or VT-3* “Ways To Teach Our Values, Traditions, Culture to Our Children.”
- After the groups develop some ideas, talk about them in the larger group.
- Record their responses on the flip chart as the group shares them. You can write down additional ideas as well if there are any others group members think of as responses are being recorded.
- Congratulate the group for how many good ideas they are using to help their children learn the values and traditions that are important to them.

Remind the group of the value of learning about other cultures as well as their own. Since Canada has many different cultural groups living here, we can all learn so much from each other.

**Table 2**  
**Participant Material - Passing on Our Values and Traditions**

<b>Ways To Teach Our Values, Traditions and Culture To Our Children</b>	
1.	Modelling 
2.	Talking To Your Children
3.	Rewarding Your Children 
4.	Listening
5.	Starting New Traditions

Easy reading materials built around a potpourri of parenting topics have been adapted to strengthen the literacy skills of parents and to provide effective literacy strategies for modeling to children. Fourteen topics provide a range from safety and discipline to building self-esteem in children. Both manuals include a facilitator guide, parenting session activities and handouts, sample evaluation tools, a volunteer tutor guide, certificates, and a general resource list. Research is now being conducted to develop a similar manual for Aboriginal populations.

### Profile of Our Students

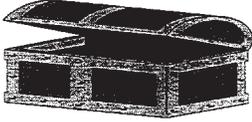
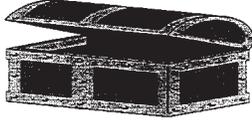
Targeted participants fall into a number of categories, as indicated below. We acknowledge that the term at-risk is an overused cliché. Nevertheless, for purposes of the *Learning And Parenting Skills* program, high-risk parents are identified as those parents who have three or more of the following characteristics:

- Undereducated, drug/alcohol abusers, victims of violence/neglect/abuse, abusers, living in poverty, illiterate, those with minimal positive or helpful support systems, those unfamiliar with Canadian institutional systems or resources, those who have mental health problems, young/immature, single parent, crippling disease, learning disabled, and/or immigrant.

Parents enter the program for a variety of reasons. Those already involved in literacy programs are interested in improving their parenting skills and in gaining support from a facilitator and other group members. Others have been drawn in because of their interest in parenting skills. These students are involved in a variety of preliteracy/literacy tasks which are intended to boost their comfort level with the written word and give them confidence to search out other literacy programs in order to enhance their skills. Still others are attracted by our inclusion of strategies to assist parents with their children's pre-literacy development.

Many parents deny that they themselves have literacy problems, but are deeply concerned about their children's progress. *Learning And Parenting Skills* provides an opportunity to examine both in a very safe environment which focuses on their capabilities. Throughout the program, participants enjoy the sense of ownership of topics and the camaraderie that develops. Session activities seek to build self-esteem and social interaction as a part of overall literacy goals of the program. Table 3 provides an example of a session activity which participants have enjoyed and continue to use at home.

**Table 3**  
**Building Self Esteem in Our Children**

<b>TREASURE CHESTS</b> <b>Self-care cards</b> <b>Warm Fuzzies I Give Myself</b> <b>Cut these up and put them in a jar;</b> <b>take one out and do it for yourself each day</b>		
<b>Play with your child</b> 		<b>I am a loving person</b> <b>and I am learning</b> <b>everyday</b>
		



Frequently heard comments from participants who have attended *Learning And Parenting Skills* in Calgary in the last year attest to the degree to which the program is reaching the targeted population. "...helps me with understanding my son more," "After the program , I learned how to read with my kids," and "I liked talking with other parents," are commonplace parent responses. In addition, a number of *Learning And Parenting Skills* students have continued on in literacy and English as a Second Language classes in other institutions as a result of their involvement in the program.

Planned use of periodic evaluation allows facilitators to find out how participants perceive the impact of the program. Tables 4 and 5 provide sample formats for participant feedback in the *Learning And Parenting Skills* program.

**Table 4  
Participant Evaluation Questions**

We recommend you allow students to answer orally.

1. What are two important things you learned in the program?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. Which of the following sessions did you attend?

<b>MAIN</b>		<b>ESL</b>	
Where Are We Heading	_____	Listening	_____
Ages And Stages	_____	Passing On Our Values and Traditions	_____
The Family	_____	Schools and Our Children	_____
Building Self-Esteem In Our Children	_____	Building Self-Esteem in Our Children	_____
Let's Practice Talking So the Kids Will Understand Us	_____	Talking To Our Children	_____
Listening Skills	_____	Discipline	_____
Positive Discipline	_____	Celebration	_____
Why Do Children Make Me So Angry	_____		
Conflict Resolution	_____		
Family As Teams	_____		
Let's Talk About Food	_____		
Is My Home Safe For My Children?	_____		

3. Which session did you like the best? Why?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. Which session did you like the least? Why?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5. Do you have any suggestions for improving the program?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

6. Are you more comfortable reading with your children after participating in this program?

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7. Did you feel supported? At the end of the program were you comfortable discussing parenting?

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**Table 5**  
**Registration Information Form**

**LAPS - Tell Us About ...**

<p>You ...</p> <p><b>1. Name:</b> _____  <b>Address:</b> _____  <b>Phone number:</b> _____</p> <p><b>2. What brings you to the program today?</b></p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p><b>3. What do you hope to get from the program?</b></p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p><b>4. Who told you about the program?</b></p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p><b>The LAPS program would like to know if we have been helpful to you. Would you like to participate in the LAPS program evaluation by telling us your thoughts about the program?</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>No</b> <b>Yes</b></p>

## Program Delivery Recommendations

*Learning And Parenting Skills* is designed to accommodate the challenging lives of a high-risk population of parents who are frequently transient. In spite of sporadic attendance, participants get involved in discussions, attempt literacy activities, and enjoy the discussion about assisting their children with literacy activities. Participants in the structured learning environment of an adult basic education class attend regularly, as they engage in both literacy and parenting skill development.

As courses have been offered throughout Calgary in 1996 and 1997, literacy and ESL coordinators across the country are expressing an interest in incorporating *Learning And Parenting Skills* sessions into their regular programs for appropriate groups. For optimum success, *Learning And Parenting Skills* continues to be offered in collaboration with existing agencies where participants are already gaining some form of support.

The families we seek to assist have frequently had challenging lifestyles. Without collaboration with other meaningful, ongoing family services, it is unlikely that *LAPS* would have had the significant impact it has demonstrated. Therefore, ideal partner organizations with *Learning And Parenting Skills* include organizations such as: *Women in Need*, which provides a drop in centre for parents and children; second stage abuse houses like the *Brenda Strafford House*; and the *Mosaic Centre* (Calgary Immigration Aid Society), a family resource centre. In these settings, parents participate in *LAPS* training and have other frequent opportunities to share their insights and their future training concerns with staff who are intimately involved with the delivery of *Learning And Parenting Skills* as support staff or co-facilitators.

Other places where *LAPS* has been considered are churches, YMCAs, Moms 'n Tots groups, community associations, and community schools. Any organization already working with families in some capacity may be considered for collaboration as a possible *LAPS* site. While *LAPS* facilitators provide program expertise, community agencies are in the best position to identify potential participants, to help build an atmosphere of trust and to advise *LAPS* program facilitators as to the best approach when working with their clients.

## Learning And Parenting Skills Training

In an effort to ensure that adequate training is available to those who intend to facilitate *Learning And Parenting Skills*, a five module training program has been developed. These modules, tailored to individual group needs, have been offered throughout Alberta and will be offered in Alberta and across Canada throughout 1998. The modules include the following topics:

### Facilitation

- Facilitation Strategies
- Dealing with Difficult People
- Learning Styles

### Literacy

- Profiles of Literacy Students
- Literacy Misconceptions/Barriers
- Literacy Strategies

### Parenting

- Parenting Process
- Communication
- Parenting Styles
- Discipline

### English as a Second Language

- Profiles of ESL Students
- Cross Cultural Approaches/Cultural Differences
- Strategies for Working with ESL Students

### Community Involvement

- Assessing Community Needs
- Collaborative Model
- Identifying Partners

Considering the lifestyle issues and the literacy needs that participants bring to the sessions, it is extremely important that appropriate training be in place for anyone offering *Learning And Parenting Skills*. Information about training can be accessed on National Adult Literacy Database at <http://www.nald.ca>.

### Learning And Parenting Skills - Future Plans

Efforts to spread the work of *Learning And Parenting Skills* continues through the development of a promotional training video in the fall of 1998 and the development of a long-term marketing plan. In addition, the *Learning And Parenting Skills* development team is engaged in the following activities:

- production/piloting of an Aboriginal manual which will be of use to those serving this population;
- translation of *Learning And Parenting Skills* into French and the distribution to program providers in the francophone community;
- design and implementation of ongoing *Learning And Parenting Skills* programs in Southern Alberta.

### Recommendations and Conclusions

Several recommendations, based on our experience, may assist those contemplating offering *Learning And Parenting Skills* and may enhance the success level of such programs. The attempt to balance literacy and parenting skill development needs to be emphasized by coordinators. Instructors with family education backgrounds, with parenting training and experience, tend to focus on parenting skills and often do not recognize literacy difficulties. On the other hand, instructors with a literacy background often underestimate the training and experience required to deal with sensitive parenting issues. Team planning and collaboration among literacy and parenting instructors is essential to support the attitudes, skills, and values of both parenting and literacy areas, and to ensure that the appropriate balance is maintained.

Evaluation, both formal and informal methods, enhances exponentially the quality of the final product. Formative evaluations conducted throughout the early stages of the program allow adaptation to current family needs and changes as the results indicate. Whether a program uses observation, focus groups, interviews and/or an outside evaluator, all approaches have the

potential for providing valuable feedback. Similarly, summative evaluation strategies conducted towards the end of the project are very helpful.

The *Learning And Parenting Skills* program, from its planning and development phases through to its current dissemination phase, has been more complex than we ever anticipated. The ingredients needed to successfully accomplish program goals include flexibility, patience, a clear organizational plan and a determination to establish timelines. In addition, support from instructors and funders, and a deep appreciation for the value that others can bring to the project are key factors in success.

We are grateful to our funders, the National Literacy Secretariat, the Language Training Department of Alberta Advanced Education, Calgary Community Adult Learning Association, and the Rotary Club of Calgary, for their ongoing support of this program.

*Learning And Parenting Skills* is one approach to addressing the literacy needs of the many Canadians who require training. Its strength has been that it can encourage people in an environment where they feel safe and supported, as they discuss the joys and struggles of bringing up their children. If such an approach builds their sense of competency and motivates them to seek out further literacy training, then this program can claim success.

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# Prospects Literacy Association

*Ruth Hayden and Maureen Sanders*

In the fall of 1992 Maureen Sanders, Executive Director of Prospects Literacy Association in Edmonton, attended the Roots of Literacy Symposium in Brooks, Alberta. The keynote speaker was Ruth Nickse, pioneer in the field of family literacy. Already interested in the concept of family literacy, Maureen was excited by what she heard at the Symposium, seeing the potential of family literacy as a positive adjunct to the adult literacy programs offered at Prospects. Established in 1980, Prospects had evolved as a prominent organization in the development and delivery of adult literacy programs in Alberta. Prospects now has a large volunteer tutor program, funded by Alberta Advanced Education and Career Development, with between 150 and 200 tutoring pairs in any year. It also has a strong record of innovation in special projects such as programming for adults with developmental disabilities, tutor training programs in math, creating curricular materials, and research on literacy program management and program evaluation. Given its history for exploring new initiatives for literacy acquisition, it was not surprising that Prospects would venture into the new area of family literacy.

At the same time, Ruth Hayden, Professor in the Department of Elementary Education at the University of Alberta, had been reading the research literature on family literacy and understood its possibilities for literacy acquisition among “at-risk” families. Innumerable hours were spent talking together about the merits of family literacy and about ways to incorporate family literacy into existing programs at Prospects. They wondered what obstacles they might encounter, how they might find funding to support their efforts, and how they might evaluate the influence of these new programs on participants. They felt that collaboration with other agencies should be an integral part of any program in family literacy. Programs should also include an evaluation component in order to determine best practices.

Following the Roots of Literacy symposium, a group of interested literacy practitioners formed an ad hoc committee called the *Family Literacy Action Group of Alberta (FLAG)* whose goal was to promote and support the development of family literacy across the province. Over the next three years, the National Literacy Secretariat provided funding to *FLAG*, under the auspices of Medicine Hat College, to produce a variety of documents such as a database of current research on family literacy, manuals on family literacy, building community partnerships, and conducting evaluation. These resources would prove invaluable in supporting the fledgling family literacy work at Prospects.

In the summer of 1993, based on her experiences with the *Homespun* family literacy program in Brooks, Bonnie Annichiarico, a *FLAG* member, was invited to Edmonton in order to provide in-service training to a group of interested literacy workers. In order to meet local needs, Ruth and Maureen decided to

modify the *Homespun* program which shows parents how to read, talk about, and share books with their young children. They contacted an inner city childcare centre as a possible site for a program and source of potential participants. Two small grant applications were submitted to the Northern Alberta Reading Specialists Council and to the Clifford E. Lee Foundation in order to offer a *Books Offer Our Kids Success (BOOKS)* program to two groups of inner city women. By the fall of 1993, Prospects had taken its first steps into family literacy.

These first two *BOOKS* programs were the testing ground for all subsequent family literacy programs at Prospects. Carried out over consecutive periods of eight weeks, different sessions were observed by a researcher. Individual and group interviews provided other evaluative material. The women who participated were very enthusiastic about the literacy experiences they had in the program. "This reading club is the best thing that ever happened to me. I wouldn't miss a session for the world," noted one woman. Another commented, "Now I know why reading books to kids is so important. I have learned so much. I just loved the books and so did my kids."

Each of the participants wrote a personal story about the birth of a child, an early life experience or, in one case, the death of a close friend. These writings were shared and treasured. Lori's photographic essay, addressed to her son through the voice of her murdered friend, has been shown at national and international conferences. A written portrait of two participants was published in an Australian educational journal. In short, this first program generated great enthusiasm within Prospects for the power of family literacy as a medium for enhancing the literacy abilities of "at risk" adults and their families.

Over the next two years, the *BOOKS* program expanded. A variety of small grants supported the expansion. A total of six different community groups such as Head Start programs and community development projects were involved in providing space, participants and even refreshments for the program. Approximately 50 families participated. Evaluative comments about the program continued to be very positive. Agency personnel noted that their parent clients told of reading more frequently to their children; another agency commented that "parental confidence skills were improving." Participants said that they "noticed a difference in their own reading," or that their children were becoming "intrigued with books." The words of one woman reminded organizers once again of the influence of the *BOOKS* program when she commented, "The program motivates me to read. I'm reading a book for the first time in eight years."

During these years, Prospects continued to explore the possibility of offering other family literacy programs through searching literature on the subject and attending a range of family literacy sessions both in Alberta and elsewhere in Canada. The *Parent-Child Mother Goose* program was receiving very strong reviews in Toronto. Under the leadership of Merle Harris, *Rhymes That Bind* was adapted from the *Mother Goose* model and became a popular program offering. Was a *Learning and Reading Partners* program a feasible family literacy program for parents of school age children? Would a *Books for*

*Babies* program be a worthwhile addition? Other questions addressed greater community involvement. We considered the possibility of engaging university students meaningfully in community literacy projects as part of course requirements. Prospects began to liaise with health, social, and educational agencies to explore collaboration. Although at times overwhelmed by the possibilities of developing a range of family literacy programs, any actions taken would have to be tempered by what was practical and financially feasible.

With a grant from the Alberta Family and Social Services in the fall of 1995, Prospects expanded its family literacy programs from two to six and combined them under the umbrella name, *Family Literacy in Edmonton (FLIE)*. Over the course of the next year, Prospects offered programs to 18 agencies in which more than 250 families participated.

The *BOOKS* program remained the cornerstone of Prospects family literacy. A collection of more than 50 boxed sets of children's books, as well as hundreds of books related in theme were established. Thanks to the work of Theone Adachi, Family Literacy Coordinator, portable display boards, craft and writing ideas, and related adult readings were developed for each boxed set. When Colleen Crozier joined Prospects as Aboriginal Family Literacy Coordinator in 1996, she began to provide much-needed, culturally sensitive *BOOKS* programming within the Aboriginal community. She immediately began to expand the range and number of aboriginal books and materials and made many presentations to local aboriginal groups.

While the *BOOKS* program grew steadily and manageably, the newly named *Rhymes That Bind Program* met with great success. Prospects began to train staff within other agencies so that they could facilitate the *Rhymes That Bind* program. The Capital Health Authority found that this program blended successfully with the *Health for Two* project which was targeted to low-income new mothers and their babies. Health personnel did not need to have broad training in literacy development, such as they would require to facilitate a *BOOKS* program, in order to feel confident in leading a *Rhymes That Bind* session. Hence many people came forward for training. The success of this program has been overwhelming, with 27 program sessions conducted in 1997 and a similar number slated for 1998. The simplicity of the program, and the opportunities it offers for young mothers to socialize, while learning appropriate language strategies to use with their children, has made it extremely popular.

Early in 1997, noting a growing interest in literacy issues among non-literacy agencies, Prospects wondered if it should provide workshops on literacy for community service providers such as nurses, social workers, or other community liaison personnel. It was felt that professionals might hold similar perspectives for literacy as did the public in general. A popular view implicitly accepts that literacy acquisition begins at school age, that reading is primarily or simply a matter of decoding, and that less literate parents are not able to act as reading models for their children. Prospects decided to explore the accuracy of these views. With a small research grant from the University of Alberta, a series of workshops was conducted to raise the awareness of social service and health professionals to literacy issues, including to early literacy

development. Twenty community service providers from 14 different agencies participated. The results obtained from pre- and post- survey questionnaires, individual interviews, and information collected during the workshops demonstrated a shift in participants' attitudes about literacy, from skills achievement to more socio-cultural perspectives on literacy acquisition (Hayden & Sanders, in press). The success of these workshops led to many requests from other public health and social service groups wanting similar experiences.

In a surprising turn of events, two police officers requested help in developing a proposal to spend time reading to kindergarten children as part of their community service. The proposal was developed for *Police Reading Outloud To Educate Children Through Stories (PROTECTS)*. It was launched in collaboration with an interested inner city school. The kindergarten teacher selected four boys whom she considered "at risk" for either literacy development or lack of a male role model in the home. Constables Darcy Strang and Neil Bubord provided 30 minute sessions whenever their official responsibilities allowed them to do so. One child noted that he felt "special when with Darcy. He's my friend now." The officers contended that although stories were the medium, their time with the children allowed the men to show the positive side of law enforcement. With the support of a small grant from United Way, Prospects was recently able to support expansion of this program to include seven police officers in four different schools. A take-home backpack of books has been added for other children in the classes, while a logo and brochure for the program are currently being developed. Each addition to this program has been initiated by the officers themselves.

Students from the University of Alberta form a key partnership with Prospects and are involved in two family literacy programs as part of their course requirements. In the first program, *University Liaison*, the students' senior reading course is held on-site at an inner city school. For part of each three hour session over a period of 13 weeks, students work one-on-one with children who are having literacy difficulties. They liaise with the children's parents or guardians and suggest appropriate literacy strategies to help these youngsters at home. The students are sensitized to the realities of the life of marginalized children and their families. The children, while increasing their reading and writing abilities, establish strong bonds with another adult.

At the request of an inner city health clinic, other students serve as reading models for parents and their preschool children who attend the clinic for immunization and other health-related concerns. Called the *Health Reading Clinic Volunteers*, this second university program allows student readers to identify particular reading strategies appropriate for babies and preschoolers. Health clinic personnel have commented very positively on this program, noting that parents have asked if they could borrow books, that they "never knew reading to kids could be such fun," or that they "had not realized that even babies could pay attention when a book was being read."

To address the needs of parents who have school age children and who are looking for ways to support their children's learning, Prospects offered the *Learning and Reading Partners* program developed in Prince Edward Island. The program provides parents with information about thinking skills,

learning styles, the reading process, and the writing process so that they will have specific strategies to help their children at home. Program facilitators felt that some modifications and adaptations were required in order to best meet parent needs. Participating parents have spoken very positively about their experiences in the program and about how their own behaviours have changed as a result of the program. The comments of one parent captured the sentiments of many of her peers when she said, “*Before I would yell at him to sound it (the word) out. Now I know there are other ways to help him figure out words - not just sounding. And they work!*”

Because of the continual attention to and nurturing of relationships with other agencies, Prospects has built a broad repertoire of current and potential partners. In 1997, The Junior League of Edmonton partnered with Prospects to implement the *Books for Babies* program over three years. This was established not as a stand alone program but as one of the continuum of family literacy programs being offered as a way of reaching parents when their children are still very young and as a way to draw them into other programs such as *Rhymes that Bind* and *BOOKS*. Book bags are distributed through the Health for Two network under the auspices of the Capital Health Authority. This program is still in its infancy. However, the financial and moral support of the Junior League is key in developing partnerships with organizations who work indirectly with families.

Another important partnership included collaboration with Success by 6, an initiative of United Way and other community groups. Success by 6 is a community-wide effort to promote collaborations among all sectors of the community to enable all children to succeed in school and in life. Leaders from a range of organizations within business, education, health, religious, volunteer and human services come together to develop the financial, human and physical resources required to address and support the needs of children and their families. Prospects worked closely with Success by 6 to implement a number of programs.

The Capital Health Authority also made a strong commitment to the *Rhymes That Bind* program and has provided financial, practical and moral support through its Action for Health project in 1997, and again in 1998. Administrative personnel within the Health Authority are currently developing evaluation criteria that show relationships between the family literacy programs they offer and physically healthier families,

As time progressed, Prospects was able to gather evidence with respect to the efficacy of its programs, due to its unique partnership with the University of Alberta. Ordinarily, it is very difficult for programs with limited resources to devote program and staff time to evaluation activities. With the help of graduate students, Prospects was able to keep records about the number of programs being offered, and to gather and tabulate data from pre- and post-survey questionnaires. A selection of programs was observed; short group interviews were conducted with participants and in-depth interviews were carried out with some program participants. Agency personnel also presented information about the effects of each program offered in their organization. As well, program facilitators wrote reflective notes about their sessions. Thus, a range of evaluative techniques provided strong data for provided detailed

descriptions on program effectiveness, as required by the Office of the Commissioner of Services for Children and Families. Resources developed by Sharon Skage of the *Family Literacy Action Group* also proved invaluable as guides to evaluation, as well as community collaborations.

As Prospects evaluated the progress of its family literacy programs, it realized it would have to spend more time with agency personnel prior to the initiation of a program to explore how a prospective family literacy program could blend conceptually with an agency's own goals. Prospects would also need to articulate clearly its understanding of literacy development and, in particular, the role of oral language in that development.

Although relationships with agencies have generally been beneficial and positive, they have not been problem-free. In one instance a collaborating social worker did not seem to understand that a *BOOKS* facilitator would not be able to release personal information that participants shared during the program. While the social worker felt she had a right to know, the facilitator was not willing to break the confidentiality rule which had been established. In another example, because both the agency and Prospects had not clearly articulated their respective goals, a family literacy program received less than satisfactory attention from agency personnel. One organization made only limited efforts to recruit participants. In other cases, initial promises with respect to the provision of childcare, refreshments or room preparation were not kept. Prospects began to accept the perspective that the time and effort spent with an agency prior to the initiation of a program was time well spent.

Looking back to the beginnings in 1993, the range of Prospects' family literacy programs has been more comprehensive than expected at that time. The magnitude of effort required to develop and maintain collaborations with other agencies could not be fully appreciated. Originally, it was thought that funding might be the most difficult aspect to be addressed; however, sources for funding were not a major problem. On the other hand, success breeds success. *Family Literacy in Edmonton* has been and continues to be a success story. By the end of 1997, more than 1,500 individuals had participated in *Family Literacy in Edmonton* programs. With that success comes new challenges.

How can Prospects continue to offer the number and range of programs it currently offers? How can a comparatively small organization continue to meet the constant requests for workshops, resources, trained personnel and the training of personnel, in addition to its other comprehensive adult literacy programs? In response to these questions, Prospects has taken on a new challenge of establishing a Centre for Family Literacy in Edmonton. With the financial support of the National Literacy Secretariat, the Centre will be provincial in terms of resources, information, training and research, and local in terms of programming. Over the next two years, a needs assessment, feasibility study, cost analysis and fund-raising strategy will be implemented to make this dream a reality. A key to the success of this new project will be the strengthening of existing partnerships and the development of strong new ones. The story will continue. New enthusiasm and many new challenges are anticipated as the next chapter of the *Family Literacy In Edmonton* story unfolds.

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## Family Literacy in British Columbia

College involvement in adult education and active community literacy organization have provided the impetus for much family literacy development throughout the province. Recent reorganization of governmental services for families and children holds further promise for family literacy within an integrated family services network. The *Families in Motion* program, included in this section, is an example of successful partnership and collaborative planning in family literacy.



# Families in Motion Chilliwack, British Columbia

*Barbara Bate*

## Introduction

*Families in Motion* is a community-based, multi-cultural family literacy program situated in the heart of the Fraser Valley, approximately one and a half hours east of Vancouver. A close knit community known as the Green Heart of the Valley, Chilliwack and surrounding rural area have a total population of over 60,000. The *Families in Motion* program for adults and their three- and four- year old preschool children includes an adult component, a child component and parent and child together time. Families (up to 20 adults and 20 children) meet twice a week for three hours per morning in multiple community facilities. The project began in September 1992 with the establishment of a community advisory committee now known as the Chilliwack Family Literacy Council.

In September 1997, *Families in Motion* marked its fifth successful year of delivery service, a service which takes direction from the program's mission statement: "As a learning program, *Families in Motion* recognizes parents as their children's first and most important teachers, by serving as a foundation for lifelong learning, and by valuing the cultural diversity and strength of the family."

## Program Development and the Chilliwack Family Literacy Council

When Chilliwack first received federal/provincial cost-shared funding for a family literacy project, the mandate was to develop a family literacy advisory council, investigate the need for family literacy, and design a model family literacy program for its communities. With some guidance the Council took shape quickly growing to over twenty members in three months. The original committee members represented the following groups: parents, students, Human Resources Development Canada, Canadian Forces Base Family Resource Centre, Chilliwack Community Services, Chilliwack Landing Preschool, Chilliwack School District, Chilliwack Times Newspaper, Fraser Valley East Literacy Association, Fraser Valley East Regional Library, McCammon Elementary School, Ministry for Children and Families, Skwah Indian Band, Sto:lo Nation, Upper Fraser Valley Health Unit, University College of the Fraser Valley. The advisory committee met regularly each week as needed to accomplish its mandate.

The group wasted no time in deciding how to proceed. Since Chilliwack had no formal community programs addressing literacy development through the family, and since many community agencies were represented at

the table, the need for family literacy programming was obvious to the Council. They felt comfortable foregoing the usual needs analysis step and started learning as much as they could about family literacy. Time was set aside to study and discuss the goals, principles, models and issues relating to family literacy. Not surprisingly, the Council quickly developed a working knowledge of the new field.

Memorable discussions took place at this time, most of them around key issues. One such issue was how to present the new program to the community. Was it to “fix family deficiencies?” Was it to enrich existing family strengths? What message did they want to communicate on family literacy? These questions had to be answered before Council could move forward with any degree of focused planning.

Eventually, they agreed that the aim of the program was to build on the existing knowledge, skills and cultural practices of the participating families, a statement which acknowledges the strengths and experience that families bring to the program. Another issue centered on the families served. Some members of the group thought families with low income and low literacy skills were the obvious participants. Other members were not convinced that families above this level should be denied access. In fact, some of the Committee thought that setting criteria of any sort only added arbitrary barriers. Finally, entrance criteria established for all participants, stated that adult participants be accompanied by a preschool child of three or four years of age and that each family be interviewed and assessed as part of registration.

The benefits of quickly building a strong, knowledgeable family literacy council paid off. The group focused on important considerations such as which family literacy model would best serve the community, where would the project be housed, who would staff it, and how would it be funded. Each question was addressed one at a time as all at once became overwhelming.

### **The Chilliwack Family Literacy Model**

Perhaps the easiest decision of the Council was selecting the type of family literacy program for Chilliwack. The Direct Adult - Direct Child program type (Nickse, 1991) was the Council’s unanimous choice. The model offered equal opportunities for adults and children and did not weigh one group as more important than the other. This choice clearly valued the importance of each generation in the family.

Having selected a program type, the Council chose a model on which to build the Chilliwack program. The Kenan model, from the National Center for Family Literacy (Seaman & Popp, 1991) was selected largely because of its structure. It features an adult program, an adult support group, a preschool, and parent/child time. The Council felt that the Kenan model offered the most benefit to Chilliwack families because of its ability to accommodate a broad definition of family literacy as well as to provide each family participant with equal access and program time.

In its deliberations, the Chilliwack Family Literacy Council concluded that literacy takes many forms, and as such should be considered in the broadest context of family culture. While reading, writing, and numeracy skills are a critical aspect of literacy development, these skills develop within the family

culture, including the psychology of its members, the socio-economic nature of the family, and the family's relationship to the community. All such skill development should be considered within the context of the whole family and not in isolation.

Finding a home for the program was the next challenge as Council turned its attention to location. Should the program be offered community wide, in one area only, or to a specific established group? And what shape should the adult and children's program take? The need for specific answers to these questions resulted in plans to offer the program Tuesdays and Fridays for three hours each morning, in multi-community facilities, with breakfast, transportation and child care support.

One of the last preliminary planning tasks was to name the proposed family literacy program. *Families in Motion*, was adopted because it captured the sense of unity, movement, growth and challenge of the program. The name fit then as it does today.

Now that the program had a name, how was Council to implement one of the most costly of family literacy models? Since there were few options, a decision was taken to apply once again to a federal provincial cost-shared literacy fund to implement a family literacy pilot project. When finally completed, the application form showed generous, in-kind community support from the Family Literacy Council members' agencies.

No doubt this support was largely responsible for the funding approval of the pilot proposal. Particular reference should be made here to the major partner groups on the cost-shared application. They include: Chilliwack Community Services, Chilliwack School District 33, Fraser Valley East Literacy Association, Fraser Valley Regional Library, the Skwah Band, and the University College of the Fraser Valley.

