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Learning how to play

Most of us take it for granted, but for some parents it is a foreign concept

By Linda Matchan, Globe Staff, January 9, 2010

LYNN - When Mumina Ibrahim and her children came to Massachusetts four years ago as Somali refugees, many agencies were involved in resettling them.

There was the International Rescue Committee, which helped with housing. There were the Somali advocates, who acted as interpreters.

And there is the woman they call "Teacher," who comes to her house twice a week to teach her something most Americans take for granted: how to turn the pages of a book and play with her kids.

"It's *good!*" beams Ibrahim, who is making a Play-Doh gingerbread man with her 3-year-old son and year-old grandson after listening to "Teacher" read "The Gingerbread Man."

The teacher is Kaltun Guled, a Somali "home visitor" with the Parent-Child Home Program, which aims to prepare children challenged by limited educational opportunities for entering school. Based on the premise that there's a connection between parent-child verbal interaction and success in school, the program models reading and play activities to parents who might otherwise not have the ability, or the opportunity, to do it on their own.

"The parents are learning all the skills the 2- or 3-year-old child is learning," said Carol Rubin, Massachusetts regional coordinator of the Parent-Child Home Program. "They're learning about the importance of language and talking and play and imagination and cause-and-effect - all those school readiness skills children learn from reading and play."

The parents may not speak English, or may have had limited or no education. "There are families who may come from a culture where parents didn't see the value in play," Rubin said. Or the parents may be under such financial stress, with so many demands on their time, that just about the last thing on their minds is reading storybooks and teaching children how to hold their safety scissors.

This is where Guled comes in. She learned to speak English in high school in North Somalia and left that country in 1990, moving first to Pakistan and then to the United States, where she settled in Charlestown. Now she lives in Lynn and is studying to be a teacher. She's one of nine home visitors in Lynn - and about 150 across the state - who visit families twice a week over the course of two years, bringing books and toys, which the family is allowed to keep.

She's been coming to Ibrahim's house for nearly two years, reading to the youngest of Ibrahim's six children, Ayub Mohamed, who is 3, as well as to her 1-year-old grandson, Farhan Abukar. She's moved the family along from "Pat the Bunny" to "The Three Bears" to - on one morning this week - "The Gingerbread Man."

"What color do you like - green?" she says to the boys, offering them Play-Doh so they can make "cookies," too. She gives a real cookie to Ibrahim, along with decorating gel, which Ibrahim gingerly applies.

Ibrahim moved to the United States in 2004, speaks little English, and is seated quietly on the floor wearing an African head covering and long robe. When the art project is done, Guled reads the story. The children - and Ibrahim - are riveted.

"One day the old woman says to the little boy, I will bake you a gingerbread man. Same *we* did!" exclaimed Guled. "What's this?" she says, pointing to the picture. "This is an oven! If you open the oven, it is very hot!"

Until recently, ovens were a foreign concept to Ibrahim, as were electricity, beds, toilets, and most other aspects of modern American life. She is Bantu, a marginalized clan of farmers in southern Somalia looked down upon by other clans for being descendants of slaves from Tanzania and other neighboring countries. Most Bantu women did not have access to education, and had barely any childhood, let alone toys. "No one has toys," Guled said. "A child will take socks and make a ball. A car is from sticks and a can."



Home visitor Kaltun Guled reads "The Gingerbread Man" to Mumina Ibrahim and her son, Ayub Mohamed, 3, and her grandson, Farhan Abukar, 1. (Photos by Pat Greenhouse/Globe Staff)



Kaltun Guled, a home visitor, teaches reading and play activities to refugees.

Five thousand Somalis and Somali-Americans live in the Boston area. The influx began five years ago, many clustering in Lynn, where families are referred to the Parent-Child Home Program by a variety of sources: schools, health facilities, Head Start programs, and through outreach efforts at libraries and laundromats. So far the program has worked with about 30 Somali families, says Jill Whelan, a Lynn public school teacher and the program's coordinator, as well as Latino, Asian, American, Haitian, and Albanian families.

Developed in New York in 1965, the program came to Massachusetts in 1970, beginning with Pittsfield and Newton. It expanded to Lynn and other communities in 2000, when the program received state funding, which tends to ebb and flow from year to year.

“[It gives] significant results for remarkably little money,” said John Silber, the former president of Boston University and chairman of the Massachusetts Board of Education who helped push for state funding for the program. “It teaches parents who know nothing about parenting by handing them books and toys that are educational. If a mother is able

to hold a child on her lap and point to pictures, it doesn't matter if she is doing it in Somali or she is doing it in English. At least she's getting the child to associate images with words, and that's important in terms of reading readiness.”

Francie Sudek, a Lynn teacher who also works with Somali families in the program, says she's seen firsthand how important the home visits are to parents. Once, about four years ago, she was reading a book called “Feast for 10,” which teaches counting and nutrition skills, and helping the family do a related art project.

Sudek thought the mother looked a little uncomfortable; what she didn't realize was that she was in labor. But the mother didn't want to interrupt the story, said Sudek, who called an ambulance when she realized what was happening. The baby was born an hour later.

“She was adamant about holding on to the glue stick,” Sudek said. “She wanted the visit to go on till the end.”

For the full article text please visit:
http://www.boston.com/lifestyle/family/articles/2010/01/09/helping_refugees_learn_how_to_play_and_read/

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