

“Home is Where the Parenting and Family Literacy Centres of the

Tammy was 15 and pregnant when she started attending the parenting centre at Park District School in downtown Toronto in 1981. There she found instant acceptance, support, information, and friendships. Tammy had left her schooling and dysfunctional family behind after meeting an older man of 18. Typical of many teen parents, Tammy was starved for affection and attention and had been sexually abused by one of her mother’s boyfriends when she was eight years old. The parenting centre was a lifeline for her. It provided “one-stop shopping”. She was connected to a high-risk prenatal clinic at Mt. Sinai Hospital; food supplements were organized along with more appropriate housing; and she joined the upgrading program provided through the centre in collaboration with the literacy unit of the Board of Education.



In 1980, the Toronto Board of Education was concerned about the low levels of academic performance and the high percentage of school dropouts from its 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 identifying parental involvement as key to children’s academic success, I wrote a proposal for a parental

involvement program involving five pilot sites. The outcome was the birth of the parenting centres.

Since 1981, these 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, have access to community resource information, and learn how to support their young children’s learning. Our family literacy and numeracy pro-

Start Is”

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grams teach parents and caregivers why and how to read to their young children, in addition to developing a range of strategies which will set them 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.

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 parents as the child's first and most influential teachers. Therefore, a critical strategy was to support them in their parenting role. We always saw the family as the answer to problems rather than their cause, and the overriding value of the centres was one of respect for all families, who were seen as possessing significant strengths and the ability to find answers and solutions to their difficulties.

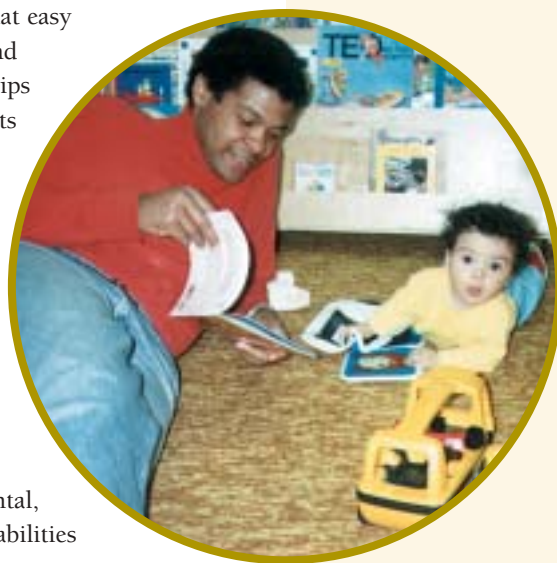
The common denominator of the diverse families who attend the centres is poverty. Some families who are newcomers to Canada arrive with precious little in terms of worldly goods; nevertheless, they bring a treasure house of dreams which keep them together, motivated, and optimistic. Not so fortunate are the many hundreds of Canadian families who are in the second or third generation of poverty. Many of them 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 needed to first respond to the practical issues they identified.

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 of all ages. Recent popularized neuroscience research 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 brain wiring, language abilities, physical capabilities, and cognitive foundations have been laid down.

And so has a connection with the school itself, for the families using our centres. Parenting and Family Literacy Centres are always located in schools rather than community centres or churches. It is through 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. Children with physical, mental, and emotional disabilities are integrated into our programs before they start school, which makes school entry much smoother for the child, with necessary classroom support already established.

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agencies in the community, sharing resources, making and receiving referrals. A tapestry of formal and informal partnerships at the community, municipal, provincial, and federal levels may include one, a few, or all centres. Some partnerships involve funding, others exchange of services, use of space, or volunteering. The centres identify early disabling conditions such as hearing and visual problems, autism, and behavioural difficulties and refer children for treatment, ensuring that they will be “ready to learn” when they start kindergarten.

The centres operate on a drop-in format so that families can attend at their convenience. Each centre sets its own hours based on parents’ requests and the number of hours budgeted for the program. Most are open mornings and some afternoons, Monday through Thursday. Some families visit the centre occasionally; most visit for a few hours two or three times a week; families in crisis often stay until the centre closes. Fridays are clear, so that staff can attend in-service sessions for training in teaching family literacy and numeracy, teach a course, or do community outreach.