Among the major partner groups and Council members, essentials such as program facilities, office space, computer, telephone, postage, photocopy, and printing services, equipment, storage, adult literacy material, children's books, toys, clerical support, staff time, volunteer time, transportation and a direct donation for the breakfast program were offered. Looking back, it was a turning point in the solidarity of the Council. Without their in-kind support, the project would never have been funded.

## Program Delivery

### Weekly Routine

The *Families in Motion* weekly routine was, and still is, enough to make the head spin. On Tuesday mornings from 9:00 am to 12:00 pm, the program is offered in the McCammon Elementary School neighbourhood catchment area. McCammon School is located on the outskirts of the downtown area. Close to McCammon school are the Skwah Band and the Band owned Chilliwack Landing Preschool. All three facilities are in walking distance of each other and house the *Families in Motion* program on Tuesdays.

McCammon School offers their multi-purpose room and computer lab for the adult classes. The Skwah Band offers its Hall for the breakfast program and part of the preschool program. Chilliwack Landing Preschool offers the

*Families in Motion* children a place in their music and large muscle activities for one part of the morning. On Friday mornings, Chilliwack Community Services makes programming a reality for the *Families in Motion* participants. By closing its family drop-in Friday mornings, the agency opens its doors to the family literacy program, including breakfast, a meeting room for the adult support group, and space for the children with use of toys and equipment.

### **Program Components**

While the Adult Program also varies from year to year, the following is an example of the instructional modules which have been offered to parents in the last five years: academic skills, volunteer tutoring, computer literacy, family reading, library trips and support instruction from the children's librarian, communication skills, life skills, parenting skills, employment readiness, volunteer reading to young children, educational field trips. Each year the parents have an opportunity to participate in deciding which modules of instruction best suit their needs.

From the beginning, the Children's Program has included opportunities for growth in the following areas: physical development, cognitive development, language/literacy development, emotional development, social development, library visits, field trips and parent and child together time. In recent years, theme units around such topics as "community" have provided an umbrella under which children's skill and concept development and understanding of their environment has been supported.

Parent and child together (PACT) is the last event of Friday mornings where the families spend time together doing crafts, stories and music. What makes this different from other family times is that the activity is led by the children who invite their parents to join them, as the children lead the activity. The opportunity for parents to demonstrate caring and respect for their child's ideas and interests cannot be missed in this component of *Families in Motion*.

### **Staffing**

Staffing the program has varied over the last five years. In year one there were four positions of one third time each: coordinator, adult instructor, children's teacher, program assistant. Today the program has a half-time coordinator, a one-third time children's teacher, a part-time adult literacy facilitator, and two part-time employment opportunity trainees through federal First Nations job training funds. Program parents help as well by taking on responsibilities such as the breakfast program, fundraising, recruiting, and occupying a seat on the Council.

### **Support Systems**

While the actual core content is critical to the success of a family literacy program, equally important are the program's support systems. A quality family literacy program should provide a broad range of support services for its families. To build programs for families who cannot arrange child care or transportation on their own makes no sense at all. *Families in Motion* made sure of three major support services for its families: the breakfast program, transportation to and from the host facility sites, and child care for siblings too

young to attend the program. These supports were deemed central to the program's ultimate success.

Considering a breakfast program as an essential service may be a stretch. But breakfast is an important social time for families to share and prepare for their day and no one can be sure that families have eaten breakfast before they arrive. In the first year of programming, breakfast began as a full, hot meal. In later years, this was reduced to a light meal of cereal, toast, and fruit at the families' requests.

Living in a small centre has its advantages, but public transportation is not one of them. Due to limited service, the Chilliwack bus system is unable to handle all of *Families in Motion* transportation needs. This was, and still is, one of the biggest problems for the Council, staff and participants. All three groups have pitched in to assist with transportation needs. When program budgets could not sustain transportation costs, other arrangements had to be made each year. Some of these include the Skwah Band providing a van and driver for family pickup, the Ministry of Children and Families providing transportation support for families on assistance, staff driving families, and families with vehicles arranging for carpools. Somehow it always works out, but not without a huge effort of coordination on the part of many.

Childcare services for the younger siblings of the three and four year old participants was as important an issue as transportation services. Without provision for the younger children, how could adults attend the program with their preschoolers? Once again the Skwah Band helped out by assisting First Nations women with their costs. In addition, social services recipients were given childcare support through their financial aid workers. In another case where the family needed childcare support, the Union Board of Health assisted. No one went without support.

## Evaluation For Families in Motion

The program underwent an extensive evaluation at the end of its pilot year. Since that time there have been two further evaluations. The first evaluation was adapted for the *Families in Motion* program from the *Adult Literacy Volunteer Tutor Program Evaluation Kit* (Thomas, 1989). Thomas' work outlines seventeen "good practice statements" in the areas of philosophy, planning, community involvement and linkages, awareness activities, access, facilities and equipment, administration, participation, staff training and development, volunteer support services, adult assessment, family support services, instructional strategies, materials, program evaluation, and funding.

Four questionnaires (Bate, 1996) were developed by staff to gather information for the program review as follows:

- The *Program Profile* for general information on the program (schedule, time, hours of instruction, staff, volunteers);
- The *Program Questionnaire* to measure program performance on the 17 good practice statements;
- The *Family Questionnaire* to measure outcomes of the parent and children's programs;

- The *Facility Questionnaire* to measure facility hosts' satisfaction and support for the program.

### Evaluation Based Recommendations

*Families in Motion* stakeholders (families, staff, facility hosts, and Council members) completed their respective questionnaires with the resulting information analyzed by staff for further program direction. While many of the program's good practices were confirmed in the program review there was still room for improvement. Some thirty program recommendations were written to guide the staff in implementing changes expected to improve the overall operation. The recommendations were sorted into the following five categories with an example of each category provided below:

- *Family Questionnaire - General Information* - That policy statements be written to address procedures such as entrance criteria for returning families, transportation, childcare, school holidays, inclement weather, and lost toys. Converting verbal agreements to written procedures would enable families, staff and sponsors to better communicate.
- *Family Questionnaire - Parent Program* - That a portfolio of creative work, photos, and teacher comments be kept for each child to take home as a "year end treasure." A record of the child's experience in preschool would instill a sense of pride as well as become a lasting memory of the program.
- *Facility Questionnaire* - That *Families in Motion* recognition events be held at different facility sites throughout the year rather than at the same site. This would assist *Families in Motion* to recognize more facility host people and provide an occasion for them and the advisory committee to visit other sites.
- *Program Questionnaire* - As a result of the information collected in the program questionnaire, recommendations were made in the 17 good practice areas. For example, the participation area yielded several suggestions, including, that family participants be encouraged to participate in all aspects of program planning, recruiting, advertising, awareness raising, fundraising, etc.

These are just a few of the thirty recommendations made from the first program evaluation. The results demonstrated the importance of evaluation as a means of directing further program activity. Another important function of evaluation is the ability to validate the existing program. Evaluation verifies the program's performance and provides documentation which can be shared with all participants, other stakeholders, and potential funders.

The first *Families in Motion* program review was the single most important factor in the continued success of the program, because it validated the work accomplished. The evaluation confirmed the direction the program was taking, renewed the energy of the staff and Council, strengthened the commitment to build and expand the program, and helped to raise funds and signal success.

## Sustaining the Program

Sustaining the program beyond the pilot year came down to several key areas which are worthy of a closer look. First is a solid, well taught adult program with a good range of content:

- *Academic Skills* - reading, writing, math, creative writing, poetry;
- *Computer Literacy* - keyboarding and word processing skills, increased comfort level;
- *Family Reading* - learning about children's books, strategies for reading with children and the joys of reading to children;
- *Communication/Life Skills* - (working in a group, expressing opinions, developing listening skills);
- *Parenting Skills* - identifying strengths as a parent, learning parenting skills, identifying areas for change, learning about child development and supporting children's learning;
- *Employment Readiness* - identifying long or short term goals, exploring career opportunities, developing skills useful in a job environment;
- *Volunteer Reading* - volunteer opportunities, reading to young children at an elementary and preschool;
- *Recreational and Cultural Experiences* - trips to Vancouver, First Nations Longhouse, hosting an international food fair.

Second, but no less important, is an excellent children's program. The children's activities have always been planned around themes and development in the following areas:

- *Physical Development* - promoting self-help skills, teaching health and safety habits, providing indoor/outdoor activity for large/small muscle development;
- *Cognitive Development* - encouraging creativity, curiosity, reasoning and problem-solving; classifying, comparing; encouraging self expression; understanding the environment, meeting individual needs and interests;
- *Language/Literacy Development* - modeling/practicing good language and listening skills, developing listening and comprehension skills, developing verbal skills to communicate needs and feelings, encouraging communication between children and between child and adult, stimulating language skills through use of books, using a variety of language development techniques;
- *Emotional Development* - developing an accurate perception of oneself, valuing individuality, feelings and ideas, learning to share and care, expressing positive and negative feelings in acceptable ways, feeling proud of one's abilities, culture and heritage;
- *Social Development* - providing opportunities to work independently or cooperatively, encouraging positive behaviour, understanding and respecting differences, feelings and property, having a sense of belonging and friendship.

Other key markers of sustaining a well developed family literacy program include the ability to employ and support competent staff, keep community

partners, successfully fundraise, and offer a valuable program to families. Lastly, be prepared to work hard, and keep setbacks in perspective without losing the vision.

## Program Voices

The next sections include excerpts of statements from partner groups, staff, and families of the *Families in Motion* program. These excerpts can be read in full text in the four year program report (Bate, 1996).

### Partner Thoughts on Families in Motion

Chilliwack Community Services  
Jennifer Littleboy, Coordinator

*"No longer do I view programs as being the sole property of one agency, but as being truly owned by the community. In a time of dwindling resources, community partnerships would appear to be the obvious solution to budget restraints. However, I would hasten to add that it is not merely a way to share expenses and save money, but also a way to form lasting relationships and mutual respect. Each of us comes from a specific discipline, which colours our perception and practice. "Families in Motion" brought these disciplines together so that we were able to share our knowledge and learn from each other. In my opinion, this is the true value in forming community partnerships ... Family Place was greatly enhanced by hosting Families in Motion. It brought families to Family Place who may not have come otherwise. This program drew out a willingness to help and support one another and a keenness to get involved."*

Chilliwack School District #33  
Michael Audet, former Principal,  
McCammon Elementary School

*"McCammon Elementary has hosted the Families in Motion program on Tuesday mornings for the past three years. Each Tuesday morning from 9:30 until 11:30 participants in the program have come to the school to hold their class meeting in our multipurpose room and they have been able to use our computer lab To promote the program I have spoken to parent groups, community groups and school principals in the Chilliwack School District. Our school staff has supported having the participants in the school by welcoming them in the school and by sharing the use of our facilities ... Families in Motion has been a successful partnership for McCammon Elementary School. Our students benefit, our families benefit and so does our community. My hope is that the relationship will continue to grow and develop to help more and more people in our community."*

Ministry of Children and Families  
Dan Bibby, Area Director

*"Principles of the Child Family and Community Service Act (1995) support the position that the best way to meet a person's needs is within the context of the family, when that is possible. Thus a primary goal of the Ministry is to strengthen families and enable them to provide a context within which family members' needs are met. The Families in Motion program enshrines the powerful influence the family has on their children. The program works towards family empowerment. The service is accessible, it focuses on strengths and assists families in building support networks to help reduce reliance on formal support services... The Families in Motion program has heightened*

*literacy issues in general in Chilliwack, and as a result is strengthening the community...Community social/health professionals are now identifying literacy issues in case conferences, school based teams, in the development of support service agreements and in funding discussions...The Families in Motion program has offered an opportunity for many clients of the Ministry. Such opportunities include increased literacy skills, parenting, and advocacy skills of parents. The program assists to bridge clients to other community services, for example Family Place, Community Kitchen, Nobody's Perfect Parenting Group, services from the Health Unit and Women's Center Services."*

Skwah Indian Band  
Denise Watts, Band Manager

*"The Skwah Indian Band gained an excellent family based literacy program to offer Band members. This program falls in line with the Band's mandate to provide quality programs that focus on parents and children learning together to increase their reading levels, parenting skills, and self esteem. It has been a pleasure working with the staff of Families in Motion as well as each of the partner organizations. By working with each partner group we gained knowledge of other community resources and programming that we could make available to our own membership...The Skwah Band places a high value on family literacy and its importance in the community. It is crucial that this kind of programming be community based and sensitive to the cultural needs of the members that utilize it. We believe, as does Families in Motion, that learning starts at home with the parents...These programs should encourage growth in individuals by improving self-image, confidence and self esteem. The Families in Motion program has achieved this, and I have witnessed several Band members who have benefited greatly from this program."*

### **Staff Thoughts on Families in Motion**

Adult Instructor, 1993-95  
Vicki Grieve

*"My role has been in part defined by the amount of teamwork required to develop and deliver our program. All staff members work closely with each other, so that each aspect of the program is fully integrated with the others... This process of integration of duties mirrors the approach we take with the families we serve: the family is considered as a whole. Although I may deal directly with the educational needs of the adults, I do not isolate those needs from the other aspects of their lives. This integrative approach has determined the instructional design of adult programming. Topics to be covered and learning activities have been chosen in consultation with adult participants. Not surprisingly, those topics reflect the immediate needs of participants. Ours and similar family literacy programs have the potential to make a real difference in the lives of this group, breaking cycles of under-education and poverty. But where is the funding that would secure the continued development of such an important social program?"*

Program Assistant, 1993-96  
Colleen Rush

*"What I have learned to value most about the Families in Motion program is the strength, diversity, and courage of the women and children who have participated in the program. I was honored with many gifts of learning during the time I spent with them. I watched children grow, learn and become teachers for their parents. I watched as women shared and supported each other during times of grief and joy. I learned*

*about compassion, empathy and determination. I watched as some went on to college while others began to volunteer or work in the community. Some walked away from relationships and began new lives. Others had babies and brought them for us to play with. I learned about laughter and how it helps overcome the fear of computers. I learned how important it is to begin the day as a family, over breakfast. I watched women and children discover libraries and the magic of books and stories. I learned how to make bannock and how to say the name of Indian Ice Cream (Sohoshim). I learned that cultural differences can be shared and help build bridges between worlds of colour. I watched wide eyed children visit an older brother or sister's school and whisper proudly, "I'm going to come here too!" I learned about patience and the importance of hugs. I learned how to dance the Round Dance and how a drum sounds and feels like a heartbeat."*

Parent/volunteer 1995/96

Kimberly Van Duk

*"I feel I've grown a lot while working with Families in Motion. As the year progressed I realized what I'd like to do in terms of a career. This is helping people to see their potential and work toward their goals through education and personal growth. Without Families in Motion I may not have seen my own potential and set my own goals."*

#### **Family Thoughts on Families in Motion**

At the end of the pilot year, it was clear the adult program had captured the interest of parents, making it a valued learning experience for them. Examples of parent comments are reproduced here from the program evaluation:

*"Reading together as a family is very helpful in bringing them closer relationship wise."*

*"Made me realize I was not brain dead and could in fact continue to learn."*

*"I find what I have learned through the Parenting Skills helped me an incredible amount."*

*"I just loved the computer time and really learned a lot."*

*"Very helpful in striking an interest to further educate myself on computers."*

*"Good for me, and my child. We have a good time between us and help to me to improve my English."*

*"I've always had a certain goal in mind, it just help me to be able to leave the house."*

*"The program made it possible for my child to separate enough from me and gave me enough self esteem to apply for employment."*

*"One more day a week would be good... one for parenting, one for academic."*

*"I have a hold on all my bad feeling, and I was able to talk about until it was all gone."*

The success of the preschool was evident in the comments of parents. Examples of their remarks from the first program review are reproduced below:

*"It helps my girls to all talk for themselves. More open."*

*"They learned about fire safety."*

*"Yes they not scared to use the monkey bar anymore."*

*"He is so creative during craft time and he also has to do it by himself."*

*"In the four months there Zorran has lean to sing."*

*“When my child went in, he barely said anything—now he can communicate in sentence form and get across his wants and ideas.”*

*“I liked how they ask the children, what did they think of what the story was about, and was able to tell us what they thought.”*

*“My daughter over came shyness.”*

Samples of parent comments about PACT (parent and child together):

*“I have gotten so much out of this program, as my daughter also has and I would like to hear about programs like this everywhere.”*

*“I have gained a whole lot more confidence in myself and I can also see the confidence in my child...”*

*“I have really enjoyed the program and my child just loves it too...”*

*“...Can I take the preschool teachers home with me? ha! ha! Just joking!”*

## Program Outcomes

A broad measure of a successful program is the extent to which that program brings something new to the community. In the case of *Families in Motion*, a number of outcomes can be showcased as major program accomplishments:

1. A viable community-based family literacy program completing its fifth year of program delivery (April 30, 1998);
2. A program which serves up to twenty parents, guardians, or grandparents and their three and four year old preschoolers, two mornings/week from October 1 to April 30-yearly;
3. A program which is multi-cultural in that it also serves First Nations people as well as South American and European immigrants;
4. A program which is guided by the Chilliwack Family Literacy Council, a broad-based community group representing families, staff and community agencies who first designed the model program in 1992/93;
5. A Family Literacy Council, many of whom are original members and all of whom sit on one of the following sub-committees: Finance and Fundraising, Program, Personnel, Community Awareness
6. A program which received government cost-shared seed funding for two consecutive years: Year One being program planning; Year Two being program implementation (the pilot);
7. A program which for the past four years has been financially independent of government funding, relying on its own strength to raise program operating costs;
8. A program which has several major agency partners who for five years have provided huge infrastructure support such as facilities, transportation, and program services and without whom the program would not be financially independent;
9. A program which has undergone three useful evaluations in the last five years of delivery;
10. A program which is a training ground for staff including professional development opportunities, resulting in many employees finding further part and full time work after a positive work experience in *Families in Motion*. A program which provides pay for teachers' prep time;

11. A program which provides opportunities for its families to volunteer within and outside of the program and/or to find employment within the program;
12. A program which continues to celebrate and communicate its successes as well as address its weaknesses for the purpose of offering the best program possible.

### Program Development Insights

Any program which plans on a life past seed funding must be developed with a detailed operating plan, based on a needed service and strong community support. Otherwise, the program has little chance of succeeding beyond the initial start-up grant. Scores of potentially good community programs do not survive for the simple reason they were developed too quickly, without enough thought to future sustainability. Such a waste of ideas, resources, time, and needed programming is disheartening. Having said this, the following insights to family literacy program sustainability are willingly shared by this writer.

- Take time to plan the project. A solid foundation guides and anchors the program as it grows. Review plans often as they may need to change.
- Build a broad community advisory committee to provide the strength and direction the project will need over time. Look for long term commitment from committee members.
- Consider the experience, resources and wisdom which community members bring to a project, sometimes obvious support systems are overlooked.
- Persevere in building an advisory committee. If for example public health representation is needed, don't give up until a representative is found.
- Compile separate packages of agendas, minutes, and related literature for advisory committee members who may join the project later in its development.
- Identify and discuss the goals and issues of family literacy in the earliest stage of planning. The advisory committee needs to be informed to provide clear direction to the program.
- Provide the advisory committee an opportunity for personal/professional growth in family literacy. For example together you can review the literature, attend a conference, and write funding proposals. Where possible make this a working committee from the beginning.
- Remember that a concept as new as family literacy often needs an introduction before the community welcomes it. Community networking is very important to good family literacy program enrollments. This is no different than introducing any other new concept; it's time consuming but worthwhile in setting the stage for a new program.
- Finally, set reasonable goals for the first year of the project. Building a broad strong advisory committee is likely the number one predictor of a project's long term success.

## **Implementing a Pilot Program**

- Set reasonable program objectives for the pilot year since it is a very demanding time. Make the work fit the hours available; the objectives will be easier to accomplish.
- Set reasonable enrolment projections for the pilot year. Remember the time required to network, raise awareness, encourage agency referrals, and recruit families to the program.
- Collaborate with other agencies to develop programs which are attractive to families. The curriculum becomes a determining factor in retention and long term program success.
- Enlist the advisory committee's help in establishing the time consuming, costly family support systems such as transportation, childcare, nutrition program.
- Expect to attract higher functioning literacy level families in the pilot year. Depending on contacts, allow more time through the network to reach families with lower literacy skills.
- Keep family intake flexible. Setting up arbitrary barriers can destroy a new program before it has a chance to establish itself. Have faith in a family's ability to select suitable programming for itself.
- Balance staff positions with the work expected of them. Time should reflect load. Write job descriptions early giving staff the direction they need to do the job.
- Remember a staff with little family literacy experience will need support. Set regular staff meetings for problem solving, team building and venting of frustrations.
- Be patient and tactful when sharing facilities generously offered by community agencies. Sharing is as much an adjustment for the agency as it is for the new program. Project participants should behave as "guests" in another's home.
- Set up committees to oversee such areas as finance, fundraising, program (content/evaluation), personnel, awareness raising. Include parents along with staff and advisory committee if possible. Committee work gives everyone a specific job and commitment.

## **Maintaining the Family Literacy Program**

- When writing first time funding proposals, seriously plan how to maintain the program past the first round of funding, assuming the program has proven value.
- Prepare partner groups for the challenge of maintaining a program past the first year of funding. Ask what more they might contribute in the second and third year of operation.
- Consider how to reduce operating costs once the program is implemented. Start up costs are usually high but can be reduced to sustain the project over time.

- Discuss the need for a seasoned advisory committee to lead a project through the early and most difficult years of development. Too many new members at once is destabilizing.
- Plan a program around stated goals and objectives which reflect good education practice rather than around hypothetical funding barriers. When funding is not available, downsize the program keeping the ideals intact. Small and strong is not a bad beginning.
- Engage the support of parents in program development. Parents are often overlooked as a program resource. Respect the knowledge and experience they bring to the program. Provide parents an opportunity for personal and professional development.
- Hire staff through a proper selection process and involve the advisory committee in the hiring, as staff are critical to the success of the program. Provide ample lead time for new staff to become familiar with family literacy and the program itself. Support staff in their work. Establish entrance and exit expectations in staff contracts since some move on to other work needing to leave records behind for the next staff member.
- Expect the program to be good and it probably will be. Expect a good program to continue and it likely will. High expectations provide both motivation and direction for all program personnel. It worked for *Families in Motion*.

### The Future of Families in Motion

As this document goes to print, *Families in Motion* prepares for its sixth year of operation. The program remains much the same as the pilot year with regard to facilities, schedule, program format, and enrollment (up to 20 multi-cultural families with three and four year old children). The Chilliwack Family Literacy Council continues to guide and support the program with many of the original members. The budget has been significantly reduced from the pilot year, making the current program more economically efficient. In the last few years, the staff has managed through surplus revenue and annual fundraising initiatives to develop a workable operating budget. Each program year begins with approximately one half the required funding in place accompanied by the goal of raising the remaining half. There is some measure of safety in this practice, but not enough to stop working hard.

Planning for fundraising by the Council is always a top priority. Applications to various foundations and community groups are standard practice in the coming years. Plans to involve families, friends, the Council, and Chilliwack School District in fundraising have culminated in an upcoming "Walk for Literacy." Another plan is a year-end evaluation in the form of a "think tank." A discussion should provide clear direction for the future work of Council and program coordinator around the questions, "What was accomplished this past year? What needs to be accomplished next year?"

Presently *Families in Motion* has one staff member on its payroll. With training in early childhood education, this person doubles as children's teacher and program coordinator. In addition, there are two other salaried, trainee positions. Both jobs are sponsored by federal training funds, directed to *Families in Motion* through the program partner Skwah Band. Trainees assist

with the children's program and provide general program support, while their time is also shared with other community group activities. As these staff have been recognized as fulfilling needed service for families, it is hoped that their positions will be made permanent. Future staffing plans also include three positions to be shared between *Families in Motion* and Chilliwack Community Services. Talks are under way to ensure that further integration of community services with literacy programming will occur across a range of family service offerings. Based on the history of *Families in Motion*, it is fair to say that the program has a promising future in the community of Chilliwack, British Columbia.

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## Family Literacy in Manitoba

Literacy programming has a strong community base with local groups involved in planning and operation. In urban areas, school divisions have sought to accommodate to the changing literacy needs of their communities. Two programs in this section reflect the strong community literacy focus in Manitoba.



# Book Bridges

*Beverly Zakaluk*

## Introduction

*Book Bridges* is a family literacy program that uses children's literature selections to engage learners and explore reading comprehension strategies. In addition, *Book Bridges* incorporates process writing (Graves, 1983). The reading component is organized around themes, beginning with the reading of family stories, realistic and historic fiction, fables and folk tales and concluding with an emphasis on informational text. In the writing workshops, participants first create biographies and then, in keeping with what they are reading, develop their own family stories.

The children of participants are indirectly involved by sharing the storybooks that their mothers bring home each week, by creating albums about family members, and by writing family stories. As the participants come to realize the social nature of learning, their children become more metacognitively aware because their mothers begin to share the reading and writing strategies that they have learned in the program. The potential therefore exists to enhance the children's school performance.

*Book Bridges* activities are directed toward adult learners with literacy skills that range from non-measurable to approximately the grade 8 level. Most participants have reading levels that are about the grade 3 or 4 level. *Book Bridges* is not designed to develop test-taking, study skills, technical writing abilities, or to help participants qualify for general equivalency diploma certification, although competencies acquired in the program may give participants the confidence to aspire to higher levels of attainment in the future.

## Program Development

The *Book Bridges* program is an off-shoot of *Bookmates* which has been in operation since 1983. *Bookmates* offers a series of three workshops for the parents of preschoolers that emphasize: (1) the value of reading to preschool children, (2) functional literacy which draws children's attention to the signs that are all around us conveys the idea that print carries meaning, and (3) the role that paper and pencil play in early learning. While the *Bookmates* program (Zakaluk & Silver, 1993) is not the focus of this article, this program has continued to expand and now includes training so that members of the community can conduct the parent workshops themselves.

*Book Bridges* came about when the Junior League of Winnipeg, in keeping with its 1989 mandate to focus on education, job training and illiteracy, approached *Bookmates* about the possibility of offering a program for adults. *Book Bridges* has become a much extensive program than *Bookmates*. It consists of sixty hours of instruction over a ten-week period. Participants attend two

three-hour evening sessions a week. A useful organizational plan is to offer the program once in the fall and once in the early spring. The *Book Bridges* program is of sufficient scope however, that the duration of the program can be extended by using more reading selections and by providing more practice in the use of each strategy over time.

*Book Bridges* was adapted from an intergenerational literacy program model developed by Goldsmith and Handel (1990) for a community college in the United States. While the Goldsmith and Handel program is based on the use of children's literature, *Book Bridges* includes a writing component. The theoretical framework underlying *Book Bridges* is that the construction of meaning is the main goal of literacy instruction. To this end, *Book Bridges*:

1. Integrates speaking and listening with reading and writing activities, based on the premise that language develops naturally and holistically, not separately in bits and pieces and that opportunities for developing reading, writing, listening and speaking occur within the same context. Gains in one domain result in gains in the other domains;
2. Strengthens literacy development by providing authentic and purposeful literacy experiences;
3. Believes that learning takes place within a social context. When learners work in a collegial atmosphere they use more language, take more risks, and help each other learn more;
4. Teaches learners "how to learn" through instruction that begins with instructor modeling and demonstration, followed by volunteer guidance, in order to promote the internalization of strategies that learners can apply when they are reading and writing on their own;
5. Accepts the role that prior knowledge about a topic plays in meaning-making and strives to convey the idea that learners need to activate or develop their background knowledge before they read in order to increase their understanding and memory for the text;
6. Teaches that writing is a process in which writers draw upon their own life experiences, put these ideas together in draft form, share their drafts with others to receive feedback about clarity, and then re-draft, edit, publish and celebrate their writing.

In addition to reading and writing with their children, participants are encouraged to share these important principles with their children. Having seen literacy acquisition behaviours and strategies modeled and promoted within a social context, participants are urged to emulate the modeled behaviours and support their children's literacy development at home.

## Getting Started

Once the conceptual framework for *Book Bridges* was established, the task was to find a home for the program. A representative from the Junior League, the executive director of Bookmates, and I, as the chair of Bookmates, visited a number of sites. Ultimately an agreement was reached with the Immigrant Women's Employment Counseling Services who provided classroom space and referred clients to the program. The Junior League contributed funding for the instructor's salary, the children's literature selections used in the program,

transportation and babysitting costs for the participants, snacks for break time, and University release time for the writer to evaluate the program (Zakaluk, 1991).

While the *Book Bridges* program was designed originally to accommodate literacy learners in general, the majority of the participants have been immigrant women and their children. Now that the *Book Bridges* handbook containing scripted lessons has been published through a grant from the National Literacy Secretariat (Wynes & Zakaluk, 1997), it would seem relatively easy to offer the program in other jurisdictions. A concerted effort can be made to modify the recommended literature selections so that they relate to the multicultural make-up of the class. In addition, participants can be urged to write and share stories from their own culture or homeland.

If housing were provided within an existing program, the essential costs associated with delivering the program would be the instructor's salary and the children's literature selections. If the program were to be delivered in collaboration with a community library, these funds could also be offset.

### Volunteers

*Book Bridges* is a highly individualized, interactive and supportive program with a participant/volunteer ratio of 2 to 1. The Junior League of Winnipeg, the organization that funded the original program, also provided volunteers. Volunteers make a commitment to attend regularly once a week on the same night for the duration of the program, one set of volunteers being present the first night of the week and an alternate set of volunteers being present for the second. A six-hour training program for the volunteers is provided. The first three-hour workshop focuses on the instructional program and the role of the volunteer, and the second on multicultural issues.

In planning to organize a family literacy program such as *Book Bridges*, volunteers will need to be recruited. Both the general public and the educational community, including preservice teachers, provide an excellent volunteer pool. In our experience, the first group of volunteers served as natural ambassadors in the recruitment of others.

In addition to addressing such topics as the goals, philosophy and content of the program, issues such as expectation and commitment need to be addressed. Volunteering in a literacy program is a very special undertaking. Participants develop relationships and experience disappointment when volunteers, from whom they expected learning support, are absent. If for some reason volunteers are unable to attend, the program administrator needs to be advised in advance so that a replacement can be found and the session can proceed as planned by the instructor. Volunteers can also take turns providing the snack and assist the instructor in tidying up after each session.

The relationship between the volunteer and the participants demands a high level of confidentiality (Herrmann, 1994). Unless the volunteer suspects that the well-being of the participants is at stake through neglect, abuse, or other legality, volunteers should be advised against the casual or idle disclosure of personal information.

