Parent-Child Mother Goose Program®

The Calgary Herald – Wednesday, October 09, 2002, by Joanne Good

‘Magic can happen’
Mother Goose program uses rhymes, rhythms to build loving connection

Twenty years ago, Toronto social worker Barry Dickson and therapist Joan Bodger developed a playful program for struggling families that has inspired a cross-country rap revival of Mother Goose rhythms and rhymes.

Today their work ï called parent-child Mother Goose Program ï is a non-profit charity teaching the concept to people who work in helping agencies from coast-to-coast.

In Calgary the program is included at Calgary Family Connections society family resource centers in Bowness and Forest Heights.

From parentôs mouth to childôs ear, rhymes join the two in a wonder of words and loving connection.

ñItôs about relationships and é bonding over rhymes,ò says executive director Sandy Vigrass.

The concept is simple enough: Once a week, in a chaotic but magical morning, lyrics and lullabies are intoned with affection, inflection, fingerplays, bounces and tickles.

For that classic childrenôs verse, ñround and round the garden, like a teddy bear,ò adults recite the ditty while tracing their fingers around chubby baby palms, tiny backs or tummies.

Young children squirm and squeal in anticipation for the delicious tickle that ends the lyric.

ñYou work with the best of yourself, you and your child. Thatôs it. No books, no name tags. No toys, puppets or music,ò says Merle Harris, who has led Edmonton groups for eight years and was High River recently teaching future facilitators for southern Alberta.

ñThe idea is that you donôt have to e able to read to teach your child language.ò

That concept is revolutionary in literacy circles where the focus is so often on the written word.

But the idea is growing and other rhyming programs with different names have popped up in rural and urban libraries, seniorsô centers and church halls, all embracing oral literacy for its magical punch.

ñWith a solid foundation in oral tradition, the next step is not so scary,ò says Harris of the segue into reading, writing and speech. ñIt makes language alive for children because theyôve actually felt the words for all those years.ò

With that goal in mind, parents are encouraged to use action verses and storytelling during daily routines such as diaper-changing, teeth-brushing, face-washing, giving medicine or waiting in lines.

ñItôs confidence-building and calming for both parents and children,ò she explains.

ñMy business is to make parents feel good about themselves.ò

And itôs not just for parents of busy preschoolers. Three to six months is considered the golden age for what has been dubbed ñlap literacy.ò

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Rhymes and riddles are amazing discipline tools, too, says Harris, mother to two grown men who were raised on lyrics.

ñI say to people, ôIf you feel tense, do a rhyme. Itôs impossible to recite a nursery rhyme in a bad voice.ôñ

And, it turns out, whatôs good for the gosling is equally compelling for goose and gander.

Harris tells the story of a preschooler and his dad at a Canadian Forces base resource center outside Edmonton, where the Mother Goose program is a staple and rhymes are a welcome routine.

The child offered to teach his father, who had just returned from fighting in Afghanistan, the verses he had missed.

But as the child progressed, dad was reciting, not connecting, Harris explains.

ñThe little boy said to his dad, ôNo, Daddy, you have to look in my eyes and see what Iôm feeling.ôñ

For a youngster to target the essence of tunes and tickles as a relationship-booster shows how powerful action verse can be, says Harris, who has used the technique in business meetings on politicians and corporate types about to blow their collective corks.

ñYes, Iôve been asked to do ôIm a little teapot, short and stoutô and itôs quite surprising to see the reactions.ò

The secret is to go slowly, Harris advises with a calm smile.

ñSlow everything down, especially your voice, and magic can happen.ò

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