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## Program Offers An Early Start: Children and parents learn skills together

By Hilary J. Larson

Two-year-old Saniya Turner already knows her colors and letters, and her playmate, Monasia Street, also 2, can do her numbers in both English and Spanish.

“She’s very smart,” said Saniya’s mother, LaTanya Smith, 21, cradling her daughter as the two of them worked their way through a colorful number book on the couch of their Bridgehampton home. “Someday she’s going to Howard University.”

If she does, it will probably be due at least in part to the Bridgehampton Parent-Child Home Program, the first early childhood program of its kind in the Hamptons. Initiated last year by Bridgehampton School Principal Dianne Youngblood and two teachers, Jackie Poole and Nanette Stutterheim, the program sends teachers twice a week into the homes of economically disadvantaged youngsters and their parents for a half hour of reading, singing, parenting tips and structured play with educational toys.

The program, which currently serves 10 children age 1 to 3, is a two-year early intervention program that aims to lay the groundwork for literacy and prepare children for success in pre-kindergarten and grade school.

According to Ms. Poole, studies have shown that the program yields tangible results, including better-than-expected academic performance in grade school, higher test scores and increased parental involvement in their children’s education.

“It’s a literacy program, but it’s also a parenting program,” explained Ms. Poole. “You’re never too young to be read to. We explain to the mother or father that they are their child’s first teacher, and the most important teacher they’ll ever have.”

“When they get to Pre-K, they don’t just sit there,” said Ms. Stutterheim, referring to the children in the program. “They’re verbal, and they’re well-rounded as far as how to act with other children.

“The average age is 2 years old, so it’s an important time to jumpstart their vocabulary,” she added.

The Parent-Child Home Program was developed on Long Island in 1965 as a demonstration project by the Family Service Association of Nassau County. In 1979, the program was established as a non-profit organization, operating a national center and fostering community chapters around the country.

In Bridgehampton, a school district with a high proportion of economically disadvantaged families, the district has tailored the program to fit the community’s specific needs. Of the 10 families now participating, most are headed by teenage parents, according to Ms. Stutterheim.

Initial financial support came from the school district, the Rauch Foundation and the Sandy River Charitable Foundation. Earlier this month, the United Way of Long Island awarded the program an \$8,000 grant that will enable five more children to join.

Ms. Smith, Saniya’s mother, could easily feel overwhelmed by the growing intellectual demands of her bright-eyed eldest daughter. After all, in addition to working full-time at The Children’s Place, she has two other children, a 1-year-old and a 2-month-old.

When Ms. Poole and Ms. Stutterheim first came to Ms. Smith’s modest red house on the Bridgehampton-Sag Harbor Turnpike, they brought books, puzzles and crayons and encouraged her to spend time daily reading to Saniya.

But it’s not all about literacy and education. “We give the parents pamphlets on potty training, immunizations, expected childhood milestones,” said Ms. Poole. “And we get to know these children who will someday be in our school from the time they’re very young.” The two teachers have already identified one child as learning disabled, enabling them to provide extra support during the formative years.

“This gives her a little bit of a head start,” said Ms. Smith of Saniya. “She learns more stuff every time they come over here.”

Michael Street, a 32-year-old father who lives nearby, said Monasia is much less shy as a result of the program.

“I think her social skills have improved the most,” said Mr. Street, who works a housekeeping night shift at Southampton Hospital and is engaged to Monasia’s mother, Mattie. “She’s opening up here. She is excited about it. Anything you bring her, she really likes.”

In particular, Mr. Street said, he and Monasia enjoy doing artwork together. Father and daughter wore matching blue athletic outfits, symbolizing their mutual love of basketball, and Mr. Street said he also hopes to send his daughter to Howard someday.

Ms. Poole and Ms. Stutterheim say the Parent-Child Home Program, which officially runs from November to May, is so popular that parents have requested a summer component.

“They love it so much, but they still need that encouragement,” said Ms. Poole. “They need that motivation to keep sitting down and reading with their kids once a week.”

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