

*Parenting and Family Literacy Centres*  
**Making a Difference beyond  
Early School Readiness**



Parenting and Family Literary Centres: Making a Difference Beyond Early School Readiness

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## BACKGROUND

The first *Parenting and Family Literacy Centres* (PFLCs) were set up in 1981 by the former Toronto Board of Education in its five inner city schools. The purpose was to help address the Board's concern at the time about the high rates of academic failure and school dropout among inner city children.<sup>1</sup> Since its establishment, PFLCs have produced many success stories and have received extensive recognition from schools, parents, and the community. Before the formation of the amalgamated school board - Toronto District School Board (TDSB) - in 1998, the number of PFLCs had grown to 32, spreading throughout the former city of Toronto.

Currently, the TDSB has over 75 PFLCs located in high density, culturally diverse neighbourhoods across the amalgamated city of Toronto. In 2007 the Ontario Ministry of Education adopted this exemplary model and built a network of PFLCs across Ontario. There are now 144 PFLCs in 15 school boards in Ontario.

The benefits of the program are to:

- ◆ Support children's early learning and lay the foundations for successful transition; and
- ◆ Help engage parents/caregivers positively with the school system using an inclusive approach.

The goals of the PFLCs are as follows:

- ◆ To provide a program that promotes positive parent-child interaction and support the health and well being of the whole child;
- ◆ To offer a *Family Literacy Program* that develops early literacy and numeracy skills which provide the foundation for ongoing learning;
- ◆ To increase parents' knowledge, involvement, and comfort levels with schools;



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<sup>1</sup> According to a number of tracking reports published by the Toronto Board of Education in the 1990s, while about 80% of the students from the higher socio-economic background (e.g. those with professional parents) graduated within 5 year of secondary schooling, the rate for those from low income families was much lower (about 50%). Brown, R. (1997), *The Toronto Board Grade 9 Cohort of 1991 – a 5-Year Tracking Study 1991-1996*. Toronto Board of Education (Research Report 225).

- ◆ To help children transition more easily to kindergarten by allowing PFLC staff, parent/caregivers, and kindergarten teachers to work together;
- ◆ To promote discussions and share parenting information that help build parents'/caregivers' confidence and competence;
- ◆ To provide support to parents/caregivers of children with special needs; and
- ◆ To collaborate with the community to offer a complementary and seamless delivery of programs and services to families in order to meet individual needs.

Based on these goals, PFLCs invite parents with preschoolers to come into the school for a program of activities, which they can enjoy with their young children, while providing them with support for their parenting. In addition, families receive information on community resources, support, and education in parenting, and an early childhood development program for their children. The intent is to provide a safe harbour where parents in their community meet, grow, develop tolerance, and become advocates for their children's education and family well being.



In 1999, a formal multi-year evaluation plan was developed to assess the immediate and long-term impact of PFLCs on students and their parents. In Spring 2005, a research article entitled, *Do Parenting and Family Literacy Centres Make a Difference?*<sup>2</sup>, was released. The findings in the article were derived from the first two phases of research (dating back to the late 1990s), which aimed at assessing the *immediate* effects of PFLCs based on 10 established sites in downtown Toronto<sup>3</sup>. As indicated in the article (see Appendix A), these Centres helped level the playing field for high-needs neighbourhood children and better prepare them for schooling prior to their Kindergarten entry.

<sup>2</sup> Yau, M. (Spring 2005), "Do Parenting and Family Literacy Centres Make a Difference?" *Research Today*, Vol.1, Issue 1. Toronto District School Board.

<sup>3</sup> PFLCs were first developed in the former Toronto Board of Education back in 1981. That is why the more established sites have all been located in downtown Toronto.

## PURPOSE

Subsequent to the Phase I and II evaluations, which focused on studying the immediate impact, the Phase III study was conducted with three specific research questions in mind.