### Participants

As designed, *Book Bridges* accommodates sixteen to twenty participants:

- Women who may “read”, but not well enough in English to understand their children’s report cards or the notices that emanate from the school explaining out-of-class activities or requesting parent conferences;
- Women who are unable to share storybooks with their children, either in their first language or in English, because they are uncomfortable reading;
- Women who aspire to be more financially independent and work outside of the home but lack confidence in their ability to speak, and read and write English, especially in today’s information-centred, technology-driven world.

The goals of *Book Bridges* are to promote the personal aspirations and well-being of its participants by developing: 1) literacy skills of reading, writing and the ability to communicate in English; 2) learner confidence and self-esteem; and 3) personal growth, not only as individuals and parents but also as members of the community. The program also seeks to enhance the personal relationships between the participants and their children and to encourage reading as a lifelong activity. The overall value of the program seems to be captured in the words of one participant:

*“[Book Bridges] has made me more confident. I’ve learned a lot from the program. I can write better, read and even speak better, and it has made me think of the future, but not only the future, but the past. I think if we had programs like this before, maybe immigrant women would have a better chance for better jobs.”*

*One thing that I noticed is that the program didn’t only help us but our children. Since I started this program, I noticed that my daughter has gained an interest in reading. The first thing she says when I get home is, “How many books did you bring?” And she always reads them all.”*

### The Program Itself

*Book Bridges* is a language-based program in that activities are designed to be purposeful and authentic. Teaching occurs with “real books” (Peterson & Leeds, 1990). Reading and writing and listening and speaking instruction are integrated rather than taught as isolated skills. Those for whom English is a second language respond to literature and the writing of their peers at the same time as they are learning English.

The reading achievement levels of the women with whom we worked when the program was first offered in 1990 ranged from a high of grade 8 to non-measurable, as indicated by story retelling scores, informal reading inventory questions, and a standardized reading test (Gates-MacGinitie, 1979). The majority of participants read at the grade 3 to 4 level. While most of the participants had no difficulty unlocking individual words, many were unable to share or retell ideas from the reading selections.

There are a number of possible explanations for this. Participants may have found it difficult to understand the meanings of the words they encountered, which interfered with their obtaining the overall gist of the story. They may have understood the story, but were unable to express their ideas in English. Or, they may have lacked a strategy and a framework for facilitating story recall and memory for text.

### **Format**

Each *Book Bridges* session begins with participants meeting in small literature circles for fifteen minutes to share their own responses and those of their children to the books they have read at home. Literature Circle is followed by a one-hour Writing Workshop. After a refreshment break, participants engage in a one-hour and fifteen-minute Reading Workshop. The evening is brought to closure by having both participants and volunteers write entries in their learning logs, describing what they learned, what they were not sure of and what else they would like to know about the topic (Calkins, 1986). The instructor responds to each of these dialogue journals personally. This activity provides the instructor with the opportunity not only to respond using correct grammatical structures, but also to elicit further commentary. When the volunteers also keep logs, the instructor also becomes aware of immediate concerns regarding the participants. To conclude each session, participants and volunteers sign out books to read at home.

### **Literature Circles**

Each evening begins with Literature Circles, at which time both participants and volunteers share their responses to the books read at home. This provides an opportunity to develop basic communication skills in English, and is also a time for participants to practise recalling stories they have read. In the course of hearing about the books others have enjoyed, participants become familiar with books they would like to read for themselves. Participants keep a reading log to record their responses and keep track of the books they read between sessions. The written responses serve as memory prompts, supporting participants as they verbalize their ideas. The reading log also helps the instructor monitor home reading practice and identify potential problems.

### **Writing Workshop**

Immediately after the book sharing in Literature Circles, participants engage in writing. Research into the writing process suggests that writers write best when they write about something they know (Calkins, 1983; Graves, 1983; Harste, Short & Burke, 1988). Writing is also “not getting it right the first time”. Instead studies of writers show that authors commit ideas to paper and read and revise their drafts, sometimes several times, before the writing is ready for publication.

In the *Book Bridges* program, participants employ a process approach to writing that includes: thinking about topics to write about; putting their ideas on paper; sharing those ideas with peers in a writing conference, redrafting and revising compositions; conferencing and re-conferencing, and finally editing for publication. During Writing Workshop, everyone writes, including the instructor and volunteers who model the writing process by writing themselves and inviting feedback from others. The first writing activity focuses on composing biographies or character sketches.

As a follow up, participants are invited to have family members interview each other and compile personal biographies of each member of their family. This activity leads into the next writing project, writing family stories, which is related to the first reading theme, enjoying published *Family Stories*.

In subsequent classes, a process approach to writing is followed using peer conferencing to enhance the quality of the ideas in participants' drafts and redrafts. Some participants are able to complete two or three family stories over the course of the ten week program. When the final editing has been completed, the stories are compiled and coil-bound to create a class book of family stories with copies being duplicated for distribution to all class members.

### Reading Workshop

Instruction in the Reading Workshops parallels and interconnects with the Writing Workshops and Literature Circles. The first focus in reading comprehension is on reading for meaning and remembering, emphasizing *before, during and after* reading strategies. While these strategies are used and reinforced as the workshops continue, the emphasis in the second series of Reading Workshops shifts to encompass aesthetic responses. The third consideration in the Reading Workshops is on processing informational text. Participants also move from reading mainly picture books in the beginning workshops to reading longer and more complex text: stories, trade and chapter books.

*Before, during and after reading* - A number of metacognitive reading strategies are introduced, the goal being to help participants both understand and remember what they read. A scaffolding approach is used in which participants gradually assume the responsibility for their own learning (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). This means that the instructor explains the purpose of the activity, models and demonstrates its use, and provides guided practice and feedback until the learners become independent and are able to apply the strategy on their own. Self-Questioning, Directed Inquiry and Story Grammar are introduced to promote active reading.

*Responses to reading* - Within any group of readers there are different responses and interpretations of the text. From one reader to another, however, there are certain commonalities which emerge based on common backgrounds, psychological predispositions and interpretive strategies (Beach & Hynds, 1991). Rosenblatt (1976) suggests that while on the one hand there is the text, on the other there is the personality of the reader. Readers both transform and are transformed by their reading. It follows that to fully understand a text and to learn from it, we must live in it, read and re-read it. We must know why we liked certain parts more than others and understand how these parts affect us as readers. Sharing responses with others who have read the same book helps engage us as readers, apply literature to life, heighten our response and clarify our thinking.

*Using context to infer word meanings* - To foster personal responses, we used "say something" (Harste, Short & Burke, 1988), a technique in which participants and volunteers join together with partners and read the story aloud. While sharing one copy of the book, participants stop after the first several paragraphs or at the end of the page and "say something" in response to the story. We found that participants would often lose the story line because they would stop reading altogether, thwarted by the failure to understand an

isolated word. Knowing particular word meanings is often peripheral to understanding the story as a whole.

Thus we soon realized that we had to stop and give some “on-the-spot” instruction. The notion that authors frequently explain word meanings within the text was illustrated by using the following excerpts from *Sarah Plain and Tall*, which caused problems. The first illustration shows that we can infer the meaning of *feisty* from the word *rascal* which follows. In the second example, the reader must refer back in the text to the word “fire” in order to understand the meaning of the word *hearthstones*, the flat stones that pave the fireplace. The meaning of hearthstones is further clarified as readers continue to read. The second reference adds another dimension to the word, suggesting that hearthstones are at floor level.

*... And Jack was feisty.” Jack was Papa’s horse that he’d raised from a colt. “Rascal,” murmured Papa, smiling, because no matter what Jack did Papa loved him.*

(p. 7)

*... He sat close to the fire, his chin in his hand. It was dusk, and the dogs lay beside him on the warm hearthstones. ... He pushed his chair back. It made a hollow scraping sound on the hearthstones, and the dogs stirred.*

(p. 3)

As a “fix up” strategy, participants are encouraged to place a pencil check beside the word that is giving them difficulty so that the meaning can be clarified in a follow-up discussion. Other fix-up strategies (Davey & Porter, 1982) suggested include: 1) Read on - the author may explain what the word means later in the story; 2) Go back in the story and re-read; 3) Look at the title, the pictures and the headings for cues; 4) Break the word up into its meaning parts - as in the word “hearthstones,” for example; 5) Substitute a word that you think means the same thing; 6) Look up the word in the dictionary; and 7) Ask someone.

*Reading informative text* - To develop topic familiarity prior to reading informative text, the K-W-L Plus (Carr & Ogle, 1987) strategy is introduced. This entails asking: 1) What the group already *knows* about the topic, and based on this, what the group predicts the selection will be about; and 2) What the group *wants to learn* about the topic. After reading, *what was learned* is recorded. Finally, a semantic map, outline or summary of the topic is constructed. The value of using K-W-L for enhancing the comprehension and recall of informational text is stressed.

Participants are also instructed in how to identify main ideas in informational text. After reading each paragraph, the topic and important details are listed and then a main idea statement inferred.

## Conclusions

Multiple measures, both quantitative and qualitative, were used to determine the success of the first program offered in the fall of 1990 (Zakaluk, 1991). Statistical analysis comparing pre- and post-test performance on the Gates-MacGinitie standardized reading test, level D, forms 1 and 2, using out-of-level norms, indicated that participants made significant gains on the comprehension subtest. Participants were not as successful, however, on the vocabulary subtest which consists of a multiple-choice task in which both the

target word and the distractors are presented in isolation. This finding suggests that for this group, context is very important to the understanding of word meanings. After sixty hours of instruction, many participants also made gains of one or more reading levels in comprehension as measured by both informal reading inventory story retellings and the accompanying questions.

When comments from the dialogue journals and mid-program interviews were examined, findings indicated that participants were reading more; knew more steps to help them retell stories (*“Before I didn’t know how to think to tell the story.”*); and found that mapping helped (*“First mapping was hard. Now I do mapping and it feels good.”*) They believed that writing stories helped improve their spelling and that they were not so shy when speaking English. Participants also appreciated the activities.

*“I am enjoying my class. I speak with my teacher about the stories of book. The most important for me is to speaking with everybody about the stories and I try to remember a new word.”*

*“I found the books you used today easier for me to read and understand. My daughter is love the story **Good Night Moon.**”*

*“I say thank you for your class and I appreciate your participation with us.”*

The Goodman-Burke (1987) reading interview was conducted at both the beginning and end of the program. While pre-program responses were sparse, the following replies in regard to how participants felt their reading had improved show that participants had developed more positive perceptions about themselves as readers:

*“When I took the first book, I tried reading it many times. Now I have so many strategies on how to read.”*

*“I think that I’ve improved because I read so many books.”*

*“In the beginning of this program, I have difficulty to stay with the understanding of the authors thought. Now I’m enjoying reading, and my vocabulary improved.”*

Among the responses to the query how would you help someone who was experiencing reading difficulty, participants mentioned: read with the person, write new words, try to understand the whole thing first, and get them to write down questions.

Anecdotal records showed that participants grew in self-confidence and that the program benefited their children. The husband of one participant had a job interview and was wondering who would serve as interpreter. She told him she would make the arrangements. On the appointed day when he asked where the interpreter was, she proudly announced: “I am the interpreter!” You will be happy to know he got the job.

Another participant explained that initially her children did not like her to read to them in English. They would ask questions about the pictures and discuss them in Spanish. She thought that her four year old daughter knew only a few, one word utterances in English. Then one day out of the blue, her daughter spoke to her teacher in English for the first time, surprising her mother even more by using a complete sentence! Thirty-seven potential participants attended the orientation for the second program, suggesting that there were many in the community who found the program beneficial.

Follow-up interviews were conducted three years after the initial *Book Bridges* sessions. Although only fourteen out of thirty-two participants could be located, results suggest that for many, the program was empowering. Respondents stated that they were more confident in meeting challenges, completing job applications, being interviewed, and passing examinations. They did not need interpreters any more. The program provided them with the skills and the confidence to obtain training for specific jobs; to volunteer; to do things for themselves; and to meet other women. Fifty percent of the respondents either had completed or were in the process of completing training to become teachers, daycare or office workers. Other advantages reported were increased understanding of spoken English and recognition of the importance of reading to their children. One volunteer enrolled in a teacher education program and is now a practicing teacher.

These kinds of results make *Book Bridges* a very rewarding program. Many participants have had very little schooling opportunities in their country of origin. They have not read much because they lack faith in their own ability. They also welcome the chance to converse in English, since as full time home makers they have few English speaking opportunities. They speak to their husbands and children in their first language and they socialize mostly with other women from the same culture and language group. Family reading also reinforces communicative bonds that may be in danger of slipping away as the children expand their contacts in the English-speaking world.

Research by Snow and her colleagues (1991) indicates that children's word recognition and vocabulary correlate highly with parental engagement in literate activities. As the youngsters model the behaviour of their mothers and read more and more, we expect that their literacy will be enhanced.

With continuing immigration, it is important to provide literacy programs such as *Book Bridges*. The high participant/volunteer ratio, although difficult to manage and maintain, provides a bridge between mainstream Canadian groups and newcomers. In our experience with *Book Bridges*, each began to appreciate and respect the other. Funding *Book Bridges* as one project within an existing program seems most manageable, perhaps in collaboration with a community library or existing literacy umbrella program. Consideration might also be given to offering the program within businesses or industries that have, as part of their mandate, the goal of promoting the well-being of their employees.

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# Family Literacy and Victor Mager School

*Jan Smith*

## Introduction

As we search together for ways to build on our knowledge of effective family literacy programs and practice, I hope the following article will be of interest to family literacy practitioners throughout Canada. Focusing on the development of literacy skills during the early years of childhood lays the foundation for the future well being of our society.

Children learn best within the context of stable and supportive family environments, where parents invest time and effort to promote the development of language and reading skills in consistent enjoyable ways. For those children fortunate enough to be members of such families, we can expect steady progress towards self reliance and capability. However, there are many children who do not begin life in such advantaged circumstances, for reasons beyond their own control and beyond the control of their parents. Parents are rarely able to focus on the early developmental needs of their children, when they are struggling to exist on a day by day basis, due to inadequate housing, isolation, family disruption, and poor health conditions.

In these situations supportive programs dedicated to family literacy are invaluable. It is also in these situations that we face our greatest challenge in providing comprehensive programming can counter fundamental barriers to learning. Therefore, it is vital to view family literacy programs within a broad framework of social and economic change. Educators alone do not have enough staff, funding and resources to bring about such far reaching change. We need to think about ways we can work together with other service providers to develop comprehensive and long-term programs in which family literacy interventions can become important components of an overall strategy to build brighter futures for children.

My own thinking on this topic is based on eleven years experience working as a community liaison worker in Victor Mager School, in Winnipeg. Over that period of time, we have deliberately and systematically changed the way we “do business” within our catchment area and have adopted a “spectrum of service” approach to working with families, in order to have an optimal impact on educational outcomes for children. Offering adult and family literacy programs as adjuncts to the regular school day seemed to be natural and logical steps to us, as we began to think of the school as a catalyst for change within families, and as a resource for adults and children. The experience of Victor Mager may not be easily replicated by others in the family literacy field, because each community and set of circumstances is unique. However, there may be some lessons from our experience at Victor Mager. We evolved our

thinking and practice as we drew other funders and service providers together in an overall strategy for family literacy development.

### **Community Demographics**

Victor Mager School is a kindergarten to grade nine school, with a population of approximately 350, located within a generally affluent, suburban Winnipeg school division of St. Vital. Nevertheless, the school's catchment area is characterized by many indicators that the provincial Department of Education and Training uses to identify "inner city" schools. Included among these indicators are high levels of unemployment, an over-representation of families living below the poverty level, substantial numbers of single parent families, high transiency rates, and a large number of English as a Second Language students. Situated in a relatively new area of urban development, over 40% of the catchment area's housing units are located in apartment blocks of five stories or higher. Rental levels are generally either in the lower end of the city's rental market or are operated as low income housing. In part reflecting this housing profile, more than one-third of the residents of this area were living in poverty in 1991, a figure almost double that of the city of Winnipeg as a whole.

Census data for 1991 show that single parent families constitute the most prevalent family type within the catchment area. Over 47% of families with children were headed by single parents and the vast majority (89%) of those single parents were women. Single, mother-led, families, relative to all other family types, are dramatically income disadvantaged. The average income of single, mother-led families in the Victor Mager catchment area in 1991 was about 25% of the average income of two-parent families in the school division. Another characteristic that distinguishes Victor Mager School from many other schools within its school division is the degree to which its student population is ethnically and culturally diverse. At least one third of the student population is now drawn from recent immigrant and refugee families.

### **Background**

Victor Mager School faces special challenges in addressing the academic needs of children within this community. The wide range of social, economic and ethnic diversity is reflected in each classroom, as staff strive to provide meaningful and appropriate educational opportunities for students. However, children are rarely able to work to their full potential, when pressing issues of hunger, despair, and family disruption continue to impact on their daily lives. Several years ago, the school was faced with the choice of either leaving these issues to be addressed by other service providers or taking a proactive stance of becoming an advocate and service broker for children and families within the catchment area. In reality, there was no choice for the school.

Despite the feeling that agencies, government departments, and non-profit organizations should provide more direct and relevant services at the local level, this was not happening. We consistently encountered difficulties in being recognized as an at-risk and disadvantaged community, because we were considered suburban and were surrounded by older, established neighbourhoods and newly built, private home estates. People were led to

believe that the St. Vital area was solid, stable and experiencing a regrowth phase. There seemed to be little or no understanding of the issues faced in the community on a daily basis. If we wanted anything positive to happen for our community, we clearly had to take that responsibility upon ourselves.

Over a sustained period of time we have been able to effect meaningful change which has worked to the advantage of many students. The transiency rate has decreased and the economic circumstances of large numbers of parents have improved. Within the community, there is a focus on supporting and meeting the educational needs of adults, as a necessary step in helping parents to become positive role models and successful, confident learners. It is within this context that we came to view family literacy as a broad based literacy strategy, enabling us to concentrate our efforts on parents and children equally, separately and jointly, in order to encourage and support the development of literacy skills of young children and adults. The economic circumstances and educational attainment of parents remain powerful influences on educational outcomes for children. The more we can provide opportunities to improve those circumstances within individual families, the more students will likely benefit from their early educational experiences.

### **Building a Spectrum of Service Model**

The position of community liaison worker at Victor Mager School has been essential to the school's ability to provide and coordinate a range of services to families. Originally the position was made available to the school through a Department of Education special grant. The community liaison worker concentrated on identifying issues which were negatively affecting educational attainment of students, on building direct links with parents, and developing partnerships with other social service providers to remove barriers to learning. This strategy has been demonstrably successful both within and beyond the school.

Staff, parents, non-profit service organizations and all three levels of government together now play significant roles in meeting the needs of Victor Mager students. Accordingly, current and previous principals of the school have been fully committed to a community involvement philosophy, such that the community liaison worker position is now an integral component in staff requirements for the school. Schools and school divisions are increasingly faced with the dilemma of providing continued service in an era when educational funds are being reduced. At Victor Mager School, we have utilized a staff position to support classroom learning by influencing the educational and economic circumstances of parents.

Before continuing a discussion on the development of family literacy within Victor Mager's community based, spectrum of services model for family development, an overview of the range of programs offered will clarify the extent and nature of family support provided.

### **Overview of Adult/Family Literacy Programs at Victor Mager School**

Considerable work has been undertaken in the area of settlement and integration for new students from other countries. In addition to in-school

strategies, we have encountered success in establishing open and supportive relationships with newly arrived parents, despite initial language and cultural barriers. We have worked very closely with federal and provincial departments of citizenship and immigration and the International Centre of Winnipeg, the local settlement service agency. Such collaboration has led to increased resources available, channeled through Victor Mager School.

### **Adult English as Second Language Programs**

For a number of years now, Victor Mager has been fortunate to house the Divisional evening English as a Second Language (ESL) classes which are offered through the evening school program. Enrolment numbers vary somewhat from year to year, with an approximate number of 20 adults per class. From the outset, the school has supported and encouraged the program as a necessary service offered within the community. Three years ago we were approached by the Provincial Department of Culture and Citizenship to seek help in establishing a Community-Based Language Training Program (CBLT). Immigrant women in the St. Vital community were not able to access other ESL programs because of childcare needs and/or cultural and religious factors. Together with the Parents Association, the school was pleased to facilitate the establishment of this program. Working closely with the provincial department and Citizenship and Immigration Canada over the past two years, we have substantially expanded the program which now serves men as well as women and is housed in two sites, Victor Mager School and the School Division Office Building.

There are two levels of instruction. A beginner class is based at Victor Mager School, where approximately 40 participants are enrolled five mornings a week. An intermediate class is held at the Division building, where approximately 20 participants meet five mornings a week. Both groups continue for a full school year. A vital component of both classes is the fact that the pre-school children of participants are integrated into the Early Childhood Centre. Approximately 10-15 children are accommodated in the Early Childhood Centre each morning, with two childcare workers provided through ESL funding. These ESL children join with other English speaking children, accompanied by their parents, to participate in early years educational experiences under the guidance of a teacher and an instructional assistant.

### **Daytime Adult General Education Diploma (GED) Classes**

Now in the third year, daytime GED classes for adults offer childcare in the Early Childhood Centre to facilitate the integration of the pre-school children into the Centre during the time that parents are involved in classes, three afternoons for the school year. Enrolment varies from between 18 to 25 participants per class, with continuous intake keeping numbers fairly stable on the register. Actual numbers of participants attending a class on any given day reflect the realities of weather conditions, illness, and family crisis. An important component of this program is the comfort level that adults feel with an instructor who will help them catch up, when they have missed classes. A second attraction of classes is parents' wish to make the effort to attend for the sake of their children's involvement in the Early Childhood Centre.

Participants in GED classes tend to be fairly young, often single parents of preschool and primary grade level children.

### **Evening Adult Basic Upgrading Class**

The evening class offers basic academic upgrading skills, two nights a week, during the school year. Depending on need, childcare can be provided in the Early Childhood Centre, when necessary. The evening program is provided for adults who wish to improve their basic skills, as an end in itself, or as preparation for more advanced work in the future. A small group of approximately 12 adults is enrolled at any one time. This group tends to have older, teenage or adult offspring. Sometimes they are long-time residents of Canada, originally born in other countries, who, while speaking the language fluently, never had the opportunity to master reading and writing skills. A few participants do want to study for the GED test. Even though the numbers are relatively low, it is important to offer an upgrading class in the evening, to provide an avenue for adults to begin and continue their literacy development at a level, other than GED or employment related.

### **Adult Pre-Employment Program**

The pre-employment program was begun in 1996 with assistance from Provincial Employment Connections. Established adult literacy programs were eligible to run specific classes for social assistance recipients at a grade eight or nine equivalent, who required academic skills upgrading in order to be more ready for employment or job training. Basic computer skills and resumé preparation are essential components of the program. Fifteen participants take part in a 20-week program, three mornings a week. In this instance childcare is not provided through the Early Childhood Centre. Instead, social assistance workers support attendance by covering day care costs at local day care centres (including one located in Victor Mager School). Funding continues to be available through provincial literacy grants. Once again, this class draws young adults who are parents, anxious to enter or re-enter the workforce, recognizing that their prospects of employment were very limited without additional labour market preparation.

### **Victor Mager Job Re-Entry Program**

The Victor Mager Job Re-Entry Program has been in existence since 1989, with interruptions for research, restructuring and funding. With its eighth intake of participants, the program has expanded its mandate, from initially working with single, female caregivers, to an individualized program which meets the identified employment training needs of men, as well as women. Thirty-two social assistance recipients are accepted into the program each year and an individualized plan is developed according to prior experience, interest, aptitude, and availability of either specific skills training or on-the-job training within cooperating employment companies.

We are able to assign participants to the range of ESL, GED and other adult education classes, according to need. The instructors of the adult literacy and ESL programs are also employed as tutors for small group and individual sessions with participants, where appropriate. Thus we establish communication and integration between the programs, which is most helpful.

The Job Re-Entry Program works with participants for up to a year, with a flexible exit point, since a number of participants are successful in securing employment before the year is over.

### **Parent Computer Program**

Throughout the 1997-98 school year and continuing into 1998-99, Victor Mager has offered an evening course in the school computer lab, two nights a week for parents. The program was made available to parents who wished to become familiar with basic computer skills and/or improve their competence in the use of computer technology. A small grant was made available to the school from the Provincial Department of Education and Training, with the goal that parents would be able to use these skills, either with their own children, or by being assigned to a classroom as a computer helper.

Approximately 24 parents signed up for classes during year one, with a significant number becoming classroom helpers. In year two, the emphasis changed to children and parents attending class together, and being supported at their own pace by the instructor and other parents who had already benefited from ongoing instruction. The most important criteria for success is parents and children engaging in a learning activity, either physically seated together working at the same pace or parents helping one another, while children are happily engaged in a different part of the room.

### **The Early Childhood Centre**

Since 1988, the Early Childhood Centre has been designed to offer educational experiences for parents and preschool children and build trusting relationships between families and school staff. The Early Childhood Centre is open to families each morning and afternoon Monday to Thursday. The Centre is also available for ESL and GED childcare purposes on Fridays, in addition to other days when these children are incorporated into the regular activities of the Centre. Approximately 250 or more children and adults use the Centre each week. A teacher and instructional assistant staff the Centre and it is the expectation that parents who attend with their children take full part in the various learning opportunities available. Story telling, songs, rhymes and reading together with nutrition, sand, water table and craft activities are key components of the play-based learning of the Centre.

Children simply love to attend and parents respond very positively to seeing their children learning new skills and becoming more socially integrated. Over and above the very tangible outcomes seen in terms of children's development, parents see the Centre as a resource and support for themselves, providing access to guidance, friendships and learning opportunities that they would not find elsewhere. At Victor Mager we have appreciated the importance of the Centre. We were pleased to be recognized as one of the first two sites in Manitoba to be funded as a provincial "Early Start" research project, expanding its outreach component to include a home visitor and monitor progress of individuals who utilize the Centre.

### **Book Bridges**

In 1991 we heard about a pilot family literacy project wishing to deliver its next sessions in our community. We requested to work in partnership with the

sponsoring organization, the Junior League of Winnipeg and our first *Book Bridges* program was underway within a short time. The program utilized children's literature and concentrated on sharing with parents how they could work together with their children. The program was preplanned and ran for a set number of weeks, culminating in a graduation celebration. Through this venture into family literacy, the school first came into contact with the provincial adult literacy office. We had approached them for advice on building our family literacy initiatives and through that office we learned about the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS).

Our initial experience with *Book Bridges* exposed us to new ways of working with parents, allowing us to develop a deeper understanding of the barriers facing families who lacked literacy skills. While *Book Bridges* was successful, we began to see that a number of parents who had expressed interest were not attending. On further inquiry we learned that these parents really preferred more basic reading and writing workshops. The close contact with families in informal family literacy sessions enabled caregivers to speak more openly about their wishes for continued education and the difficulties surrounding childcare.

The next year we requested funding to offer a program that would allow more individualization and flexibility in meeting learning needs. As we focused more specifically on the learning needs of the adults, we began to hear participants say they would like to continue their upgrading and work towards a high school equivalency diploma. Up to this point, all classes had been held in the evenings with children either fully participating in the sessions or being involved in appropriate alternate activities in the Early Childhood Centre. The following year we were able to offer daytime GED classes with childcare provided within the school building.

### Reflections on Building a Spectrum of Service Model

Many of the initiatives undertaken could not have happened without the cooperation of the Victor Mager Parents Association. Funding for certain programs has been made possible by successful grant applications submitted by the Community Liaison Worker on behalf of the Parents Association. Adult literacy, job training and English as second language funding continues to be awarded to the Parents Association, based on demonstrated need, previous good management, accountability, fiscal responsibility and obvious close working relationship between the school, its parents and the wider community. In fact, we are frequently cited as a model of collaborative planning and implementation. The programs exist, because, as a school, we devote time and energy to make them work. We see the rewards of those efforts over and over, as families are able to focus more directly on the learning needs of their children, and experience success in their own learning.

Ten years ago our first major undertaking was to establish an early years intervention program, the Early Childhood Centre. It was readily apparent that many children within our area did not have access to a variety of educational opportunities, prior to kindergarten. We successfully made the case to the provincial Department of Education and Training that in order for children to be best able to function in the school setting, we needed to work

with children and their parents, before they officially became part of the school system. Recent Canadian research (Doherty, 1997) relating to healthy child development identifies the critical importance of preparing children for transition points in their lives and the need to begin assisting children with the transition to school.

After an initial grant from the Province was committed to the Early Childhood Centre for a three year period, funding eventually became a regular school division budget allocation. Currently other local schools are actively pursuing similar early intervention programs, as they identify similar needs within their own areas. The Early Childhood Centre is used as a base for parent and child learning activities, including an emphasis on language development in its broadest sense. Much learning occurs through stories, songs and shared reading experiences. A qualified and experienced early years teacher is the director of the Centre and a large part of the success of the program is due to the trusting relationship this staff person has built with parents and children who attend.

Our early programming with *Book Bridges* really was an eye opener for us in observing how much adult caregivers valued the opportunity to concentrate on their own learning needs in a safe and supportive environment, while knowing that their children were being exposed to learning experiences close by. As they learned more themselves, parents talked about their growing confidence in being able to support their children's learning in ways they had never thought possible before. They spoke of going to the library together with their children, of sitting down in the evenings to do homework together, of feeling more comfortable in dealing with teaching staff of the school. Children were pleased to see their parents attending classes and younger children could not wait to go to school "just like mum."

Trying to adapt the goals of a *Book Bridges* approach to our families' needs was the watershed experience for us. It truly demonstrated the value of offering adult literacy and upgrading programs with a family focus through the school setting. We now recognized that it was not simply a matter of applying a formula-like approach to adult education program delivery. Rather, the learning needs of adults are varied and are much complicated by family stresses and strains.

Based on our observations over the past several years, we knew we needed to be able to offer a number of different entry points for parents, depending on their prior level of learning and current family circumstances. We wanted to be able to provide basic literacy and GED classes, pre-employment and job training opportunities, computer based programming and family literacy workshops, all integrated into an Early Childhood Centre component. We also knew that we wanted to provide continuity of programming from year to year and throughout the school year. We wanted adults to feel that they could move ahead with confidence, that the programs would remain in place, and most importantly, that there would be staff continuity as well. It is extremely difficult to build strength in a program, when funding is only allocated for small segments of time, while staff cannot wait in uncertainty for the next amount of money to become available. If it had not been for the fact that the community liaison position was in place at the school, there would have been

no continuity and no one to keep making the case for programming year after year.

