



# **Literacy And the Parent: A Project Report**

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# Literacy And the Parent:

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# 1. How to use this book

This report is meant to provoke thought and discussion about family literacy. It is not meant to be a formula to be followed when creating other programs. We learned a lot from our project and we hope that this book will contribute to your thinking about family literacy.

You will find here a description of East End Literacy's three-year project, Literacy and the Parent, and how we, as an adult basic literacy program, explored family literacy. We entered this project with some objectives that came out of our initial research, but we kept our minds open. The project that developed was grounded in the needs of the parents in our particular program.

The parents who took part in our Family Issues Group spoke of their needs and the needs of their friends and neighbors who had not yet taken the step of joining a literacy program. Their activities developed from their individual abilities and interests. In another family literacy project, the activities of the parents might take very different forms.

We hope that this report will help you think about the different roles that people in the community play to help parents get access to the information and programs they need.

People who may find this book useful include:

- Adult educators who want to know more about designing and delivering family literacy programming;
- Community workers who run programs for parents and children and who want to integrate family literacy into what they do;

Organizations and people who want to get involved and support family literacy.



## 2. Introduction

The Literacy and the Parent pilot project was launched in 1990 to develop a model of adult education that would support the parent learner in a variety of ways both in our literacy program and in the community.

East End Literacy began its project at a time when family literacy was just beginning in Ontario. Over the three years of this project, I had many opportunities to speak to people doing family literacy programming through meetings of the Ontario Family Literacy Interest Group. Talking with other people who were beginning family literacy programs was a great help to understanding the direction of our project.

Family Literacy programming takes different forms depending on the setting. Our project was planned within an existing adult basic literacy program. Many parts of the project have now become a part of our core program. East End Literacy as a whole has benefited from including children and families in our activities.

From my experiences in coordinating this project, I have concluded that illiteracy is not passed on from one generation to another automatically. It does not appear that a child's literacy development is necessarily handicapped by a parent who can't read. The children of the parents in our literacy program are often doing well in school. It is the parents who are struggling - frustrated and embarrassed that they aren't learning as fast as their children are. The ability to learn to read seems to me to be an individual thing that is also affected by speaking, language, personal relationships and many other factors. Of course the school system plays an important part in what is happening with children's learning. There are many reasons why a person does or doesn't learn to read and write. For these reasons I didn't view our Literacy and the Parent project as an "illiteracy prevention" program. It was, however, a project that developed supportive programming for parents.

Parents who take part in literacy programs are already showing their children by example how much they care about and value learning. However, adults who can't read well need support to be good parents and to help their families get equitable access to the resources in the community.

Adult literacy programs and the community at large can recognize and respond to the needs of parents.

What forms would this response take?

At East End Literacy, when parents talked about family literacy, what surfaced immediately and repeatedly was their need for clear, simple, direct communication with and information about the institutions and organizations that affect family life. Parents and literacy workers can work together to communicate this need, and help parents to function better even as they are learning to read and write. I believe that this is important literacy work and should be a priority in a literacy programs.

Parents who can't read are usually hidden in their own community. They aren't included in the communications that are sent to them from important community institutions such as the schools and the public health department. They struggle with letters from social assistance and forms at the hospital. They are afraid to sign forms from the Children's Aid Society. Misunderstandings arise and the parents feel blamed because they can't read. The institutions giving out this information are not aware of what is hindering these parents. But something can be done to help them. Agencies and institutions can become aware of clear language and design and think of alternative ways of communicating, such as information telephone lines.

Literacy programs can also provide support to parents by making effective referrals to services they need. And by networking and doing outreach in the community, we can build awareness of literacy in other agencies.

The majority of the parents who took part in our project were women and the issues they raised often centered around violence in their lives, the need for safety for themselves and their children, and the need for better access to information and services. We were able to find ways in this project to integrate literacy learning with the women's need for information about safety, through our Wen-Do course and our discussion groups.

Public education was an important part of this project, and it took a particularly interesting form, as you will see from the description in this report. The project staff were not "teaching" the parents to advocate with the school board or city hall. The project instead created opportunities for the parents to do this themselves. They had plenty to say and said it better than a literate person could, because they spoke from their own experience. The role of project staff was to help the parents see where opportunities arose and to act as a sounding board as they organized their presentations. A tremendous amount of learning and confidence developed as a result of these activities.

