

'At-risk families' program forced to trim activities HIPPY Montreal short of funding

By BRENDA BRANSWELL,
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A program that helps at-risk families prepare their children for school is sharply scaling back its Montreal activities because of a lack of money.

HIPPY Montreal helped 135 children and their parents in Notre Dame de Grâce and Côte des Neiges during the last school year.

But the 30-week program that starts anew next month can take on only 60 families in N.D.G. and a handful in Côte des Neiges. And the number of "home visitors" it employs has shrunk from 11 to four.

"We are concentrating our efforts in N.D.G. because we have a lot of support from the community," said program co-ordinator Valeria Taranto.

"It's really sad. Some families have been with us for two, three years. And they are referring their friends, their neighbours. Even the CLSC in Côte des Neiges refers us people and we cannot take them," Taranto said.

Offered in English and French for children age 3 to 5, HIPPY targets low-income families, most of whom are immigrants.

"The emphasis is preparing the family for school - not only the kids. We prepare the parents so they're able to prepare their kids. And that's the key of the program," Taranto said.

HIPPY stands for Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters. The program is offered in several countries and counts former U.S. President Bill Clinton as one of its big boosters.

Parents who are trained as "home visitors" meet with families in their home every week and deliver the curricula. Through a series of activity packets, families work on things like pre-literacy, and fine and gross motor skills with their children. Each family receives eight storybooks for free.

Staff explain to parents how to use the material and the skills they are developing in their children with it, Taranto said.



Members of the HIPPY Montreal program at their meeting yesterday: (from left) Olena Voloshyn, Hanqing Chu, Jessica Nuñez, Valeria Taranto and Conway Shannon.
Photograph by: PIERRE OBENDRAUF ; THE GAZETTE,
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The weekly meetings also gives participants a chance to talk with other parents, Taranto said. "Some people are so isolated that maybe this is the only adult they've talked to in the whole day." Now in its fifth year in Montreal, HIPPY received more than \$1 million in non-renewable funding for its first four years from the Fondation Lucie et André Chagnon.

To offer the program as it did last year, HIPPY Montreal would need about \$300,000 annually, Taranto said. So far they've raised about \$130,000.

"In the (economic) circumstances, we've actually done really well," said Linda Shohet, executive director of the Centre for Literacy, which manages the program.

"We've raised enough money to serve 60 families this year." "We'll never ever replace the Chagnon money unless it's taken up by government," Shohet said.

"The irony is we built this really strong program with a strong community base, with all the pieces in place and then can't find the government support." However, in other provinces where there was a "minimal" HIPPY program, Shohet said, governments have said 'this is a model that we think could help us achieve our goals.' The program is expensive because the home visitors - many of whom were once participants - are paid, Shohet said. "We're giving them their first job." Marie-José Mastromonaco, a school commissioner for N.D.G. at the Commission scolaire de Montréal, said the service should be expanded not cut back. "It's a service that's appreciated on several levels as much by (school) administrations as teachers," Mastromonaco said.

Praba Suresh, a mother of two originally from Sri Lanka, has taken part in the program for two years. Her 5-year-old daughter now speaks English well and the program has also helped improve her English, Suresh said.

Suresh, who lives in the Côte des Neiges district, hoped they could continue in the program this year but learned HIPPY didn't have enough funding.

Suresh said she has learned "what kind of steps I ought to do first" to prepare her daughter for school.

"I didn't know what they do at the school (in Montreal). Now I know," she said.

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