National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) funding had greatly assisted us in developing our capability to deliver a range of programs to meet community needs. We were also grateful that provincial funding was made available to us over the next few years. We have developed to the point where our diversity of programming and our funding base (approximately \$280,000. for the 1997-98 year) allow us to serve a wider catchment area than the immediate community surrounding Victor Mager School. In collaboration with the St. Vital School Division, we now advertise our programs through other schools, especially those with identified high needs populations. We have found other parents very receptive to our programs. They seem to find it helpful to learn about the programs through school newsletters or word-of-mouth from school staff. We can no longer accommodate all programs within the school building and we use supplemental space at the nearby school division offices and a local church, in addition to renting a commercial property to house our job training program.

Our focus has always been on assisting families in order for children and adults to feel more secure and supported in their own learning. We recognize that the families are at many different starting points. For some caregivers, a fairly short-term program of sharing strategies for reading with and encouraging the development of literacy skills in children is sufficient. For others, it is vital to address their own literacy related, employment needs. For yet others, upgrading becomes a short-term goal in itself and, when attained, allows adults to examine future possibilities. The spectrum of services model which has evolved at Victor Mager over the years, has been successful in providing a range of opportunities and choices for families in order that they may take more control of their own learning and that of their children. We feel fortunate to be able to assist families by providing an encouraging atmosphere for learning.

## References

Doherty, G. (1997). *Zero to six: the basis for school readiness*. Ottawa, ON: Applied Research Branch, Human Resources Development Canada (Paper R-97-8E).

For more information about programs at the Victor Mager School, contact:

Victor Mager School  
81 Beliveau Rd.  
Winnipeg, MB R2M 1S6

Tel: (204) 253-9873 or (204) 253-1906  
Contact: Community Liaison Worker





## Family Literacy in Newfoundland

Literacy policy and concerns continue to be affected by this province's decline in its resource-based economy. While college-based adult literacy programs have offered traditional literacy upgrading, new approaches are being developed within local communities. The work of the Fogo Island Literacy Association reflects one community's commitment to family literacy.



# The Fun and Learning Centre of the Fogo Island Literacy Association

*Della Coish*

## Background

Fogo Island is located on the northeast coast of Newfoundland and is the largest of Newfoundland's offshore islands with an area of 185 km<sup>2</sup>. The Island is home to approximately 3300 people who are scattered throughout nine coastal communities and rely on ferry service to connect them to the mainland of Newfoundland. Fogo Island was originally settled during the sixteenth century, when it was used as a seasonal fishing community by the Portuguese, French, and English fishing fleets, all of whom were impressed with the Island's proximity to rich fishing grounds.

There have been rough times in the fishery since the Island was originally settled, but never have the prospects for Islanders been bleaker than at present. The closure of the northern cod fishery on July 2, 1992 brought an end to the traditional fishing industry in Newfoundland. It also meant the end of a way of life for thousands of Newfoundlanders, and it created uncertainty for people who had traditionally made a living working on the sea. There are now few indicators that the cod stocks are recovering. One of the more noticeable effects of this prospect has been the continuous and devastating out-migration of people who no longer see a future in the tiny isolated coves and bays that they call home.

During the initial year of the moratorium, there was pressure for displaced fishery workers to enroll in retraining programs or adult basic education programs. However, many individuals felt that they lacked the basic literacy skills needed to meet the objectives of a traditional adult basic education curriculum. The Fogo Island Literacy Association was established in 1993, when concerned citizens recognized a need for alternative literacy programs. Soon after its inception, the Literacy Association began providing literacy programming for those who were unable to access conventional adult basic education programs and to increase the profile of literacy in the community.

In 1995, the Fogo Island Literacy Association received a grant from the National Literacy Secretariat to conduct a major awareness campaign for educational opportunities on Fogo Island. Together with support from the Newfoundland and Labrador Literacy Development Council, a literacy conference was held in January, 1995 to launch the literacy awareness campaign. Despite blizzard conditions, possible ferry service disruptions, and the possibility of being 'marooned' on Fogo Island, off-island delegates, local residents and representatives from nearly all service organizations and

schools on the Island attended. The awareness campaign was very successful and it led to the development of a local access and outreach project.

### Introduction to the New Reader's Package

Family literacy was one of the areas to receive considerable attention throughout the awareness campaign. The Association felt the need to address the issue of family literacy, because many people asked for general information about reading to children and inquired whether it was ever too early to begin exposing their children to books. Many parents were unaware of the importance of early reading with children and were unsure how to start the process of early reading. While the members of the Association did not have much previous experience in this field, they sought advice on how to address family literacy issues from various provincial and national literacy organizations.

The development of a family literacy kit was viewed as a definite need in the area. Various national organizations, such as Frontier College and the Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs, and provincial organizations, such as the Port au Port Community Education Initiative, were very helpful in offering suggestions and encouragement, as we began the process of selecting materials and putting kits together. The goals of the program are to encourage reading as part of the family's daily routine and to stress the importance of reading for all children in the family.

The *New Readers Package* is a locally produced kit for parents and their new babies, distributed to each household by Association volunteers or visiting public health nurses upon the new baby's return home from hospital. The package consists of a brightly coloured board book for the newborn and an additional book for each sibling under the age of five. Parents receive easy to read information about family literacy and are encouraged to foster their children's love of learning. Information is contained in a pouch made of a receiving blanket which is closed at the top with a drawstring. A local seamstress volunteers her time and expertise to produce the pouches, which adds a little "home made" warmth to the entire project. The style of the pouch is in keeping with the new baby theme and is both aesthetically pleasing and environmentally friendly.

We have been heartened by community participation in the project and by the support of local businesses and agencies. A local business supplies the books and materials for the project at wholesale cost, which permits us to meet the needs of the program each year. Many parents have commented on the uniqueness of the *Package* and on its attractive appearance. At the present time, we are about to celebrate the three-year anniversary of the *New Reader's Package* and we plan to continue the project for as long as there are babies born on Fogo Island.

### Responding to Community Needs for Family Literacy

The Fogo Island Literacy Association developed two family literacy initiatives, *Read With Me* and the *Fun and Learning Centre* in response to concerns of parents and the community at large. As previously discussed, the closure of the fishery brought tremendous change to our economy and community spirit. One of the

most alarming demographic changes was the tremendous rate at which our communities began to shrink. In a population spread over nine communities, with nearly all young, upwardly mobile people moving away to attend college, university, or to find work, the number of births dropped significantly.

This meant that in some communities the number of preschool children had dropped to an all time low. In some cases there were so few children that parents began travelling to neighbouring communities so that their children could play with others their own age. At Venture Academy, the primary/elementary school on the Island the declining birth rate has been noted. Enrollment in the kindergarten to grade six programs at the school has dropped from 600 students in the 1988-89 school year, to 285 students in 1998. Parents and educators became increasingly uneasy about the repercussions of the decrease in population in combination with the geographical isolation of the Island. In an area where close neighbourhood ties have been a strong tradition, this type of social isolation was unheard of and alarming for families of Fogo Island. One parent expressed her concerns as follows:

*“Our community is often isolated from the rest of Newfoundland due to our geographical location and seasonal conditions. At times it is almost impossible to leave Fogo Island due to ice and in such cases we can leave only by helicopter or plane. We have few facilities to offer our older children and practically not to offer those of a pre-school age. My children are missing the opportunity to interact with other children because of where we live, and I am afraid that this will affect their entry into the conventional education system. I am afraid that they will be disadvantaged when compared to other children from larger centres, who may have better access to learning opportunities.”*

### The Read With Me Program

Concerns about social isolation and the desire to increase parental involvement in the education system contributed to the development of the *Read With Me* program on Fogo Island. The program was established by the local school board with the assistance of administrators and staff at Venture Academy, Human Resources Development Canada, and the Fogo Island Literacy Association.

The *Read With Me* program was directed toward children from ages two to five and was aimed at increasing their exposure to books, while familiarizing parents with the school environment. Teachers had observed that many kindergarten children were entering school with few school-related early literacy experiences, such as understanding that books can be used to tell stories, begin at the front cover, and contain pictures and words which tell a story. The *Read With Me* program sought to provide opportunities to assist families of young children with early literacy experiences.

The *Read With Me* program operates as a book lending service in a classroom in the primary/elementary school. A wide variety of age appropriate reading materials were purchased and sorted into sets of five titles. These sets are placed in individual plastic bags with a top closure. Cue cards are affixed to the top right corner of each bag displaying an identification number and listing the book titles within. One hundred and thirty bags of books (650 books in total) were assembled in the initial year of the program. In addition, each child entering the program received a cloth book bag,

containing a pencil case with crayons, safety scissors, and pencil. A local group was awarded the contract to produce the book bags. The program was originally delivered by primary school teachers on one afternoon each week. Parents and children would arrive at the school to exchange a book bag from a previous week for a new one.

Community volunteers and members of the Fogo Island Literacy Association assisted with *Read With Me* from its inception. We also worked cooperatively with all stakeholders to investigate the potential for program expansion. It was felt that parent involvement in the program should be increased and that more parent-child socialization and on-site literacy activity could be included. Many parents felt they lacked the necessary literacy skills to help their children find success at school. We concluded that by developing a community based, grassroots family literacy initiative we could provide support and encouragement for parents in improving their literacy skills, while raising understanding of the importance of family literacy.

### The Fun and Learning Centre

The Literacy Association, in partnership with a small group of interested parents began the process of developing the Centre by inviting all Island parents to share ideas in a series of parent meeting at the local school complex. It was thought that community involvement would help increase literacy awareness, bring a sense of ownership to the community and allow more effective literacy outreach opportunities. The school is an accessible, central location that symbolized cooperation.<sup>1</sup> A small but interested group of 14 parents attended the first information session. We felt encouraged by the enthusiasm that was expressed and believed that these parents could convey their eagerness to others in the community. Their quiet yet persistent pleas for program expansion were extremely influential in building community support for the initiative.

The emphasis on community ownership was critical to the process of drawing people toward the project. From the beginning the Literacy Association stressed that parents would be the “master architects” in designing a program that best suited their needs and interests. This was a novel idea for many people. There was a persistent belief that programs could only come from somewhere outside the community or from some institution such as the school or government. It may be that Newfoundlanders have become accustomed to “doing what they are told and being told what is best for them.” Rules and regulations from sources external to the community have been a feature of Newfoundland culture since the days of merchant rule. To many individuals the cod moratorium was just another reflection of their lack of control and evidence that their concerns and expertise had been ignored when fishery policy was developed.

1. In 1972 Fogo Island Central High School became the first Joint Services school in Newfoundland. This means that all students regardless of religious denomination attend the same school.

Building a sense of community empowerment was a critical element of program development. The establishment of the Centre depended upon the input of parents and allowed them to view themselves as central to the program's success. Parent input was encouraged at every level of program development. For example, the Centre's name was proposed and accepted by parents. Interestingly, some parents have commented that the act of naming the Centre was a very empowering experience.

In summary four main ingredients were critical in laying the foundations for the *Fun and Learning Centre*:

- A need for the program in the community,
- Access to volunteers,
- A vision of what the program should accomplish,
- Patience, tolerance, cooperation and a willingness to listen.



Reading time at the Centre

### Goals of the Fun and Learning Centre

The initial goal of the *Fun and Learning Centre* was the establishment of a place where children and parents could grow and learn in the company of peers. However, as the program began to take shape we found that other, more specific objectives could be reached. A general outline of the project goals includes:

#### **Objective 1:**

To foster an understanding of early language and cognitive development by increasing the opportunity for learning interaction between parent and child. This may be accomplished through centre-based, fun activities such as word-to-colour searches, counting games, rhymes, and singing. These

activities are supplemented with group discussions and information sessions about emergent literacy and general learning principles;

**Objective 2:**

To provide opportunities for children to socialize in a safe environment, while using materials that help to increase fine motor skills (cutting and pasting, coloring, drawing, writing);

**Objective 3:**

To provide an accessible, comfortable area where parents can socialize through Centre activities and learn positive strategies for dealing with behaviour, learning and health issues;

**Objective 4:**

To provide easy access to parenting resources that encourage the use of positive reading and communication patterns between parent and child.

### **Overview of the Fun and Learning Centre**

The *Fun and Learning Centre* at Venture Academy is open Monday through Friday and Saturday afternoons. The Centre is equipped to accommodate 20 children at a time. Parents select one day per week that is convenient and are asked to attend on that particular day. All children from infants to age four are welcome. All children must be accompanied by a parent or primary care giver. The Centre is not a drop-off, so parents are not permitted to leave the building while their children are in the Centre. Approximately 65-75 children and parents/caregivers attend the Centre on a weekly basis.

The *Fun and Learning Centre* is a non-profit, volunteer program which relies on parents and donations to make things happen. A core of ten parent volunteers make up a special advisory committee to manage the Centre. All participating parents volunteer time and effort which allow the Centre to run without enforcing registration or user fees. This feature increases the accessibility of the Centre for low income families. Several families car pool and offer transportation to others. The philosophy that all children should have an equal opportunity to learn and grow is demonstrated through these acts of sharing and cooperation.

The *Fun and Learning Centre* provides an enriched environment where children can explore. There are painting, dress-up and arts/crafts centres and “story time” places an emphasis on reading. There is a reading corner where children may select books, or have books read to them by a parent. The Centre emphasizes the need to make books, conversation and learning a part of every child’s life. Many parents have commented upon the usefulness of the Centre for family literacy and upon the overall educational value of the Centre. The Fun and Learning Centre has been a positive step in building awareness of family literacy and has also worked to bring adults into literacy and adult basic education projects.

A volunteer schedule for the Centre is developed by the parent committee on a monthly basis. Everyone who brings a child to the Centre must volunteer some time to help make it run. In this way, the work is spread out and shared by all the people who use the Centre. This also means that parents will get to take a break by not having to volunteer at the Centre every day. Teams of

parents, made up of one team leader and three members take turns running the Centre. Each team operates the Centre on their chosen day and thereby gives the rest of the parents a chance to go to the Community Centre, take part in a group discussion, watch a video, or just sit, relax and talk about parenting issues. The Literacy Association has found that the Fun and Learning Centre provides excellent opportunities to discuss literacy issues with parents and provide them with information about local adult basic education and literacy enhancement programs.

During the initial development of the Centre, parents raised some very pertinent issues related to snack time, washroom emergencies, exit routines in case of fire, use of indoor footwear, and so forth. By listening to parent suggestions and involving parents in decision making, they have come to know that the structure and operation of the Centre is truly in their hands. The following are some guidelines distributed to beginning families to acquaint them with the expectations for participation at the Centre.

#### Fun and Learning Centre: Guidelines for Drop-In

- Please be safety conscious. Always keep a watchful eye on the children you bring to the Centre.
- Encourage children to keep toys and games in the appropriate areas. This makes clean-up time much easier.
- In the case where a child becomes ill, the parent will be paged and asked to return to the Centre. This is an advantage of having parents stay in the building - you're just a call away.
- Please hold your child's hand when in the hallways. Avoid running in the halls or disturbing others in classrooms.
- Do not bring coffee or tea into the Centre. Please finish your refreshments in the parent room.
- Food and drink are not permitted at the Centre. Please ensure your child has eaten prior to arrival at the Centre.
- Use positive discipline with your child. This will help make the Centre a pleasant place for all who use it.
- Any donation will be appreciated to help with the cost of running the Centre. No donation is too small. A donation can is available in the Centre.
- The Centre program is intended to give children a chance to play and learn together, based on unstructured activities meant for pre-school children. Relax and enjoy your children; they are small for such a short time.

A newsletter for participants in the *Fun and Learning Centre* has been successful in increasing social networking among parents, for clarifying program goals and for sharing news about the program. The response from parents has been positive.

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## Fun and Learning Centre News

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Fogo Island Literacy Association  
Fun and Learning Centre Bulletin #1

March 6, 1997

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### Fun and Learning Centre Opened!

The Fun and Learning Centre for parents and pre-school children opened in early February and has been a hit with parents and children alike. The idea to develop a Centre of this type has been of great interest for a number of years and finally has become a reality. A wide variety of Family Resource Programs from all over the Province shared lots of helpful pointers on how to establish Centre guidelines and meet program objectives. We express our sincere thanks to all the groups that sent us information packages and telephoned with 'words of wisdom' as we worked to establish the Centre. A special thanks is also extended to all members of the Fun and Learning Centre who have been very supportive and enthusiastic throughout the development of the Centre.

In addition to the facilities at the Fun and Learning Centre, the Fogo Island Community Centre, operated by the Fogo Island Literacy Association, has also been reserved for parents involved in the Fun and Learning Centre. The Community Centre is a place where Moms and Dads can relax while the children are in the Fun and Learning Centre. The Community Centre is complete with videos, books, coffee and a relaxed atmosphere.

The Fun and Learning Centre is operated by *parent volunteers* and is therefore not set up as a drop off. Since this is a program for parents *and* children, a parent or primary caregiver must accompany the child. A primary caregiver is a person who is the regular babysitter of the child in cases when parents work outside of the home and/or use the serv-

ices of a *regular* babysitter. All parents that bring a child to the Centre must stay in either the Fun and Learning Centre or in the Community Centre. This is important since parents/caregivers can be easily contacted in case of an emergency.

### Read With Me Program and Fun and Learning Centre Merge!

The Fun and Learning Centre and the Read With Me Committee have joined together to bring a bigger and better program to parents and children. Now the fun at the Centre has a book and reading program built right in! Parents can now exchange their book bags when they come into the Fun and Learning Centre. We also need volunteers to help in getting the "homework" sheets into the book bags again since many children loved taking 'school work' home as part of their weekly school adventure. Please see Della if you are interested in help out.

### Parent Committee – Your Committee!

If you are interested in becoming a member of the Fun & Learning Centre Parent Committee please sign the nomination sheet on the wall in the Centre. The Parent Committee is a Subcommittee of the Fogo Island Literacy Association. Regular attendance of Fun and Learning Centre meetings is a part of Committee duty. If you would prefer to volunteer as a lead volunteer rather than as a Committee member, please mention it to one of the other lead volunteers.

For more information about the *Fun and Learning Centre* contact:

Della Coish, Literacy Coordinator, Fogo Island Literacy Association  
P.O. Box 15 Stag Harbour, NF A0G 4B0

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## Family Literacy in Nova Scotia

While there has been a tradition of literacy program development through school boards and literacy councils, there is a strong community presence. The Hants Shore Health Centre, presented in this section, illustrates the broad range of community collaboration that is possible when a community values family literacy.



# Learning Together at the Hants Shore Health Centre

*Patricia Helliwell*

## Introduction

The Hants Shore runs along the Bay of Fundy in the western part of Hants County, Nova Scotia. It has about 900 households in 13 communities extending from Upper Burlington to Tennecape. The town of Windsor provides the nearest services for most people. Until about eight years ago, there were few preschool or nursery programs. At the same time, the nearest town library may be 45 kilometers away, with bookmobile service sometimes difficult to access. In the centre of this community lies the Hants Shore Community Health Centre which provides health services to the 3,000 people who live there. The Centre has been guided by the belief that good health care ensures the physical, mental and social well being of the individual. For this reason, efforts have been made to make the Centre more than just a treatment facility. As part of its commitment to the community, the Hants Shore Health Centre views the family as the foundation of good health and well-being. Its efforts in developing health education programs have been directed to families as the most effective influence on adult and child health.

With great foresight, the Hants Shore Health Centre has appreciated that literacy is also fundamental for social, mental and physical growth, and has been actively involved in family and community literacy development for many years. Consequently, this article is as much about the partnerships fostered by the Hants Shore Community Health Centre as it is about a particular family literacy program. The next section will provide some background on the literacy vision of the Centre.

## Community Involvement and the Hants Shore Community Health Centre

Traditionally, medical care for the Hants Shore had been provided by a single country doctor working from his home. In 1984, when this type of medical delivery was no longer possible, the concept of a community health centre grew from the determination of area residents. A group of concerned residents formed the Hants Shore Health Association, with a mandate to establish and operate a community health centre in order to ensure that appropriate and accessible health care services continued to be available within the community.

The Hants Shore Community Health Centre opened its doors in September of 1985. The Centre is one of the few health care facilities in Nova Scotia which is both owned and operated by the community, and is committed to citizen participation in all aspects of health care delivery. The Centre defines its mission as the delivery of comprehensive primary health care to the

community, along with the establishment of health promotion and preventive medicine structures.

The Centre owes its existence to volunteer effort and community support. Over 14,000 hours of volunteer time were involved in the establishment of the Centre. A site and a drilled well were donated; volunteers poured a basement, repaired and connected the electrical system, and built a driveway. All along the Shore other volunteers focused on fundraising events such as food sales, dances, collections, auctions, and jamborees.

The Board of Directors, made up of volunteers elected from the community, continues to be responsible for operating the Centre. The Centre has been and continues to be guided by the spirit of the Ottawa Charter and the Nova Scotia Provincial Health Goals. From the beginning, the board and its employees have adhered closely to the World Health Organization's broad definition of health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease.

The Centre serves a community of 3000 people. It employs a staff of one full time and one part time physician, one health promotion coordinator, a receptionist, a part-time pharmacy clerk, a nursery school teacher, and facilitators for various health promotion programs. Through government funding together with short and long term project assistance, the Centre generates approximately \$226,000 yearly to the local economy.

The Centre continues to be the catalyst for many programs and projects that have a direct impact on the overall wellness of the community, based on the conviction that people must take active responsibility for their own health and the health of their community. The Centre supports and encourages community involvement. It has made continued efforts to create supportive environments, strengthen community action and develop personal skills. Along with the cooperation and assistance of our community, the Centre strives to make the Hants Shore a safer, healthier place to live.

### **Hants Shore Community Health Centre Initiatives**

The Centre has been involved in a wide range of community development activities and creative initiatives. It has helped to create supportive environments by sponsoring and organizing social groups such as a women's network and a seniors' network, a chronic pain support group, and a "beat the blues" program to help women combat rural isolation and depression.

The Centre has helped to coordinate sport and recreational activities, from organizing teams to developing new ones (an outdoor community rink, cross-country ski trails and walking routes), while improving existing recreational facilities. It sponsors a summer camp for children, ages six to ten, as well as soccer and ball teams, golfing, and canoeing for youth throughout the summer. Examples of other involvement include development of coffee groups to spearhead area tourism development and resource support for community organizations, such as those concerned with clear cutting and land usage.

In the past, the Centre has offered a general equivalency diploma upgrading class, a job-finding club, a homework club for teens, a parenting skills program and a nursery school two to five mornings a week. In

cooperation with the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture, and local community organizations, Centre literacy activities have also included the distribution of a community health kit to all families in the area, the creation of *Upshore/Downshore*, a community newsletter, family literacy workshops, and a family literacy program that brings together preschool and school children with parents and teachers.

The Health Centre has also published *Shorelines*, a collection of letters and poems from contributors who include residents of Hants Shore. The goal of *Shorelines* was to promote literacy and raise community pride and self esteem. Launched in 1996, *Shorelines* has sold over 800 copies in Nova Scotia. It has raised awareness of our community literacy initiatives and has contributed to our ability to secure additional funding for literacy projects.

A strong partnership has developed between the Centre and Dr. Arthur Hines Elementary School. Under the auspices of Mrs. Hazel Dill, Principal, and Dr. Michael Cussen, Community Centre Physician, and with joint fundraising, a school breakfast program was initiated. The school provides space for community events and family programs sponsored by the Health Centre. Community pot lucks, fairs and dances, a women's network, a chronic pain support group, as well as a morning "moms and tots" program all occupy space at the school. The Health Centre and the School have offered panel discussions for the community on stress management and family violence. A cross country skiing program at the school was started with a Health Centre grant providing skis.

There are many links between the Dr. Arthur Hines School and the Centre. Volunteers from the Centre help in many school activities including tutoring children in reading. The Centre organized a community visitor program for grades five and six, in which men representing a variety of occupations spoke and read about their jobs. It was felt that male role models and reading were an important combination to present to students. In this way students became acquainted with an organic farmer, a woodsman, a researcher, a cabinet maker/musician, and an airforce person. All of these adults stressed the role that reading played in their work and personal lives.

The next sections describe in more detail the background and implementation of family literacy workshops offered as part of the Hants Shore partnership with Dr Arthur Hines School.

### **Background on the Learning Together Program**

In the early nineties, the Adult Education Section of the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture determined that direct literacy assistance to families would be one of the most effective ways to further literacy development within the Province. Organized into six geographic areas, the Adult Education Section provides a coordinator who serves each region. Working with volunteer and community groups, as well as resource staff from Human Resources and Development Canada, coordinators from all regions clearly identified family literacy needs. Throughout the Province, organizations had requested help to raise awareness of family involvement in literacy and to provide literacy resources for families.

Along Hants Shore, plans had already been developed for community literacy involvement, with leadership provided by the Community Health Centre. In 1992 *Healthy Families*, a health care kit, had been created through joint efforts of the Department of Education and Culture, the Centre, and the National Literacy Secretariat. The kit which was distributed to every family in the area contained attractive, easy to read booklets on health promotion topics such as:

- Healthy Families: Introducing the Kit
- First Aid: Caring for someone who is hurt or sick;
- Health: Keeping healthy, fit and safe;
- Nerves: Dealing with feelings and problems;
- Education: Learning to be healthy.

The success of *Healthy Families* provided additional support for the development of the provincial *Learning Together* program. One goal of *Learning Together* was to provide accessible family literacy resources and facilitator materials to enable communities to conduct family literacy workshops, without requiring costly prior training. Workshop manuals, paired with easy to read parent booklets, would allow communities to plan and implement family literacy workshops without extensive training or expensive assistance.

In 1993 a provincial government commitment to raise awareness of the importance of the role of the family in supporting literacy as part of lifelong learning resulted in the creation of a series of four family literacy workshops, *Learning Together*. The aim was to help parents feel more confident and equipped in their efforts to support their children's learning at home and at school. The workshops allowed parents to explore what and how children learn. In presenting fun learning activities that families can do together, suggestions were provided as to how parents can help their children with schoolwork. The workshops also encouraged parents to examine their own attitudes towards learning and to develop their own reading and writing skills.

Family literacy programs were developed for three specific groups in Nova Scotia: English-speaking, Acadian, and Mi'kmaq. A French language version of the workshops, entitled *J'apprends pour mon enfant*, places special emphasis on the cultural factors which influence learning. The Mi'kmaq version addresses specific cultural beliefs and values, issues and concerns of that community.

Four booklets were written in simple English, to accompany the workshops:

- Workshop 1: Families and Learning
- Workshop 2: Families and Reading
- Workshop 3: Families and Writing
- Workshop 4: Families and School (in draft form – not available)

The booklets emphasize ways that families can help children to learn at home and they describe the importance of early reading and writing with children. Practical suggestions for home reading and writing are made, using free materials and parent-child interaction.

Workshops were piloted by staff from the Department of Education and Culture, in association with community organizations across the Province. The Department conducted several "train the trainer" sessions for literacy

practitioners and community volunteers to encourage the introduction of the family literacy workshops in a variety of community settings. Facilitator materials were developed for workshop leaders, which include a filebox containing workshop outlines, articles and handouts, suggestions for overheads and discussion. A video, *All Things Wise and Wonderful*, was created to encourage discussion about early parent child literacy activities and shared reading at home. Based on parent response from attendance at pilot workshops, the facilitator kit was modified and distributed to community organizations across the Province. For a nominal fee, parents who participate in the various family literacy workshops receive family literacy booklets and resource materials containing additional information to promote family learning.

Since the *Learning Together* workshops and materials have been developed, there has been a steady growth in interest across the Province. Dissemination has been helped by support from organizations such as The Nova Scotia School Board Association, where local schools and teachers have learned about availability of the program. Many community organizations have held local fund raisers in order to provide the *Learning Together* workshops at no cost to families. In the case of the Hants Shore community, the Community Centre provides materials free of charge.

### Starting Families Learning Together at Hants Shore

In the fall of 1995, the position of Literacy Coordinator was created at the Hants Shore Community Health Centre with assistance from the National Literacy Secretariat. I began to offer two-hour workshops for small groups of parents at Dr. Arthur Hines School. The Nova Scotia Literacy Section *Learning Together* materials seemed ideally suited for the parent workshops I wanted to conduct. In my experience, all parents want the best for their children and will assume with pride the responsibility for being their children's first teachers. Nevertheless, parents often feel unprepared for this role and seek information

You don't have to be a reading specialist to give to your children the love of reading. As parents, use your children's interests and passions to encourage them to read.

#### A. Before you read

1. Choose books that will interest your children.
2. Make reading a pleasant time. Try turning off the TV and radio. Sit together in a comfortable place and make sure there is enough light.



3. Help your children become interested in the story. Talk with them about the title, the pictures, the way the book is put together (chapters, etc.) and the first few lines of the story. Ask questions such as:
  - "What do you already know about this story?"
  - "What do you think the story is about?"
  - "What do you hope to find out from the story?"
  - "What do you remember about this story from the last time we read it?"

or assistance. At these times it is important to recognize and respect them for the difficult job of being a parent.

Seven or eight families came to the first two workshops and four families came to the third and fourth workshops. These families were very enthusiastic, but I was disappointed at the low turnout. The workshops were viewed as one-time events, so that no parents attended more than one workshop. It also seemed that two hours was too long for the time available to parents during the day.

In June, 1996, I was included in a group of professionals who met with all parents of in-coming kindergarten children during "Round Up Week" at Dr Arthur Hines School. From that time on, I was able to reach many families of young children and developed a steady demand for workshops.

In the June "roundup," while children attend class, parents meet the public health nurse, dental technicians, the speech therapist, and me. In this way I have been able to share information about the workshops with every parent each year. In the 1996-97 school year, *Families Learning Together* and *Reading Together* workshops were offered four times for a total of 32 parents. Most of the participating parents who attend these optional workshops are already aware of the importance of home experiences in developing literacy. These parents gain more ideas, thereby adding to what they are doing at home. A few adults have noted that they have difficulty reading themselves, and that they understand how important it is for their children to experience stories and conversation at an early age.

### Organization of Families Learning Together Workshops

Each of the workshops begins with parent discussion, recalling adult experiences as early learners. It is often sad to hear parent recollections of how they had been made to feel stupid, ridiculed, or discouraged. All parents have been enthusiastic about wanting the best for their own children and are eager to delve into the content of the workshops.

