



Do Parenting and Family Literacy Centres Make A Difference?

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About the program ...

- Parenting and Family Literacy Centres (PFLC) were established in 1981 in five inner city public schools in Toronto.
- There are now 54 Parenting and Family Literacy centres located in schools across the TDSB. Sites are located in high density, culturally diverse neighbourhoods where students are more often at risk for academic failure.
- One of the key goals of these Centres is to help level the playing field for all children, by preparing them for school entry and building strong home/school connections.
- It is the Parenting Centre's philosophy that: "The parent is the first and most important teacher in a child's life. Increased parental involvement in their child's education contributes to academic success." Hence, it is the mandate of the Centres to work with both the parents/caregivers and their children.
- To foster optimal development of the child, the centres support positive parent/child interaction by offering a play-based model of learning with a strong literacy and numeracy component.



About the research¹ ...

- In 1999-2001 data from teacher assessments, the Early Development Instrument (EDI) and teacher interviews were gathered from 10 established downtown sites.
- Phase I of the research focused on whether children who had attended Parenting and Family Literacy centres were more ready for school entry than their peers who had not had similar pre-school experiences.
- In Phase II of the evaluation, parent worker surveys and parent user surveys were collected from all sites across the system with a focus on understanding the effect of the program on parents and, in turn, on their children.

What did we learn?

Key findings focus on:

- The impact of the program on children
- The impact of the program on parents/caregivers

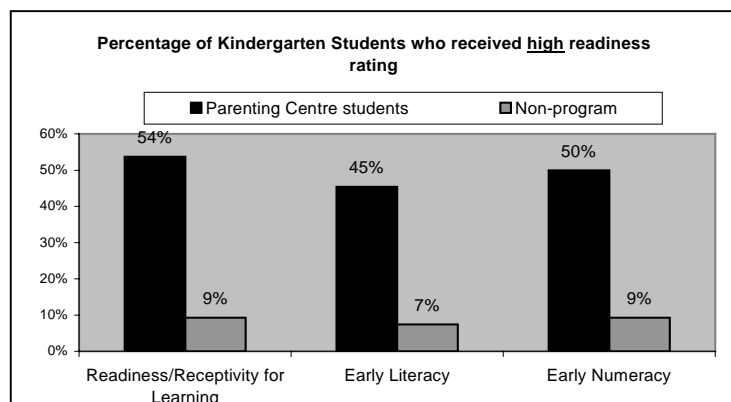
FACT

"... young children who had attended the Parenting Centre were much more prepared for schooling than their peers in the same schools who had not attended the program."

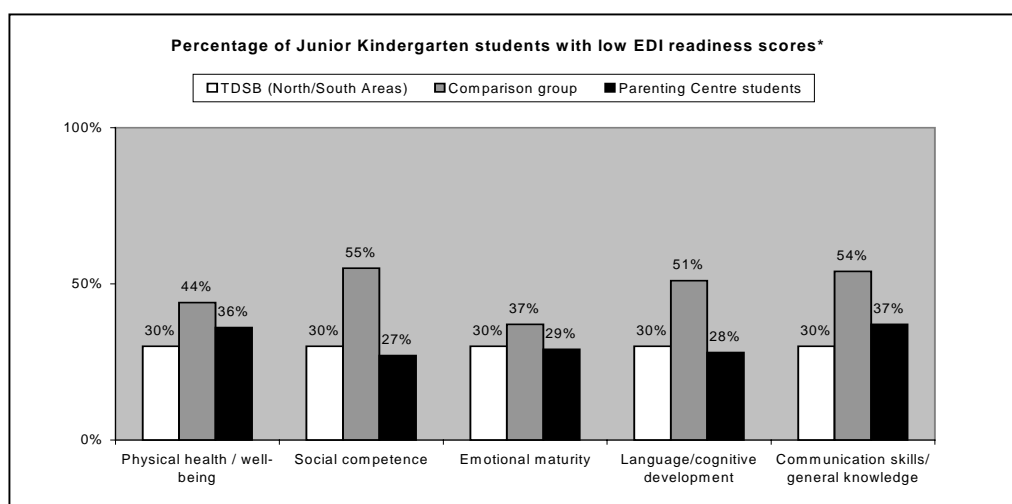
What was the impact of the program on children?

Data gathered from over 200 Kindergarten students in 10 sites indicate that young children who had attended the Parenting Centre were much more prepared for schooling than their peers in the same schools who had not attended the program.

- About half of the Kindergarten children who had attended the PFLCs had been rated by their classroom teachers to have a **high** readiness or receptivity level for learning, and a **high** level of early literacy and numeracy skills. (See chart below.) This proportion is significantly higher than those who had not attended the program. For the latter, fewer than 10% received high readiness scores based on their teachers' assessment.



- Another source of evidence was the Early Development Instrument (EDI) assessment administered in 2000.² The EDI measure confirms that 4-year-old children from these inner city schools had a much greater chance than the overall population to have **low** school readiness level – especially in the areas of social competence, language development, and communications skills and general knowledge. (See chart below.) However, for children in the same schools who had attended PFLCs with their parents or caregivers (Parenting Centre students), their chances of receiving low EDI readiness scores were significantly smaller than their counterparts who had no exposure to the program (comparison group), and were comparable to the general population (TDSB – North/South Areas).