1. Can the earlier evaluation findings (i.e. smoother transition to formal schooling) *be generalized* to all PFLC sites (over 50), including the newer ones, across the amalgamated TDSB?
2. Can the PFLC program produce a *longer term impact* beyond the first year of schooling - Junior Kindergarten?
3. Can the PFLCs generate *other kinds of benefits* for inner city children aside from preparing for school entry?

This report presents the recent findings related to these three questions.

## METHODOLOGY

To confirm the findings from the earlier evaluations, a similar measurement process adopted in the previous research was replicated. Since the system-wide *Early Development Instrument* (EDI) assessment data were used in the previous study, the latest board-wide EDI data (collected in winter 2008) were employed again as one of the key measures.

To answer the first research question, however, a larger sample than that of the previous evaluations was required. Therefore, in this study, sampling was drawn from *all* (over 50) operating Centres (instead of selected sites only). It should further be noted that rather than studying PFLC students of various age range, the sampling selection for this study had to be limited to one particular age group – i.e. the cohort whom we could match with the most recent system-wide EDI data available (winter 2008). The sampling criteria for this study were thus defined as those:

- ◆ born in 2002;
- ◆ who had been registered in the PFLC records; and
- ◆ who were attending Senior Kindergarten (SK) in one of the 51 PFLC host schools during 2007-08, the year when the latest board-wide EDI assessment was conducted.

Using these criteria, a total of 549 students were identified as having attended one of the Centres with their parents/caregivers prior to kindergarten entry. They represented about a quarter (24%) of the SK students who attended the 51 PFLC host schools. In other words, about 1 in 4 of these students and their parents in these neighbourhoods had availed themselves of this parenting and pre-school program offered by the school board.

Aside from including a larger sample, this Phase III evaluation also collected detailed information about the level of usage among the PFLC users. According to the Centres' attendance records, 42% were regular attendees who had attended the PFLC approximately four or more times a month. The remaining 58% were deemed occasional users, who had attended the Centres fewer than four times a month, or very sporadically.

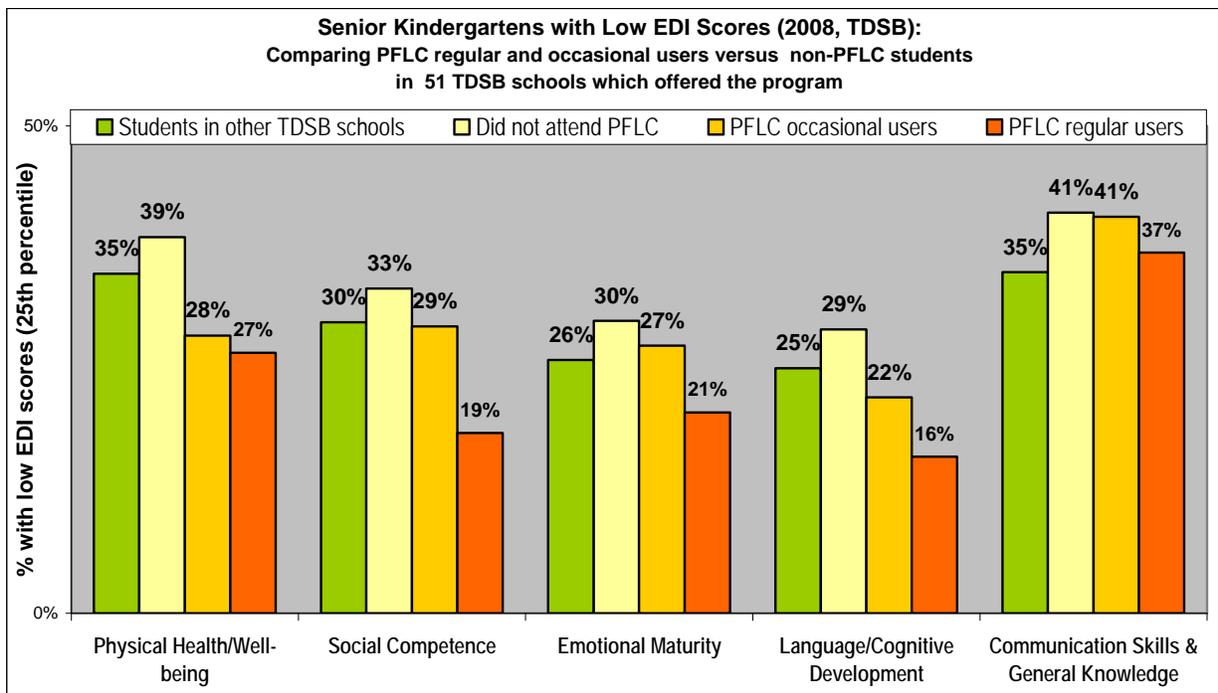
To examine the other two research questions, this study also employed additional data sources including Grade 1 Report Card information and school attendance records.