For the first *Families and Learning* session, the focus is on what we learn and where we learn. The facilitator lists group ideas and guides parents to consider differences between how children learn at home and at school. Parents are quite lively in discussing how they help their children learn, and individuals in the group provide suggestions and ideas which others find useful to try themselves at home. Parents engage in a small group activity to identify different kinds of learning that children experience with their parents during everyday jobs at home such as mealtime laundry, yard work, grocery shopping, getting dressed. Parents discuss how to establish a "learning through play" environment at home by providing books, paper and pencils, crayons, old magazines, magnetic alphabet letters and numbers.

In the *Families and Reading* session, parents view the *All Things Wise and Wonderful* video on family storytime and discuss their own experiences and observations of reading with children at home. Parents engage in small group read-alouds, followed by discussion to highlight the different learning that can occur through the enjoyable activity of reading with children. Parents share strategies for how to establish a love of reading, build listening skills, develop

vocabulary, understand the “sense of story” in books, and share values through reading.

Instead of a workshop for *Families Writing Together*, I have asked parents to write anecdotes from their own childhood and send it along with a story written by their children. A family “big book” may be made for the senior kindergarten class and a copy given to each family. The following are some parent-written anecdotes from childhood written for a “big book:

*My Name is Mary Smity.\*<sup>1</sup> My story is about a dog I had growing up. It was a brown, medium size dog and his name was Sandy. He used to run and play with us kids where ever we went. One thing I do remember about this dog is he didn't run off and when we came home he did too. The sad thing is one day Sandy wanted to go with us, but we left him home. One of the windows that had a screen was left open, so Sandy ate through the screen and went on the road and was hit by a big truck.*

*Josey\*: Mom, when was your favorite Christmas? And your favorite toy?*

*Mom: Well Josey, I never really had a favorite Christmas but one does stick out in my mind. Christmas of 1987. The year I received my school jacket, with my name on it no less. I also received another special gift that year. My family genealogy. Your grammy had one and I literally wore it out reading it over and over. But to have one of my own was pretty special.*

*My favorite toy would have to have been when I was about 9. My sister and I received a 4-piece Holly Hobbie Kitchen set. We played with that more than I think anything else.*

A questionnaire was developed to obtain feedback about the program during family visits. Table 1 contains a sample parent response.

### **Other Developments in the *Families Learning Together* Program**

Home visits have been implemented recently to maintain contact with families who have attended workshops. Home visits seem to be a welcomed opportunity for families to discuss their children, while these visits enable me to extend invitations to other programs offered at the Health Centre. Families have shown interest in our Nobody's Perfect parenting program as well as our “moms and tots” weekly meeting. For the latter, small group informal meetings of mothers and babies are held in nearby homes in order to listen to stories and socialize. These group meetings have been especially popular with young, isolated parents who can begin to develop a social network.

We have also initiated a “celebration of story” on Saturday mornings at Dr Arthur Hines School to involve teens in literacy activities in the Hants Shore Area. Teenagers dramatize children's stories, sing nursery rhymes and play singing games with children aged one to five years and their parents.

With these developments the Learning Together program continues to have the support of the community and looks forward to future involvement.

1. \* All names have been changed.

**Table 1**  
**We Need Your Opinions**

1. ***What did you find most useful about the session Families Learning Together?***  
Seeing that things like laundry are good for talking. My son pulls the line for me while I fold the clothes. He says, "Those are mine, those are Daddy's, these are big, etc."
2. ***Which activities at home seem to be the best for developing conversation and new words?"***  
When he is drawing pictures, he talks about his pictures all the time...When we feed the rabbits on the weekend.
3. ***Which ideas from the Families Reading Together session did you find most enjoyable?***  
– that you can read the pictures as well as the words. He reads all the pictures and sees everything.
4. ***Were any ideas useful from the booklet, Families Reading Together?***  
Yes, reading the pictures.
5. ***What time of the day seems best for reading with your child?***  
– morning time when he's fresh...Anytime really, when he's home he often brings a book and wants a story.
6. ***What kinds of stories do you enjoy reading?***  
Animal stories.
7. ***Which books does your child ask for over and over again?***  
Alice in Wonderland, I've Been Working on the Railroad.
8. ***Does your child enjoy nursery rhymes?***  
Yes.
9. ***Would you like a regular time to meet with other parents and look at children's books?***  
Yes, that would be good. I'm always looking for children's books.

## References

- Hants Shore Community Health Clinic. (1992). **Healthy families: Your community health kit**. Halifax, NS: Department of Education: Literacy Section.\*
- Nova Scotia Department of Education. (1994). **Learning together**. Family literacy workshop program (facilitator materials, family booklets, video). Halifax, NS: Department of Education: Literacy Section.\*

(\*Now the Department of Education and Culture: Adult Education Section)

For more information on the Hants Shore Community Health Centre *Learning Together* program contact:

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Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture:  
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## Family Literacy in Ontario

A network of community college and non-profit, community-based organizations forms the basis of adult literacy programs in the province. With trends for government support of literacy for workplace training and employment, programs that have a focus on family literacy have found support from community groups and school boards that understand the importance of parental involvement in the literacy development of children. In this section, two Ontario programs have had long standing local support. Because the *Parent Child Mother Goose Program* has been replicated in many other communities, a report on a Mother Goose adaptation, *Rhymes That Bind*, has also been included.

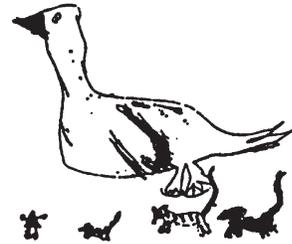


# The Parent-Child Mother Goose Program

*Celia Lottridge, Director*

## Introduction

Picture a group of mothers, a few fathers and grandmothers, sitting in a circle on mats in an otherwise empty room. Some of the adults have babies on their laps; several toddlers are sitting with their parents; others are wandering sociably about the room. One of the two group leaders is teaching a rhyme. "This is a really good one to use for diaper-changing, but kids love to do it any time," she says. "It goes, "Leg over leg, the dog went to Dover ..." Welcome to the *Parent-Child Mother Goose* program.



It is widely known that positive and extensive experience with oral language is an essential foundation for later literacy. One purpose of the *Parent-Child Mother Goose* program is to help families who might not naturally provide their babies and young children with significant language experience to become familiar and comfortable with the wide range of materials and activities that make up oral literacy.

By taking part in the program, parents become accustomed to using patterned and imaginative language with their children and see their children respond to language from a very early age. Those who do not feel comfortable with print and books or who may not be effectively literate are enabled to acquire poems and stories without the stress of reading. Parents who may well feel inadequate in providing their children with a good start to language and learning come to feel that they do have something to offer their children. Some also gain confidence in their own ability to learn and to express themselves. All of these experiences provide an excellent beginning and ongoing support for other literacy activities within the family.

During the group sessions and program-inspired activities at home, children gain early pleasurable experience with the rhythm, rhyme, and meaning of language. In the most natural way they gain a sense of the structure of story. At every age the children's joyful response to shared rhymes and stories, as well as the learning that obviously takes place ("She knows *all* the rhymes."), provides the parents with real encouragement to take these activities into family settings.

These concepts are fundamental to the *Parent-Child Mother Goose* program, a non-profit, charitable organization which has operated several on-going groups in various locations in the greater Toronto area since 1986. Since 1993 the program has developed training workshops and resources which have

enabled a number of agencies across the country to begin offering programs based on the pattern of the *Parent-Child Mother Goose* program. In 1997 there were *Parent-Child Mother Goose* programs in five provinces.

### Overview of the Program

The *Parent-Child Mother Goose* program invites parents and their children to attend weekly sessions for about one-and-a-half hours each week. The program can be offered as a stand alone program in various community settings, such as recreation centres, health centres, church halls, and shelters for homeless families. It can also be provided as one offering of a multi-faceted agency, such as a parent resource centre or a moms and tots drop-in in a housing project. The program is usually offered in areas of high need and is particularly directed at parents who have low incomes, are isolated, educationally disadvantaged, new to the country or city, and/or lack positive role models for parenting.

The activity of the program is centred on oral literature - rhymes, songs, and stories. Parents and children sit in a circle on the floor with two group leaders and learn new rhymes, chanting old favorites, sing songs and listen to stories. Teaching is directed to the parents with the children participating, napping or wandering, as is appropriate to their age. There is informal discussion of how the rhymes can be and are used in everyday life, as well as any issues about child development that come up. The atmosphere is relaxed and accepting, with time for informal visiting and snacks, as well as for more structured teaching.

The program is usually offered in a ten-week series of sessions but participants are welcome to attend subsequent series as long as their children fall within the target age group. At the end of each ten-week session each participant receives a folder containing printed versions of all the rhymes and songs that have been taught. Parents report that they use the printed material to refresh their memories and, since the rhymes are loved and enjoyed, the booklet becomes valued and frequently used.

### Variations within the Mother Goose Program

While the core routines of the *Parent-Child Mother Goose* program outlined above are found in all program variations, individual programs have to be adapted to the needs of participating families. Consequently four program types have evolved, which have distinct qualities and activities, relating to the family literacy needs of these groups.

#### **The Infant Program**

Designed for parents and infants to two year olds, this was the original program, where the emphasis is on providing experience with rhymes and songs that parents may use consistently and naturally with their babies. The importance of early language experience for brain development and later language abilities has been reported extensively. We see in our groups the growing comfort which parents experience in using language with babies. It seems clear that one of the strengths of the *Parent-Child Mother Goose* program is the early start parents and infants receive in using song and rhyme to communicate at the nonverbal level of eye contact, gesture and facial

expression, as well as at the verbal level. Parents model language and the give and take of communication at the earliest possible time in a child's life. Through the natural interaction of parent and child engaged in song, rhyme, or story both parent and child learn valuable lessons about each other.

### **Mother Goose for ESL Groups**

The *Parent-Child Mother Goose* program was originally developed as an English language program, but it can be successfully adapted to use with groups who have minimal English. The key elements are:

- the involvement of bilingual leaders or volunteers,
- lots and lots of repetition and action to support the meaning of the rhymes,
- provision of printed copies of the rhymes as soon as they have been taught.

The strong connection of the oral to the written is helpful to people trying to learn English. In addition, these groups share rhymes in their native language. We also stress how important this kind of activity is to children's later success in school. With participants from many backgrounds, the common interest in the children is a strong binding force. Everyone focuses on the responses of the babies and children, with lots of laughter and enjoyment. The slow pace and absence of any performance pressure enables people to relax and nearly all make significant progress with the sounds, rhymes and meanings of English phrases during a ten-week program.

### **The Two to Four Program**

This variation centres on the active learning of this age group. Again, sharing between parents and children is fostered through discussion of the value of introducing rhymes and songs in difficult situations at home. Parents are encouraged to notice and enjoy their children's language development and to use lots of language in play. In addition, in this program parents learn stories they can tell their children. This is done in a Parents-Alone time, while the children are engaged in active play with a child-care worker. Parents learn the story by hearing it and then telling it "around the circle." While the stories we teach may come from books or books may be supplied for a parent who wants to refer to a text or read the story aloud, nevertheless, the stress is on telling the story. The main program objective is to encourage language, rhyme and story, as a vital part of the lives of the families. In addition, we want parents to be both aware of and encourage their children's developing language during the crucial period.

### **Pre School - Entry Program**

This program is offered to parents and three or four year old children who will be entering school during the next school term. Usually located in a nearby school the children will be attending, this *Mother Goose* variation is offered for families who will benefit from engaging in activities such as reading aloud, as they help prepare children for learning to read. While the program is once again based on oral rhymes, stories and songs, there is a strong emphasis on helping both children and parents feel comfortable with literature which will become part of the children's school experience. An additional feature of this

program is a strong connection with the school library. A librarian comes to the program to encourage the families to borrow books and, whenever possible, the rhymes and stories are linked to books that are available.

Books are on display for browsing during the break and following the program. Kindergarten teachers have noticed that children who had participated in a preschool *Mother Goose* program show a familiarity with rhymes and stories and a comfort with group language activities which would not have been expected. In addition, parents feel more confident in their relationship with the school setting and the school staff, as a result of the familiarity with school gained during *Mother Goose* participation.

### **How the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program Began and How It Has Survived**

The Parent-Child Mother Goose Program has its foundation in a pilot project that was conceived of by Joan Bodger, a storyteller and Gestalt therapist, and Barry Dickson, a social worker. They designed a group program that would teach parents who were at high risk of failing to bond with their infants to use interactive rhymes as a way of strengthening the connection between parent and infant as well as giving the parents a way of coping with the stresses of everyday life with a baby. This project was funded by the Toronto Children's Aid Society Foundation and was implemented with clients of the Society. Although the project was considered successful, it was not continued by the Children's Aid Society when funding ended in 1985.

Katherine Grier and I were both storytellers with a background in Education. We had assisted Joan Bodger during the pilot and in the process had learned a great deal about the power of interactive rhymes to help parents and babies feel comfortable with each other and experience some joy amidst the stresses of life. We felt that a program based on this oral language activity could be of great help to many parents and young children in the general community, especially to families who were isolated and for various reasons were in need of support. We sought funding at a number of levels and in 1980 were successful in getting a start-up grant from Metro Toronto Community and Social Services. This led to the first *Parent-Child Mother Goose* program group which met, and still meets, in an underserved, low income neighbourhood in the Lakeshore area of Toronto.

Running this group was a learning experience for both of us. The *Parent-Child Mother Goose* program was completely new to the community and we wanted to reach not just the general population, but also parents in need of a program that would give them more resources and confidence in dealing with their children. We learned the power of networking with existing agencies and of word of mouth. We also learned from the group participants how they benefitted from experiencing accomplishment in learning and remembering rhymes and seeing that even their pre-verbal children responded to the rhythm, words and actions of rhymes. We also became aware of the importance of an accepting, enjoyable group to people who were lonely and who often felt society's disapproval.

The networking became more than a way of getting clients for the program, it also became part of our education as group leaders. It was through

networking that the *Parent-Child Mother Goose* program came in contact with family literacy programs and we came to realize that family literacy in all its aspects is one identity of our program.

Since 1986 *Parent-Child Mother Goose* has grown to four ongoing groups, a part-time staff of nine teachers, one director and an office administrator. We also provide from ten to fourteen ten-week projects each year on a fee-for-service basis for other agencies (notably Babies Best Start). This growth of capacity for service has occurred, even though our core funding from Metro Community and Social Services has only grown about 50% since our first grant. We were never successful in getting provincial funding, which probably was to our advantage in the long run, since we would almost certainly have lost that funding in the big cutbacks in the mid-90s. We have received small ongoing grants from the cities of Toronto and Etobicoke. When these are added to the Metro grant we have about 50% of core program and administration cost.

The balance of our funding has come from a patchwork of short-term grants and fund raising projects. Of the short-term grants the most significant was \$10,000 per year for three years which the Toronto-Islington Rotary Club gave us in the late 80s. This grant allowed us to expand beyond our initial single group. We have never been able to find another source for a similar amount but the projects we established then have become so much a part of the community that we have had to find ways to continue to support them. The other very significant grants came from the Community Foundation and from the Trillium Foundation. These allowed us to develop materials and mount a campaign to make our program better known. These efforts, in turn, have led to other fund-raising possibilities.

Being better known has made it easier for us to solicit money from a variety of sources such as individuals, family foundations, and businesses. We have a very low membership fee and twice a year send out a newsletter which has the goal of giving our members a sense of what is actually going on in the program. This tends to encourage these people to make donations, most of which are small, but some are substantial. We have also had some very good press coverage which tends to attract some donations.

Our other important method of raising money has been the sale of publications and a video. The books were a logical idea for us, because the rhymes used in *Mother Goose* are mostly in the public domain and have wide appeal. So far we have published two rhyme books and a teacher training manual. The writing and editorial work on each was done by our staff, with production supported by project grants. Similarly we produced a video with a grant from Health Canada. All of these are sold both by mail and at our training workshops. In addition, Groundwood, a publisher of children's books, published a book of nursery rhymes with beautiful illustrations donated by twenty-nine children's illustrators. All royalties go to *Parent-Child Mother Goose* and, since the book has sold very well, this has been a major income-producer.

Like other small agencies, we rely upon cooperation with other service agencies to minimize our costs. Thus, we share office space and equipment, run programs in donated space, receive help with outreach from community

agencies, and have the donated services of childcare staff for older siblings in some situations. While we have benefitted greatly from the services of volunteers, we do not rely on volunteers for program delivery.

In an ideal world the *Parent-Child Mother Goose* program would have been able to secure added funding, as demand for the program grew. As it is, we have had to use our wits and our strengths to keep enough money coming in to maintain our basic programs with a minimal administrative component. It became clear to us in the last several years that although we could not hope to get stable, additional funding, the program met many family needs and should be available to more families. Therefore we developed our fee-for-service capacity, as well as training workshops for people from other organizations and agencies. We have now given workshops in nearly every province and programs are being offered in at least five provinces. Our present challenge is to establish a way of linking these programs with our central office so that all those engaged in offering these programs can learn from each other and provide additional support.

### Staff Development and Training

As Katherine Grier and I taught the first Parent-Child Mother Goose Program group, it became clear to us that some participating parents had a particular affinity for the rhymes, songs and stories as well as an ability to share what they were learning. We decided that such people would be ideal teachers in the Program. Their teaching would be rooted in personal experience and they would be closely connected to the communities where the groups were meeting. At the same time we wanted to bring in some teachers who had work experience that would add new understandings to the development of the Program. Our teaching staff therefore comes from a wide variety of backgrounds. Six of the nine current teachers were originally program participants. Of the other three, one has a background in social work and two have training in art therapy. Most, but not all, have children. Educational background varies from leaving school in grade 5 to having advanced university degrees.

Whatever the background of the potential teacher, the training follows an apprenticeship model. Program participants often start as program assistants, helping with room set-up, snack preparation and keeping an eye on wandering children. For people who have not considered the possibility of becoming group leaders and teachers, this beginning level can be very important because it shifts their way of thinking about their role in the group, and they begin to take some responsibility for the way the group functions.

The real training takes place when a person becomes a teacher-in-training. In this role s/he works with a teacher as one of the co-leaders of the group. Each teacher-in-training has some skills and knowledge s/he can immediately use and others s/he must develop. People who have attended a group will know rhymes and songs to teach but may not have any experience with group leadership and record keeping. Those who have worked in other group programs will have the reverse situation. The teacher who is doing the training will build on the strengths of the teacher-in-training while helping her acquire the other needed skills. As an organization we have developed resource material (rhyme collections, books of songs and stories) and have laid down

routines for outreach and record keeping which support both trainer and trainee as the training goes on.

In addition to weekly training, staff meetings are held three times a year to discuss issues and procedures that affect everyone working in the Program. In-service training sessions on storytelling are also periodically conducted. As Director, I visit each group at least twice a year to observe and meet all staff members, especially the teachers-in-training. A staff member becomes a teacher when she and I both feel that she has mastered all the skills needed to run a group. This takes a minimum of two ten-week sessions but may take as many as six.

## The Parent-Child Mother Goose Program



## Teacher Training Manual

Most of the time our teaching staff teaches one to three group sessions a week. This is very little time and most of the teachers have other part-time jobs they must coordinate with the Program. In spite of this we have very little staff turnover. Only three staff members have ever left, two because they moved away from Toronto and one to take a full time job. This extremely high level of staff retention can be attributed to three aspects:

1. It is a real pleasure to teach a *Parent-Child Mother Goose* group. The enjoyment of the parents and children is energizing for the teachers and there is a real feeling of accomplishment as we see all the learning and changing that is taking place.
2. Teaching staff is paid a fair hourly wage for five hours for each group meeting. Teachers are expected to take responsibility beyond the actual hours of the program for such things as community outreach, networking with other agencies, and finding and learning new material.

3. Every staff member is valued for what s/he brings to the program. We work together to understand the communities we work with and to make the Program effective in each situation. Each teaching team is responsible, with the support from the Director and other staff members, for making the Program work with a particular group.

## Resources

### Books

#### *The Moon is Round.*

A collection of 24 favourite interactive rhymes with suggestions on how to use them.

*Bounce Me, Tickle Me, Hug Me: Lap Rhymes and Play Rhymes from Around the World.* Thirty rhymes in 20 languages collected from participants and friends of the Program. Each rhyme is given in its original language and in a user-friendly English adaptation with suggestion for use.

*The Parent-Child Mother Goose Program Teacher Training Manual. (1994) .*

A practical, step-by-step guide for conducting a session of the program.

### Video

#### *Parents, Kids and Mother Goose*

This 27 minute video gives a lively overview of the Program in action and includes comments from participants, teachers and child development specialists.

Resources are published by the Vermont Square Parent-Child Mother Goose Program and available through:

The Parent-Child Mother Goose Program  
1071 Bathurst Street  
Toronto, Ontario M5R 3G8  
Tel: (416) 588 - 5234

### Workshops

The experienced teachers of the *Parent-Child Mother Goose Program* lead one and a half day and two day training workshops for agencies and community organizations wishing to offer a Parent-Child Mother Goose Program or incorporate some of its features in existing programs. Further information on workshops is available through the contact listed above.

# Rhymes That Bind: Adapting the Parent Child Mother Goose Program Model<sup>1</sup>

*Barbara Sykes, Ruth Wolfe,  
Louise Gendreau, and Lynda Workman*

## Introduction

The first *Mother Goose* program in Edmonton, Alberta was offered in the spring of 1995 and several programs were begun in other communities shortly after. The success of these initial programs convinced a number of community organizations of the value of offering *Mother Goose* in a more intentional and sustained way.

In the spring of 1996, Prospects Literacy Association made a commitment to include *Mother Goose* as one of their key program areas. In a collaborative effort involving Capital Health Authority and other partner organizations and with funding from Early Intervention, Action for Health and the United Way, Prospects Literacy Association undertook to coordinate the delivery of a number of *Mother Goose* programs across the city. The programs that were included in this collaborative effort were given the name *Rhymes that Bind*.

The model for *Rhymes That Bind* programs in Edmonton is Toronto's *Parent Child Mother Goose* program which was developed twelve years ago and which has subsequently been running in a variety of settings in Toronto. Much has been learned, both from the Toronto experience and from the Edmonton programs, about what works and what doesn't work. However, until this initiative began there had been no comprehensive evaluation of *Mother Goose* programs.

In preparation for a development phase for *Rhymes That Bind*, a one day basic training session and a four session storytelling workshop were held for potential program facilitators. Following training, *Rhymes That Bind* programs were offered in six sites in the fall of 1996 (and an additional site beginning in November). Many of the people who had taken the initial training, continued their training as co-leaders of these sessions. This phase of the program in Edmonton offered a unique and valuable opportunity for focused learning about the *Parent Child Mother Goose* program model regarding:

- the difference it makes to parents, children, and other participants,

1. Adapted from *Rhymes That Bind: Adapting the Parent Child Mother Goose Program Model*. Report prepared for Prospects Literacy Association, January, 1997. Published with permission of Prospects Literacy Association.

- where it fits in the community,
- what is needed to support and sustain the important elements of *Mother Goose*.

In order to define the work of an evaluation, we worked with key program partners to identify what they felt was most important. We began by identifying traditional program outcomes, because we did not yet have a language of experience to use. However, as we attended *Rhymes that Bind* sessions, talked to participants and experienced the program ourselves, our language shifted to that of client-defined outcomes that reflected the essence of what *Rhymes That Bind* is about and what it means to participants.

The focus of the evaluation was the experiences of program participants, facilitators, and community partners. In attending *Rhymes that Bind* sessions (three at the beginning of the program and five at the end), we also became participants in the program and thus, our experiences are reflected in this learning. During the program sessions, we were able to engage in informal conversations with parents and facilitators, as well as with some children. We also had more intentional focus group discussions with parents in the final sessions and spoke to some parents by phone. We attended a debriefing session for people who had taken the *Rhymes That Bind* training and/or had been involved in facilitating programs and we interviewed several facilitators. Throughout the evaluation we engaged in conversations and more formal interviews with community partners.

This article will share learning about the differences that participation in *Rhymes That Bind* programs made for parents, children and others. While we refer to written material about *Rhymes That Bind* and to related literature, by far the most important source of learning is the stories of participants themselves. We will also consider some of the implications of the learning for action and offer some questions to guide further thinking and action.

As we began the evaluation work, we sought to identify the underlying beliefs and assumptions of the program and to understand the intended outcomes and strategies. Also, we felt that it was important to anchor our work in an understanding of what the related literature has to say about some of the important elements of the program. While our review of the literature was not comprehensive, it did include some key items related to literacy and health, early literacy development and resiliency among children and parents.

### Understanding the Philosophy of the *Parent-Child Mother Goose* Program Model

As we began to collect the stories of *Rhymes That Bind* participants, we were able to see strong links among the program philosophy, the related literature and the lived experience of involvement in *Rhymes That Bind*. While the language of each was somewhat different, the underlying meanings revealed a consistency in understanding about what makes a difference for the health and well being of children and parents.

*“We really believe oral literature has the power to help parents bond with and nurture their children. It also gives kids a love of language that sets the stage for reading and writing later on.” (Celia Lottridge)<sup>2</sup>*

During the evaluation, several people commented on the need to be clear about what *Rhymes That Bind* is about, why it is important, and why it makes sense. What follows is an attempt to identify the program outcomes and assumptions based on reading “between the lines” of program documents, reading articles written about the *Parent Child Mother Goose* model and talking to people who were involved in the programs.

*Parent Child Mother Goose* can be viewed both as a parenting program oriented toward strengthening parent-child relationships and as an oral literacy program aimed at providing a strong foundation for the development of literacy in infants and preschoolers. As a parenting program, it is concerned with developing strong bonds between parents and children (as well as between other caregivers and children) and with building on parents’ skills and confidence to create healthy and positive family patterns. In particular, it recognizes the potential stresses of parenting. These stresses include factors such as poverty, isolation, cultural differences and single parenting, along with the everyday stress that comes with the territory of caring for young children. *Mother Goose* programs aim to reduce these stresses through mutually enjoyable, tension-reducing play and interaction. Through involvement in *Mother Goose*, parents learn to have fun with their children, to be more relaxed and to develop more realistic perspectives on their children’s behaviour.

An important feature of *Mother Goose* as a parenting program is the creation of a supportive group in which parents and children can make connections with each other and thus feel less isolated. Stronger connections with the community through links with community services is also an expected outcome of the program. There is a belief that ultimately, through enhancing parenting skills and developing stronger community bonds, *Mother Goose* programs can be instrumental in decreasing family violence.

As a family literacy program, *Parent Child Mother Goose* is oriented toward building children’s early language skills and helping both parents and children to experience real pleasure in language. What is most important about *Parent Child Mother Goose* as a literacy program is its focus on the preservation of oral culture. Through the traditional activities of rhymes, songs and stories, it aims to develop a culture of literacy in families that will provide a strong foundation for children’s literacy and for school entry.

The link between the parenting and literacy aspects of the program is recognition of the value of oral culture in generating positive interaction between parents and children. The rhymes, songs and stories are much more than a way of learning and practicing language. It is through participation in these activities with their children that parents are encouraged to engage in

2. Telephone interview with Celia Lottridge, Program Director, Parent Child Mother Goose Program, Toronto. January, 27, 1997.

loving touch with their children, make eye contact, and be attentive to their children's responses. The power of rhymes, stories and songs in building positive relationships between parents and children is central to the *Parent Child Mother Goose* philosophy.

The beliefs and assumptions that underlie the *Parent Child Mother Goose* program model find support in the literature on resiliency in children and on family literacy, as well as in recent ideas about health promotion (National Crime Prevention Council, 1995; Hoffman, 1994). Recent shifts in health care toward a community health development/health promotion orientation have focused attention on the multiple social, cultural and environmental factors that shape our health and well being. Community health development strategies call for building and nurturing healthy communities in which all members have a sense of belonging and opportunities for connection. Communities that are health enhancing ensure that individuals and families have the capacities and opportunities to take control over their own health.

At the same time, there is a growing recognition of early childhood as a critical period for determining later health status. Health care professionals, as well as those involved in social services, are beginning to understand the potentially devastating health effects of child poverty and other conditions of disadvantage. As a result, more programs are aimed at early intervention, beginning as early as the prenatal period, in an effort to positively affect the health of children. Within this context, the concept of "resiliency" has emerged as a way of understanding how we might focus efforts to positively affect the health and well-being of children. Simply put, "resiliency is the capability of individuals and systems (families, groups, and communities) to cope successfully in the face of significant adversity or risk" (National Crime Prevention Council, 1995). It has been suggested that certain characteristics that are associated with resiliency begin to form very early in life. Specifically, the literature related to resiliency indicates that:

- nurturing (as demonstrated by attentiveness, sensitivity and acceptance) is strongly related to resiliency in young children
- parental control needs to be balanced with warmth, interest and involvement for resiliency to be encouraged
- the community can play a role in resiliency through fostering belonging, stability and continuity as well as through providing support to parents in their nurturing roles
- resiliency is related to a wide range of characteristics including self-esteem, trust, optimism, a sense of self reliance, ability to handle stress, sociability, and competence
- optimism has its roots in early childhood, in children being able to count on life feeling good
- competence among children depends on having opportunities, support and encouragement provided by interested adults.

There is a growing body of research that explores the conditions of literacy development and shows a strong link between children's early experiences with oral language and the development of critical literacy skills. Children learn language by using language in play and storytelling activities with the result that they develop a "literate orientation" (Goelman & Pence, 1994). This emerging understanding of early literacy has underscored the potential roles

of families and community organizations in literacy development. Some researchers are calling for community agencies to promote literacy development within the communities that they serve so that they may “help reduce the number of children who could be termed ‘at risk’ on entering school” (Hayden & Hayden, 1996).

### Learning from Experience: Stories of Participants in *Rhymes That Bind*

Perspectives on the differences that *Rhymes That Bind* made were collected through interviews and conversations with a wide range of program participants as well as through our own participation in the program. Two learning areas were central to understanding the impact or effectiveness of *Rhymes That Bind*, and so our inquiry was anchored in learning about:

- differences that participation in *Rhymes That Bind* made in promoting health among parents and their children,
- effectiveness of *Rhymes That Bind* in building community.