East End Literacy benefited from this project as a whole because we experimented with many areas of family literacy. Some of our activities were more successful than others, but our program as a whole grew from everything we did. I think it would be a benefit for any literacy program to explore family literacy. The needs of families are so easily forgotten in our society. This report is about what the parents told us they need.

Michele Kuhlmann  
Project Coordinator  
December, 1993



### 3. Project summary

#### Background

The Toronto East End Literacy Project is a well established, community-based organization with a mandate to educate functionally illiterate adults in the densely populated, low-income neighbourhoods of downtown east Toronto.

For many years, the parents in our programs have told us that they are motivated to learn for their children's sake. They do not have to read the social research studies which say that their low socioeconomic status places their children at risk of school failure. They know it. And they fear that their own lack of education will compound this risk. The Literacy and the Parent project created a forum for parents to talk about what they needed. The purpose of the project was to develop a model of parent education that:

- helps parents improve their own literacy, using materials relevant to parenting and their children's education;
- helps parents create a home life that nurtures learning in all its diverse forms;
- helps parents develop the skills and confidence to advocate, on behalf of their children and themselves, for the best education their families can receive;
- promotes community and institutional awareness of the barriers illiterate parents face in reaching these goals;
- advocates for the removal of those barriers.

Drawing on research and our own experience in adult literacy, we created, evaluated and documented an effective approach to empowering parents within the context of an adult literacy program in a low-income, urban setting. Literacy and the Parent was a three-year pilot project which began on July 1, 1990 and ended on June 30, 1993, at which time activities stemming from the project were integrated into our core programming.



The Literacy and the Parent project received funding and support from the National Literacy Secretariat of the Department of the Secretary of State, Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada, the Literacy Branch of the Ontario Ministry of Education (Ontario Training and Adjustment Board), the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services, the Metropolitan Toronto Community Services Department, the City of Toronto, the Toronto Public Library, the Children's Aid Society Foundation, Fairlawn Heights United Church, and Irwin Toy Limited.

## **Project activities**

The summer of 1990 was the planning period for the project. In September, the parents group began to meet, naming themselves the Family Issues Group.

The concerns that parents voiced in the Family Issues Group became the basis for project activities in 1991. Clear language and parent advocacy work was done with the Toronto Board of Education and the Coalition for Student Nutrition. The Children's Library was in place at the beginning of the year and the Family Reading Group met during the summer and fall.

The Project Co-ordinator and parents began to take part in family literacy related groups in the community to communicate what we were doing in our project.

In 1992, we continued our clear language and advocacy activities in the community. The Working For Change committee was created at East End to continue this work after the end of the pilot project.

We took part in the Southeast Toronto Health Project's work with local hospitals to promote clear communication and services.

The Project Co-ordinator and parents worked on the production and publication of The Ontario Family Literacy Interest Group Manual, *Learning Together* and the Literacy For Social Change book, *Choices and Changes*.

We invited storytellers to the Family Reading Group to explore oral history and storytelling with parents and children. We worked with Celia Lotteridge, who developed the Mother Goose Parent Child Program.

In January of 1993, the Project Co-ordinators and the other direct service staff evaluated the Literacy and The Parent project. A model for describing Community Literacy Integrated Programing (CLIP) was developed from this evaluation.

We continued to improve our information and referral services. We offered a Wen-Do women's self-defence course in the spring and a women's discussion group in the summer.

The Project Co-ordinator continued as an advisor to the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women on its Women and Literacy research project, which will be published in 1994.

We began planning how we could continue to work on clear language communication with the Children's Aid Society after the end of the pilot project.

## **Participation**

Fifty parents and caregivers took part in the project over a three year period ('caregiver' in this report refers to a literacy learner who has a job as a babysitter or nanny, or who babysits children of relatives or friends. Of the participants, 80 per cent were women. Thirty-four per cent were single parents, and 56 per cent were on social assistance.

## **Actions stemming from the project**

The Literacy and the Parent project helped us to develop our understanding of working with 'the whole person' and to integrate this understanding into our overall literacy programming. We learned an enormous amount about the organizations in our community that we can work with to ensure that parents in our program have access to programs and services that do not fall within our mandate. The project helped us to identify literacy issues of concern to parents, and to develop methods of including parents in doing public education around those issues.