Several years ago, two departments of the Toronto District School Board (with funding from the federal LINC Office) joined forces to develop a unique parenting/ESL class for parents with infants to three-year-olds. At present, four of our parenting centres serve as language laboratories, where newcomers to Canada are integrated both socially and linguistically. In addition to ESL instruction in a family literacy context, participants receive a range of support services and parenting education. Half-day classroom instruction takes place in a room close to a parenting centre, where childcare is provided. This model provides access to the program for mothers with infants and toddlers who would not be able to attend without childcare support. Shanti, an immigrant from Sri Lanka and mother of a two- and a five-year-old, speaks about the program.

“We were not able to speak English when we first came. Within three months, my 2½-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 (a parent worker) helped settle my son’s behaviour 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.”

Roshena, a recent immigrant from Trinidad, added that the Centre relieves feelings of isolation for her and the two children to whom she gives home day-care, a girl from Trinidad and a girl whose family is from India. “It gets so lonely at home,” says Roshena. “We all love to come here.”

At Church Street Public School, Caius Ould, four, has just finished a blue abstract painting. His dad, Jay, proudly writes his son’s name on it and hangs it up to dry.

“We’ve been coming here for two years and this place has saved my sanity,” says Ould, a single father and an actor. “We have no other children on our block, and if you’re with your young child 24 hours a day, you’re ready to snap.”

“It alleviates the frustration that builds up that makes you end up giving the child a smack when he doesn’t deserve it,” he says. The centre has helped him understand how to build a strong and positive relationship with Caius. “The people here have helped me learn how to praise my son, and how and when to use discipline.” The centre also helped Caius develop his social skills, making an easier transition into kindergarten.

Although they are placed in poor communities, the centres are universally accessible, and no stigma is attached to using them. School is the universal axis point for families and community and the logical location for family literacy and numeracy interventions, and parenting is the common denominator of these centres. Parents 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 future generations.

The very success of these centres has placed the Government of Ontario in a dilemma of its own making. The Premier’s commissioned report, The Early Years Study, co-chaired by Dr. Fraser Mustard and the Honourable Margaret McCain, points specifically to the Toronto Board’s parenting centres as one model for replication throughout Ontario. Yet the funding formula of the Ministry of Education is a barrier to their continued location in schools. While other provinces and countries are beating a path to the doors of the parenting centres, in Ontario we are at risk of throwing the baby out with the bath water.

Attention has come from well beyond Ontario. Australia and South Africa have visited and are interested in replicating this model. Japan has already done so. Educators from England have studied our family literacy/numeracy programs. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development invited a presentation on our parenting centres at their session on early childhood education in Paris. And when OECD officials met in Toronto a

few years ago to talk about community involvement in education, the head of the Clinton administration’s new preschool education branch in the US Department of Education expressed enthusiasm for the program.

“I was really impressed by the sensitivity to the strengths that all families have,” said Naomi Karp, director of the National Institute of Early Childhood Development and Education in Washington. “This program meets people where they are; it doesn’t expect them to meet the standard of the school.”

The family continues to be the bedrock of our society. How we invest in families now will determine the quality of life we can expect in the next generation. Providing them with the information and support they need to educate their very young children is the job of parenting and family literacy centres. As a country we cannot afford to do less.

EN BREF

Depuis 1981, les Parenting and Family Literacy Centres du Conseil scolaire de Toronto s’efforcent d’améliorer les résultats scolaires des enfants des zones urbaines défavorisées. Les parents qui ont des enfants de quatre ans et moins y reçoivent de l’aide et une formation sur la façon d’être de bons parents, obtiennent de l’information sur les ressources communautaires, apprennent comment soutenir les efforts d’apprentissage de leurs enfants et développent un rapport positif avec l’école. Par ailleurs, quatre de ces centres sont désormais équipés de laboratoires de langue pour aider les immigrants récents à s’intégrer, au plan social et linguistique, à la société canadienne.

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