



## Parenting and Family Literacy Centres: Engaging Children, Empowering Parents

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### *About the program ...*

The Parenting and Family Literacy Centres (PFLCs) are school-based, early-years programs free to families with children ranging from birth up to six years of age. Families are welcome to enrol and attend the program any time during the school year without the need for pre-registration. The general purpose is two-fold: (1) to support children's early learning and development while laying the foundations for successful transition to school, and (2) to create an inclusive program in which parents can positively engage with both their child(ren)'s learning and development as well as the school system.



Established by the former Toronto Board of Education back in 1981, the program was initially offered in five inner city schools in downtown Toronto. Today, 78 PFLCs have been set up in elementary schools across the amalgamated Toronto District School Board (TDSB) to serve families from diverse cultural backgrounds in largely high-need communities. Resulting from 30 years of successful implementation and development in Toronto, along with evidence from ongoing research, the Ontario Ministry of Education adopted and expanded the PFLC model in 2007 to other school districts. Currently, there are 172 PFLCs across 19 school boards throughout the province.

### *About the research ...*

Since 1999, the TDSB's PFLC program has undergone several rounds of evaluations. Early studies have demonstrated both immediate and long-term benefits of the PFLC for young children's development and learning. Following these earlier results, this article, which draws on data from recent research, examines the "how" of the program – i.e., the crucial elements behind the PFLC philosophy and practice that help explain its positive impact on young children, especially those from high-needs communities. To better understand these factors, Bronfenbrenner and Morris' Ecological Model of Child Development was incorporated. According to the model, a child learns and develops under the influence of a multi-layered social system. The two most inner layers – microsystem and mesosystem – were used to analyze the impact of PFLCs on children. Data for this research were gathered from three main sources.

- a) A board-wide PFLC Parent Survey for 76 TDSB Centres in Spring 2012 with nearly 1,300 parent respondents;
- b) One-on-one interviews with 45 parent users at seven culturally diverse PFLC sites<sup>1</sup>; and
- c) A series of intensive site observations at a recently established PFLC (Crescent Town Public School).

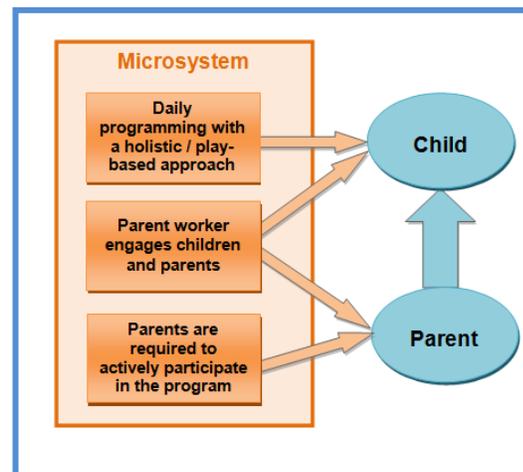
<sup>1</sup> These sites included Chester Le JPS, General Mercer JPS, Knob Hill PS, Rockford PS, West Glen JS, Willow Park JPS, and Crescent Town PS.

## What the research has found so far ...

### Direct Impact (at the microsystem level)

This section examines how the PFLC at the microsystem level - i.e., as an immediate learning environment in which a child (and his/her parent) is immersed - produced direct benefits for young children, specifically in terms of:

- 1) Its direct impact on the preschoolers
- 2) Its impact on the parents who in turn directly influence their child(ren)
- 3) the impact of the on-site staff (Parent Worker) on both the children and their parents