The following recommendations summarize actions that East End Literacy is planning or has already taken to build on the lessons from the Literacy and the Parent project.

1. Community Literacy Integrated Programming (CLIP), described in the evaluation section of this report, has been developed at East End, partly in response to the need to integrate family literacy into our core program.
2. East End Literacy will continue to advocate for clear language information for parents, in particular with the schools, the Children's Aid Society, the health care system, the social service system, and grass roots community organizations.
3. East End Literacy will continue to offer Wen-Do and other forms of education geared to safety for women and children in cooperation with other groups in the community.
4. We will continue to build our resource collection for parents and our Children's Library.
5. We will continue to build our contacts with other community groups working with families.



## 4. Group work

### **The planning group**

In July, 1990, we formed a work group of three adult learners, two volunteers, and three staff. The members of the work group were all parents and caregivers themselves. The group planned how to organize a parents' group, found space for the group at Central Neighbourhood House one block away from East End Literacy, and called parents to see when they were available. The group also talked about issues that might come up for discussion in a parents' group and began to collect resources on these topics. This group continued to meet through 1991.

### **Student intake, support and information gathering**

Throughout the project, the Coordinator kept a project diary of activities that summarized all group meetings, attendance, community outreach contacts, meetings and referral information. She recorded meeting with learners, volunteers and other project staff.

As a result of the Literacy and the Parent Project, we have redesigned our student interview and learning plan forms, and have created a new form for parents to use as part of the interview. The new forms ask parents what they need in literacy to help them as parents. Having these questions as part of the first contact with a new learner in the program allows a conversation about the family to take place. It improves our ability to support them and their tutors in many ways. We can provide referral information for child and family services, direct them to family-related materials for tutoring, invite families to our social events and plan activities for the children who come. We can also provide funds for childcare during tutoring sessions.

### **The Family Issues Group**

The first parents' group met once a week from mid-September, 1990 through April, 1991. Nine adult learners took part in that group. There were two volunteer tutors and two staff facilitators in the group. The group named itself the Family Issues Group.

From the outset, the group agreed that the subjects for discussion and learning should be determined by the participants. The parents talked about:

- problems of child behavior in separated and divorced families
- older children's behavior
- support for parents with disabilities
- getting the help you need from Children's Aid Society workers
- what to do when children bring home dirty needles found in school yard
- the relation between hearing and vision problems and behavior in small children; identifying these problems on time
- going to the hospital with sick children; getting the information you need; signing consent forms when you can't read; role of patient advocates
- fear of Children's Aid Society investigations; fear of losing custody of children because of illiteracy
- using the subway with small children when you have a reading problem
- pharmacists making mistakes printing dosage information on children's prescriptions and parents not being able to detect the mistakes with confidence
- surviving incest
- parents caring for their own parents
- understanding written communication coming from the school
- the need for clearly written information about AIDS

### **Activities stemming Iron group discussions:**

In addition to reading and writing about these topics in the group, the members invited or phoned resource people to get answers to specific questions.

We talked to the Patient Representative at Sick Children's Hospital about the needs of under-educated parents who bring their children to the hospital.

One learner spoke to the Health Department about how to get information about who is responsible for cleaning up needles left in schoolyards. As a group we designed a flyer for basic readers that explains how to safely dispose of the needles.

Two group members attended a community meeting about AIDS at the Woodgreen Community Centre. They stressed the need for clear language and design of print information on this subject.

The group invited Carolyn Klopstock from the Public Health Department to one meeting and prepared a list of questions about how to deal with doctors, such as:

- At a hospital clinic, how do you find your doctor when they keep switching your doctor?
- Being transferred to more than one doctor in a clinic, how do you get the results of your tests? We have had experiences of records being lost and tests having to be retaken. What do you do in a situation like this?
- Doctors are not giving information and specialists are not explaining treatment and decisions. How do we get the right information?
- Does the medical profession listen to male patients more than female patients?

During the first three months of 1991, the Family Issues Group meetings focused on projects the parents were working on, which are described elsewhere in this report. During this time, parents also began to ask themselves why they found it so hard to read even simple story books to their children. The feelings they expressed were helpful in planning our Family Reading Group.

