



Jill Whelan, a teacher who makes house calls for a state program (left), modeled parenting skills to Walquiria Nicasio. Whelan played with Nicasio's son, Sebastian Rodriguez, 3, at their home in Lynn. (Lisa Poole for the Boston Globe)

This preschool is for parents, too State program sends teachers to families' homes to help them prepare toddlers for kindergarten

By Russell Nichols, Globe Staff | December 5, 2005

LYNN -- With an "I Love Kids" button pinned to her sweater, Jill Whelan entered the house in this town north of Boston with four tubes of Play-Doh in her bag. Then for 30 minutes, Whelan sat down and played with the toddler as his mother looked on and followed Whelan's lead.

Whelan, a Lynn public school teacher, makes house calls twice a week to this toddler's family and others to model parenting skills.

She's part of a statewide program that is making a slow comeback this year after shrinking because of budget cuts. The program, created 35 years ago, received \$2 million in state funding this year, a \$1 million increase, to expand from 400 to roughly 1,100 families.

At its peak in 2002, the program reached 1,200 families. Whelan and other home visitors, dispatched in various communities, show parents how to teach their toddlers to speak, read, and develop motor skills with games and puzzles. The Department of Early Education Care, a new agency created in July, sees the program as key in a statewide effort to better prepare children for prekindergarten and kindergarten.

"There's a level of need out there that we're not meeting right now," said Ann Reale, the department's commissioner. "Now we have the opportunity to help as many parents as possible."

Most of the families in the program earn less than \$20,000 a year, but money is only one qualifier. The home visitors, trained professionals paid by the state, visit families that struggle with limited education, homelessness, or speaking English.

In addition to state funding, each site gets money from public and private sources, including some federal grants. The amount of private money each community receives varies. The statewide cost per family is about \$2,500, which pays for books, toys, the home visits, and the home visitor's training.

Now, 260 families are on waiting lists around the state to get home instruction.

"Some of them are families that don't have much," said Brenda Bednar, coordinator of Lynn-based workshops that help Somalian families learn to read and write. "Without it, they won't have the exposure of how we in the US encourage parents to be the first teachers."

Walquiria Nicasio, 22, who is unemployed and lives on \$600 a month in disability checks because of an anxiety disorder, dropped out of school in the ninth grade. She wants to make sure her 3-year-old son, Sebastian Rodriguez, who she raises alone, doesn't follow her path.

On a recent fall afternoon during one of the home visits, Sebastian stood over a table and fiddled with clumps of colored clay. For the most part, home visitors talk, play, and work with the toddlers as parents observe, Whelan said. But Nicasio, now in her second year, interacts alongside Whelan using a technique she has learned: teaching by showing.

"I want the blue one," Sebastian said, pointing to the cup with the blue top.

"You can color mix with this, too," said Nicasio, as she sat beside Whelan, mashing the clay into one glob. "What color is this?"

"That's not orange," Sebastian said, pointing to the ball. "That's red."

He has come a long way from his first day in the program.

"He didn't know how to speak English until Jill came along," Nicasio said. "It's not like school, it's more fun."

Long after Whelan left that afternoon, Nicasio sat with her son as he read, drew, or tinkered with the clay creation he made earlier. She wants to give Sebastian the opportunities she never had as a child.

"If [my mother] would've enrolled me in programs, my life would've been different for me right now," Nicasio said.

Candy Jezewski, 28, of Pittsfield, was in the program when she was 2 because she lacked hand-eye coordination and could not pick up things.

At the time, she didn't know the toys were learning tools. In retrospect, she said the program changed her outlook on education.

"I loved school when I was little," she said. "And I loved it all the way to the fact that I have three degrees."

After she finished the program, Jezewski said her mother continued to help her develop her motor skills.

"The value of the program in many cases is as much for the mother or parent as it is for the kid," said James Shiminski, the program director in Pittsfield, which was the first one in Massachusetts established after the 1965 test program in New York. "If we can get an at-risk 2-year-old with their parent for two years, we can make an incredible difference." ■