

THE IRISH TIMES

Home is where the learning is

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Tuesday, January 26, 2010

Pre-school children and their parents in some of Dublin's disadvantaged areas are enjoying the benefit of a novel home learning programme

'HI JACKIE! Books in your bag, Jackie?' It's visiting day and my two-year-old son is positively hopping with excitement. Jackie's weekly visits have become a source of great curiosity and fun for Lúí, one of 46 children currently participating in the Parent Child Home Programme (PCHP) under the auspices of the National College of Ireland's Early Learning Initiative.



Pamela Martin, home visitor from the Parent Child Home Programme, with Helena Hasler and her two-year-old daughter Olivia at their home in East Wall, Dublin.

Photograph: Alan Betson

The preschool children are visited twice weekly and brought a book or toy. The home visitor plays constructively with the child for about 30 minutes while the parent (sometimes grandparent) actively observes. The toy or book is then left as a gift for the child. "The role of the home visitor is to encourage the parent to see the enjoyment their child gets from the book or toy," says Beth Fagan, co-ordinator of the PCHP. "The home visitor is modelling for the parent; they are not telling the parent what to do. It is a non-directive technique."

The programme, funded entirely by local business, has been implemented in four parishes – Ringsend, East Wall, North Wall and City Quay – and is currently rolling out in Bluebell in Dublin. It aims to nurture children's pre-literacy and pre-numeracy skills. The docklands programme is in its third year and is based on the Parent-Child Home Program in the US. Fagan, resident in the US for 25 years, was a natural choice for co-ordinator here – a Dubliner, experienced home visitor and co-ordinator who understood how the US system could be adapted for Dublin.

Michele Morrison, training and programme support director of the Parent-Child Home Program in the US, says: "In the primary grades, children who have participated in the programme perform well on all standardised tests, surpassing peers from the same socioeconomic background who have not been through the programme.

"Long term, our studies have shown that our programme graduates, who come from families challenged by poverty, low levels of education and other stresses, graduate from high school at a rate equal to their middle class peers."

The programme's objectives include the support of the parent-child relationship and the quality and quantity of their verbal interaction. "When the parent encourages, praises and shows affection for the

child, both verbally and non-verbally, the child develops the confidence and ability to regulate his or her own behaviour and develops a love of learning,” says Morrison.

Home visitors here attend mandatory weekly meetings and wear a casual uniform during visits. Books and toys are chosen for their richness and open possibilities. So far Lúí has loved the toys which include stacking cups, a tool puzzle and animal magnets. “If children are equipped with pre-literacy and numeracy skills before school age they have a greater chance of success all the way through school,” says Fagan.

Helena Hasler is a mum living in East Wall whose daughter Olivia participated in everything from infant swimming to ClapHandies’ Playlabs before she learned about the PCHP programme at a local toddler group. “When I was made redundant, the number of classes I could avail of dwindled,” says Hasler. “I was looking for anything that would help Olivia’s development and obviously something that didn’t cost money was very welcome.”

Hasler says her experience of the programme is “fantastic” and she finds the toys and books excellent. “At first I was worried because Olivia didn’t seem to take to it as fast as I thought she would, but now that we have realised that it takes her about a week to get used to the new toy or book, it works very well,” she says. “The sessions are not at all strict and are geared towards what Olivia is interested in, even if that is not the current toy, but something from a few weeks before.”

While Fagan believes the programme can work only if the home visitor is skilled, Hasler believes the input of the parent is also important. “It is a parent and child programme, I don’t think it can work if the parent is not willing to do the ‘homework’ as such. It’s only a small amount of work but if you don’t put it in, you could lose the benefit of the programme,” she says.

“Reading is something that kids feel they have to do in school, but it should also be a pleasure and a joy,” says Hasler. “It’s a huge gift to be given a new toy or book every week. It’s not just about getting a freebie. It’s about spending quality time with your child and putting in a small investment for their future.”

Individuals or community representatives who are interested in the Parent Child Home Programme can contact Beth Fagan at The Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland, Dublin 1, 01-4498627, www.ncirl.ie/eli or e-mail: bfagan@ncirl.ie

[Please click here to visit The Parent-Child Home Program](#)