

At home, children schooled in success

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DAWN SHURMAITIS Special to the Times Leader



SWOYERSVILLE – Three-year-old Larissa Ellsworth nestles in her mom's lap, her sweet round face the very picture of intense concentration.

She is, after all, working.

“Silly bunny,” she says, pointing to a well-thumbed page and giggling in delight at the antics of a runaway hare featured in a now-favorite book.

Lori George, a home visitor from the Parent-Child Home Program, prompts Larissa to delve even deeper into the story. “Remember what the bunny grew?” she asks the pony-tailed tot, dressed in a pink T-shirt that says “Daddy’s Exquisite Little Girl.”

Quickly, Larissa answers: “A carrot!”

Larissa and her mother, Mallory Shaffer, have participated in the intensive home visiting program for the past year. The program’s aim is to promote language, literacy and school success through reading, play and verbal interaction between parents and children.

“She’s been all smiles ever since,” says Shaffer, 26. “She gets to learn and have fun with it. If I tell her it’s Tuesday or Thursday she loves it because Miss Lori’s coming.”

When she’s especially happy, a once-shy Larissa dances and sings a little song whose chorus line is “thanks so much.” Mom loves the program because it helps her help her child. Larissa’s dad is Howard Ellsworth.

“I want her to have a bright future,” says Shaffer. “A very bright future.”

The Parent-Child Home Program is one of 12 community organizations featured in the Times Leader’s annual Giving Guide, which began Nov. 27. Readers are encouraged to donate directly to the organizations featured in order to help them continue to serve area residents.

The cost averages \$2,300 per family per year, including books, toys, home visits and administrative expenses. The program works with 100 families in nine school districts in Luzerne County.

Kathy Bolinski, director of community education and outreach, says donations are crucial. Financial support is based on the availability of funds in the state budget and this year started with an 8 percent funding cut.

“If there are serious state budget issues, we could end up getting our program dollars cut more,” says Bolinski.

Started in 2002, the program targets 2- and 3-year-olds in at-risk families and is especially geared toward families that make too much to qualify for Head Start programs but not enough to fund tutors or private pre-school. The ultimate goal is to better prepare kids for school.

The program encourages parents to read to their children and participate in “deliberate” play that helps them learn. The agency trains home visitors like George, who meets with families twice a week for a half hour for 23 weeks, from October through May. Families keep the educational books and toys they’re encouraged to keep using.

The mission is to master effective literacy building skills and create stronger parent-child connections, but the real key is parent participation.

During a recent lesson, her mother reads to Larissa while George provides subtle guidance, asking questions about the action and characters. Later, when they’re alone, Shaffer continues the lessons, prompting Larissa to point to certain characters, review her colors and count objects like trees. While Larissa can’t actually read yet, she has learned to follow words from left to right, how to hold a book and turn the pages, pre-literacy skills that George says will help lay a solid foundation for future reading.

“It’s really a partnership between parent and child,” says George. “We work together.”

According to Bolinski, the program is now at more than 150 sites across the U.S. The program targets families – including two-parent families, single parents, teen parents, foster parents and grandparents raising grandchildren – challenged by poverty, low levels of education, literacy and language barriers. Studies conducted during the past 30 years demonstrate that children in the program outperform comparison children on school readiness measures and on standardized tests throughout elementary school and go on to graduate high school at the rates of children from middle-class families.

Locally, the program is administered through the Luzerne Intermediate Unit No. 18 in collaboration with Family Service Association of Wyoming Valley (FSAWV), Catholic Social Services of Greater Hazleton and the GNA Family Center. The project is funded through the state department of Public Welfare through the Office of Child Development and Early Learning.

“In this day and age, the more educational opportunities available the better,” says Bolinski. “The earlier children are taught, the better off they will be.”

Home Program

To give: Send checks payable to FSAWV: The Parent-Child Home Program, 31 W. Market St., Wilkes-Barre, PA 18701.

To volunteer: Call the FSAWV office in Wilkes-Barre at 823-5144.

To donate items: Call the FSAWV office or send e-mail to kathy.bolinski@verizon.net.

Wish List: Preschool puzzles, crayons, washable markers, stickers, pencil boxes, scarves, hats, mittens or socks for 2-4 year-old children, toothbrushes/toothpaste, children's book shelves, children's tables, Barnes & Nobel gift certificates to purchase books for the program, Toys R Us gift certificates to purchase toys for the program.

Agency's mission: FSAWV is a nonprofit, non-sectarian organization working with children, individuals, families and communities to achieve their potentials.

Service area: Areas covered under the school districts of Pittston Area, Wilkes-Barre Area, Hanover Area, Wyoming Area, Wyoming Valley West, Northwest Area, Lake-Lehman, Dallas and Tunkhannock Area.

Year established locally: Family Service Association of Wyoming Valley was established in 1895. The Parent-Child Home Program began locally in 2002.

Executive director: Dennis R. Gourley, Ph.D., LCSW

Web site: www.fsawv.org

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