In March, 1992, Diane Padychuk came to East End Literacy to talk to us about the South East Toronto Health Project. This 'action research' project talked to agencies about what people in the community need so that health services can be better co-ordinated. Our Family Issues Group discussions encouraged the project to focus on clear language and design and alternatives to print.

Parents also talked about their experiences taking their children to the hospital. These concerns were taken by parents to a meeting organized by the Southeast Toronto Health Project with the administration of three local hospitals at the end of September 1992. (See details in Advocacy section.) Over the course of the project, 31 people took part in the Family Issues Group meetings. Nine parents took part in the weekly group meetings and an additional nine parents took part in the meetings on health issues. Seven children came to the groups with their parents.

### **Family Reading and Storytelling Groups**

We introduced a Family Reading Group during the summer and fall of 1991. Parents were encouraged to bring their children, and a play program for children was included in the group design.

The parents met in the room where we have our library of children's books. They talked about the books with staff and tutors, who had also brought their children. Meanwhile, the children played, drew, and listened to stories with a paid childcare worker in another room. At lunch, the parents and children came together again, ate, and looked at books together. Then parents borrowed books to read at home.

One of the issues raised by the Family Issues Group about reading with children was that it can be a painful and humiliating experience for a parent who is not an experienced reader, and that it can be a source of tension rather than pleasure and learning. In our Family Reading Group, we took the approach that parents could use books to tell a story to their children with the pictures if they did not feel comfortable with the words, and that often this method of storytelling was very creative and pleasurable.

In November 1991, the staff met with storyteller Dawne McFarlane and discussed using storytelling in the group to model this method and to help parents relax. Dawne is also interested in family history as storytelling, and we felt that this was a natural link with family literacy.

At one of the groups, Dawne told the story of her grandfather. This brought memories to other people of their own families. They began to remember stories from Ireland and Jamaica. There were surprising similarities in family customs. They started remembering their grandmothers, the food they cooked, stories about childbirth and how children were raised.

The parents coming to the Family Reading Group also used the time to raise many family concerns and problems. They asked, for example, about how to help children understand death, and about the problems and conflicts young parents have living with their own parents. We used our parents' resource collection to find information we needed and books to help discussion.

The parents wanted to learn from each other about better ways to relate to their children. During one group meeting, a parent, Cathy, talked about how she was trying to stop yelling at her daughter. Cathy was trying to play with her or read stories when she was being 'bad' rather than get into a fight. Cathy said that she herself is bored by the repetition in children's books. But she noticed and learned from what other parents were doing with their children in the group. When Michael, a staff member, was reading aloud to the children, Cathy commented on how Michael used his voice to make the story fun and silly, and enjoyable for both himself and the children.

One woman was doing gentle exercises with her baby's arms and legs as it lay on the floor. Another mother with her baby watched her as we talked. At another meeting, we talked about how there is jealousy between the first and second child in families. One mother talked about how she plans for time alone with her older child.

One mother was going through a custody hearing. She worried about how her older daughter felt about her parents being separated. She took some books from our library that are written especially for children about separation. Another mother was trying to get her young son back into school and into a special education class. He was being tutored at home now and had health problems. She came to the group by herself and enjoyed the chance to talk with other parents.

From December 1991 through the spring of 1992, there were monthly groups. Three storytellers took part in the groups: Dawne McFarlane, Colin Anthony and Michael Moore. In May, 1992, mothers and children from the Regent Park Parent/Child Drop-in came to the group. Some of the mothers and children who came had very little experience listening to stories, so we tried different ways of interacting to make listening easier. Michael Moore told stories that the children could take part in either by repeating what was said or by guessing what would happen. Colin Anthony told humorous Native Canadian stories. On one occasion, a learner and caregiver brought a favourite children's book and read to the whole group.

In the late summer of 1992, the project staff met with Celia Lotteridge of the Mother Goose Parent-Child Program. Celia is also a well known storyteller and author of children's books. Celia described how the Mother Goose Program involves parents in activities that develop language, images and rhymes. The mothers use these skills their children at home thus teaching language and an interest in reading to their children. She talked about ways that we could do storytelling in our group and how the parents who can't read would benefit from the increase in their confidence in expressing themselves.

In the fall of 1992, we offered a series of five Storytelling Groups. Five parents and one caregiver took part in the groups'. Only one parent was able to bring her son. We hadn't expected to have a group of only parents. There were a variety of reasons why the other parents and caregivers could not bring children, mainly because of school and daycare schedules.

