

HIPPY program gets children off to good start

A home education system, launched 40 years ago in Israel, has arrived in Vanier to help solve the 'school readiness dilemma'

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Any primary teacher will tell you that children do not enter kindergarten on a level playing field. Some have never heard a bedtime story, while others are almost ready to start reading to themselves. Some can recite the alphabet, others can't even say the word.

Academics and policy-makers call it the "school readiness dilemma."

But they have also grappled with how to ensure that children, even those who live in low-income homes, enter kindergarten at the same level as classmates with more advantages.

Today in Vanier, an international program launched in Israel 40 years ago will be officially introduced. It has the whimsical acronym of HIPPY -- Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters.

It works this way: "home visitors," usually young mothers, visit parents weekly with a simple curriculum the parents deliver to their own three, four and five-year-olds.

The free curriculum, which teaches the basic pre-kindergarten skills, takes about 15 minutes a day to deliver. Parents are equipped with everything they need, from advice on area services to books, crayons and scissors.

Every day, Anne Riel and her daughter Gabrielle follow the curriculum dropped off by their HIPPY home visitor.

This week, mother and daughter have been reading a book in the popular Spot series, which is part of the curriculum. Gabrielle is already adept at listening to instructions and recognizes some letters, even though she isn't even three years old yet.

"My other kids were ready. She'll be even more ready," said Riel, a single mother with two older boys, 10 and 14.



A Poster Child for School Readiness :Every day, Anne Riel and her daughter, Gabrielle, follow the curriculum dropped off by their HIPPY home visitor. Gabrielle is already recognizing letters, even though she isn't three years old yet.

Photograph by: Bruno Schlumberger, The Ottawa Citizen, The Ottawa Citizen

"The teacher won't have to take her by the arm and show her how to cut with scissors."

Bill and Hillary Clinton liked the concept so much they introduced it during Clinton's term as Arkansas governor, and both still refer to HIPPO frequently. The queen of Jordan wants to bring it to her country.

In Canada, where the program is already active in a number of cities, including Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal, supporters believe HIPPO offers advantages to immigrants and aboriginal families who might be unfamiliar with the school system or are hesitant about getting involved.

Ottawa resident Judith Maxwell, founding president of Canadian Policy Research Networks, was easily convinced when some friends approached her about introducing HIPPO to Ottawa. Embassies hosted fundraisers, and foundations and Citizenship and Immigration Canada have provided funding.

Individuals are also digging into their pockets, said Maxwell, who notes that poor performance in primary schools leads to a number of costs to society, including more high school dropouts and higher rates of teen pregnancy, delinquency and crime.

"As soon as I learned about the program, I was sold on it. It captures the essence of the right interventions," she said.

"If a child arrives at school and finds they can be successful in all the tasks they get, they're on a positive trajectory that leads to success. I think that's why people are so excited about HIPPO."

Maxwell points out that Vanier's elementary schools are among the poorest performers in Grade 3 standardized tests.

"If you could have Grade 1 classes populated with five or 10 students really ready to learn, it allows other students to piggyback on them."

Over the years, numerous initiatives have tried to come to grips with the "school readiness dilemma."

Sesame Street, for example, was launched in 1969 to help give low-income kids a boost in early literacy and numeracy before they entered kindergarten.

In 1995, Ontario's \$3-million royal commission on learning recommended introducing non-mandatory three-year-old kindergarten, arguing that it would put children from less-privileged backgrounds on a more level playing field and prevent expensive fix-it costs further down the road. But three-year-old kindergarten never materialized in Ontario because of the expense.

"We underinvest in early childhood education in every province but Quebec," said Maxwell.

Andrew Rheaume, the director of counselling and community services of the Vanier Community Service Centre, which will be administering HIPPY, said four home visitors have been recruited for the program so far.

He heard about HIPPY four years ago when he was approached to be part of a program called Parents as Teacher, but couldn't afford the staff. HIPPY costs about \$2,500 to \$3,000 a year for each family enrolled.

There are benefits for the home visitors as well as the families, said Rheaume. "In the past, mothers have become home visitors and went on to get jobs in day cares or go back to school," he said.

Across Canada, about 600 children are enrolled in HIPPY and there are about 3,000 graduates, said Debbie Bell, the program's executive director for Canada.

The program lets children learn skills that middle-income families take for granted, she said.

"The schools have certain expectations. If children don't meet that, then they start a downward trajectory. It can affect the rest of their school careers."

The program also helps parents navigate Canada's school system. HIPPY helps them understand the sometimes-confusing vocabulary of schooling, including terms like "story comprehension" and "fine motor skills."

And it helps them learn how to advocate for their child. If a parent can learn to advocate for their child before the child even starts school, they will be an advocate for the rest of their child's school career.

Riel said Gabrielle is more advanced than her older brothers, and HIPPY has helped her excel.

"I think she's the poster child for HIPPY."