

NORTH FORK PATCH



CAST Teaches Literacy, Family Bonding With North Fork Parent-Child Home Program

Through games, toys and books, children learn language and literacy skills, with the parent-child bond is strengthened.

North Fork, NY

By LISA FINN (Patch Staff) - March 10, 2016 1:59 pm ET

NORTH FORK, NY - Vanessa, 3, her brother, Andy, 4 and her mother Alecea, gather around the coffee table in the living room of their cozy East Marion home.

It's a sunny Tuesday afternoon, and the little girl is just home from the baby-sitter. When their guest, Sarah Benjamin, coordinator of the North Fork Parent-Child Home Program, arrives, the children's eyes light up.

Benjamin brings a bag filled with toys and books, puzzles and learning games. The goal, Benjamin said, is to spend time with Vanessa and her mother, teaching Alecea how to interact and play with her child, how to engage in memory-making moments and learning exercises that can build a foundation for excellence in school — and for a strong, loving relationship between parent and child.

CAST recently announced the start of the third year in Southold Town of The North Fork Parent-Child Home Program. The site received national certification in November, 2015.

"The Parent-Child Home Program (PCHP), a research-proven home-visiting model, prepares young children for school success by increasing language and literacy skills, enhancing social-emotional development and strengthening the parent-child relationship which provides critical support to at-risk families," Benjamin said.

In addition, she added, "The program model promotes a safe and healthy development for children which ensures school success by stimulating reading, conversation, and play between parents and their children. The program helps parents create a language-rich home environment and prepares them to actively participate in their children's development and education."

Home visitors support the parent "as their child's first and most important teacher and advocates and acts as a protective factor for the family by developing a long-term relationship — a minimum of two years — with the parent and connecting them to needed services in the community," she said. "This access to support allows parents to nurture their child's social-emotional well-being during difficult times of poverty and loss."

According to Benjamin, the North Fork Parent-Child Home Program site was developed in 2013 to serve the families living in poverty in Southold Town.

"Many thousands of people living here are below the poverty line, despite their affluent neighbors," she said. "This program model has been successfully answering many ongoing needs of families suffering from poverty for almost 50 years in this country, including homeless and immigrant families and is now doing the same thing for Southold Town."

The home-visiting model helps to bridge transportation gaps, as visits are offered in homes across the hamlets of the five local school districts, Benjamin said. "The only early childhood education on the North Fork for families of poverty are Head Start and a small pre-Kindergarten class in Greenport school. They serve less than 100 children together. With the lack of early-childhood education opportunities in Southold Town for families of low income, this proven program is making a difference for young families."

Over 74 families have been served to date, she said.

As Vanessa plays, she intersperses Spanish and English words, laughing with her mother as the two work on a learning game, matching animals, and then, dressing up bears in a wooden puzzle. Next, Vanessa colors with markers, her mother tracing her hands, and then, paints with watercolors. Later, Benjamin reads a book with Vanessa and her mother.

Over the course of the year, Benjamin says, children receive new toys and books they can keep.

Alecea said the toys are kept in a basket in the living room and her children's uncle plays with the kids, too, when he comes to visit.

Benjamin provides Alecia with a sheet of parenting tips, exercises she can work on with her children after she's left the weekly visit.

Alecea said she's thrilled with the program. "It makes my daughter so happy," she said. "She likes the books, and the toys, and she always asks when Miss Sarah is coming back."

The children and families receiving the home-visiting program, Benjamin said, are able to see tangible results for their children in language development, early childhood education and positive behavior socially and emotionally, all paramount for school success.

"Children that enter school not ready to fully participate quickly fall behind their peers. Once they start behind, they often stay behind and cannot catch up. School dropout rates contribute to the regeneration of the poverty cycle they need to escape. Children who have received this program enter school as ready to learn as their more advantaged peers. What happens early lasts forever, and we hope to change the lives of families by supporting them as they raise their children," Benjamin said.

The connection to and relationship with the program coordinator and home visitors becomes a critical source of support, she added.

"Research has proven that a relationship with even one competent and caring adult can make the difference in the life of a parent and their family, acting as a lifeline to the

community at-large. This program is raising the odds that the next generation will break the cycle of poverty and become self-sufficient."

The North Fork Parent-Child Home Program is now currently serving 43 families from Laurel to East Marion.

Funding for the program is raised in addition to the the host, Community Action of Southold Town's, budget. The initiative is being supported by several private foundations, local services organizations and individuals, Benjamin said.

The program is currently up for a matching \$10,000 grant from the Rauch Foundation.

"Due to the lack of early childhood education opportunities for families who cannot pay tuition, this program is filling a large gap for the North Fork public with young children. Science has shown us that what happens in the early years of a child's life when the human brain is developing is key for the potential of that individual for a lifetime. Educational success is key to self-sufficiency. Economics have shown us that for every dollar spent on early education the public is saved \$7-10 later on," she said.

The programs help to meet the needs of a swelling immigrant population form Central America, which has grown on the North Fork, Benjamin said. "Local public schools are challenged by enrollees who do not speak English. Home language arts are not English. The North Fork Parent-Child Home Program provides literacy support in both Spanish and English with bilingual home visitors."

Thee main goal, she added, is to support the parents of these young children to be their kids' most important teachers.

"We empower parents to be active participants in their children's education, increasing communication and understanding between the local communities and schools, bridging gaps that are proven to enhance school success. It would be extremely beneficial to local families and schools to be given state or county funds to support this important work and it would encourage additional funds from private foundational supports," she said.