## FINDINGS

### 1. Can the earlier evaluation results be generalized and applied to all PFLCs in the TDSB?

The answer to this first question is illustrated in Figure 1. The first bar (white) shows the proportion of kindergarten children in all TDSB schools who had received low EDI scores<sup>4</sup> on each of the five developmental domains with the exception of the 51 PFLC host schools. The second bar represents the proportion of those in the 51 host schools who had not participated in the PFLC program. It is clear from the diagram that the latter group of children were more likely to have lower EDI scores in all five developmental areas than their counterparts from other parts of the city. This is understandable, as PFLCs were strategically located in these higher needs neighbourhoods.

**Figure 1 – Senior Kindergartens with Low EDI Scores (2008, TDSB)**



In the same diagram, however, it is evident that for children in the same neighbourhoods who had attended the PFLC even occasionally, their likelihood of receiving low school readiness scores was *much* smaller than their school peers (see the third bar in Figure 1). Indeed, when these occasional participants were compared to students in other parts of the city, they did fare

<sup>4</sup> Low 25<sup>th</sup> percentile based on national norms.

better in the areas of physical health and well-being, and in language and cognitive development, and performed as well as the general population in terms of social competence and emotional maturity. The only domain that these occasional participants did not seem to have a clear advantage was communication skills and general knowledge. This might be a developmental area that requires more time and intervention to affect change.

Those who had attended PFLCs regularly demonstrated the largest and most consistent gains. Not only did these kindergarten students surpass the peers in their neighbourhoods, as a group they were doing *much* better than the general population in four of the five developmental domains - physical, social, emotional, language, and cognitive, and were doing just as well in the area of communication skills and general knowledge.

These results confirm that PFLCs can make a difference, even for those who attend the program occasionally, and that the positive outcomes can be generalized to all Centres across the school board.

## **2. Can the immediate impact be sustained over time?**

Aside from validating the earlier findings, another advantage of the current analysis is that it helped reveal the *longer-term* impact of the PFLC program. Unlike the previous evaluation when EDI data at the Junior Kindergarten level were employed, in 2008 only SK EDI data were available at the system level.

