

Parent-Child Mother Goose Program®

Vancouver Sun - Monday, April 5, 2004, p. B2 by Nicholas Read

Going back to the basics: In a world of high-tech gadgets, Mother Goose, still uses rhyme and song to teach language skills

On the surface it couldn't be simpler. Seven pairs of adults and very young children and two group leaders gather in a room at Sir Wilfred Grenfell school in East Vancouver to enjoy rhymes, songs and games.

"Come along and sing with me on this rainy Monday," group leaders Linda Lines and Annie Lee begin once everyone is comfortably sitting on a crush of cushions and blankets. It doesn't take long for the group to join in.

"Zoom, zoom, zoom, we're going to the moon," they sing. "Criss cross, applesauce," the adults say to the kids as they draw a cross on the children's squirming backs with their index fingers. "The wheels on the bus go round and round," they chorus, "the babies on the bus go Waa, Waa, Waa!"

The room is noticeably spartan. It's small, there is no furniture or decoration and it's painted a nondescript shade of white. There is nothing to distract anyone from what's going on on the floor. This, it turns out, is deliberate.

But if there is more to this gathering than just a few adults and children getting together to enjoy themselves, you wouldn't know it. All the adults are smiling, and the children are delighted to be there.

No, that's not right. There are moments when the children are more than delighted. There are moments when they get so excited you'd think Santa had just walked in with a sack of toys. It is extraordinary to see.

Extraordinary, because all that's entertaining the children -- who, after all, are growing up in a world of endless and endlessly expensive high-tech diversions -- is language. When Lines rolls her hands over and over to emphasize a lyric in a song about a recalcitrant woman named Jenny Jenkins who won't wear red " 'cause it hurts my head," they are beside themselves with excitement, shrieking, laughing and jumping up

and down. They want her to do it again and again. But language, it turns out, is the point. Learning it, enjoying it and using it. Welcome to the world of Parent-Child Mother Goose, a province-wide early literacy program that teaches moms and dads, aunts and uncles, big sisters and brothers -- anyone with a baby or toddler to look after -- how to communicate with that child using rhyme and song.

"The primary purpose is to promote attachment between parent and child," says Jane Cobb, Mother Goose coordinator for the Vancouver Public Library.

"We do that through play with language. But the whole purpose is bonding." And if it seems strange that there should be an organized course for that, consider this: "There's a real need for support for parents in our society," says Cobb. "I think families are more isolated than they were a generation ago. I don't think grandparents live close by to help and teach the rhymes they knew.

"A lot of parents in our program don't know any lullabies or nursery rhymes. They don't know the importance of using stories and songs with their children."

What matters is that they use them anyway. Because according to a growing body of research in Canada, the U.S. and the U.K., rhymes, stories and songs are hugely important to a child's early upbringing. In fact, they're more important than anyone ever realized.

"There is now a rich array of information showing

that children who grow up in a strong language environment develop earlier in terms of their own language and cognitive development and have an easier time in school as a result of that," says Dr. Clyde Hertzman, a physician, epidemiologist and head of the Human Early Learning Partnership at the University of B.C. Broadly speaking, he says parents should be concerned about three primary areas of their child's development: Language and cognitive development, social and emotional growth, and physical health.

Take care of all three, Hertzman says, and your child will thank you forever. Take care of them when the child is very young, he adds, and the child will benefit for the rest of his or her life.

"Kids are learning things about language even before they can respond in ways that we can easily tell," says Hertzman. "They're learning words, but they're also learning the use of language. Kids who are asked a lot of questions learn language in a different way from kids who only hear orders." In fact, he says, a child who hears nothing but commands during his or her pre-school years instead of stories, songs, rhymes and conversations, may not even understand what a teacher is doing when he or she stands up in front of a classroom and talks, let alone the lesson that's being taught.

"Kids who have never heard long sentences of 20 words or more have trouble understanding what's coming at them [in school]," he says. "Kids who have only been grabbed or shouted at don't understand what teachers are doing with their flapping mouths."

Early literacy and language training also can help with aggression, Hertzman says. Contrary to popular opinion, children are not at their most aggressive when they're teenagers. "They're most aggressive when they're two to two-and-a-half years old."

It's just that because two-year-olds can't do the damage that a teenager can, society often fails to recognize two-year-old aggression as the real thing. But up to 45 per cent of all Canadian children will be aggressive when they're two.

"Kids who go on to be aggressive as teenagers started out being aggressive as two-year-olds," says Hertzman.

The key to arresting that aggression, he explains, is to transform it into language and "friendly negotiating skills." When that happens, the likelihood of the child continuing to be aggressive later on is greatly diminished. It all depends on the child learning that lesson early in life.

However, studies also show that children growing up in wealthy households have a better chance of hearing varied language and language patterns than children in less well-off homes. And that puts poorer children at a distinct disadvantage.

