

The Seattle Times

Speaking of learning

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By Linda Shaw, Seattle Times education reporter



Every week on Monday and Thursday afternoons, Chi Le Nguyen arrives on Em Tran's doorstep to make a literacy house call. She pulls a book or toy out of her bag and summons Tran's daughter Kathy who, no longer shy around Nguyen, bounds over. For the next 30 minutes, Nguyen, with Tran at her side, models how to read and play in ways that build the 2-year-old's vocabulary and conversation skills.

Nguyen works for the Parent-Child Home Program, created four decades ago by a clinical psychologist who concluded that the best way to reduce the number of high-school dropouts was to start when children are 2 and 3.

The program now operates in 164 places across the nation, mostly in the East, and serves low-income families. A number of studies conclude that it works, including one in 1998 that found students who were part of the program as young children in Pittsfield, Mass., graduated from high school at a much higher rate than low-income students as a whole -- 84 percent vs. 54 percent.

The program is in its third year in Seattle, sponsored by the Business Partnership for Early Learning and the city of Seattle. Over five years, it plans to serve 500 families, all low-income and mostly immigrants or refugees.

Home visitors such as Nguyen meet with parent and child twice a week for 23 weeks, or 46 times a year for two years. Along with the weekly home visits, parents (or grandparents, if they are the primary caregivers) are encouraged to attend play groups at community centers. The goal is to encourage more conversation between parent and child.

"There's a direct connection between the number of words that a child hears at home and the child's literacy skills when they get to school," said Sarah Walzer, executive director of Parent-Child Home's national office.

The program is a small part of a burgeoning early-childhood effort in Washington that includes a new state Department of Early Learning, and significant investments by the private sector, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

But Parent-Child Home is one of few programs that target children who aren't in licensed preschools or day-care centers -- or roughly two-thirds of the children from birth to age 5 in the state, said Nancy Ashley, the project coordinator.

"It's not necessary for everybody, but it's helpful for new immigrant families who are isolated," said Holly Miller, director of the city's Office for Education.

Both the city and the Business Partnership were attracted by the program's track record. They've put up a total of \$4.5 million to fund the program for five years -- \$4 million from the Business Partnership and \$500,000 from the city's Family and Education Levy. The Washington Women's Foundation was an early donor as well, Miller said. How many dropouts "are underachieving going into kindergarten?" asked John Stanton of Trilogy Partners, the Business Partnership's chairman. "We need to get them not to give up."

At first, the Seattle program had trouble finding families and getting them to sign up. They went door to door, posted fliers, asked anyone who expressed interest if they knew anyone else who might be interested. One mother, Nguyen said, bluntly told her that a literacy program for a 3-year-old would be a waste of time. But she -- and others who expressed similar views -- realized their children learned a lot.

Now, the program has a waiting list.

An evaluation of the Seattle program's first years is encouraging, too.

Many participating parents report that they now read and talk to their children more. If they don't read themselves, they talk with their children about the pictures.

The home visitors say parents quickly pick up on the kind of positive discipline that the home visitors use. The children sit still longer, concentrate better and can describe a book's pictures in words and sentences.

"I thought kids learn just at school," one mother wrote in her evaluation. "But after this program I notice that kids learn at home and I can help."

The program focuses on emotional skills as well as literacy skills because the two are strongly linked.

"Cognitive learning happens in healthy relationships," Ashley said.

Earlier this year, an anthropologist criticized programs like Parent-Child Home, saying it promotes the kind of parent-child play that's practiced by middle- and upper-class Americans, and not most of the rest of the world.

But Walzer says the program doesn't insist on play. The home visitors model reading, play and conversation, she says, with the idea that parents can choose which they're most comfortable doing.

The home visitors in the Seattle program say they find it empowers parents, especially those who haven't been to school themselves.

Next year, at the request of parents, five more weeks will be added for families served by Neighborhood House (one of the agencies administering the program) so that the children can learn U.S. nursery rhymes and songs before they start kindergarten.

At Tran's house, Tran joins in as home visitor Nguyen asks Tran's daughter to identify the animals in the book, and what sounds they make. When Kathy tires of that, they move on to another book -- one of the girl's favorites. Before the session ends, they've read the two books and played with plastic blocks, asking the girl to name the color of each. At one point, Kathy fishes a backpack out of a nearby toy bin, and puts all the books inside.

"So, you want to go to school?" Nguyen asks.

The girl sits back down to read more.

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