



Photograph: The Boston Globe

SCHOOL READINESS: by Carol M. Rubin, Parent-Child Home Program Learning through Play

Why would parents have to be taught what many of us take for granted—the importance of spending one-on-one time with our children reading, building, imagining, talking, questioning, listening, singing, and creating? For many parents, such concepts are foreign. Perhaps they grew up in homes where there wasn't the time to read together or there was no understanding of the power of play. When someone models these behaviors in a positive and caring way, parents can be helped to become powerful teachers for their children.

That's the premise behind the Parent-Child Home Program (PCHP), a research-validated, home-visiting program started in 1965 by psychologist Phyllis Levenstein at New York's Stony Brook University. Originally called the "Verbal Interaction Project," the program was created to enhance the verbal, thinking, and social-emotional development of 2- and 3-year-old children from low-income families. The assumption was simple: cognitive enrichment should occur when a child is young and language skills are developing. Levenstein chose home visits as the most effective approach and initiated a two-year, twice-weekly program cycle.

Laying a Foundation

"Learning through play" is the method modeled by the home visitors. The theory is that children's cognitive growth results from the natural, playful exchange of conceptually rich language between parent and child. The program provides strong motivation through its curriculum materials. Bilingual books, puzzles, blocks, and educational toys are given to families in their native language and serve as

tools to encourage parents to talk, read, and play with their children. When the program ends, each family has a library of high-quality children's books and educational toys.

Parents are taught that they are their children's first and most important teacher. Through reading and playing together, they see the school-readiness skills their children are learning. PCHP serves families challenged by poverty, limited educational opportunities, language and literacy barriers, or geographic isolation. The targets include two-parent families, single parents, teen parents, foster parents, grandparents raising grandchildren, recent immigrants, American-born families, homeless families, and special needs families.

Home visiting is the most effective strategy for reaching families who lack transportation, are socially isolated, are unfamiliar with the community, or are facing the multiple problems associated with homelessness and poverty. During 2009-2010, the Massachusetts sites—located in 80-plus cities and towns from Pittsfield to Boston—worked with more than 1,500 young children and their siblings and 1,500 parents. One-third of the 150 home visitors are bilingual, speaking Spanish, Portuguese, Haitian Creole, French, Somali, Bengali, Punjabi, and Cambodian (Khmer).

The program's benefits extend beyond the targeted child to other siblings. An older school-age sibling in a family of recent Bulgarian immigrants, for example, once asked the author, "Can I learn, too, and be in the program?" The children's grandfather, who spoke no English, taped the sessions so that he, too, would be able to listen and learn from spoken English.

Program leaders see real change in children as they develop a love of books, ask to be read to, increase their attention spans, and improve their language skills dramatically. They also see parents beginning to feel more effective and developing greater confidence in their parenting. Nationally, one-third of parents who graduate from the program reenter as paid home visitors.

A “Typical” Home Visit

Although every home visit is different, the following scenario may provide a tangible sense of what is likely to occur.

Linda, the Parent-Child Home Program visitor, arrives as agreed at 4 p.m. She greets Sonya and Eddie, Sonya’s 2-year-old son, and they settle into the most comfortable play space. It may be on the living room rug, the couch, or at the kitchen table. This week Linda has brought stacking cups, bright colorful plastic cups that can be played with in several ways. Eddie opens the package and carefully takes out the cups, looking at each one’s size, shape, and color. He begins by trying to stack the cups one on top of another, not in any particular order. Linda comments on what she observes, saying, “I see you’re putting one cup on top of another. ... What happens when the tower gets tall? ... Crash! That’s a loud noise!” Then Eddie’s mother, Sonya, takes one of the smaller cups and puts it inside of a larger cup. “Look,” she says, “the small cup fits into the big cup.” Linda and Sonya talk about the bright colors, and point to matching colors in the room, or in the clothes Eddie is wearing.