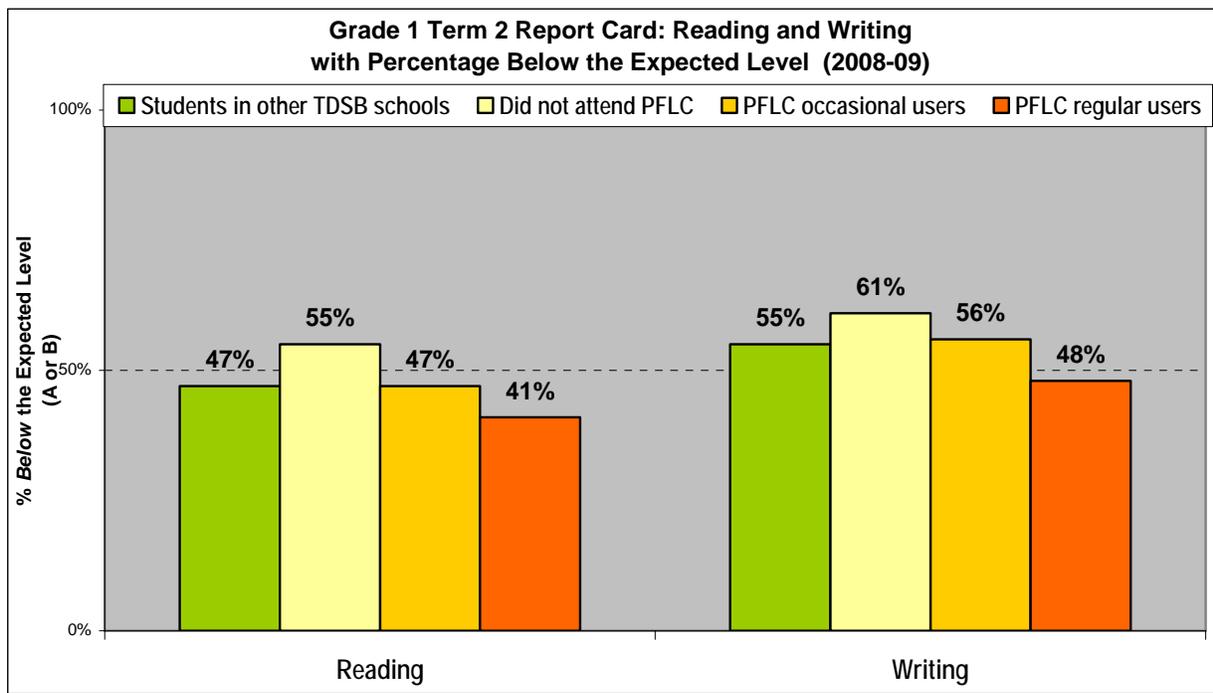
Although this did not lend itself as a measure for assessing the initial (or first-year) school readiness level, the SK data collected in the middle of the school year did inform the developmental level of the young children after their one and a half years of schooling. Hence, when noticeable gains could still be discerned in the SK EDI data, one may infer that not only can the PFLC program produce an immediate impact, its impact in the various developmental areas can still be maintained even after the child and his/her parent/caregiver have “graduated” from the program for almost two years.



To further determine the longer-term impact of PFLCs, the same cohort of PFLC students from the 51 centres were tracked to see if they could still retain their gains when they were in Grade 1 (2008-09). To explore this, their Grade 1 Term 2 Report Card data were examined. Figure 2

shows that after almost three years of schooling (JK, SK, and Grade 1), the PFLC students, especially the regular participants, still demonstrated a clear advantage over their school peers.

**Figure 2: Grade 1 Term 2 Report Card: Reading and Writing with Percentage Below the Expected Level (2008-09)**



For instance, while the majority (55%) of the non-PFLC students in the 51 schools failed to reach the expected Reading level (A or B) by the middle of the school year, the proportion was significantly smaller for the regular PFLC participants (41%). For the occasional PFLC participants, their Grade 1 literacy level was also higher than their non-PFLC schoolmates, and was similar to that of the general population (47%).