#### Changes for Parents and Children

As parents and leaders talked about the differences they saw and experienced through participating in *Mother Goose* programs, they were describing the many ways in which parents’ and children’s worlds had expanded. They noticed differences in children’s development in terms of language skills, social and emotional development and musical ability. The opportunity for children to be with and have relationships with other children was seen as important both in itself and for encouraging development. Parents talked about noticing things about their children that they hadn’t paid attention to before and about seeing them in different ways. They talked about their learning about the capacities of babies to learn and understand. Also, parents were very attuned to the fact that their children were having fun at the same time that they were learning.

*“People don’t think that babies can do a lot but they can do lots of things. You can see that when you’re here watching them.”*

*“It increases her skills with language and music and it gives her a love of language. I can see the difference at home. She likes to copy everything we’re doing here. Also, it’s a chance for her to interact with other children and there are not many other opportunities for them to do that at this age.”*

*“It’s helped my daughter to get over her shyness. She’s really changed. She’s much more outgoing now.”*

*“I noticed how my daughter picked up rhymes - long ones. She recited one to my wife after hearing it once. I never realized this from the other stuff we do like going to the library.”*

*“The kids learn in a mode that’s fun. My daughter loves it. She really misses it if she’s sick and can’t come.”*

*“I would like to keep coming - it’s fun.” (2 year old)*

An important difference identified by parents was a strengthened relationship with their children. For some parents, this is related to having special time to spend together; for others, it had to do with affirming the relationship with their children as important. Parents expressed an increased

optimism about their children, glimpsing possibilities they may not have seen before. Many parents talked about how they use the rhymes and songs from *Rhymes That Bind* at home to deal with their own stress or to calm their children. Being in a *Rhymes That Bind* program was experienced as positive and energizing. For many parents, mothers in particular, getting out of the house and socializing with other parents were important in decreasing their sense of isolation.

*“Someone suggested that I come because it would give me a more positive frame of mind with my daughter. And it has done that. I really enjoy coming here and doing the rhymes and things with her.”*

*“It’s a time for us to be together - just the two of us. It helps with closeness between the two of us as we share the rhymes and stuff. We didn’t used to do this until we came here. It gives you more incentive to play with them.”*

*“I take it home and use it in different situations. The best advantage is that it helps defuse situations. They’re not rational at this age so you can’t explain things to them. So I just use the songs and rhymes and it works.”*

*“I didn’t know how to distract my child. I’ve learned this here. It’s very calming to her. I use it as a distracting mechanism when she’s cranky or whatever.”*

*“When I went to the Monday morning session, I was feeling tired and sort of low. By the end of the session my mood had turned around and I felt completely energized. I saw and felt the energy of the group. The mothers and children were having fun and I was having fun. I was really able to glimpse the power of parents and children having fun together.” (Evaluator)*

Participation in *Rhymes That Bind* programs became “a family thing” as other family members developed an interest in learning the rhymes and songs.

*“I like the group. At home, I remember only parts of the rhymes. My older one hears me with the younger one and comes and picks up where I forget. She can help her sister.”*

*“My husband is learning the rhymes and songs. He wants to do it with them too so it’s become a family thing.”*

Leaders in *Rhymes That Bind* programs have observed important changes among parents participating in the program and they tell their stories of what these changes look like:

*“One of the mothers used to shout at her kids all the time - just constantly. After about seven sessions, she came up to “I don’t yell at my kids any more and you didn’t ever tell me not to. I just learned it.”*

*“There was a teenage mother with two children who came kind of against her will. She’d been strongly encouraged to come and really only came because she got a ride. She told me that she had considered not coming any more, but her children were enjoying it so much and responding so positively (they were happy and excited about coming) that she decided to keep coming and she was coming willingly.”*

### **Building Community**

Participation in *Rhymes That Bind* seemed to generate a special feeling of connectedness and belonging. Parents talked about their feelings of comfort in the group and of how important it was to be involved in something that was non-threatening. By attending sessions and becoming actively involved, parents formed bonds, not only with one another but with the more powerful entity of the group itself. Supportive relationships developed and were

important inside the group. Being a parent of a young child (or children) was a great equalizer and much sharing happened in the groups around the joys and challenges of parenting.

*“We have a really good time here. I’d miss it if I didn’t come. It’s really good to get out and to socialize with other mothers and to share some ideas about what to do with your kids - like when you’re having problems. Everything is wonderful about it. It’s a non-threatening environment where you can come and have fun without making a fool of yourself.”*

*“We’re all equal in the group and that gives people a feeling of comfort. It’s a chance for everyone to share their experiences in a non-threatening environment. It’s different from other programs that focus on parenting skills. In those programs, if you know that things aren’t going really well, it has a way of hitting your self esteem. That doesn’t happen here. There are not ‘shoulds’ and ‘shouldn’ts’. It’s a chance to relax, forget all the pressures and have a good time.” (Leader)*

One of the ways in which *Rhymes That Bind* made a difference in building a sense of community was in its ability to bridge environments. With its focus on building a foundation for early literacy, it helped to prepare children for school and to bridge the gap between home and school. For families in which English was not the first language, it helped children and parents develop a proficiency in English. Also, where there was diversity among group members, such as ethnic or social diversity, it provided glimpses of other worlds, while at the same time affirming some of the common experiences related to parenting.

However, both parents and leaders felt that there was a need for more opportunities to socialize, to share experiences and resources, and to establish relationships with other parents and children. For the most part, connections did not seem to be sustained outside of the *Rhymes That Bind* sessions and some parents would have liked to see this happening. On the other hand, the fact that parents expressed the desire for such connections can be seen as evidence of the beginnings of community building.

*“I feel connected with the other mothers when I’m there but none of them live near me so I don’t see anyone in between sessions. It would be good to make more friends there. If there was a Mother Goose program in my area, maybe I could get to know other mothers in the area.”*

*“It’s hard to make connections with the other parents because there’s not time for this. We do the Mother Goose stuff and then everyone leaves. I’d like more time to socialize with the other mothers.”*

### Program Qualities That Made a Difference

As we talked to participants and experienced the program ourselves, we were attentive to what it was about *Rhymes That Bind* that contributed to the program’s effectiveness. In analyzing what we heard from parents, children, and most service providers, we identified program features or qualities that represent the essence of the program. The following table summarizes these essential aspects in terms of effects for participants.

**Table 1**  
**Qualities That Contribute to Program Effectiveness**

Essential Characteristics	Results for Participants
<p><b>Climate</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• non-judgmental</li> <li>• non-threatening (safe)</li> <li>• inclusive</li> <li>• supportive</li> <li>• encouraging</li> <li>• Validating</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• participation</li> <li>• being real (even silly)</li> <li>• bring older children and family members</li> <li>• sense of equality</li> <li>• relieves stress</li> <li>• forced attendance becomes voluntary</li> <li>• experience “success” with children at home</li> </ul>
<p><b>Program Orientation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• hands-on, experiential</li> <li>• focus on oral language through story, rhyme, song</li> <li>• being in it together to learn</li> <li>• informal, fun/focus on enjoyment</li> <li>• recognizing strengths</li> <li>• modeling of relationships</li> <li>• appropriate to the developmental stage of the child (rhythm, rhyme, repetition, touch)</li> <li>• relevant</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents allow their children to act like children (even silly, noisy sometimes)</li> <li>• Parents have fun with children.</li> <li>• Children try relating to other children.</li> <li>• Parents take children out of car seats sooner and begin to interact.</li> <li>• Parents open up about what they learn and share it with others.</li> <li>• Parents share their stories.</li> </ul>

These characteristics offer a way of seeing the essential features of *Rhymes That Bind* that really make a difference for parents. Other important elements that underlie the model reflect a program provider’s perspective and tend to focus on leadership qualities as follows:

**Table 2**  
**Staff Views of Essential Program Characteristics**

Program Format	Leadership Qualities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• using the rhymes orally, then making them available in writing at the final session</li> <li>• having a leader and assistant leader</li> <li>• ensuring the leader and assistant leader are adequately trained and skilled</li> <li>• having job descriptions for leaders</li> <li>• running the program for a set number of weeks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• being able to see strengths of participants</li> <li>• finding and affirming the positive contributions participants bring</li> <li>• seeing and working with the group dynamics</li> <li>• recognizing and respecting the comfort levels of participants</li> <li>• being a “good mother” role model</li> </ul>

### Reaching the Target Group

As the evaluation began, a concern expressed by key program partners was whether the target groups were being reached. The target group was defined somewhat loosely as those who most need it, but underlying this definition was an assumption that the program would be most needed by young, disadvantaged, and/or single parents who were deemed to be “at risk.”

Many of the parents who came to *Rhymes That Bind* programs were not in the intended target group. Nevertheless, these parents spoke eloquently about their own needs for participation and the benefits to them and their children. Therefore an attempt was made to reframe the issue as one of access for all parents and other caregivers who can benefit from the program. Some important learning about access suggests that some of the key elements in ensuring broad access include:

- awareness of the program - promotion
- appropriate location (visible, comfortable, accessible)
- transportation
- appropriate timing
- creating a supportive climate/valuing/responding to diversity

In participants’ words:

*“Transportation is quite difficult, especially if you have to take the bus. That’s the one thing that makes it hard to come. The other problem with the location is that it’s in a church and some people are intimidated by that. I know people who probably would have come if it wasn’t in a church.”*

*“I won’t be able to come during the day once I go back to work in January. Is there a possibility of having a Saturday program or one in the evening?”*

*“We have to lower the threshold so that people can participate more easily. This may mean offering the program at times that work better, providing meals or having transportation available.”*

### **Sustainability of Rhymes That Bind**

One of the challenges for the *Rhymes that Bind* program was its rapid growth over a short period of time. Five new program sites were established in the fall of 1996 and interest had been expressed by many other organizations in starting *Mother Goose* programs. As 1997 began, there were eight current program sites and others in the planning stage. It has been difficult to address sustainability in a context of such expansion. Through the evaluation process, some important learning occurred about how program sustainability is viewed by various program participants and about what needs to be taken into account to ensure sustainability.

By far the most common perspective on sustainability is that it lies in the ability of the community to train sufficient numbers of people to run the program in a variety of locations. Related to this is the question of whether or not those trained to run a program should include parents who are or who have been participants, although there is no consensus on this. For some, the low cost of running *Rhymes That Bind* programs almost guarantees its sustainability. Yet there is a broader recognition that more proactive steps are required to ensure sustainability.

The experience of those involved in the Toronto *Mother Goose* program confirmed what our program partners began to realize in Edmonton. It is essential that sponsoring agencies make a commitment to the program based on a clear understanding of what *Mother Goose* is about, the difference it makes and how it contributes to the aims of the organization.

### **Implications of Evaluation Learning**

There was significant agreement about the impact of the program on participants. The *Rhymes That Bind* program demonstrated that it was possible to achieve many desired family literacy and health promotion outcomes among parents and children who participated. The stories of both parents and leaders spoke of the differences that participation in *Rhymes That Bind* made for parents and children.

On the other hand, the program outcomes related to building community were not achieved to the same extent as personal outcomes for families. Because some parents identified the establishment of relationships with other parents and children outside the program as something that was important to them, the issue of building community among participants should be a focus for future discussion.

#### **Implications: Program Delivery/Adaptation**

It is noteworthy that the qualities of the program that made a difference to parents and children had to do with the climate that was created and the approach that was used in the delivery. Program providers also recognized these qualities as important. However, because the program was based on a model developed and used elsewhere, there was a tendency for some people to focus on structure and content rather than climate and personal approach as

being of primary importance. In addition, qualities of the program leaders were thought to be critically important by providers.

This difference between parents and providers may reflect different perspectives about the organization and delivery aspects of the program. On the other hand, adherence to a precise structure may have implications for reaching the target population and responsiveness to participants. If the program is experienced as being too “recipe-like,” this might compromise some of the positive qualities of the program identified by participants

Issues related to program flexibility and adaptability have also been faced in Toronto where cultural and social diversity is even more pronounced than it is in Edmonton. The Toronto program seems to have been successful in adapting *Mother Goose* to a wide range of group needs without giving up the essence of what the program is about. This has been possible through a commitment to listening to and learning from the diverse groups that the program has worked with. According to Celia Lottridge, program director of *Parent-Child Mother Goose* in Toronto, “our response to diversity isn’t to be more rigid but to be more flexible.” There are, of course, limits to flexibility in that the underlying values of the program are always adhered to. Promotion of oral culture will continue to be an essential element of *Rhymes That Bind*. Clearly, the challenge here, as in Toronto, is to strike the right balance between the essence and the structure.

### **Implications: Sustainability and Integration in the Community**

#### ***Structure of the Program***

Although *Rhymes That Bind* seems a simple program, it becomes a complex task to ensure that the program runs smoothly in a variety of locations and that the planning for offering programs gets done. All of the partners need to be aware of the work involved in planning and delivering *Rhymes That Bind* and be clear about their roles in this work. At the same time, there is a danger in being overly structured or bureaucratic, such that the simplicity of *Rhymes That Bind* is destroyed.

During the pilot phase of *Rhymes That Bind* in Edmonton, Prospects Literacy Association played the critically important role of coordination, advocacy, program promotion, training, fundraising and evaluation. Many partner organizations had no idea how extensive this coordination role was until they were asked what they would need from outside their own organizations in order to keep *Rhymes That Bind* running. When this role became apparent, some participants became concerned about the tension between running a “simple, lovely program” and the demands that come with such community initiatives.

#### ***Target Population***

According to program materials and discussions with key program partners, the original *Mother Goose* program was designed for disadvantaged parents. It originated among child welfare workers in Toronto who could see the potential value of the program for establishing and altering relationships between parents and their children. It was seen as a preventive program. Initially, many of the participants in the Toronto program were referred to the program by child welfare workers and, in many cases, participants were required to go.

The pilot project in Edmonton demonstrated that the *Mother Goose* program model has appealed to a wide audience including disadvantaged parents. Disadvantaged is used to describe parents who are characterized by any of the following: loneliness, isolation, over-burdened, “at-risk” and/or poor.

We often think of disadvantaged as being a stereotype of the poor, perhaps aboriginal single parent who faces many barriers to good health outcomes. However, participants in the Edmonton programs included middle-class parents from two-parent families with one or more other children, who were looking for a resource for themselves and their babies or young children. Some were feeling lonely or isolated, while others were interested in connecting with other people with young children. In some cases, older children were much older, and this was seen as a support for starting over when parenting a new baby or young child.

Program providers have acknowledged that the “*target group may be those who come.*” Some program deliverers described the program as a “great equalizer,” collecting all participants by the common thread of being a caregiver..

#### **Program Access**

Access to *Rhymes That Bind* was identified as a barrier by some participants in the evaluation. Some sponsors changed location part way through the program to better accommodate the number of interested people, only to find that the new location brought a new group of participants. In addition to physical access, “emotional” access was identified as being important. Program planners must recognize and acknowledge that different people respond differently to different locations and to different sponsors for reasons having to do with “how they feel about them.” Thus diversity of locations and sponsors is probably important.

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# Parenting and Family Literacy Centres of the Toronto District School Board

*Mary Gordon*

## Introduction

In 1980 the Toronto Board of Education was concerned about low levels of academic performance and the high percentage of school dropouts of its students from inner city schools. Rather than blame the victim, the Board undertook an investigation to discover new ways of working with inner city populations, which might be more inclusive and supportive. Stimulated by a growing body of research which identified parental involvement as key to children's academic success, I wrote a proposal for a parental involvement program involving some pilot sites. The outcome was the birth of Parenting Centres.

Since 1981 our Parenting Centres have sought to improve academic outcomes for inner city children. Parents and caregivers with infants and children up to age four attend the program. Here families receive parenting support and education, access to community resource information, and learn to support their young children's learning. Our family literacy and numeracy programs teach parents and caregivers why and how to read to their young children, in addition to developing a range of strategies which will set their children up for success once they enter kindergarten. More than 7,000 families and 11,000 children register each year in our 34 *Parenting and Family Literacy Centres*.

## Rationale and Values

From the inception of the Centres, it was our belief that the preschool years spent in the home were crucial to the child's development and set the child on a trajectory of success or failure. We saw the parent as the child's first and most influential teacher. Therefore, a critical strategy was to support parents in their role of parenting. The family was always seen as the answer to problems rather than the cause of problems. The overriding value of the Centres was one of respect for all families, who were seen as having significant strengths and the ability to find answers and solutions to their difficulties.

The common denominator of the diverse families who attend the Centres is poverty. Some families who are newcomers to Canada arrive with precious little in terms of worldly goods. Nevertheless, they bring a treasure house of dreams which keep them together, motivated, and optimistic. Not so fortunate are the many hundreds of Canadian families who are in the second or third generation of poverty. Many of these families experience a different type of poverty, one that robs them of hope and initiative. All of these families want

the best for their children, but they have different starting points. We decided that, in order to be successful with our educational objectives, we had first to respond to practical issues identified by families.

Our parenting programs set out to work with the families of preschool children, providing information, interventions, and interactions that support optimal development of young children in all areas. Recent popularized neuroscience research (Shore, 1997) has confirmed early beliefs that the preschool years are critical to the child's development, and that this period helps shape the way a child learns, thinks, and behaves. By the time a child reaches school age, most key brain wiring, language abilities, physical capabilities and cognitive foundations have been laid down.

### Demographic Profile

The *Parenting and Family Literacy Centres* reflect all aspects of a large, complex urban society which is culturally and linguistically diverse. Program participant caregivers range in age from 15 to grandparents. We are all colours, ages, religions, languages, and all for our children.

Many of our families struggle with poverty issues every day. Some families come to the Centres not having had breakfast, living in overcrowded conditions and under high stress. Referrals to food banks and emergency shelters happen regularly. Family violence is an issue in every one of the thirty-four Centres. We are working with crack babies and babies with fetal alcohol syndrome. Many of our parents have low levels of literacy.

Almost half of Toronto Board of Education students are from non-English speaking families representing over 76 different language groups. Our students come from over 170 countries. One in four of our school children live in single parent families. This is more than double the Ontario ratio of 11.5%. (Toronto Board of Education, 1997). Thirty six percent of Metro Toronto children are living below the poverty line (Association of Family Resource Programs, 1997).

### Program Delivery

In 1981, when the Centres were first opened, they were funded through the Inner City Department of the Toronto Board of Education, with curriculum support from the Early Childhood Education Department. In the mid-1980's, the Department of Continuing Education took over the funding of the programs. There is still a strong curriculum link to the Early Childhood Education Department, as the Centres are seen as the first part of the literacy continuum.

Parenting and Family Literacy Centres are always located in schools rather than community centres or churches. It is through the daily contact with community, parents, and school staff that easy communication and trusting relationships grow. When parents are introduced early and positively to the school system, they usually stay involved and increase the likelihood of their child's academic success.

The Centres use a drop-in format so that families can attend when it is convenient. Each Centre sets its own hours based on parents' requests and the number of hours budgeted for the program. Most Centres are open mornings

and some afternoons, Monday through Thursday. Fridays are clear, so that staff can attend in-service sessions for training in teaching family literacy and numeracy and other aspects of the program, to teach a course, or do community outreach. Some families visit the Centre occasionally. Most families visit for a few hours two or three times a week. Families in crisis often stay until the Centre closes.

Everyday in every Centre starts with classical music playing. There is some research to suggest that early music processing can lead to gains in spatial reasoning (Begley, 1996). This relationship is also known as the Mozart effect (Campbell, 1997). Gym time is built into most programs, as many families live in overcrowded conditions with no safe, active play area. Music and movement are also part of gym sessions. Awareness of rhythm can play a critical role in early reading and language processes (Armstrong, 1997), and we reinforce rhythm activities throughout the program. A nutritious snack also provided for the children in the morning. Through informal activities that involve sharing food, parent workers assist parents to learn what constitutes good nutrition and how to best ensure that it is provided.



**After making learning materials, parents discuss how they will use them with their children at home.**

Music circle and storytime are part of every session. Families are taught a repertoire of interactive songs, chants, nursery rhymes, finger plays, and songs. Having this repertoire is especially helpful for children whose first language is not English. Parents and children enjoy and repeat the chants, rhymes, and songs in English and thus make the transition to fluency. Talking, reading, and singing to a baby stimulate understanding and use of language, as the foundation of literacy learning. In addition to a formal story time where parents have reading techniques modeled for them and learn a new teaching point with each story, there are many informal readings.

Through a rich early learning-through-play program designed for children, parent workers discuss child development and assist parents to develop ways to stimulate and interact with their children in a developmentally appropriate way. Through guided observation, using the children themselves as the “textbook,” parents learn to identify and celebrate their children’s developmental milestones. Many Centres have received a donated computer so that parents can learn the language of technology and basic computer skills. Senior students or teachers volunteer to coach parents, either in the Centre or in the computer lab.

### **Parent Training**

In 1997, as part of our family literacy and numeracy work, we designed learning materials made from items readily accessible and affordable to families. These learning materials were designed to teach the concepts that support the young child’s literacy acquisition. A series of 90 minute training sessions, conducted by the administrator and lead instructor, were set up for parents to learn how to use the materials. The use of role play in volunteer situations, using learning materials has been very effective as a training strategy. Parents and grandparents help one another and enjoy the informal, social atmosphere.



**A training session where parents use kaleidoscopes to role play parent-child interaction in native language and in English.**

Once parents had been trained to use a variety of learning materials, kindergarten teachers began asking the parents to help in their classes. Training was subsequently revised to include two sessions on developmentally appropriate practice with four-, five-, and six-year olds and the etiquette of being a guest in a classroom. When training is completed, a graduation ceremony is held, so that the school principal can present certificates, with kindergarten teachers in attendance.

Parents work with individual children under a teacher's direction. One of the most common reasons for parent assistance is speech or language delay. Many non-English speaking children have made significant gains with parent assistance and teachers have seen children's strengths, as children engage in animated interaction with parent volunteers. Parents feel that they are making a significant contribution to the school and teachers appreciate the unique contribution of parent volunteers.

## Staffing

Attracting good people, training them, and maintaining motivation is central to building and sustaining an effective program. In our experience, the human dimension in programs is the most important aspect. In Parenting and Family Literacy Centres, the development of trust between parent worker and families is key to the effective functioning of the program. In each Centre the parent worker is responsible for program operation on a daily basis. The parent worker reports to a lead instructor, is evaluated by that lead instructor, but also maintains an informal reporting relationship with the principal of the school.

Great effort goes into the hiring process to ensure there is the right fit between parent worker and program. The hiring of a parent worker is done by a team which includes a parent, the school principal, the lead instructor, and the administrator of the parenting programs.

In considering parent worker candidates desired qualities include being non-judgmental, well educated, having high energy, experience teaching young children and adults in literacy and/or parenting. It is essential for staff to have a deep understanding of child development and behaviour. They need to have a firm grasp of how children acquire literacy and mathematical awareness. We also look for community development experience. A second language is also desirable to outreach to one of the languages of the community. Sophisticated communication skills in oral and written English are an asset.

Parent workers need to be able to provide team leadership. Because only one staff person is assigned to a Centre, the array of tasks is enormous. Parents are encouraged to participate in the set-up, clean-up, snack preparation, book and toy library operation, and many other tasks. The parent worker is responsible for all aspects of the program but is expected to concentrate on the key program aspects:

- family literacy and numeracy instruction, parenting education and support,
- resource information sharing,
- children's early learning program.

Parent workers need to be able to liaise with school staff and local agencies. They need to understand how the school bureaucracy works and know all available services, so they can help parents become advocates for their children's education. Parent workers also advocate for families in areas of health, housing, and legal aid.

The parent worker position is unionized, as is the lead instructor position. The parent worker teaches an average of 19 hours a week. While paid hours

include instructional time only, many more hours are spent in preparation, community outreach, in-service programs, and attending school or community based meetings. There is high job satisfaction for parent workers and very low turnover. Staff hold their positions for an average of over ten years. There is a high level of support and education of staff. There are monthly in-service sessions where staff have input into the sort of professional development they would like. These sessions are delivered by the administrator who maintains a close connection to all staff.

### Community Partnerships

A tapestry of formal and informal partnerships exists at the community, municipal, provincial, and federal levels. Partnerships may include one Centre, a few Centres, or all of the Centres. Some partnerships involve funding, others exchange of services, use of space or volunteering. The Centres have always worked closely with agencies in the community, sharing resources, making and receiving referrals. Children with physical, mental and emotional disabilities are integrated in our programs before they start school. This makes school entry much smoother for the child and the classroom support will already be established.

There are numerous examples of local community organizations or agencies sharing space and expertise. When the *Canadian Children's Dance Theatre* moved into an area near a Centre, an arrangement was made to have the *Theatre* come to the school to teach and to have children visit the studio. This was coordinated through the local recreation centre. Parent workers often give free workshops for local groups or agencies that, in turn, provide support with space for special events and support for community kitchens or transportation for field trips. This year, more than one hundred of our families went to the dress rehearsal of *The Nutcracker Suite*. Our community reader program involves volunteer readers from many different sectors.

### Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) Parenting Program

Several years ago, two departments of the Toronto District School Board joined forces to make a proposal to the federal LINC office to develop a unique parenting/ESL class for parents with infants to three year olds. At the present time, three parenting centres serve as language laboratories, where newcomers to Canada are integrated socially and linguistically. In addition to ESL instruction in a family literacy context, participants receive a range of support services and parenting education. Classroom instruction take place in a room close to a parenting centre for half of the day, with childcare provided in the parenting centre. This model provided access to mothers with infants and toddlers, who would not be able to attend without childcare support.

The immersion aspects of this program have been critical to the acquisition of English language skills, while the parenting support and education have been heralded by parents. A child development curriculum was developed through the Board's Parenting Education Department to assist LINC/ESL instructors in the classroom to bridge parents' experiences in the parenting centre with formal instruction. With three pilot sites now in operation, the federal government is considering opening another program.

### **Community Action Program for Children (CAP-C)**

Two centres have received federal and provincial funding to extend their hours and offer parenting/family literacy classes to parents who attend their centres. This grant is in partnership with other community groups in order to meet the needs of the community children, aged birth to four. A community recreation centre provides music and movement classes and a mental health agency provides visits and prenatal classes through this grant.

## **Special Features of Parenting and Family Literacy Centres**

### **Multilingual Book Lending Library**

While many of our families do not read in English, they do read in their native language and often grandparents living in the home also read in a language other than English. The main thrust of our family literacy program is to encourage family reading at home. In order to do this a supply of relevant, multilingual reading material is accessible. There are many advantages to having children read to in their parent's first language. Mother tongue reading is always more powerful than halting second language reading, which does not come from the heart. There is a strong aspect of intimacy which makes family reading a powerful tool in literacy learning. Language and culture are inextricably linked and distancing readers from their culture by using second language reduces the impact of the reading.

We know that literacy learning is more easily transferred when it is introduced at an early age. Asian bilingual children who have been exposed to alphabetic reading at the Parenting Centres as well as Asian character texts from our library books are more advanced than monolingual children or bilingual children who have been exposed to only one written system by the time they are five (Bialystok, 1997). Children who are exposed to books in both the language of the home and English, the language of the Centre, understand a whole year earlier that written words have particular meaning.

At Centres, family literacy instruction provides models of reading with "big books" for group story time. Parents borrow small book versions of the big book, translated into their own language for family reading at home. The lending library is also stocked with a variety of wordless picture books so parents with low literacy skills can enjoy shared reading with their children. Literacy learning happens without text, as the family transmits to the child enjoyment of reading in sharing books together.

### **Toy Lending Library**

Each Centre has a small toy lending library so that families can have age appropriate toys for their children to use at home. Parent workers suggest ways to encourage interactive play with children to foster language growth, using a borrowed toy. Parent workers match the child's development level to the toy to be borrowed. Parents learn the continuum of their child's development and why a certain toy would be appropriate for a particular stage of development. Many of the toys encourage mastery play or imaginative play. Parents are encouraged to play pretend games with their children, in order to develop symbolic thought as a basis for understanding the elements of story structure in later reading.

### **Parenting Courses**

A series of courses has been written using two formats. Day time courses involve both the parent and child, while evening courses use a discussion format and do not include children.

#### ***Evening***

A series of parenting courses (*Parenting Your 4-8 Year Old, Parenting Your 9-12 Year Old, and Parenting Your 12-15 Year Old*) has been developed to respond to requests for help in parenting and helping children with homework. These courses take a developmental perspective and always have the child in focus as a student as well as a family member. Parents receive information about normal expected development and strategies which may assist in setting up homework routines. Temperament and learning styles are discussed in relation to the child's behavior at home and school. The courses are designed for parents of children in the various school divisions.

#### ***Day Time***

Parenting courses (*Parenting Your Infant (0-9 months), Parenting Your Toddler (10-20 months), Parenting Your Preschooler (0-3 years), Roots of Empathy*) have been designed for caregivers who want a more structured parenting program. With an opportunity to meet on a regular basis to discuss parenting issues, these courses also have the advantage of the Centre play program for babies and preschoolers. There is a strong element of family literacy and numeracy instruction in these programs. Some courses target a specific age, while the preschooler course invites families who have more than one-child aged birth to three years old

#### ***Roots of Empathy***

This classroom-parenting program for junior kindergarten to grade eight is completely funded by a private foundation. The goal is to prepare children for competent, caring parenting by nurturing the development of empathy. Through hands-on-learning in monthly visits from a community parent and infant, children learn human development, an awareness of a baby's needs, and how to respond appropriately. The visiting parent is trained for the class visits by the parenting staff. Teachers notice gains in language development knowledge of child development, empathetic behaviors, reduced aggression and find that students are extremely attentive during the visits. This program is very popular with teachers, students and the parents of the students.

### **Family Literacy Comes to School – Teddy Bear Picnic**

This is an evening event for children in the primary division and their families. With children dressed in their pajamas and carrying their teddy bears, families gather in the gym and enjoy "read aloud" stories in English and other languages of the community. After stories and singing with their parents, the children are invited to go for a teddy bear picnic, where they are supervised in play, stories and snack. Parents stay in the gym and have a discussion on their role in their child's literacy learning. Principals note that these evenings are the best attended event of the school year. Frequently, these evening family literacy events are used as a jump-start to a series of school-based meetings for parents of children in the primary division.

## Evaluation

The Centres have always asked for feedback from program participants. Parents complete a follow-up questionnaire on all aspects of the program. Parents who don't speak English are teamed with another parent who speaks their language and English. Questionnaire feedback is used to help parent workers modify their programs. School principals are also interested to know what parents have said about the tone of the school and how welcome parents feel. The questionnaire is a barometer of many intangible aspects of the program and conveys to parents that their opinions are valued.