The absence of children really put the parents on the spot as storytellers. The atmosphere was too serious even as we tried to play with language. The group really needed children to lighten it up and be more fun. We tried to think of different ways to continue and make it fun but it never got off the ground as a group. We came to the conclusion that we weren't the right setting for this kind of group and that a parent-child drop-in, which was already built into family routines, would be better.

Looking back, there are other lessons to learn from the failure of the Storytelling Group. The Family Reading Group was certainly a more useful experience for parents. There were a variety of activities in that group, and even when we had storytellers come, we still included discussion, family stories, personal concerns, and children's books and stories.

The storytelling that went on in the Family Reading Group was the telling of personal and family stories, or oral history. Dawne, Michael and Michele told stories from their own family lives, and then the parents did the same. They were telling their own stories; they were not learning how to tell someone else's, and this seemed to work better for the parents. This principle is true for all storytellers, who are taught to "become" their stories in order to tell them best. We learned from this experience that we would have to create a space where people's stories come alive and are told from the heart, or else we are just putting people through an exercise they don't understand. As a staff we hope to find a way to use storytelling effectively in our program in the future.

During 1991-92, 16 parents, 5 caregivers, and 27 children took part in both the Reading and Storytelling Groups.

### **Wen-Do and the Women's Group**

Throughout the three years of the Literacy and the Parent project, it seemed that when parents got together in a group they talked a lot about the problems in their lives with relationships, feeling unsafe, violent experiences and sexual harassment. The project staff decided that group work in the last six months of the pilot project should make space for these issues.

In May and June, we offered a Wen-Do Women's Self Defence course for women learners and tutors. Seventeen women from East End Literacy took part in this six-session course.

We planned the course with Beth Wood, a Housing Worker at Genesis Place across the street from East End Literacy. This supportive housing project has a community room that was an excellent space for the course. Three women who live at Genesis Place also took part. The City of Toronto Parks and Recreation Department provided the instructor.

For literacy learners taking the course, clear verbal and written communication was essential. Before the course began, the Wen-Do instructor came to meet us at East End Literacy. She spoke to students, tutors and staff at our Program Committee meeting and we told her about our needs for clear communication for literacy learners. Throughout the course she spoke to staff and checked with us how well she was communicating. During the class, she was careful to give examples and demonstrate what she was speaking about.

There was a lot of interest in the Wen-Do course at East End Literacy. Many women who wanted to take the course were not able to because of time restraints. The Program committee has recommended that we re-apply to the City to offer the course again next year.

The Wen-Do course itself includes a lot of discussion and information on violence against women. We also organized group discussion sessions after the course to allow the women to bring up issues they wanted more information about.

Seven women attended these discussions. At the first two groups we talked about what we had learned in the Wen-do course, violence in our lives and when we feel unsafe. Many of the women who had taken the course or come to the women's group had experienced assault. They talked about bad experiences with how the police treated them and, as the victim, not feeling supported when they were in court.

In response to this, we planned our third meeting with a speaker from the Community and Legal Aid Services Program (CLASP) at Osgoode Hall Law School. She came to East End Literacy and told us about their services to help women who have laid assault charges go through court. The women asked her questions and she told them how to get in touch with her.

Women wanted to know more about their rights with the Children's Aid Society. For parents who can't read and are anxious about decisions affecting their children, complicated verbal communication print information is a problem. Also, women who are going through separation and court cases because of domestic violence are often worried about how this will affect their custody of their children. We invited the Parent's Rights Advocate who is working with the Catholic Children's Aid Society to come and talk to the women's group. East End Literacy will continue to work with the Children's Aid Society on issues of literacy and clear communications in the future.





## 5. Resource Collections

### Parents' Resource Collection

In response to the interests expressed by parents in our program, we have acquired and continue to add materials to our resource collection on the following subjects:

- parenting pre-schoolers and young children
- pregnancy
- baby's health
- first aid for children
- listings of parent resources in Toronto
- fathering young children
- information on legal aid
- the experience of Caribbean children in Canadian schools
- family law
- sexual assault and incest (for parents)
- sexual assault and incest (for children)
- battered women
- prescription drug dependency
- bringing up a handicapped child alone
- childcare directory

- how to read with children
- stealing

The books on early child development and parenting (especially the *Nobody's Perfect* parenting packs) are very popular. Books on sexual abuse and incest have been borrowed more than any other books in the collection.