### Key Ingredients to a Successful Program

#### Direct impact through a holistic, play-based approach with daily structured and semi-structured programming

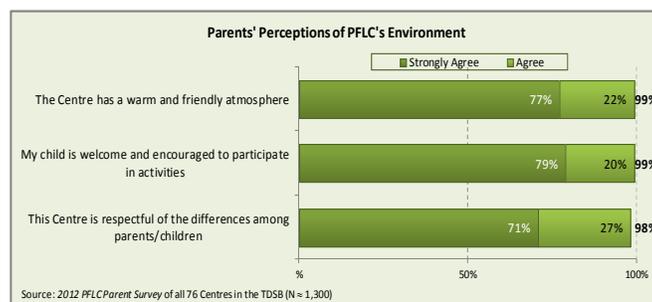
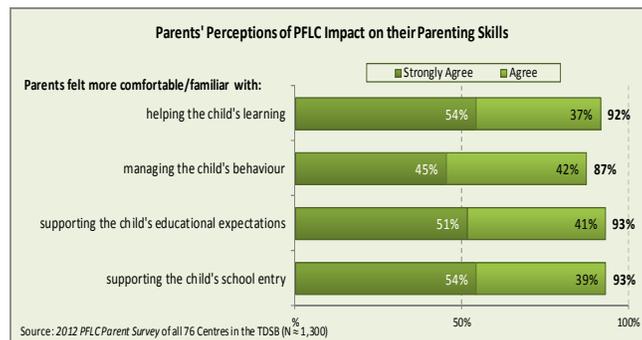
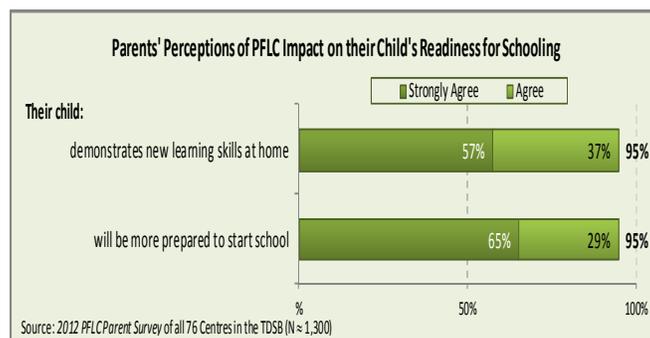
The PFLC holistic, play-based, and intentional daily programming approach helped enhance preschoolers' multiple developmental areas. For instance, physical health, social skills, and literacy/numeracy were promoted through play in the form of hands-on, tactile activities targeting fine and gross motor skills, social interactions as well as pre-reading and language based skills.

#### Direct impact on parent participants through their active participation in the program

One of the PFLC's guiding principles was to have parents participate in the program with their child at the Centre. Through active participation under the guidance of the Parent Worker (PW), interviewed parents reported having spent quality learning time with their child, which many had not experienced before. Also, with PWs role modelling appropriate interactions with children, parents acquired practical knowledge and skills on effective parenting. These skills and practices were replicated at home as a way to sustain and extend their child's learning beyond the Centre.

#### Impact of the Parent Worker on children and parents to engage children and empower parents

Aside from its programming and in-school setting, what made PFLCs effective was the vital role played by the PW assigned to each site. With ongoing support and professional learning opportunities offered by the Central PFLC Office, PWs across all Centres played a crucial role in making the program effective for both children and parents. For instance, the PW at each site had to ensure the atmosphere of the Centre was friendly and welcoming for all families regardless of language background, that children were engaged in learning

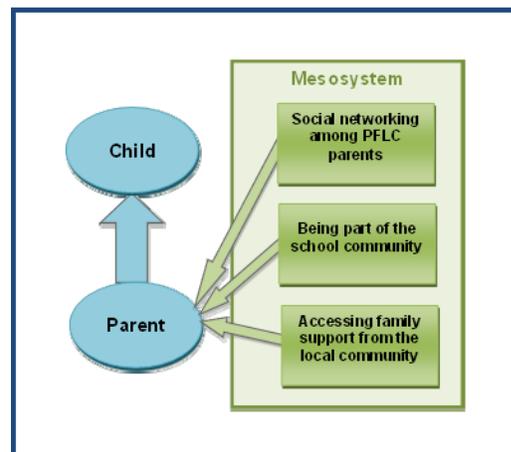


through purposeful play, and that parents were empowered to support their own children as well as others at the Centre.

### Indirect Impact (at the mesosystem level)

The “mesosystem” refers to any interaction among the immediate social groups within which the child interacts. The idea is that supportive interactions at this level could shape the child’s immediate social environment (e.g., improved parenting or available family support network), which in turn would have a positive impact on the child. In the case of the PFLC, the mesosystem refers specifically to:

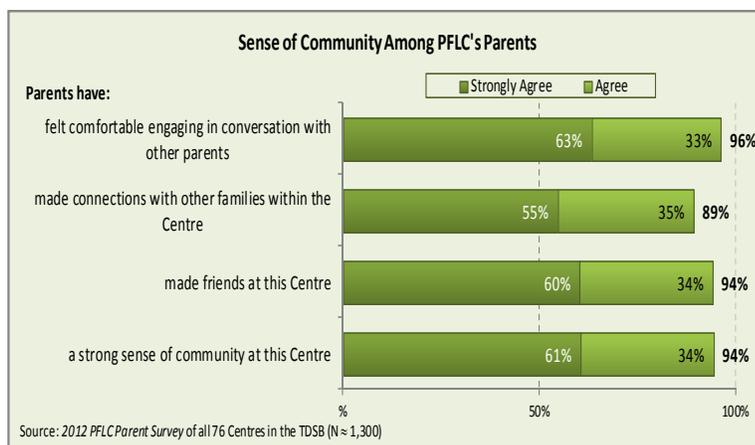
- 1) the peer support network formed among parents as a result of attending the PFLC
- 2) parents being connected to and feeling increasingly comfortable with the school community through the PFLC
- 3) increased family support through connections with the local community facilitated by the PFLC