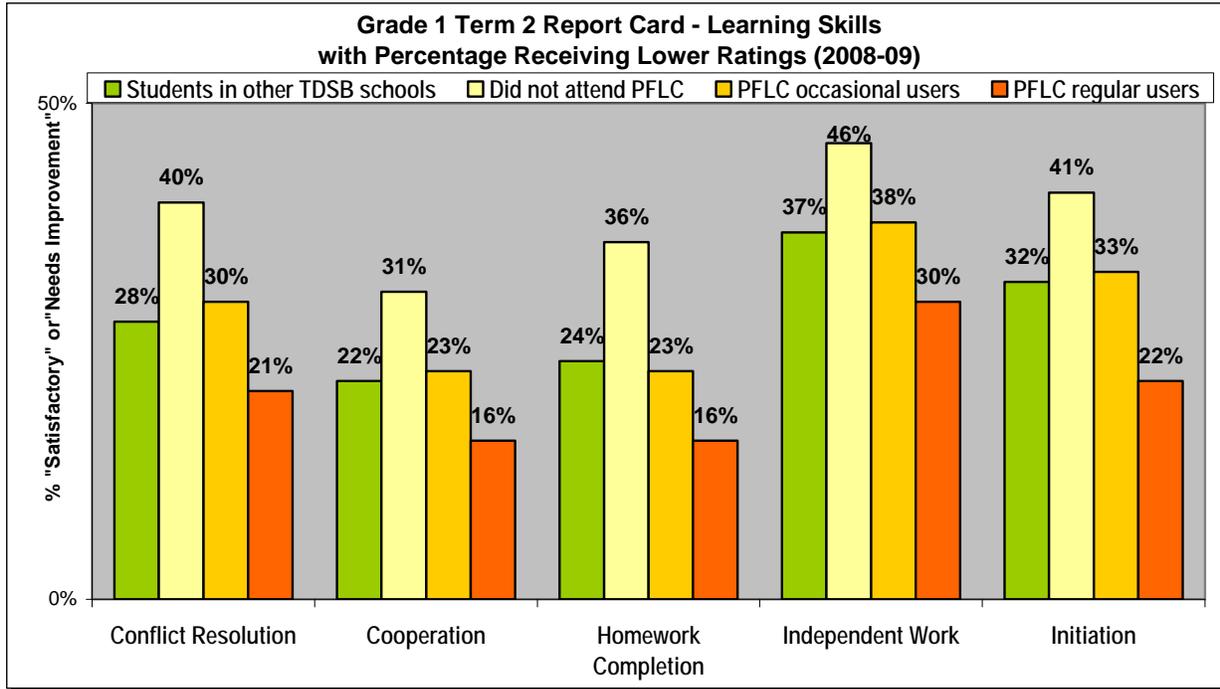
### **3. Can PFLCs produce other kinds of impact aside from better school entry?**

Further examination of the Grade 1 Report Card data reveals that apart from gains in early development and early literacy, PFLC students also seemed to fare better in terms of learning skills (e.g., homework completion, independent work, and initiation) and social skills (e.g., cooperation and conflict resolution). As shown in Figure 3, the likelihood of receiving *lower* ratings<sup>5</sup> in any of these skill areas in their Report Cards was greater among students in the more challenging neighbourhoods; but this likelihood was *much* smaller for their schoolmates who

<sup>5</sup> That is, percentage not receiving a “good” or “excellent” rating from their teachers in the Report Card.

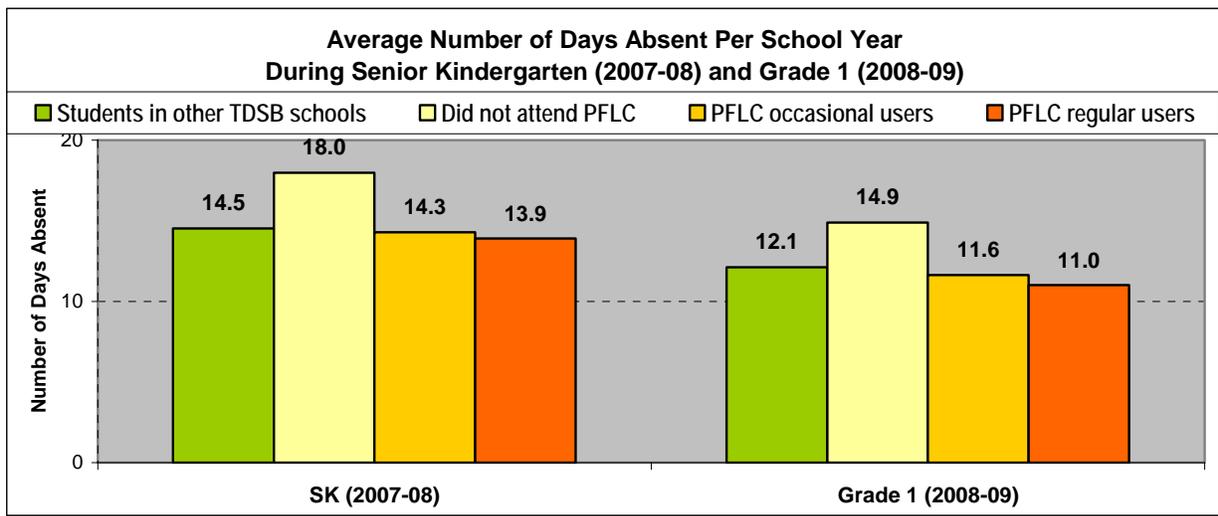
had attended the PFLC program, especially the regular attendees. As a group, the latter even had a better rating from their Grade 1 teachers in these skill areas than in the case of the general population.

