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A magical morning of relaxed fun for moms, kids

Magic is happening here. Small, unfolding miracles of mothers and babies looking into each other's eyes with delight, laughing, playing games that came dancing down to us through centuries of words, words polished on tongues and cradled in memory.

The whole idea of the Parent-Child Mother Goose program is outrageously simple and astoundingly powerful. One morning a week, mothers and babies come together to learn and play nursery rhymes. You could take a brace of scientific laboratories, a wardful of white-coated specialists and a think tank of child care experts, stir them together and you wouldn't get anything half as potent as the life-enhancing transformations wrought by silly old Mother Goose.

I'm in a big, bare room of the Elmbank Recreation Centre in Rexdale, one of three Mother Goose locations around the city.

"Grandfather clock goes Tick! Tock!" chant the mothers, their babies riding on their outstretched legs. "Clock!" exclaims baby Benjamin, deliciously rolling his "l." The rhymes gallop, the babies swing and sway. Every now and then, one of them toddles off to wander the room, drawn back by the lure of another rhythmic chant. For the bouncing rhymes, the littlest babies sit facing their mothers, mesmerized by the sounds, the motion, the laughing and undivided attention. The older ones sit facing outwards, sharing their chortles with the circle of familiar faces. This is the infant group, 8 months to 2 years. Upstairs, the 2- to 4-year-olds are in a similar session, led by Carolyn Wingrove. She began coming to the group eight years ago, when she was a troubled single mother with an 8-month-old baby boy and a threat of Children's Aid intervention hanging over her.

"I can't believe I'm a leader now!" she laughs with gutsy triumph. "The first time, I thought, 'Oh no! More social workers watching me.' But it wasn't like that. Carolyn was at her wits' end then with her baby. She had no support from her original family, and little idea of how to mother an infant. "I mean, I knew to feed him and change him and that's it. When we started doing these nursery rhymes, I thought, 'Wow! You can actually play with your baby!' "

Rhymes and stories became a part of her life with her son. She quickly began to absorb the unspoken lessons of loving touch and tension-defusing play. Her son, now 8 years old, still regularly demands to hear the play-rhymes and stories that gave him so much delight as a toddler. About 100 mothers and their children attend the Mother Goose program each year in three different locations around the city. Half of them are "mothers at risk" - lonely or overburdened, immigrants anxious to adapt to a new culture, or women struggling with poverty. They mingle seamlessly with luckier women who are not "stressed," but seek out the program for the company, the fun, and the stimulation for their children. Mother Goose rhymes and stories effortlessly throw bridges across all class divisions and cultural gaps.

Celia Lottridge and Kathy Grier, both experienced story-tellers and founders of the program, know that they're invisibly vaccinating all these mothers and children with strong medicine. The bond between parent and child, the practice with language and memory, the pleasure in hearing and telling stories, the utterly cost-free repertoire of family fun that each mother carries away with her - this is great stuff to strengthen emotional and intellectual development. And yet it's so low-key and unthreatening that even the shyest, most isolated mothers eagerly look forward to the weekly event. Many form lasting friendships, as do their children.

One of the most promising aspects of the program is that the mother-participants are automatically trained to become leaders, so that the skills and social benefits are multiplied. I watched while Carolyn led her relaxed and friendly group through familiar action rhymes and circle songs. "You put your left foot in, you put your left foot out . . ." The kids were up on their feet, eyes sparkling, hopping, jumping and enthusiastically mixing up left and right with unself-conscious joy.

When the mothers swung into a favourite lullaby, a dozen toddlers instantly slumped on to maternal laps, eyes glazed with sleepy pleasure. No pressure, no stress: nobody's performing for anyone's benefit, no one's competing for praise or attention, no one's braced against a scolding or correction. It's the most relaxed fun I've seen in ages.

The Mother Goose program, with five part-time leaders, two part-time organizers and four parent helpers, exists on a yearly budget of about $50,000, patched together from Metro social services, the City of Etobicoke, and tiny grants from foundations. This recession year, it has a drastic $30,000 shortfall. Is any group, service club or foundation out there willing to support one of the most low-tech, high-impact programs ever invented?

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