

Montreal Gazette

Helping parents help their children; Hippy Montreal trains parents to be their children's first teachers. Top of the curriculum is spending time together

Thursday, September 27, 2007

Page: R2

Section: Raise A Reader

Byline: J.D.GRAVENOR

Source: Freelance

CORRECTION: (From The Gazette, September 28, 2007) A foundation that funds HIPPY Montreal, an organization that trains parents to be teachers to their children, was named incorrectly in yesterday's paper. The correct name is the Lucie and André Chagnon Foundation.*****

Illustrations: Photo: PHOTOS BY TYREL FEATHERSTONE, THE GAZETTE / Daniela State and son Albert, 4, are in their second year with HIPPY. "Although parents know they should work with their children every day, they don't always do that," State said. "When you are part of HIPPY, you have to sit down and do something with your child." (3 photos).

As a former factory worker, Kalpana Premraj is determined to provide a brighter future for her preschool-age child.

She wants her son, Raam, to be ready for school when he's old enough to attend. That means starting his education at home.

But as newcomers to Canada, she and her husband were unfamiliar with the resources available to help them prepare for Raam's coming school years.

"We wanted to start educating our child at home, but we just didn't have any idea what to do," said the Sri Lankan native who now lives in Notre Dame de Grâce.

Then she heard about HIPPY Montreal, a non-profit organization that trains parents to be their children's first teachers.

Through a combination of home visits and group meetings, HIPPY offers a three-year learning program to parents who are willing to spend 15 minutes a day teaching their pre-school kids.

The 30-week HIPPY curriculum includes a different educational packet every week, featuring storybooks, crafts and physical activities that parents agree to teach their children at home.

The program is catching on.

When it started up three years ago, HIPPY Montreal served fewer than 40 families. The number was up to 70 last year and this fall the program will serve about 120 families. It is largely funded by the Claude and Lucie Chagnon Foundation, with in-kind donations made by local partners, including the Centre for Literacy.

For Premraj, instructing a restless three-year-old started off as a challenge.

"In the beginning it was a bit difficult with him," said Premraj, who came to Canada nine years ago.

"But as time passed, he got it. When I'd take a book, he'd sit with me for 15 minutes and really like it. Soon, when he went to bed at night, he wanted to read all the books with me."

HIPPY, which stands for Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters, was developed more than 30 years ago in Israel to help immigrants and refugees adapt to that country's school system. Today, more than 22,000 families participate in HIPPY organizations around the world.

The organization says its system prepares preschool children for academic success by developing their cognitive and literacy skills, and Premraj agrees. She believes the HIPPY program connects with children, in part because the lessons are based on playing.

"Playing helps learning," Premraj said. "It's good for kids."

This year, Premraj is joining HIPPY's paid team of home visitors who will fan out across Côte des Neiges and N.D.G. to teach the system to other parents. The bilingual program targets families with low incomes, especially immigrant, refugee and single-parent households.

"Ninety per cent of the families (in the HIPPY program) are immigrants," said Valeria Taranto, 36, program director of HIPPY Montreal. Taranto herself started out with HIPPY as a participating parent, having immigrated to Canada from Argentina.

Participating families also attend group meetings to discuss parenting issues, such as child development, discipline and the Quebec school system.

"There are aspects of the educational system that aren't familiar to immigrants," Taranto said. "We show them how to work with schools and be involved in the system and how to support their kids at school."

And while the HIPPY program is offered in English and French in Quebec, parents can adapt the material to any language they choose.

"We encourage parents to work in their mother tongue, and slowly introduce English or French," Taranto said. "We are trying to build on the learning relationship."

"There's no relationship if you aren't comfortable

communicating with your child."

Daniela State first learned about HIPPY Montreal through her son's English-language daycare. As a former nurse and psychologist, the 30-year old Romanian immigrant gives the program high marks.

"Although parents know they should work with their children every day, they don't always do that," she said. "But when you are part of HIPPY, you have to sit down and do something with your child."

State, who will soon begin her second year as one of HIPPY Montreal's paid home visitors, believes the structured nature of the program helps build the relationship between the parent and child.

In addition, it puts the child at the centre of the activity.

Maybe that's why her four-year-old son, Albert, said he missed the activities after last year's sessions ended for the summer.

"With the program, my son feels it's time devoted especially to him," State said.

But she's convinced that one of the best things about the HIPPY program is that it primes children to thrive in the school environment.

"It's not just for learning the alphabet," State said. "It helps the child's personality. It establishes a good learning relationship with the parent. That way, they will love school."

"These kids and their parents become natural leaders in any group," Taranto said. "They learn to be calm and confident. They are attentive. They observe the situation and then they react. These are just some of the competencies they learn through the program."

HIPPY Montreal is anticipating continued growth and evolution over the next few years. Two staff members work in the HIPPY Montreal office, while the number of paid home visitors will more than double to eleven this year from five.

They plan to branch out from their sole operating bases of Cote des Neiges and N.D.G. to other districts of Montreal. They also hope to spread the work of education beyond the traditional role of mothers.

"Fathers are not very involved in their kids' education and they transfer all of the responsibility onto the mother," Taranto said. "So we would like to work with the fathers to see how we can get them involved in their kids' education. It's not that they are not interested. It's just that they don't do the work."

HIPPY Montreal is also seeking to help more of the city's approximately 30,000 single parents, many of whom do not always have time to set aside for preschool instruction.

"We need to be able to serve the needs of this specific population," Taranto said.

HIPPY Montreal can be reached at 514-486-1486 or by email at hippymontreal@bellnet.ca. You can visit HIPPY Canada on the Web at: <http://www.hippycanada.ca>