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Helping parents and children explore books together

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PLYMOUTH, MASS. - Christopher zips through the kitchen, down the hall, and into the family room, his Pokemon slippers tracing a wild arc of school-bus yellow. He pulls himself onto the couch and sits at attention. "Marcia, Marcia," he calls.

It would be easy to believe that Marcia is the name of a new Nickelodeon show Christopher is anticipating. But Marcia is really a disarming woman who has just arrived and is taking a seat next to him and his mother, Genevieve Smolinsky.

For the next 30 minutes, the three are deep in activity, reading a book about cats and taking cues from the pictures. Christopher, a dimple-cheeked 2-year-old who could be mistaken for Shirley Temple's brother, crosses his arms and shivers when the cats eat an ice-cream cone. When a firetruck races across the page, he flinches from its piercing horn: "Cover your ears!"

Christopher is obviously at the center of this act, but his mother is equally engaged. "Every time Marcia [comes], she teaches not just my 2-year-old, she teaches me as well," says Ms. Smolinsky, a single mother who adds that most others in her family don't seem to care about education. On her kitchen table is a pancake stack of worksheets with tips on how to get children into reading.

Smolinsky is exactly the sort of person that the Parent-Child Home Program (PCHP), a federal project with sites in nine states, is looking to help. "[These parents] are concerned, but they don't really know how to interact with their kid ..., how to pull a child into a book," explains Paula Ryan, director of the PCHP site in Plymouth, Mass.

Marcia McChesney is one of 12 home visitors in the Plymouth group. After 20 hours of training, these paraprofessionals are assigned to families with 2- and 3-year-olds. Visitors come twice a week for half an hour, with one visit focused on reading and the next bringing the family together through a toy or game.

The parents range from high school dropouts to a few college graduates. Many are poor, single parents, and many come by referral from a social service agency or friends.

Driving the idea is concern that more and more kids are entering kindergarten unprepared. "We have kids who don't know what cows are or where corn comes from -other than a can," says Ms. Ryan, with an ironic gesture in the general direction of the Plimoth Plantation, the first permanent pilgrim settlement in southern New England, now a museum, just a few miles away.

But there's a broader, more basic aim than just tweaking tots for kindergarten. Many participating parents have negative memories of school, and the program seeks to restore their enthusiasm for learning. Executive Director Sarah Walzer sums it up: "Parents become empowered to become their kids' teachers."

Parents not only are present at all times, but they are urged to work (or play) alongside the home visitor, learning to see the home as an extension of the

classroom. Ultimately, the visitor is merely a midwife, showing parents how a little creative conversation with their children can boost imagination and skills.

"A block is not just a block. It's red and it has corners," says Richard Goulart, explaining how the program helped him learn to engage his son, Jason.

A big hurdle for many parents is realizing that 2- and 3- year-olds don't have the same attention span as older kids - nor do they need to. Talking about a picture, for example, can be just as stimulating as sticking to the text.

Two years ago, Mary Miller was straining her nerves trying to force-feed her daughter Kristina an entire book. But the program led her to take a different tack. "You don't have to read the exact words," Ms. Miller says. "If you're relating the story to the picture, then you're doing your job."

Both Kristina and Jason are in preschool now, having completed the two years of PCHP. And their parents say they had an advantage over older siblings who were not in the program.

Ryan, who is also the director of the district's Title I program (a federal initiative that provides additional educational services to low-income children), points out that none of the local children who previously completed PCHP have gone on to become Title I recipients - even though in many cases their siblings were.

Ryan says PCHP, funded by a combination of federal and state dollars, was a hard sell when it first came to Plymouth in 1994. Yet today, 82 families are enrolled, and there's a waiting list.

Evidence that it works is not just anecdotal. A 20-year study found that 84 percent of participating students completed high school - 20 percent higher than the national rate for kids from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Home visitor Ms. McChesney explains the kids' success: "If you learn something from the person you love most in the world, it's so much more powerful."

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