There are many areas where readable materials still need to be developed to meet the needs of parents who are literacy learners. East End Literacy plans, for example, to help the Children's Aid Society publish a book in clear language for parents so that they can read about their rights in custody disputes.

Here are some of the books in our collection that are well-liked and heavily used, with ordering information (if we have it). The Ontario Family Literacy Interest Group's manual, *Learning Together: Family Literacy in Ontario*, has an excellent resource list for family literacy programs. It can be ordered from the Family Literacy Interest Group of Ontario, 35 Ellerbeck St., Kingston, Ontario K7L 4H5.

*Period*, Gardner-Loulan, Lopez and Quackenbush, Volcano Press Inc., 330 Ellis Street, #518, Dept. B, San Francisco, Ca. 94102

*I call it the Curse! a book about periods*, East End Literacy Press, distributed by Pippin Publishing, 380 Esna Park Drive, Markham, Ontario, L3R 1H5

*Degrassi Talks* (a series on alcohol, drugs, and sex), Mint Publishers Inc., 83 Woodlawn Avenue West, Toronto, Ontario M4V 1G6

*I am worth the effort: a handbook for women in abusive relationships*, Judith Kelsey, Iris Kirby House (St. John's Transition House) P.O. Box 6208, St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada A1C 6J9

*Belle's letters: voices from homes of violence*, written by participants in a women's writing project conducted by Mary Hutchison in conjunction with Doris Women's Refuge and the Incest Centre, P.O. Box 92, Canberra City 2601, Australia

*Let the healing begin: Breaking the Cycle of Child Sexual Abuse in our Communities*, Maureen McEvoy, Nicola Valley Institute of Technology, Box 399, Merritt, B.C. V0K 2B0

*No more secrets for me*, Oralee Wachter, Little, Brown and Co., Boston and Toronto

*The childbearing year*, Barbara B. Holstein, New Readers Press (publishing division of Laubach Literacy International), Syracuse, New York

*The right to control what happens to your body: a straightforward guide to issues of sexuality and sexual abuse*, Roeher Institute, Mnsmen Building, York University, 4700 Keele St., North York, Ont. M3J 1P3

*Let's talk about sexual assault*, Victoria Women's Sexual Assault Centre, 306 - 620 View Street, Victoria, B.C. VSW 1J6

*Sexual assault: information for adult survivors*, Victoria Women's Sexual Assault Centre (see above)

*Childhood sexual abuse: a booklet for adult survivors*, Victoria Women's Sexual Assault Centre (see above)

*Handbook for young mothers*, Dr. Frances Peck, Rainer Foundation, 89 Blackheath Hill, London SE 108YS, England

*Having a baby: an English as a Second Language workbook for beginners*, Helen Cunningham, Vancouver Community College, King Edward Campus, 1155 East Broadway, Box #24620, Station C, Vancouver, B.C., V6T 4N3

*The well baby book*, Mike Samuels, M.D. and Nancy Samuels, Summit Books, Simon and Schuster, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020, U.S.A.

*No repeats: a book about women and prescription pills*, Reynolds, McAlpine and McAlpine, Action on Women's Addictions - Research and Education (AWARE), P.O. Box 86, Kingston, Ont. K7L 4V6

*Words that count women (out) in*, Ontario Women's Directorate, Government of Ontario.

*Women: where have we been? Where are we going?* Action Read Community Literacy Centre and Garlic Press, 45 Cork Street East, Guelph, Ont. N1H 2W7

*You can be free: an easy-to-read-handbook for abused women*, Ginny NiCarthy and Sue Davidson, Seal Press, 3131 Western Ave., # 410, Seattle, Washington 98121-1028, U.S.A.

*Survive: don't be a victim, a tough self-defense technique that works - by a woman for women*, (illustrated), Debbie Gardner, Warner Books, P.O. Box 690, New York, N.Y. 10019, U.S.A.

## **Children's Library**

In the early days of community literacy in Toronto, there were few books around for adult literacy learners that had content relevant to their lives. It was demeaning for adults to try to learn to read using children's books, so literacy programs began to create their own books for adults, and to weed the children's books out of the resource collections. But by 1990, there were enough books with interesting subject matter for adults to think about creating a separate collection for parents to choose from when reading with their children.