The impact of the Centres has as many interpretations as the participants who offer feedback. Each voice speaks to the individual need that is being met by our Centres and the work that is being done there to break the cycle of illiteracy and poor school performance. Below is a sample of participant and staff perceptions of the program. Names have been changed to protect privacy.

## Voices of Caregivers

Chandra (mother of two children)

*“School is the one place I take Suraj (2 years) where my traditional mother-in-law doesn't frown on my leaving the apartment. For me, the Centre has helped a lot. I get ideas here of things to teach and show my kids. I didn't know too much about playing with kids before. I didn't learn about that in India.”* (Chandra lives with her husband, two children and mother-in-law in a two-bedroom apartment.)

Tina

*“I had a lot of trouble reading in school and dropped out. My daughter (3 years) is doing well, because I take her to the Centre at school. I've done all the things they tell you to help the kids learn. I wish I had known this stuff before my boy went to school. We didn't live in Toronto then.”*

Alice (mother of three girls)

*“My three children went through the Parenting Centre, It was a bonus - it prepared them for kindergarten. One of my children was very shy and timid. She was set up to deal with kindergarten because she felt comfortable in the school. The Centre was like home. It gave my girls good roots.”*

Gracia (grandmother of Donald, 5 and Lucia, 3)

*“My first born grandson, was difficult to manage. The Centre was a great help. Lucia benefited even more than Donald because I started bringing her before she was one month old. Donald learned self-help skills and does messy things like paint and glue that I couldn't do at home. They both benefited a lot from the songs and learning materials. Lucia calls me to come quick and help her write down any telephone numbers that she sees on the TV. She knows about this from school.”*

Sahanta (mother of a four and five year old and immigrant from Sri Lanka)

*“We were not able to speak English when we first came. Within three months, my 2 1/2 year old daughter was speaking English. She started kindergarten this year and her attention span is so good because of our circle time of reading, singing and talking. Joyce (parent worker) helped settle my son's behavior and he learned self-control. My kids are good learners because of the Centre. Before I was very shy and didn't speak to anyone. Now I speak perfectly.”*

Heather (caregiver)

*“When I was 15, I took my baby to the Parenting Centre at .....School. I learned a lot there about taking care of her and making sure she was doing the right things for her age. She is in grade 11 now. I did a good job. I’m back at a Parenting Centre now with an 18 month old baby I am baby sitting. I’m making sure her language is developing well and I read to her all the time like I did with my daughter. The parent worker teaches the mothers how to teach the children. The parent worker at ..... encouraged me to finish my education and get my own place. The Centres are important to families.”*

## Voices of Teachers

Delores (kindergarten teacher)

*“The program is very important because the children coming out of the Parenting Centre are exposed to many activities which help them master skills needed in kindergarten. Activities that require hand-eye coordination, counting, classifying, matching colors, shapes and language are more developed. Children are more equipped to deal with routines.”*

Helen (reading teacher)

*“Where there are Parenting Centres, we see parents in the school more. Teachers become more approachable. Parents feel comfortable about asking questions about children’s learning. They’ll often ask for resources to use at home.”*

Shaka (kindergarten teacher)

*“The parents from the Parent and Family Literacy Center who volunteer during class create great excitement in the children. The children are always eager and really motivated to participate in the various learning activities the mothers bring in. Thank you to Rose, Lan, Susie, and Cindy for your exceptional help.”*

Monika (principal)

*“The Parenting Centre is the corner-stone of the school. Parents are introduced to the school programs and expectations. Parenting skills and literacy strategies for parents to work with their children are implemented daily. This connection must be fostered in every way possible. The Centre is a most valuable resource. Special programs such as Roots of Empathy should be encouraged and supported.”*

## Voices of Parent Workers

Laura

*“I see them as being a preventative measure for child abuse. Parents are out of isolation and have support and resources. Barriers are broken down, friendships formed, and children reap the benefits. The informal teaching of family literacy and parenting skills results in parents who are more competent and happier. The children make an easy transition to kindergarten.”*

Claire

*“The parents who have volunteered in the kindergarten have said they see the difference between the children who have attended the Centre and those who have not. The children have been exposed to books in different languages, they know stories and songs and this boosts their self-esteem. They know how to follow directions take turns and they understand a lot about books. Our children know their colors, geometric shapes, numbers, some letters and are able to accept and follow routines.”*

## Voices of Other Professionals

Dr. Fraser Mustard

(Founding Director of the Canadian Institute of Advanced Research/Director of the Founders Network)

*“This parenting/literacy program is an integrated early childhood development program which makes use of the profession of early childhood educators and the skills of parents. This program creates a very positive social environment in early childhood development that, at the same time, builds the skills of parents. It is a low cost, highly effective program when done in partnership with the school system.”*

(Telephone interview, March 10, 1998)

Dr. Graham Chance

(Chair, Canadian Institute of Child Health, Ottawa Retired Neonatologist)

*“Timing is critically important for some aspects of brain development. Failure to receive proper input or experiences at the right time will lead to permanently reduced ability. This (Centre) is a very effective way of marginalizing the polarization that exists among children entering kindergarten. I would love to see this program implemented elsewhere.”*

(Toronto Star, 1997b)

Dr. Naomi Karp

(Director of the National Institute of Early Childhood Development and Education, US Department of Education, Washington DC)

*“I was really impressed by the sensitivity to the strengths all families have. These programs meet people where they are.”*

(Globe and Mail, 1998)

Cameron Smith

(Environmentalism, Sustainability Writer for the Toronto Star)

*“If we want Canada and Canadians to prosper, if we want the option of preserving our natural heritage through the next century, this is exactly the kind of program that should be available in every school district in every part of the province.”*

(Toronto Star, 1997a)

## Update on Evaluation

A formal evaluation from an external agency is just getting underway. Dr. Dan Offord, Director, Center for Children at Risk of McMaster University, is conducting “readiness to learn” research on some schools where there are *Parenting and Family Literacy Centres*. In the fall of 1998, kindergarten teachers of these schools will complete a 15 minute checklist for each child. This list will look at social confidence, language development, emotional maturity, physical health and general knowledge. The children from the Parenting Centres will be compared to their classmates who did not attend a Centre. This is a three-year study and the Centres are one of two areas in Ontario chosen for research.

## Challenges for the Future

*“The experiences of Canada’s children especially in the early years influences their health, their well being, and their ability to learn and adapt throughout their entire life.”* These words from the Speech from the Throne, (36th Parliament, September 23, 1997) underscore the national priority to support the family and

ensure that all children have the resources necessary to participate fully in society.

Readiness to learn is comprised of more than an understanding of basic print and numeracy concepts. It involves an emotionally healthy, well nourished body and a curious, well fed mind. While there are numerous factors that influence readiness to learn, our Centres have been able to buffer some of the devastations of poverty. Centre staff have identified hearing loss, vision problems, speech and language disorders. Nevertheless, it is parents who are the true teachers, mediators, early interveners, because they provide the unique family strengths and skills necessary for the literacy development of children.

The main challenge to the future viability of the Centres lies in the fact that although they are part of school board programs, they are not mandated under the Education Act of Ontario. When there is a shortfall of funds, non-mandated programs are at risk of being cut. Nevertheless, educators believe in the family literacy work of the Centres and see how children benefit from participation. Educators also appreciate the greater parental involvement in education, which results when parents attend Centres. At the same time, school trustees have always supported the programs because they see the direct result that Centre parents are more active in participating in school governance.

Teachers and principals see the effectiveness of offering early support through Centres versus later remediation. Nevertheless, Reading Recovery and related remediation programs, which entail expensive individual intervention for six year olds, continue to be common programs for schools which do not have Parenting and Family Literacy Centres.

Another challenge is related to recent restructuring and amalgamation with partner boards of education. Partner boards do not have Parenting and Family Literacy centres, while Continuing Education non-credit programs are operated on a cost recovery basis. Cost recovery is out of the question for poor families who attend Centres.

School is the universal axis point for families and community and is the logical location for family literacy and numeracy interventions. Parents who attend the Centres feel a connection to their children's schooling as they attend parent/teacher interviews or play an active role in school governance. Family literacy/numeracy instruction and parenting education have a multiplier effect in that the immediate impact on individual children carries over to the raising of new generations.

The family continues to be the bedrock of our society. How we invest in the family now will determine the quality of life we can expect in the next generation. Providing families with the information and support they need to educate their very young children is the job of family literacy instruction. As a country we cannot afford to do less than this.

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## Family Literacy in Quebec

Literacy programming in Quebec has tended to be organized through school boards (commissions scolaires) and local literacy groups active in community organization. In this section, the Learning With My Child program, presents a school-based family literacy program with an extensive volunteer tutoring focus.



# Learning With My Child – Sault Saint Louis School Board

*Gillian di Vito*

## Introduction

In 1991 the Sault Saint Louis School Board adopted a three year plan with the eradication of illiteracy as one of its top priorities. Among the approaches put forward, *Learning With My Child* was identified to encourage parents to participate in the literacy development of their early school age children. The program also sought to address the literacy needs of young students with learning difficulties. *Learning With My Child* is based on the understanding that children's reading development is influenced by adult models who enjoy reading at home and who value reading with their children. Experience indicated that children with few early literacy experiences at home were more likely to encounter difficulties in beginning reading on entering school. It was the aim of the School Board to provide a community-based, preventive program for literacy development, with the focus on family involvement.

Sault Saint Louis School Board covers three municipalities in the southwest section of the Island of Montreal – LaSalle, Lachine, and St. Pierre. The majority of the population is French speaking. While a large minority is anglophone, this group includes new immigrants who speak neither official language. Demographic studies identify the community as a largely blue collar, working class area, with pockets of low cost housing developments for low income and social assistance residents. Many residents face socio-economic difficulties which make entry into the workforce difficult. Nevertheless, this aspect is balanced by significant numbers of families who are financially secure, are French and/or English speaking, and include many trilingual immigrant families. Sports facilities are excellent; each of the three municipalities boasts a library and cultural centre to serve its population. Public transport in the region allows easy access to downtown Montreal.

The Adult Education sector of the School Board has always been active and innovative in reaching out to its community. Studies had shown that only a small number of potential adult student clientele were being served by the adult education sector (literacy, second language, secondary/vocational school). In 1990 *Learning with My Child* was conceived as one way to reach those not accessing all the services available in the community. We were fortunate to have a Director of Adult Education with a vision to promote both preventive and remedial programs for adult literacy. His enthusiasm encouraged staff to apply individual interests in order to promote literacy initiatives which would encourage adult learners and family involvement in education. A community program in Hull, Quebec, which used volunteer visitors to homes of adult students as a means to upgrade literacy and learning within families became a focus for family literacy development in the Sault Saint Louis School Board.

As a parent with work experience in elementary schools, I have always felt that home and family are the primary influences in children's learning. As a remedial reading teacher and library resource person, books have always been the keys to learning. Schools must have the confidence and the approbation of parents in order to support children's learning. Parents must have the tools to enable them to fulfill their role as educators of their children. When given the opportunity to work with the *Learning With My Child* program, I was able to combine my own enjoyment of reading with my experience with families in order to bring books and children together in the comfort of their homes

### Program Objectives

Objectives for *Learning With My Child* focus on parental involvement in children's reading, supporting parents to seek personal educational opportunities and access other community support networks, as well as on developing children's school based literacy. For children the program aims to:

- develop an interest in books and a love of reading;
- develop a positive attitude towards school and learning;
- develop literacy skills related to listening, speaking reading and writing.

Program goals for parents include:

- engagement in regular reading with children;
- appreciation of their role as primary educators of young children and as role models of literacy learning;
- an active role in the education of their children.

It was hoped that benefits of participation would extend to parents, children, and teachers. For children, program expectations included enhanced self-confidence and improved self-esteem, greater interest in books and increased reading. For parents, program expectations included improved parent-teacher communication, increased parental involvement in children's school achievement, and increased literacy skills for home support. It was also hoped that teachers would be able to improve home-school communication.

### Early Program Development

In 1990 discussions with the Director of Adult Services and the Director of Teaching Services, led to a decision to utilize a budgetary surplus in the adult sector for a preventative program. All educational sectors agreed on the need and efficacy of such a program, and no obstacles hindered its development. Approval by the School Board was unanimous. *Learning With My Child* was launched quickly into the French sector and later into the English schools.

Initially, a major focus for *Learning With My Child*, was the identification and recruitment of adult literacy students. It was felt that only 10% of adults who were candidates for basic literacy upgrading or in need of second language instruction in either English or French, were registered in the Centre for Adult Education language and literacy classes. The program was meant to be part of a two tiered support program for adult learners with children. This latter support program would combine in-school adult education with reading sessions at home for the children, using adult volunteers. A slide presentation was developed for parents and children in all schools in the Sault Saint Louis

Board to highlight the help that could be available for parents who had difficulties with language and literacy. The presentation was very successful in raising awareness and developing interest in a *Learning With My Child Program*.

It was agreed that *Learning With My Child* would complement existing school based reading programs for elementary students by offering tutoring at home. In most classes, parental involvement programs already existed. Every night, students brought home reading assignments which involved reading with parents for fifteen minutes. A journal was also used to follow up the home reading activity. The new tutoring component involved meeting a child twice a week at the child's home, with parental permission. Reading sessions lasted about 45 minutes throughout the school year, with at least one caregiver present in the home. Collaboration with the classroom teacher and school principal was of utmost importance in establishing the tutor-child teams. These educators were considered key in recommending children and in maintaining parental communication with the school.

In this tutoring program, volunteers and families are matched according to agreed upon time, location and certain preferences (age, sex of child/volunteer). It was decided that families and volunteers would be personally interviewed before beginning tutoring and introduced at a first visit. Volunteers would receive starter kits consisting of learning materials such as word games, puzzles, poems, crosswords, arts and crafts, magic and science experiments, alphabet and colouring sheets, annotated book lists, and bibliographies. A range of books at various reading levels is available at the first visit and an initial selection is made with each child.

## Getting Started

*Learning With My Child* was introduced as a pilot project in October, 1991, in four French elementary schools and three English schools. In September, 1992, it was introduced into all elementary schools of the Sault Saint Louis School Board. The program targetted young school-age children identified as experiencing literacy difficulties or delays, whose parents felt that their children would benefit from receiving extra help at home. The program sought to attract families who might benefit from support in parent-child reading at home and sought to reach parents who:

- faced socio-economic difficulties which limited access to literacy materials;
- were unfamiliar with the language of their children's instruction at school;
- were themselves having difficulties with print;
- had school experiences which negatively affected their views of their positive role in children's literacy development.

Much of the pilot year was devoted to developing strategies for dissemination about the program to parents, teachers, and children, for recruiting participants and tutors, and for tutor training. The next sections will describe information sessions, recruitment, and volunteer training, which are necessary to get *Learning With My Child* off to a successful start.

## Information Sessions

In order to attract the target groups of parents and teachers, information meetings are scheduled at the beginning of the year, in the school gym or library, for those concerned with students in grades one to three.

### Initial Meetings with Parents

Parents receive an invitation to an evening meeting at their child's school in order to discuss reading. The children deliver the invitation themselves following their encounter with the alphabet fairy, *Elfabet*. Their own enthusiasm helps to motivate parents to attend this initial meeting. At this time, a program coordinator discusses some of the problems faced by the community owing to poor language skills and low literacy development. Reading development is explained as enjoyable and a skill which can be improved at any age and which needs to be used regularly in order to maintain a certain level of fluency. Second language learning was also discussed.

A slide presentation is used to show various ways that parents may help their children at home with language and literacy development, and to discuss the role of parents in their children's education. After viewing, parents receive a brief outline of the objectives and methods of *Learning With My Child*, followed by parent questions. The meeting lasts about one and half-hours in an informal, social atmosphere. Most parents who attend are anxious to ensure the academic success of their child. Most of the questions relate to children's reading attainment and development, the methods being used in the classroom, and ways to ensure proficiency in spelling, grammar and second language learning.

Questions are answered as fully as possible, with reference made to the importance of parent/teacher interviews as a link to the *Learning With My Child* program. Parents sometimes have not appreciated the influence of either family reading or the bedtime story in developing good reading habits. The evening focus on family reading highlights the school's emphasis on the importance of parents and further encourages parent involvement. Other common questions refer to the amount of time needed to schedule reading sessions with a visiting volunteer. Time and energy are major concerns, especially for working parents.

Parents also want to know who would provide the materials to be used, how volunteers are recruited and trained, and what recourse parents have if they are dissatisfied or uncomfortable with any aspect of the program. Parents seem less reticent than teachers in accepting the help of trained volunteers for their children. The goal of academic success and its relation to their child's reading attainment is a strong motivation for family participation.

Immediate results of these meetings vary from school to school. If the school is located in an area of a more educated, financially secure population, attendance and interest are high. Parents tend to follow up with a telephone call for further information on the program. In areas with a high number of immigrant families, interest is also intense and many wish to register immediately following the meeting. However, areas of the greatest need may show low interest and attendance. The problem of out-reach remains a concern.

At the initial meetings in the pilot schools there was little follow up interest in adult literacy classes and we subsequently did not offer adult classes for parents based on the elementary curriculum. It was clear that the program attracted parents based on their primary concerns for their children. Only after further involvement with *Learning With My Child* volunteers does it become easier for adults to request help for adult literacy difficulties.

Years of experience with the program have yielded important lessons. The most important of these is that sufficient time must be allowed for word of mouth to spread through the community, both in the schools and in the homes. Continued exposure of the program is important, whether recruiting students or volunteers. Individual contact with families is probably the most effective way of getting the message across, where one-on-one communication with another parent is helpful. After the first year of the program, special meetings to introduce the program to teachers, students and parents may be unnecessary. Mail, telephone, word of mouth, individual visits to schools and homes may all be effective to recruit families and maintain contacts with them.

### **Initial Meetings with Teachers**

*Learning With My Child* was introduced as a pilot project in three targeted English schools in January 1992, where meetings were scheduled with the Program Coordinator and primary grade language arts teachers. At this time, the topic of the intergenerational effects of low literacy and the importance of the family in literacy development were discussed. Teachers were encouraged to discuss how to help parents with literacy difficulties. Whenever possible, a parent will volunteer to relate their personal experiences to the group. This is often helpful for teachers to understand a parent's perspective, their aspirations for their children, and the hurdles which stand in the way. Many parents feel residual anger and resentment against teachers, because of negative experiences in school; these attitudes can be indirectly handed down to children. Overall, these conversations with parents reveal the universal wish for the very best for one's child, particularly academic success, and the obstacles that must be overcome in order to achieve it.

Teachers are reassured that a tutor will not replace parent or teacher, but will allow for an increased amount of time to be devoted to books and reading within the family. Parents are encouraged to refer children who are experiencing difficulties in learning to read, if they feel that the amount of reading being done at home is not meeting the child's needs.

Teachers may be initially reticent to collaborate with adult education services to offer family literacy assistance. In starting the program the selection and training of the volunteers was a major concern, especially as no precedents existed at the time of these meetings. It was stressed that tutors would not be teaching specific reading schemes, systematic phonics, or versions of a whole language program. Rather, volunteers would be partnered with a child for shared reading activities, provide enjoyment and the opportunity to practice the skills being taught in class. Each year we see greater and greater input from teachers, and referrals from them make up the greatest number of our students.

In the first year of the program most referrals came directly from the parents following the meetings. However, we could usually count on at least one teacher in each school, who would readily refer students. Teachers are often aware of a family's reading habits, as a young child's openness and frankness enables the attentive adult to infer the number of stories being read at home or literacy related experiences available to the child. Principals are also an important referral source. Non-teaching professionals such as the speech therapist and school psychologist also make referrals. Telephone calls and visits to the schools maintain personal contact between the program coordinator and school staff.

At the pilot schools, students in grades one, two and three assemble in the gym or library for a half-hour meeting. In order to make the message interesting students are introduced to the fairy, Elfabet. Closely related to the tooth fairy, Elfabet explains to the children that she hides behind the letters which they see around them. Whenever she sees the children reading, be it a sign, a book, directions for a board game or the cereal box, she is very happy. Because so many people are not reading enough, Elfabet was forgetting how to laugh. All the children are invited to encourage the fairy, by reading something with their parents, brothers and sisters, or neighbours, for a few minutes every day! Then, if they listen carefully, they may hear Elfabet laughing or they may just catch a glimpse of her peeking round a letter on a road sign. After a slide presentation which shows family reading at home, the children are given a parent invitation to colour, before they taking it home.

Following information meetings, teachers and parents make initial contact with the Program Coordinator. Principals also submit names of children considered "at risk" or those who have repeated one year of school. In the latter cases, the Program Coordinator initiates contacts with families about program participation. Appointments are made to visit those families who express an interest. The Coordinator interviews parents and children in the home in order to assess the literacy environment.

In these home visits, it is important to note the number and accessibility of books and other print materials, whether or not a comfortable, well lit corner is available for reading, and the interest level demonstrated by child and parents. If the child has any preferences, these are noted. Parents often have questions regarding homework or TV time, which lead to fruitful discussion in a relaxed atmosphere around the kitchen table. Parents may discuss the difficulties they are facing with their own literacy and further educational needs, as well as their frustrations and anxieties regarding their children's development and progress within the school system. These concerns are noted and volunteers offer information or assistance.

Pamphlets are left for the parents to peruse, and every child in the family receives a bookmark and/or colouring booklet. If the family considers that they might benefit from this type of intervention, they will register, but they are under no pressure to do so. Before signing an agreement form, parents are informed of their responsibilities, which includes being present in the home for the duration of the reading session.

## Volunteer Recruitment

<p><b>LEARNING WITH MY CHILD</b></p> <p><b>AIM</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To prevent illiteracy and high school drop outs</li> </ul> <p><b>OBJECTIVE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To develop the reading habit within the child's home</li> <li>• To encourage parents to follow and support the child's learning</li> <li>• To encourage parents to read regularly with their children for pleasure</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>BOOKS FOR CHILDREN</b></p>  <p>A volunteer program to help children with reading difficulties, desperately needs donations of French and English children's books. If you can help, please call</p>	 <p>Attention Book Lovers!</p> <p>Do you like reading?</p> <p>Do you like children?</p> <p>Are you interested in giving someone the gift of literacy?</p> <p>Are you free for half an hour twice a week?</p> <p>Then, we need you to read with a child!</p> <p>For more information, call</p> <p><b>595-2038</b></p>  <p>Le Commissariat scolaire de Saint-Jean-Lévesque</p>
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Prospective volunteers are recruited from the community through articles and announcements published in local papers, parish magazines and student bulletins. Advertisements ask for volunteers, eighteen years and over, who have a love of children and an enthusiasm for reading. The Volunteer Bureaux of Montreal and the West Island also refer volunteers. Book marks and pamphlets describing the program are distributed in local libraries and other strategic locations. Local radio and community television stations have aired interviews with the Program Coordinator, as well as with volunteers and families.

Each prospective volunteer is interviewed. Suitable qualifications include some experience with young children, an interest and enthusiasm for reading, and a demonstrated sense of responsibility. Patience, kindness, a sense of humour, a non-judgmental attitude and empathy are the qualities we seek. The aims of the program are clearly stated, as well as the role of volunteers within the family. A folder containing information on the program and documentation on the importance of family literacy is given to each applicant. An application form must be completed, which makes note of their availability, transport, interests, special skills, requests, allergies, and so forth. All pertinent information must be carefully considered before matching a volunteer with a child and his/her family.

## Volunteer Training

Following individual interviews, volunteers must attend a group training session before they can be matched with a family. Between three and ten volunteers, depending on the results of an advertisement or recruitment drive, may participate in the two and one half-hour session. Each receives an information package, containing tips and suggestions for approaches to use during reading sessions. Other topics include enhancing reading readiness, structuring reading sessions, using games, puzzles and tactile materials to stimulate and add variety. The session emphasizes reading for pleasure, so time is spent in discussing children's literature, both popular and recommended authors and illustrators, with some emphasis on Canadian publishers. The collection at the Centre is representative and gives volunteers the opportunity for hands-on exploration of the field. Suggestions are given to help the volunteer select books appropriate to the child's interest and ability.

Training also focuses on the relationship between the volunteer and family. It must be clear that the tutor's prime role is to encourage a love for reading, to introduce a variety of reading materials, and to present a reading model to the children and other family members. The tutor's interaction with parents and children should encourage them to engage in activities, which will extend the children's, and/or parents' reading and learning experiences. The volunteer is not responsible for homework and in no way may they be considered a baby sitter. The parent is always responsible for discipline and ensuring a minimum of distraction as well as the child's presence and attention during the volunteer's visit.

Volunteers are anxious not to offend parents and must be reassured that their presence in the home is both desired and welcomed. They are often a little apprehensive about the first visit, and the fact that they will be accompanied and introduced to the family by the Program Coordinator is essential to reassure all parties. How to handle the bored and reluctant reader, and the hyperactive or overtired child are common concerns. They welcome the support offered by the program, particularly the accessibility of books, magazines and other resource materials, and the availability of a coordinator. Student volunteers often wish to know if they will be able to receive a later reference, if one should be required. An experienced volunteer may be on hand to relate some personal experiences with the program.

Volunteer training is ongoing. During the school year, four general meetings for all volunteers are held. At these times, new materials and documentation will be distributed, new references and books displayed. A topic will be selected for discussion, with perhaps a guest speaker to offer expertise and information. Volunteers also share their questions and concerns and enjoy some social interaction.

## Aspects of Program Success

*Learning with My Child* has grown from twelve families matched during the first year of operation, to sixty-one in the sixth year. Some statistics for the 1996-97 year of operation are as follows:

- Families receiving volunteers 61
- Children referred by schools 67

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• Children participating	79
• Families wait-listed	2
• Volunteers trained and matched	65
• Number of volunteer reading hours	1230
• Number of books circulated	460

Undoubtedly, the success of *Learning with My Child* depends in large part on the quality of volunteers. For this reason, time and effort is given to support and encourage them through training and providing them with the resources they need to fulfill their role. When tutor-family matches remain stable over the school year, all become familiar with each other and reading development progresses for children at home. The program allows tutors to use their strengths to best advantage. The expressive reader, the actor, the patient grandparent, the energetic student, all bring a unique quality to share with a child. Perhaps the greatest gift is that of their time. While sharing delight in story reading, volunteer tutors receive appreciation from families who see tangible improvement in children's reading. All share the magic of the first halting attempts to read aloud, observe the enthusiasm of, "Look Mummy, I read this whole book by myself!"

Volunteer tutors have a direct influence in sensitizing parents to their important role as primary educators of their children. The parent is usually an observer of tutor-child activities, and will often talk with the volunteer after the reading session. Families frequently discuss the child's progress, ask how they may help, and read the books the volunteer has brought. Tutors have assisted during the report night interviews and provided simultaneous translations of the teacher's remarks. Others have accompanied child and parent to the library, museum, planetarium, or botanical garden. In short, the involvement and commitment of the volunteers often go far beyond the requirements laid down by the program.

Other tutors have provided the impetus for parents to return to school themselves, particularly for first and second language training. In many instances, a parent will make the first admission of a reading or language difficulty, because of a desire to help the child. While a parent may not immediately be in a position to take advantage of literacy courses, the positive experience with tutors often sets the stage for a later initiative. Some parents express fear that their child will repeat their own school failures. The tutor can reinforce the efforts these parents are making and present a model of academic achievement or other successful life skills. The amount of time and energy, care and concern demonstrated by volunteers is a continuing inspiration and challenge.

Volunteer tutors are provided with a follow-up form to be completed after each session. To be noted are the number of visits made during a two-month period and the length of each reading session, including preparation time. There is also space for anecdotal reports regarding the child's progress, books read, student interest and participation. Notes on the home setting for tutoring (parent participation, common distractions) are also made.

Teachers are encouraged to contact the program and report on children's progress in class. Often teachers report that changes and improvements are visible shortly after the introduction of the volunteer into the family. In some

instances, these improvements consist of greater interest and enthusiasm for class reading lessons, readiness to borrow books from the school library, eagerness to demonstrate reading skills in front of the class, and greater involvement in discussions based on books and stories read at home. Children are often less inclined to “forget” reading journals or assigned reading books and they usually show greater confidence in their abilities as readers and writers.

A grade three teacher wrote, “A big thank you to you and all your wonderful volunteers. The kids, with the help of your volunteers have come a long way in reading this year!” On another occasion, “The girls improved greatly once they started working with their tutors and looked forward to their visits.” A grade two teacher reports, “This child was a real success story. She repeated grade two, but the difference in her attitude was noticeable, and she improved in all subjects once she received the volunteer service.” When asked why she referred students to the program, one teacher replied, “Because I know it’s the only way they will ever have any one to read to them!”

Parents report similar results. They also appreciate the sense of routine that is established by a tutor’s regular visit; a “quiet time” that benefits the whole family. Comments made include, “She has made a great difference to the whole family.” Before being a match, a mother called to ask, “When may we expect our tutor? The other kids are talking about theirs, and J. asked me to call and tell you to hurry up and find someone for him!”

A mother reported being inspired by a volunteer’s example to read aloud with her child for the very first time, using a book which was suitable for his reading level, although a little above her own. They lay on the bed together, laughing at their mistakes, and helping each other with the difficult parts. Shortly after this, she returned to school.

In many instances other family members will join in some of the activities. Siblings will ask for a certain story for themselves; a parent will help assemble the ingredients for a recipe, or participate in a magic trick, or join in the search for their native country/town on a map or globe.

Figures indicate a steady increase in demand for the service. Parent calls for information, teacher and principal referrals increase each year more students each year. While reports from volunteers are largely anecdotal, specific data are collected on:

- the children referred to the program and the volunteer match;
- total number of children referred, visited, but not yet matched;
- number of siblings not directly referred, but included in activities
- number of hours of reading for each child;
- number of volunteers matched with families

### Maintaining the Program

Thanks to the inspired leadership of educational sector directors, funding for the program has been made available each year from budgetary surpluses in the Adult Education Department. The French and English branches of the program work closely together in the same office and come under the same budget. Included are salaries and benefits for the two coordinators, at 35 hours

per week for the larger French sector and 25 hours per week for English sector schools. Other expenses include travel for initial home visits to families, followed by introduction of volunteers, advertising to recruit volunteers, expenses for on-going training, group meetings for volunteers held four times a year, and volunteer appreciation. Administration and secretarial costs, staff training and development, development of materials and resources are reimbursed through the Sault Saint Louis School Board.