**Figure 3: Grade 1 Term 2 Report Card:  
Learning Skills with Percentage Receiving Lower Ratings (2008-09)**



The same pattern of findings can also be found in their school attendance records (see Figure 4). While on average SK students across the system were absent for about 14.5 days over the school year, the figure was noticeably higher (18 days) for the SK students in the 51 schools who had not participated in the program. The absenteeism rate for those who had attended the PFLCs was lower – 14.3 days for occasional attendees (a rate which was comparable to the general population), and 13.9 days for regular participants (which was slightly lower than the system).

**Figure 4: Average Number of Days Absent Per School Year During Senior Kindergarten (2007-08) and Grade 1 (2008-09)**



Although absenteeism rates tend to decline when Kindergarten children enter Grade 1, the non-PFLC students from the 51 host schools still had a higher average number days absent (14.9 days) in Grade 1 vis-à-vis their counterparts from other TDSB schools (12.1 days) (see Figure 4). For the occasional PFLC students, their rate (11.6 days) was comparable to that of the system, and for the regular attendees their average Grade 1 absenteeism rate was even lower (11 days).

## CONCLUSION

One can extrapolate from this recent analysis that through PFLCs, the better early start and the parenting skills acquired by the parents/caregivers have given these high risk neighbourhood children immediate as well as long-term and broader benefits. These latest results demonstrate that the initial gains the PFLC students had made could be extended beyond their early child development to other related areas in their later school years – including academic performance (e.g., literacy level), school engagement (e.g., lower absenteeism), and positive schooling experience as a result of better learning attitudes and peer relationships. Part 2 of this Phase III evaluation report will examine *how* and *why* PFLCs have made such a lasting and wider impact. These findings will be based on field observations and surveys of parents/caregivers and staff of the Centres, and are expected to be reported by the end of the current school year (2009-2010).



## **APPENDIX A**

Do Parenting and Family Centres Make A Difference?





