

# Porter: HIPPY, a program for immigrant preschoolers that works

By [Catherine Porter](#) Columnist  
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I find homework time with my 5-year-old, Lyla, challenging. She gets frustrated when the sounds she makes don't match the letters laid out on our kitchen table at night, and I am less than perfectly patient. It's been a long day already.

I can't imagine how hard it is for Ta Kaw Paw. She belongs to the Karen ethnic group and is a refugee from Burma. When she was around six, the army stormed her village and burned it down. Her family hid in the jungle for years before moving into a crowded refugee camp across the river in Thailand. She went to school for only a few years. She never owned a book. Even if she had, there was no one to read it to her — both her parents were illiterate.

Now 22 and living in a highrise near Jane and Finch, how is she supposed to help her 5-year-old daughter, Htoo Paw Say, to read — especially in a language she doesn't even speak?

You can see why some kids are already behind by Grade 3. I visited Ta Kaw Paw's immaculate home with Than Dar Oo, a part-time HIPPY worker at the nearby Working Women Community Centre.

HIPPY stands for Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters. It's a 30-week program developed in Israel 40 years ago to help new immigrant parents prepare their kids for school. The parents are visited every week by a worker like Than Dar Oo, who goes over homework to do with their children for 15 minutes every night that week. Over the course of the program, 3-year-olds are introduced to books, numbers, shapes and sizes, and almost more important, so are their parents.

"These parents are coming from all over the globe," says Stefania Ntonas, a HIPPY program coordinator in Toronto. "In many places, the teacher does everything for the child and the parents don't need to be involved as much. Here, the system demands the parent to be the primary educator.

"The goal is readiness for school for the kids, but practically, it's all about the adults."

Bill Clinton is a big fan of the program. So is Immigration and Citizenship Minister Jason Kenney (although his ministry carved back its funding recently).

There are dozens of reports from all over the globe that show it works — kids are better prepared for school, their reading levels are higher than average, their vocabularies are richer, and they have more solid relationships with their parents.

Those 15 minutes a night make for bonding time.

Other reports show the mothers become more involved in the community and school because of the confidence gleaned from the program. In Toronto, most of the 25 home visitors like Than Dar Oo are in the program themselves, getting their first "Canadian experience" in the workforce. Than Dar Oo is also a Karen from Burma. The HIPPY job helped her to get part-time work working with Karen refugees at the airport, she says.

Sometimes simple ideas work.

Here's another cool thing: it was Jane-Finch parents who demanded the program six years ago during the "Summer of the Gun," when young black men were getting shot down like flies around Toronto.

Since then, it's expanded to six sites around the city, serving families from North Africa, Afghanistan, China, Iraq. . .

The Karens, though, face the steepest learning curve, Ntonas says.

Most, like Ta Kaw Paw, have languished for years in refugee camps with little or no education.

"She wants me to read to her," Ta Kaw Paw tells me in Burmese through a translator as her daughter picks up a copy of *Where's Spot?* "I read as much as I can. If I don't understand, I ask her what it's about."

Yet there are obvious signs of progress. For the first time, there are books in the house. Daughter Htoo Paw Say settles behind a pink Disney desk set up in the living room to draw. Taped to the wall above is a bristol board with the letters of the alphabet neatly printed out.

"Her teacher says she's improved in writing and reading and her English is improving," Ta Kaw Paw says proudly.

Perhaps the best indication is Htoo Paw Say's little brother, Eric.

He is only 2. But already, he is sitting on the floor, patiently cutting up a piece of paper with miniature scissors, just like he saw his sister do.

I leave, thinking this family might have a chance after all.

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