It doesn’t matter whether Eddie is perfectly fitting the cups into one another, or whether he can identify all the colors. There’s no right way to play. What Linda is encouraging is exploration, observation, using one or two new words or concepts—such as inside of or on top of—and pointing out cause and effect. “When you do this, the cups come crashing down.” The parent is a participant. Later, Linda may bring out some crayons and try to trace around the cups. Or she may offer

Play-Doh and help Eddie use the cups to make different molds or shapes.

At the conclusion of the half hour, Linda sings the clean-up song and all three help to put away the stacking cups. Eddie also loves “Twinkle Twinkle” and “The Itsy Bitsy Spider,” so they sing those songs together, too. Linda reminds Eddie and Sonya that they will see her for a second visit later that week.

In this cumulative program, each home visit has its own tempo. Linda’s relationship with Sonya and Eddie keeps growing and developing through respect and trust. Gradually, Sonya begins to feel more comfortable reading the words and discussing the pictures—imagining, pretending, and singing along with Eddie. She is developing an appreciation for the joy in learning.

During the two years that PCHP works with families, parents often bring up worries and turn to their home visitor for information. Staff members refer families to services such as food banks, the USDA’s Women, Infants, and Children program (WIC), Head Start, and public preschool. They visit the public library with families and walk to the closest playground together. Home visitors may translate school information, help families fill out applications for vouchers and scholarships, and encourage attendance at free community events. As University of Alaska professor emeritus Todd Risley has written, “The Parent-Child Home Program arguably has the best cost-benefit ratio of any literacy program. Its years of data demonstrate that it actually changes parental behaviors ... prompting parents to foster language development in their children.”

Starting Early Really Works

Longitudinal research demonstrates that the Parent-Child Home Program bridges the achievement gap for low-income children:

- A 1976-1996 study of the effects of the Pittsfield, Massachusetts, program found that 84 percent of program participants graduated from high school, whereas only 54 percent of a randomized control group did.¹
- A study of special education referrals in Salem, Massachusetts, indicates that Parent-Child Home Program children are referred for special education at a lower rate than children from the general population. That has financial

implications as PCHP costs approximately \$2,750 per child per year, but special education services may reach \$14,000 per child per year.

- A study published in the *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* reports that 93 percent of children completing the Parent-Child Home Program in South Carolina pass the statewide first grade test, compared with the 74 percent of all students eligible for free lunch statewide.²
- Recent Pittsfield, Massachusetts, research on kindergarten assessments indicates that children who participated in both a pre-K program and the Parent-Child Home Program performed substantially better than those who had only pre-K. The data were included in a report from the Center for Law and Social Policy in Washington, DC.³
- A New York University study, published in the National Head Start Association journal *Dialog*, concluded that the Parent-Child Home Program successfully bridges the achievement gap, preparing children to enter school as ready to learn as their more advantaged peers.⁴

The Parent-Child Home Program can be replicated in other cities and towns where there are underperforming schools and a high incidence of poverty. With trained home-visiting staff in place, it is possible to scale up quickly to offer direct services to families.

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Endnotes

- ¹ P. Levenstein, S. Levenstein, J.A. Shiminski, and J.E. Stolzberg, “Long-Term Impact of a Verbal Interaction Program for At-Risk Toddlers,” *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 19 (1998): 267-285.
- ² P. Levenstein, S. Levenstein, and D. Oliver, “First Grade School Readiness of Former Child Participants in a South Carolina Replication of the Parent-Child Home Program,” *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 23 (2002): 331-353.
- ³ D. Ewen and H. Matthews, “Title 1 and Early Childhood Programs: A Look at Investments in the NCLB Era,” http://www.clasp.org/issues/pages?type=child_care_and_early_education&id=0005.
- ⁴ L. Allen, A. Sethi, and J. Astuto, “An Evaluation of Graduates of a Toddlerhood Home Visiting Program at Kindergarten Age,” *Dialog* 10, no. 1 (2007): 36-57.