- Teachers further noted in their interviews that some of the most obvious advantages demonstrated by these young children were in the areas of:
 - ✓ language development
 - ✓ school adjustment – following instructions and routines
 - ✓ socialization with others
 - ✓ purposeful play
 - ✓ listening skills
 - ✓ ability to learn from and interact with adults

What was the impact of the program on parents?

Questions have been raised as to whether the positive results could be attributed to the self-selection process of a group of motivated parents rather than to the program itself. Data gathered from the Parent Worker survey produced the following profile about the parent users:

- the majority of the parents/caregivers were of immigrant and/or ESL background
- in some communities extensive outreach efforts were needed to encourage participation
- the majority were shy and hesitant in the beginning
- the majority were not motivated initially
- most had little or no prior knowledge about parenting and/or child development issues

These reported characteristics refute the argument that the success of the program was due to the concentration of initially self-motivated parents. On the contrary, Parent Workers reported that many of the parent users need continuous support, guidance and encouragement to help break their social isolation, and to gain confidence on how to become more involved in their child's learning.

It should, however, be noted that once these parents were introduced to the program, most attend the Centres voluntarily on a regular basis - at least twice a week.

What did parents/caregivers gain from the Parenting Centres?

Familiarization with the school system

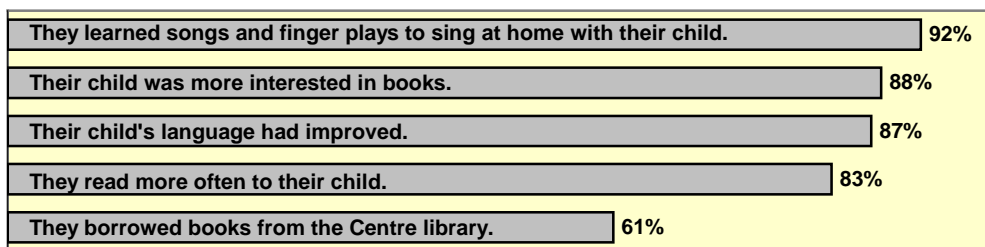
Many families attending PFLCs reported that they felt socially isolated and faced the challenge of being a newcomer with language, cultural and social barriers. They often felt unfamiliar with and/or intimidated by the school system. According to the Parent User survey conducted in 2003 (N=740), almost all of the parent respondents agreed that as a result of attending the Centres, they felt:

- comfortable and welcomed coming to school (96%);
- positive about being involved with their child's education (95%);
- their child would have an easier time starting school (95%);
- they knew the principal and school staff better (69%).



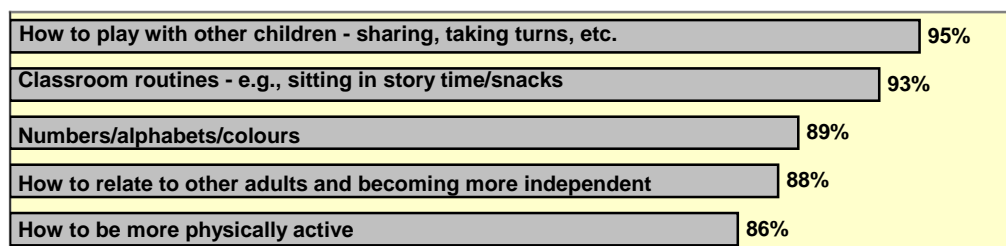
Family literacy and numeracy

One of the key functions of PFLCs is to offer a strong family literacy and numeracy program and to educate parents on how to extend this learning into the home. Parents reported what they and their children had gained from this specific component of the program.



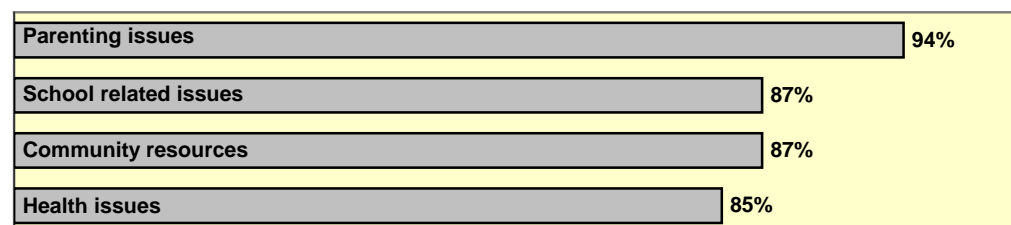
School readiness skills

Parents agreed that the children themselves had learned important skills to prepare them for formal schooling, including:



Knowledge and information

Parents found their Parent Workers particularly helpful in educating and offering them valuable information and knowledge for positive involvement in child's growth and education.



Social network

Many of these parents also had little social contact outside home. According to the open-ended responses gathered from the Parent Worker survey, the PFLCs provided a place to build social networks and to mingle with the mainstream community. With the safe and culturally sensitive environment offered by the Centres, parents/caregivers who were isolated and new to the community became more confident and comfortable:

- to form friendships and develop support networks with other parents at the Centres, and
- to interact with Parent workers, school staff, teachers and principals, which helped to get them involved in school.

¹In 1999, the PFLCs received funding support from the Atkinson Foundation for multi-year data collection and tracking.

²This instrument, developed by The Canadian Centre for Studies of Children at Risk (McMaster University) as part of the Readiness to Learn Project funded by the federal HRDC, has been used as a community measure to gauge Kindergarten students' school readiness level at the group level. In Year 2000, EDI was administered in almost 200 schools across the north and south areas of the TDSB. This data collection was performed with no connection with the Parenting Centres' evaluation. The results were extracted for this study as an independent source of data.