The Sault Saint Louis Foundation makes an annual grant for book purchases. This is a charitable foundation whose aim is support for programs which enable students to achieve their full potential. The sums received are for use by both English and French sectors. Books have been purchased for the program's library which was started by donations of second hand books. The donation from the Foundation allows us to upgrade our collection with reference books for children and parents. It also permits the purchase of some good quality hardcover books, so that students may experience the very best available in children's literature. A large portion of the grant goes towards a book ownership scheme, which presents a volume to each child registered in the program.

The quantitative and qualitative results of this program offer an outstanding example of what may be achieved by using the pool of volunteer human resources available to community programs, at minimal cost. I have always considered it a privilege to work with the talented, dedicated and resourceful volunteers of *Learning With My Child*. Their contributions to our families and to our children's development could never be paid for by fiscal means.

### Future Developments

Since the inception of Learning with My Child, much effort has gone into developing resources and materials for use in the reading partnerships. Ensuring that documentation and records are up-to-date, recruiting volunteers, and keeping track of volunteers and families is time consuming. While it sometimes takes longer than one would wish to make the reading match-ups, it is worth the consideration given to each case as this ensures a stable partnerships, a high rate of satisfaction, and a good retention rate.

Families have the option of refusing the service when the program is offered to them. It requires family effort to accept a stranger in the home, to ensure that a parent is always present for the reading sessions, and that the child is ready and prepared for the tutor's visit. It is not always possible to send a volunteer into a home where conditions are not conducive to creating a good atmosphere for reading. Often parents who refuse the service are the ones in the greatest need. This means that remedial services are limited to the classroom, and reading is uniquely associated with school.

Parents often express frustration in dealing with their children. Discipline, homework, divorce, single parenting, health and hygiene are some of the concerns voiced by parents to their volunteers. A series of courses on parenting skills has been successfully introduced into the French sector of the School Board. They have been well received by parents and should be expanded to include an anglophone series in the near future. It is worth noting that parents

who attend workshops often have more education, are comfortable in a public setting, can afford baby sitting services for their children, and have no difficulty in accessing transportation. These considerations often eliminate many of the parents of *Learning With My Child*. Therefore, the volunteer as role model remains one of the most efficacious ways of helping families improve literacy and related skills.

*ABC Canada* recently granted funds to the program, in order to offer parents workshops on literacy. A session entitled *Read and Write Together* is planned. Each family will receive a personalized invitation and volunteers will follow this up by accompanying families, in order to encourage participation by parents. Wherever possible, volunteers will provide transportation. The workshop will take place on two alternative dates and in two separate locations in order to maximize parent participation. Topics for discussion include the acquisition of literacy skills by young children; paired reading techniques; playing and learning together; evaluating and choosing children's books. The *Learning With My Child* program coordinator will facilitate the discussion, and a teacher will answer questions concerning the process of reading attainment. Parents will have a wide selection of children's books and magazines to peruse, and each participant will receive a package of handy hints, and book list subscriptions.

For more information on the *Learning With My Child Program* contact:

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## Family Literacy in Saskatchewan

There is a strong volunteer base in adult literacy programs throughout Saskatchewan. Within this context, the *Come Read With Me* family literacy model has been successful in training over 200 program facilitators available to implement programs in a wide range of settings and organizations. In this section the *Come Read With Me* approach has been discussed from the perspectives of facilitator training and program implementation.



# Family Literacy Training: The Come Read With Me Program

*Pat Hoffman*

## A Homespun Beginning

In the fall of 1992, when the Saskatchewan Literacy Network was looking for literacy practitioners to attend family literacy training in Brooks, Alberta, Pat Hoffman put her name forward.

In that southern Alberta prairie town, Pat met Norma Klassen, another Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology basic education instructor. They were treated royally by Bonnie Annicchiarico and Karen Nelson, who had developed *Homespun* (Family Literacy Action Group of Alberta, 1995) to meet family literacy needs in Alberta. Based on the *Motheread* program (Morrow, Tracey, & Maxwell, 1995) in North Carolina, practitioners were introduced to wonderful new and old children's books, and a way to reach the "first teacher" in every parent. There were prepared lessons to follow and ready-made parent hand-outs. The concept of addressing the roots of reading and writing in the home was exciting and new for Saskatchewan Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs.

## A Crash to Reality

We returned to our Saskatchewan urban centres, book lists and program model in hand. Book orders flew and family literacy groups with their ABE students began. We had such enthusiasm for *Homespun*, it didn't occur to us that the books we had loved in Brooks, Alberta wouldn't fit the backgrounds of our largely aboriginal, cross-cultural group of learners in Saskatchewan. Another unexpected thing that happened was that our Saskatchewan Life Skills Coach training came into immediate use as students began to discuss the issues related to their childhoods, their experience as parents, and their present-day struggles for learning and empowerment. There seemed to be no end of deviation from the *Homespun* training binder, which we had loved because of its ready-made lessons, hand-outs and follow-up. The students led us instead to the realities of life at the margin. We followed, using the best facilitation skills that we could bring to the table.

## Working on a Saskatchewan Model

In return for training in Brooks, we had agreed to deliver a weekend workshop to introduce family literacy to other literacy practitioners in Saskatchewan. As we began to discuss the *Homespun* materials, it became obvious that the binder needed a Saskatchewan adaptation. The decision was made to provide a flexible format for training family literacy facilitators in Saskatchewan. Piece by piece through the summer, as Norma worked on research and I worked on handouts, a Saskatchewan style of family literacy training came together.

A binder of resource materials and readings were compiled to cover the following topics: family literacy background and issues, adult education principles, family literacy program models, starting a family literacy program, reaching the hard to reach, facilitator resources, children's literature resources, reading strategies and theories, evaluation, and community resources and networking.

General formats were provided for group sessions, processes for encouraging discussion were detailed for several books, and many ready-to-copy parent handouts were made. Rather than providing a lot of information about books, the Saskatchewan model focused on the process of empowering the parent and on supporting the parent in establishing a reading culture in the home. The training also gave facilitators current literacy statistics, information on fund-raising and proposal writing, program evaluation tips, and ways to create fun! A Saskatchewan Literacy Network practitioners group choose *Come Read With Me* as the name for provincial family literacy programming.

The following is a sample agenda for one of three days of Come Read With Me training. None of the agendas are prefixed; they are flexible and vary depending on the requests and needs of the group.

### **Come Read With Me Training Day 1**

#### **A.M.**

*Welcome*

- Housekeeping* – parking, bathrooms, smoking areas, times, an address list.
- *Introductions. Break the group into pairs to meet and find out about each other.*
  - *(After five minutes have them introduce their partner to the whole group.)*

*Come Read With Me video presentation*

*Facilitator Reading – The Key to Family Happiness*

*What is Family Literacy? What will a Come Read With Me class be like?*

*Group Guidelines*

*Agenda for the rest of the time and participant questions*

*Introducing the first book, **Leo the Late Bloomer** (Read and Share)*

#### **P.M.**

*One thing I remember doing as a child with my caregivers. (Group share)*

*Cycles in our lives*

*What is family literacy? Avoiding deficit models*

*Unconditional positive regard, strokes, I statements*

*What do family literacy programs look like?*

*Model a Homespun session – **Amos' Sweater***

*Choose book pairs for Day 2*

*Evaluate the day and close*

## The Learning/Reflection Process: Using Children's Books as a Stimulus

In *Come Read With Me* groups, children's books are used to initiate each learning experience. The facilitator uses questioning to guide participants through each subsequent stage in the learning process. An example of how the spiral model of the learning process applies to *Come Read With Me* groups is provided below.



### Experiencing Stage

The book *Amos's Sweater* by Janet Lynn is presented to the group. The facilitator may point out who the author and illustrator, and usually asks a series of questions about the book.

- Is anyone familiar with this book?
- Would you be willing to read the book?
- How would you prefer to read this book? (for example: with a partner, in a round-robin manner, according to characters and narrator, as a whole group).
- Do you have any suggestions?

### Naming Experience

After reading, reactions to the book are shared. At this stage, questions are asked to encourage discussion about personal responses.

- What did you think of the book?
- Did anyone have similar thoughts? different thoughts?
- How did you feel after reading the book?
- Were there any surprises for you?

### Analyzing the Experience

The themes or the main ideas of the book are discussed at this stage. The facilitator acknowledges that each participant may get something different out of the book. S/he helps participants reach their own understandings and conclusions with further questioning.

- What are some of the main things the book is talking about?
- What does that idea mean to you?

- Did the book remind you of anything?
- What does that mean in your life? any connections?
- What did you learn or relearn from reading this book? How or why is that significant to you?

### **Planning Stage**

Participants now plan how they can share this book with their children. They will discuss how to connect the main ideas in the story to their children's lives and identify ideas that they want to mention to their children. They will also think of possible questions to ask their children. Activities, which are related to the book, are also chosen.

- How can you apply or use the ideas from the story?
- What do you want to do now? How will you accomplish that?
- What are some choices or options?
- What will you do to help make this interesting and meaningful to your child?
- What does your child already know about this topic?

### **Doing Stage**

Participants take the book home and read it with their children. They discuss the book and do some activities related to the book's main ideas.

### **Shared Experiencing Stage**

When the family literacy group meets again, the "Doing Stage" activities become the basis for what is being discussed. They become the next experience, the experience that is being processed and discussed so that the spiral continues.

## **Training Groups and Issues**

Since the fall of 1993, *Come Read With Me* has trained about 200 facilitators from libraries, regional colleges and training institutions, band councils, preschools, K-12 schools, friendship centres, social services, teen parent programs, family support services, correctional centres, child care centres, immigrant groups and parent volunteer groups. The training has attempted to be flexible enough to meet everyone's training times and needs through regional delivery and content adaptation.

In 1997 a phone survey of 94 *Come Read With Me* facilitators in Prince Albert, Regina, Saskatoon, and other regions indicated that 140 different *Come Read With Me* programs had been offered, of which 30 were part of ongoing family support programs. All had considered *Come Read With Me* training very worthwhile in enabling them to offer programs in their communities or organizations. Facilitators offered several recommendations to maintain the effectiveness of programs, as follows:

- The availability of long-term funding for local and regional coordination of programs would contribute to an increase in *Come Read With Me* offerings. Programs often need financial assistance to provide transportation and childcare for parent participants and materials for books and home craft activities. Lack of facilitator time to prepare and promote programs, and recruit parents was cited as the greatest obstacle to offering programs.

- Provincial awareness campaigns will encourage community collaboration in family literacy initiatives.
- The integration of family literacy into existing programs in agencies and institutions will enable *Come Read With Me* programs to share resources and support of other staff in recruiting and program delivery.
- Providing provincial networking opportunities through refresher courses and the developing local *Come Read With Me* associations will enable facilitators to share experiences, successes, and ideas.

### What's Next?

There is great enthusiasm in Saskatchewan for the potential of family literacy programs. Support from the Saskatchewan Literacy Network, Saskatchewan Credit Unions, the National Literacy Secretariat, and new training initiatives of the Saskatchewan Training Strategy hold out a brighter future for family literacy in the province. There are plans to offer additional, complementary training in Nurturing with Rhymes which is an adaptation of the Mother Goose program, and Literacy and Parenting Skills.

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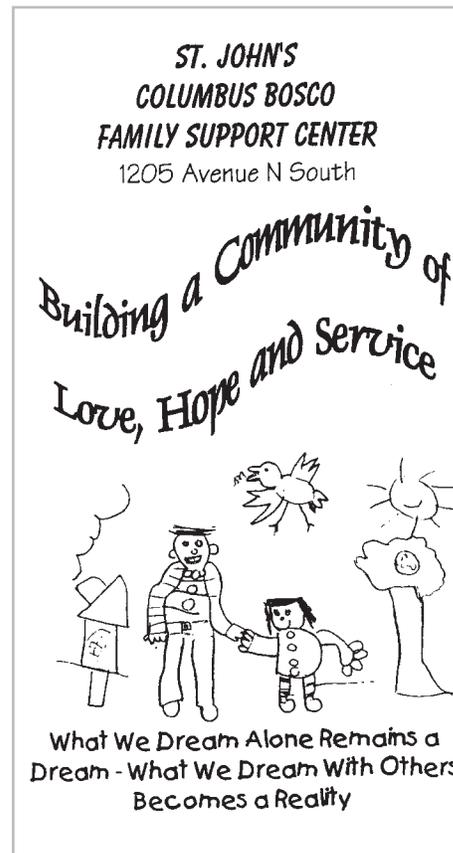
# Come Read With Me at the St. John's Parent Support Centre

*Cathy Sieben*

## Introduction

The St. John's Parent Support Centre came into being as a pilot project in 1995, in the Saskatoon neighbourhood of Holiday Park. The culmination of the vision of Elaine Zakreski, Family Coordinator for the Saskatoon Catholic School Board, the Centre has been funded by the Knights of Columbus and St. John's Bosco Catholic Workers League in partnership with the Saskatoon Catholic School Board. Grants have also been provided by the Bishop James P. Mahoney Institute of the Family. Created to honour the late Bishop's memory and to perpetuate his love and support of family life, its objective is to provide "financial assistance for initiatives and programs intended to strengthen and support family life within urban and rural communities." With a dedicated group of both volunteer and paid workers and participants, the St. John's program has been thriving. Participants have assumed ownership of the group through decision-making and responsibility. With the goodwill of the staff and students, a strong community has emerged and it has made a difference in people's lives. Currently there are five parent support centres operating within the Saskatoon area.

The *Come Read With Me* Association was formed in 1995 to provide training support and library materials for the program. Funding for the Association's library was sought from several local organizations and funds from a National Literacy Secretariat grant helped add to the collection. So that all participants in a *Come Read With Me* program are able to take home a book for a week, the library has aimed to have 14 copies of every book. At present it contains over 70 titles. *Come Read With Me* books and supplies for crafts continue to be donated



or supplied through fundraising. Space for books is provided at the Saskatoon Board of Education by Ron Wallace, Coordinator of Continuing Education and treasurer of the *CRWM* Association. The downtown location is central and accessible to all groups in the Association.

At the present time, *Come Read With Me* is a component in all five parent support centres. The communities include Holiday Park, Confederation Park, Fairhaven, Massey Place, and Erindale, neighbourhoods characterized by a mix of working class families and marginalized poor families (with the exception of Erindale which includes higher income families). *Come Read With Me* programs are being offered in a number of public schools in and out of the inner city and have been offered at the Saskatoon Food Bank, the Family Support Centre, Egadz Youth Centre, and Maggie's Childcare. Approximately 50 programs have run since 1993.

### **Come Read With Me Program Goals**

The Come Read With Me program believes that, as parents, we are our children's first and most important teachers. At the St. John Parent Support Centre, we have tried to make this belief a reality by providing a literature-rich learning environment for parents and children. Children learn through play and parents have opportunities to observe and model positive interactions with their children. Come Read With Me provides a literacy component which is an integral part of parent-child activities at the Centre. We feel that the involvement of Come Read With Me in parent support services highlights the important role of literacy in family life and its contribution to family development. The goal of prevention and early intervention for family support has led to an implementation strategy which combines community action from school, church and others in the community.

### **Overview of Activities at the St. John Parent Support Centre**

The Centre operates throughout the school year, where several parents meet once a week in the preschool room. Since February, 1995, over 20 parents and 30 children (five years of age and younger) have been served; a number of families have been there since the beginning.

The families come from different ethnic backgrounds and economic circumstances. However, many are single mothers at the lower end of the economic scale. A limited number have little formal education and some have not completed senior matriculation. The ages of most range from early twenties to mid-thirties. In general, participants can read, but literacy skills vary. Some participants have had positive role models and family literacy experiences. Others have had poor role models and negative experiences.

At the Centre we focus on the person, not the program and we treat each participant with the dignity and respect that every human being deserves. By focusing on both the parent's and the child's needs, we put into practice our understanding that children are parented best by adults whose own needs have been met. The atmosphere is friendly, relaxed and non-judgmental. As parents we all need support and encouragement, regardless of skill. The Centre offers parents opportunities to solve their own problems and to be a resource for each other.

Participants have a part in decision-making, including the direction of parent talk and the planning of celebrations and special excursions. Parents have increased their sense of belonging and ownership through brainstorming for ideas, reaching consensus, and assuming responsibility. Outings have included picnics and swimming, museum trips, hikes, tobogganing parties, library visits, and a wind-up barbecue at the Columbus Bosco Homes/ Separate School Board's farm school. The farm school serves teenage students with social, behavioural, and emotional difficulties in an alternative educational setting.

When possible, *Come Read With Me* book themes are linked to current activities. We plan cooperatively to ensure that activities are free or low cost. Lasting friendships have formed between participants and staff. One group who are neighbours have formed a loose support network in their apartment complex. Their children have become playmates and they have helped each other in times of need.

A fundamental aspect of the Centre involves modeling. From play and interacting with children, and from seeing and hearing about other parents reading with children, all parents, including those who have not had such first-hand experiences themselves, are given the chance to observe. Given the opportunity to observe and interact, parents are able to contribute to the group, enrich their understanding of the challenge of parenting, and benefit their children. In participating and interacting, parents, the paid workers and volunteers all become role models. Regardless of the level of parenting skill, all have something to contribute and to gain through involvement.

For low literacy parents especially, early involvement within a positive, non-threatening environment in their school helps them to gain the confidence to advocate for their child and provides them with the tools to help break the cycle of illiteracy.

The paid staff consists of a parent worker who is also a St. John's pre-school teacher, and two child care workers (a grandmother and grandfather) who are both trained as *Come Read With Me* facilitators. While the Family Coordinator of the Saskatoon Catholic School Board oversees the Centre, she also volunteers in the program as well. The *Come Read With Me* facilitator position is a volunteer one. It involves borrowing books, deciding on a craft or activity to complement the theme of a book, and assembling necessary items to arrange the activity for parents and children. The parent worker assists with ideas, supplies, and covers in the absence of the *Come Read With Me* facilitator.

### **Come Read With Me – A Typical Session**

The routines of a two hour session start with a half hour of free time, where parents, parent worker, child workers, and children meet and interact in the pre-school room. Children can choose from a wide variety of activities which are to found in any well-equipped preschool room, including building toys, blocks, puzzles, games, beading, play-doh, painting, role playing, and reading. The pre-school room has its own collection of accessible reading material for both children and parents, including an extensive parent file. Compiled and assembled by the *Come Read With Me* facilitator, workers and

parents, the parent file contains clippings, and literature related to a wide range of parenting issues.

For the next hour parents, parent worker and *Come Read With Me* facilitator, gather in the staff room for parent talk. This hour provides an opportunity for parents to take a break from the task of parenting, to enjoy a snack, and to explore a range of issues. Without formal workshops, parent group discussion has focused on child behaviour, parenting and discipline strategies. Discussion groups use books, articles, newspaper clippings and videos dealing with child and parental development issues of self-esteem, safety, nutrition, literacy, and a variety of topics sparked by group interests and needs. Through sharing the struggles and successes, parents support each other and increase their own understanding of the challenge we call parenting. While parent talk is underway, children and childcare workers have a 15 minute gym period, followed by a nutritious snack time, prepared in various ways.

The parent worker moves between adults and children, demonstrating confidence in the group's ability to initiate and maintain meaningful discussion. Because the children participating are five years of age and younger, flexibility is crucial to meet children's needs as they arise. Occasionally, a parent will volunteer to miss parent talk to help out with the children, thereby further enhancing responsibility and ownership for program activities.



**Parents involved in craft activities with children.**

When parent talk is over, parents, children, and workers gather in the pre-school room once again. At the St. John's Centre, the *Come Read With Me* program has been modified to fit the overall parenting approach taken. This final half hour of the afternoon is devoted to the *Come Read With Me* component. The weekly program concentrates on sharing books with children

and expanding on a book's theme through songs, rhymes, and actions as well as crafts or activities. Together we explore the many ways of bringing books alive, and discover connections between books and the everyday world. A resource list for developing theme related activities is included at the end of this paper.

Together with our books we gather in a circle and collectively decide how we want to read the book, whether by turns, in groups, all together or with a read aloud by the Facilitator. We allow the books to provoke inquiry and learning in a fun way. Parents and children are full of ideas for songs, rhymes, and actions which sometimes fit the theme of the book and sometimes do not. Parents then settle around the pre-school table to incorporate communication with their children through a follow-up craft. Reflecting on the book just read, crafts are chosen to involve everyone. We strive to be creative, to re-cycle, re-use, and have fun. Along with the craft, parents go home with ideas and recipes, methods and inspiration for bringing books alive.

The weekly routine for parent group discussion combined with the *Come Read With Me* program focuses on inviting parents to discuss and voice opinions freely on matters relevant to child and parental development. It emphasizes modeling family literacy in the framework of a parent support centre.

### Experiences With Program Development

In September, 1994 I was invited to take part in a *Come Read With Me* facilitator training workshop. Already involved in volunteering in the school and community, I viewed it as another way to contribute and welcomed the opportunity for a new learning experience. After training, I attempted to initiate a *Come Read With Me* program at St. John School.

This was an exercise in futility. I advertised the program in the school's weekly newsletter, with posters around the school. Although I showed up weekly, no participants arrived. Nevertheless, about this time I was invited to sit on an advisory board, representing the *Come Read With Me* program, to oversee the development of the St. John's Centre. Parenting workshops had already been taking place at the school, with limited success. Amalgamation of the two components into a family support centre became a reality in February, 1995. Over time we have come to recognize ourselves as the St. John's Parent Support Centre.

From the beginning our intent was not to provide formal *Come Read With Me* workshops of the sort that run for eight to ten weeks. Rather, we planned a program which would operate throughout the school year, where family literacy modeling and parent social networks could be emphasized to encourage the joy of reading with our children.

### Program Successes

For me the directions which participants and staff have taken are the prime indicators of our Centre's success. It is not possible to separate the contributions of the *Come Read With Me* program from the overall efforts of the St. John's Parent Support Centre. At St. John's there are interesting positive stories which have emerged from the journeys people have taken. These

stories represent families seeing goals come closer to reality, parents using improved parenting skills, participants returning to further education. Nevertheless, a tangible indicator of effectiveness has been the expansion to five family support centres, located in Catholic elementary schools around Saskatoon. In addition, over the years I have noted parent success experiences related to literacy development in *Come Read With Me*.

The increased use of shared reading at home can be gauged by the fact that parents take home books to share with their children during the week. During the *Come Read With Me* segment, parents have demonstrated their developing parent-child interaction skills by actively engaging in “book talk” with their children. Through involvement, parents have become aware of the importance of reading with children, of the enjoyment it provides. From time to time a box of donated children’s books appears, allowing participants to increase their home library. Library visits have enabled parents to have more access to a wide variety of literacy materials and services, and library usage has increased.

### Stories of Family Success

Many of the parents who have been part of the Centre began as shy and isolated individuals. Over time they have blossomed to take leadership in discussion, offer ideas and show pride in their own and their children’s literacy achievements. One parent, a single father with custody of two of his sons, expanded his horizons by joining the Children’s Advocacy Board, the Renter’s Board, and by returning to further his education. He entered a program to help him start his own business. A young single mother faced with the challenge of raising three sons became a community association indoor coordinator and co-facilitated a parenting group dealing with preteens. Another single mother faced with the challenge of developmentally challenged sons had to leave the Centre, when she was accepted into an architectural training program. A very shy single mother became more out-going and began to reciprocate the good feelings she received from others. She too left the program to pursue her high school diploma. We all have attempted to recognize the achievement of everyone through encouragement, positive feedback, and tokens of esteem and remembrance. The following story of one parent’s participation will offer some further insight into role that The St. John’s Centre has played in families’ lives.

Donna,<sup>1</sup> age 30, was a parent who coped with a general learning disability and who experienced abuse and the trauma of being burned as a child. She said that, as a child, she felt that God did not hear her prayers. As the mother of two children, her first-born was given up for adoption. Sam\* her second child was a former ward of Social Services, having spent some time in foster care. As part of regaining custody of Sam, Donna was required to attend the Centre with Sam. Donna faced many struggles, yet was open and honest regarding her disability and her past. She shared with other parents her great sense of humour, which was a strength in coping with difficulties. As a person not easily dismayed, Donna was finally able to assume full custody of her son.

1. Parent and child names have been changed

While continuing to deal with parenting issues facing all young parents, Donna had to cope with her own learning difficulties as her son entered kindergarten. Her sense of determination was always an inspiration. She worried about his progress and her ability to help him, as he progressed in school. Through support from the Centre, Donna involved herself in the school, helping teachers in kindergarten and grade one. Her growing sense of community, her understanding of the importance of her involvement, and her confidence gave her encouragement to help her son.

Donna was enthusiastic about involvement in the literacy component of the Centre. As a model for others, one example of her tenacious spirit came from her use of the Saskatoon Public Library. Donna took Sam to the library regularly, but accumulated fines which prevented further book loans. Nevertheless, she convinced the library staff to forgive her fine, an achievement not easily accomplished.

Donna was no stranger to self-improvement, as she worked hard to attend parent workshops and retreats. She was a member of Alcoholics Anonymous and overcame addictions, and traumatic childhood experience. She persevered through much bureaucracy and received tutoring. By overcoming many barriers, Donna was finally accepted into a program to help learning disabled adults upgrade their education. Donna was a speaker at a forum for victims of violence. Recently, in a retesting of general ability, it was revealed that Donna's IQ had increased by 10 percentage points.

Donna's goals have changed over time. When Donna began at the Centre, her immediate goal was to prove that she was a fit mother. Her goals expanded over the years and her current aim is to further her education and someday work with other disadvantaged people. In recalling the child who felt that God did not hear her, Donna says that the people she has met through the St. John's Parent Support Centre have been the answer to her prayers. They have encouraged her to hope and to dream, to set and achieve goals for herself and her son.

### Tips for Success in Come Read With Me

In implementing a family literacy program, considerations must include recruitment of participants, availability of an appropriate location, and available resources. The necessary planning for these key aspects of a successful program was ensured through the development of partnerships with others and the involvement of partners in decisions about all aspects of getting the program off the ground. An ongoing aspect of the *Come Read With Me* program has been the provision of good and plentiful children's literature. With our library now containing over 70 titles, most are simple, predictable books geared to children five years of age and younger. Taking into account the fact that many of the families served also have older children, some books have been selected to appeal to older children. A list of favourite books over the years at the St. John's Centre is included at the end of this paper.

Given that a number of participants have school-age children, concerns have been raised about homework and children's intellectual development, as well as parent queries for help, services and further education. Parent talk provides the time for brainstorming to recommend strategies to deal with

different concerns and questions. The question of how to get your child to do homework willingly and how to avoid “pulling your hair out,” is one which has been addressed in some creative ways by parents. Together, parents have gained confidence to advocate for their children when concerns at school do arise.

Perhaps the most important thing to keep in mind when initiating a family literacy program involves expectations. By focusing on the importance of each person, rather than on theoretical aims of reversing the cycle of illiteracy, facilitators demonstrate that helping one person is realistic and that small steps are vital in changing lives.

### Favourite Books in the Come Read With Me Program

- Bogart, Jo Ellen. (1992). **Sarah Saw a Blue Macaw**. Scholastic Canada.
- Carle, Eric. (1983.) **The Very Hungry Caterpillar**. Philomel Books.
- Chase, Edith, N. (1993). **Waters**. North Wind Press.
- Chase, Edith, N. (1984). **The New Baby Calf**. Scholastic Book Services.
- Evyindson, Peter. (1988). **Chester Bear Where are You?**. Pemmican Publications.
- Fernandes, Eugenie. (1993). **Waves in the Bathtub**. North Wind Press.
- Kimmel, Eric A. (1990). **I Took My Frog to the Library**. Viking Penguin.
- King, Bob. (1991). **Sittin on the Farm**. Kids Can Press.
- Kovalski, Maryann. (1987). **The Wheels on the Bus**. Little Brown.
- Loewen, Iris. (1993). **My Kokum Called Today**. Pemmican Publications.
- Lunn, Janet. (1988). **Amos's Sweater**. Groundwood Books.
- Martin Jr., Bill. (1989). **Chicka Chicka Boom Boom**. Simon and Shuster Books for Young Readers.
- Martin Jr., Bill. (1983). **Brown Bear, Brown Bear**. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Mayer, Mercer. (1975). **Just for You**. Golden Press, Western Publishing Co.
- Munsch, Robert. (1986). **Love You Forever**. Firefly Books.
- Oppenheim, Joanne. (1986). **Have You Seen Birds?** North Winds Press.
- Pelletier, Darryl. Gabriel. (1992). **The Pow Wow**. Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research.
- Poulin, Stephane. (1991). **Animals in Winter**. M. Quintin Publishers.
- Reid, Susan. (1992). **Grandpa Dan's Toboggan Ride**. Richmond Hill, ON: Scholastic Canada Ltd.
- Wheeler, Bemelda. (1986). **Where Did You Get Your Mocassins?** Pemmican Publications.
- Wise, William. (1993). **Ten Sly Piranhas**. Scholastic, Dial Books for Young Readers.
- Wood, Audrey. (1984). **The Napping House**. Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich.
- Young, Ed. (1992). **Seven Blind Mice**. Philomel Books.

### Resources for Theme Related Activities

- Press, Judy. (1996). **The Little Hands Big Fun Craft Book - Creative Fun for 2-6 year olds**. Williamson Publishing.
- Press, Judy. (1994). **Little Hands Early Learning: Art Book**. Williamson Publishing.

**The Giant Encyclopedia of Theme Activities for Children 2-5.** (1993). Gryphon House Press.

Tomczyk, Mary. (1996). **Little Hands Early Learning: Shapes, Sizes and More Surprises.** Williamson Publishing.

Warren, Jean. (1992). **1 2 3 Series.** Warren Publishing House.

Warren, Jean. (1994). **Totline - Toddler Theme-a-saurus.** Warren Publishing House.

For more information about the Come Read With Me Program in Saskatoon contact:

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# Family Literacy in Canada: Profiles of Effective Practices

*edited by*  
**Adele Thomas**

This volume presents diverse family literacy approaches from different communities across Canada. It is written in the many voices of practitioners who are closely involved in the establishment and maintenance of family literacy programs. The contributors reflect on the nature of their literacy work with families and the challenges they and program participants have encountered.

**Adele Thomas**, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Education, Faculty of Education, Brock University. Her interests focus on family literacy and early primary teacher education. She has helped to develop the Family Learning Program of the Niagara District School Board which offers caregivers adult education upgrading and early childhood education for their toddlers. The program is based on a unique family literacy curriculum which stresses parent-child interaction.

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