## Do Parenting and Family Literacy Centres Make A Difference?

*Prepared by Maria Y. M. Yau*

### 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 research<sup>1</sup> ...

- 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

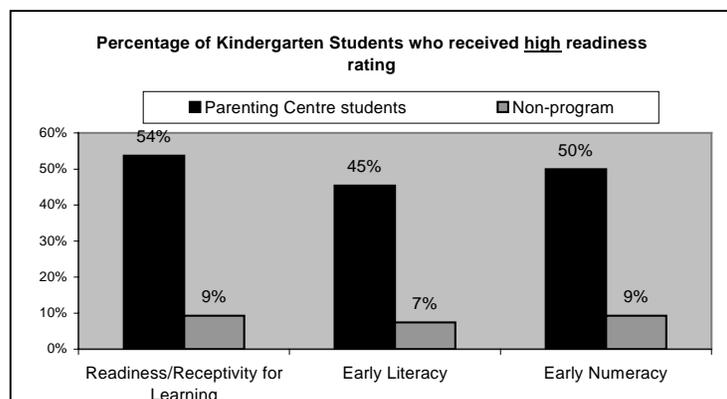
#### FACT

*"... 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."*

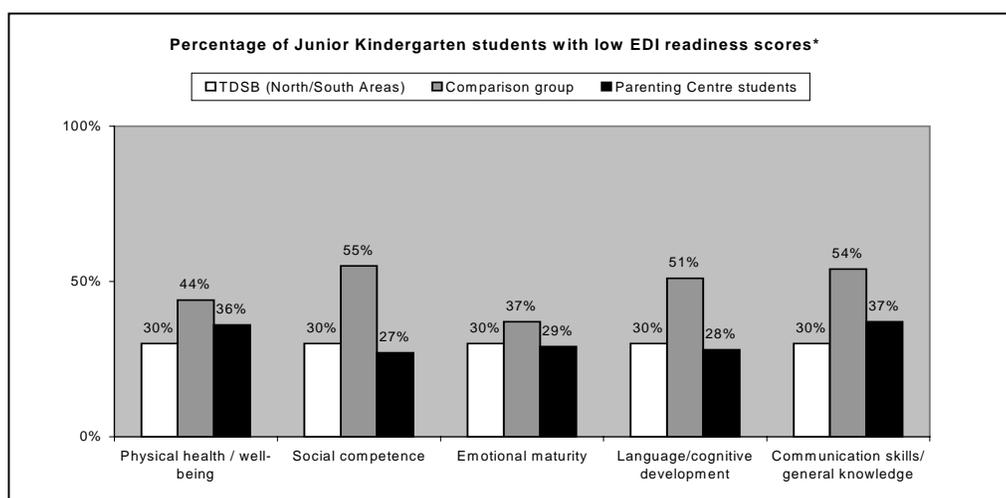
## What was the impact of the program on children?

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.<sup>2</sup> 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**

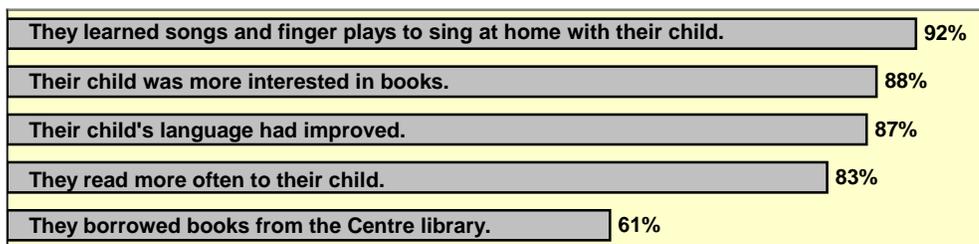
Many families attending PFLCs reported that they felt socially isolated and faced the challenge of being a newcomer with language, cultural and social barriers. They often felt unfamiliar with and/or intimidated by the school system. According to the Parent User survey conducted in 2003 (N=740), almost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



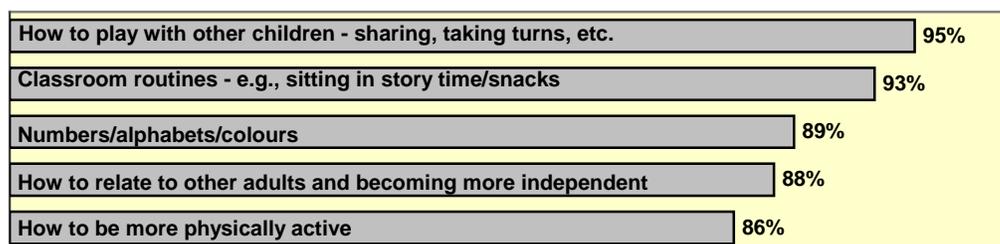
## Family literacy and numeracy

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.



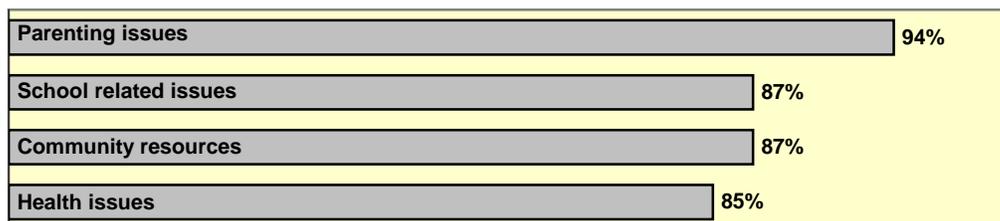
## School readiness skills

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.

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

<sup>2</sup>This 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.