### Key Ingredients to Developing a Cohesive and Supportive Community for Parents

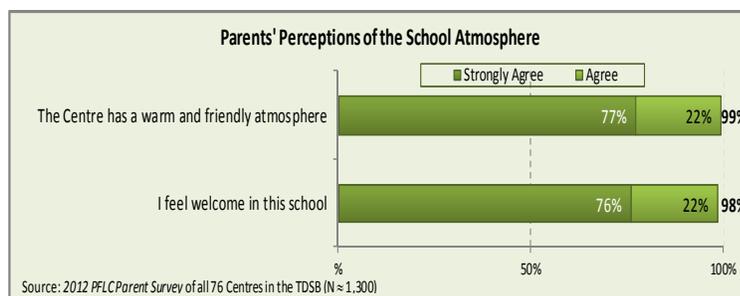
#### ➤ Social networking and a strong sense of community among parents

Prior to attending the PFLC, many parents recounted stories of isolation. According to parents interviewed, the PFLC offered them a sense of community with networks of friends and supports. The board-wide PFLC Parent Survey indicated that most parents felt comfortable to engage in conversation, make connections, and forge new friendships with other parents at the Centre. The cohesiveness of the parent group became a hub and/or a central resource for sharing parenting ideas and strategies. It had also evolved into their own ongoing social support and networking system outside the Centre.



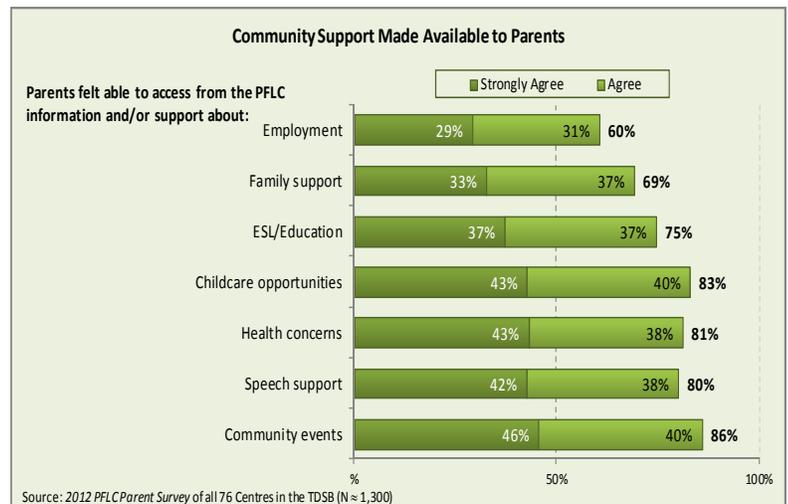
#### ➤ Being part of the school community

The fact that the PFLC was situated inside an elementary school building made it easier for parents of preschoolers to connect with the school community. For instance, it enabled parents to acquire knowledge about the school setting and system, as well as to feel comfortable within the school environment including kindergarten and administration staff. Their increased comfort and greater sense of familiarity with the school community helped explain why many of these immigrant parents, though relatively new to Canada, become actively involved in school as volunteers or school council members when their children enter formal schooling.



### ➤ **Community link**

To further support the needs of parents, especially newcomers, PFLCs promote access to community programs and services by connecting with or bringing in external resources. Different agencies worked collaboratively with the Centre share information and resources on a wide range of topics including child development, employment, family support, health issues, speech support, community events, etc. With greater knowledge and access to important community services, programs and opportunities, parents and ultimately their child(ren) have become more engaged, empowered and connected not only to the PFLC, but also to their neighbourhood and the community at large.



### **Conclusion...**

The multiple benefits parents gained at both the microsystem and the mesosystem levels had not only helped to build their skills and confidence in supporting their children, but they had also been pivotal in the reinforcement and sustainability of the immediate benefits their child(ren) experienced at the Centre. This capacity building for parents was particularly valuable for families in high-needs or immigrant communities, where parents were often experiencing isolation with their young child(ren), and where resources, social networks and familiarity with or access to community services were limited. Through the intentional efforts of the PFLC, parents felt connected, equipped and empowered, enabling them to engage actively and positively in their child(ren)'s learning and development.



### **Next Steps...**

This report examined how the PFLC benefited its immediate participants, both children and parents, including how these benefits were sustained over time. The next study will turn its attention to the impact on schools that host PFLC programs – in particular, how the presence of a PFLC affects school environments and dynamics, as well as the school community at large. In addition, the upcoming study will look into ways the PFLC's central office maintains the qualities, consistency, and effectiveness of its multiple sites across the school board. Data for the subsequent study will be largely collected from various staff groups, including the PFLC's Parent Workers, central office management staff, school principals, kindergarten teachers, and school council members.