According to research done on thousands of American children before 2002 by Betty Hart, a professor emeritus of human development at the University of Kansas, and Todd Risley, a professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Alaska, young children from low-income homes often lag behind their economically better off peers for years to come.

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"With few exceptions, the more parents talked to their children, the faster the children's vocabularies were growing and the higher the children's IQ scores at age three and later," Hart and Risley wrote in what is now considered to be a landmark study in the field, Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children.

The problem, they noted, was that children growing up in homes where the parents were on welfare heard up to 1,500 fewer spoken words per hour than children growing up in households where both parents were professionals.

Extrapolate that statistic to a year, they continued, and the child in the professional family would hear 11 million words while the child in the welfare family would hear only three million. And that, they say, puts the poor child at a big disadvantage when he or she reaches school.

Ideally, Mother Goose and programs like it -- the library also offers a Man in the Moon program for male caregivers, in which men are taught rhymes and stories to tell their children -- are supposed to help correct that imbalance. They're free -- paid for by whatever agency oversees them in whatever part of the province they take place (in Vancouver, group leaders are trained with proceeds from the Raise-a-Reader fund) -- and they're open to anyone who's interested, regardless of means or income. No questions asked.

Unfortunately, says Lines, a VPL children's librarian, "most of the time the parents who take advantage of this program are the parents who would take advantage of other pre-school programs. The other parents are probably working 18 hours a day." It's not that the children who do come won't benefit from it she says; it's that the parents and children who might benefit most from it are often the parents who are hardest to reach.

One of the ways schools try to identify those parents is to identify children in Grades 1 or 2 who are having difficulty learning and who have younger brothers and sisters at home. The thinking is that if these younger children can be introduced to a Mother Goose program when they are still two or three years old -- when learning is arguably at its most crucial -- they might have an easier time when they're five or six.

"We're relying on the kindergarten or Grade 1 teacher to talk to the parents and say 'Johnny's not doing as well as he might, and if you don't want Susie to have the same problems, you might try this program,'" says Janice Douglas, VPL's director of youth services and programming.

It's why Mother Goose is starting to take place in

schools, Lines says. (There are now six on Vancouver's east side where the need is perceived to be greatest.) Others take place in community centres, libraries and health centres -- wherever there's an interest and a need for them, says Beth Hutchinson, the program's provincial coordinator for the B.C. Council of Families.

Introduced to B.C. in 1997, there are now more than 145 such programs throughout the province, says Hutchinson, and the number is growing all the time.

Each one lasts 10 to 12 weeks, and takes place up to three times a year. "It is gangbusters," Hutchinson says. "The need for ongoing training of staff -- we're racing to try to keep up."

One reason is that more and more parents whose first language is not English are beginning to sign up. In fact, most of the adults attending Lines' and Lee's current 12-week program at Sir Wilfred Grenfell probably spoke something other than English when they were growing up.

Mother Goose gives them a chance to speak English in a new way to their children, and gives those children a headstart in a language they'll need to be proficient in if they're going to succeed in a Canadian school.

Because, it also turns out, there's a lot more to rhymes than moon, spoon, croon and June. Scholars say they are an integral part of early literacy and an essential step on the path to a well-rounded education.

Mother Goose is no mere bird. Susan Berry, a psychologist at the Etobicoke Children's Centre in Toronto, says rhymes provide babies and young children "with the kind of repeated experiences that they need to learn."

They also encourage interaction between the parent and child, she says, and help babies begin to control physical sensations, emotions and attention. Rhymes "provide repetition of familiar words and action, and opportunities for imitation, turn-taking, making requests and having requests understood," Berry writes.

"Children learn new words and gain a sense of what those words mean through the actions and responses that accompany them. Rhymes also help them learn the rules for interacting with others -- taking turns, asking questions, and responding."

And yet, watching Lines and Lee lead their group through an enchanting session of Sailing, The Wheels on the Bus, Jenny Jenkins, Zoom, Zoom, Zoom and more, they seem like nothing at all. Or at least like the most natural thing in the world.

But that, clearly, is the intent. Everyone learning and having fun at the same time. What could be more ingenious?

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Illustration: Color Photo: Peter Battistoni, Vancouver Sun / Jan Christine Cortes, 3, and Nisha Kalia, 4, share a laugh. The primary purpose of Mother Goose is to promote attachment between parent and child.

Color Photo: Peter Battistoni, Vancouver Sun / Teacher Linda Lines (right) begins a class of Mother Goose literacy program at Sir Wilfred Grenfell school where immigrant children and adult relatives learn nursery rhymes to improve their English. Color Photo: Ward Perrin, Vancouver Sun / Mother Goose coordinator Jane Cobb says a lot of parents in the program don't know lullabies or nursery rhymes, nor the importance of using stories and songs with their children.

Color Photo: Peter Battistoni, Vancouver Sun / Studies reveal that the more parents talk to their children, the faster the children's vocabularies grow and the higher the children's IQ scores at age three and later.

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