As we were beginning to develop a library of children's books, the congregation of Fairlawn United Church chose our project as the focus of their White Gift Sunday. We consulted with them on the kind of books that we needed for a literacy program. They gave us four boxes of easy-to-read children's books and tapes for our library. When we bought books to add to this collection, we chose colourful picture books with simple texts and storybooks with tapes that assist the parent as well as the child. Many of the books have only a few words on each page and very large print. These books are., small, with cardboard or soft covers that very young children and babies can hold easily. Four learners who took part in the Literacy and the Parent project helped the staff to organize the books into a lending library. The books are arranged face out on low shelves in the tutoring room, so that small children can reach them. Parents can take one book home to keep for their children and can borrow and return any number.

In December 1990 we introduced the Children's Library to the parents and caregivers at East End Literacy by holding two 'Book Looking Events,' one in the daytime and one in the evening. The new books were on display, staff and volunteers were on hand to talk about the books, and there were refreshments. Twenty-one people came to see the new children's and parent's resource collections.

Because of the children's library, parents and caregivers started to bring children to the Wednesday Night Drop-in at East End. This means that there is a place in our program for parents who cannot arrange childcare.

The following is a story from project co-ordinator Michele Kuhlmann about how one parent uses the Children's Library:

Dorothy has a three year old daughter and lives on social assistance. She is a basic reader who meets her tutor at East End Literacy on Wednesday afternoons. She has always had books at home for her daughter, and she feels good about herself as a parent that she provides them for her child. But Dorothy has never said that she actually tries to read them.

She was meeting with her tutor the day the Children's Library was put into the tutoring room. She took one book and borrowed another. Dorothy and her tutor used the books in their tutoring session. They found that she had picked a book that was too hard for her to read. During their session they tried out different books from the library and found that there were many books that Dorothy could read.

Dorothy was really surprised that some children's books are easier than others and she could choose these. Because the books are in the same room where she works with her tutor, Marty, Dorothy can try out books to find what she can read that will also interest her daughter. Dorothy and Marty now use the children's library as a regular part of their tutoring sessions.

The following books are very popular with the parents and children in our program. The Family Literacy Interest Group manual, *Learning Together*, contains an excellent resource list for family literacy.

*Going into hospital*, Althea, Dinosaur Publications, Fontana Paperbacks, (Collins Publishing Group)

*What kind of family is this? a book about step families*, Barbara Seuling, Golden Books, Western Publishing Co. Inc., Racine, Wisconsin 53404, U.S.A.

*When you were a baby*, Debbie Slier, Cheekerboard Press, U.S.A.

*See how you grow*, Dr. Patricia Pearse and Edwina Riddell, (a lift-the- flap body book), Barron's Educational Series Inc., 250 Wireless Boulevard, Hauppauge, New York 117887, U.S.A.

*Its my body: a book to teach young children how to resist uncomfortable touch*, Parenting Press Inc. P.O. Box 75267, Seattle, Washington 98125, U.S.A.

*Friends*, Helen Oxenbury, Wander Books/Baby Board Books, Simon & Shuster Inc., New York, N.Y. U.S.A.

*This little piggy and Baa baa black sheep*, Moira Kemp, Kids Can Press Ltd., 585-112 Bloor St. West, Toronto, Ontario M6G 1K3

*Pat the bunny*, Dorothy Kunhardt, Western Publishing Co. Inc., Racine, Wisconsin 53404, U.S.A.

*Angry feelings*, (one of a series of five titles) Clairece Feagin, Contemporary Books, 180 N. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60601, U.S.A.

*Red is Best*, Kathy Stinson, Annick Press Ltd., 15 Patricia Drive, Toronto, Ontario M4C 5K2.

*Mommy and Daddy are fighting*, Susan Paris, The Seal Press, 3131 Western Ave., #410, Seattle, Washington 98121-1028, U.S.A.

*Nobody's Perfect*, Att. Nobody's Perfect Orders, Canada Communication Group Publishing, Ottawa, Canada K1A 0S9

*Talking to children/talking to parents about sexual assault*, Lois Loontjens, Network Publications, c/o ETR Associates, P.O. Box 1830, Santa Cruz, California 955061-1830, U.S.A.

*Where do babies come from?* Margaret Sheffield, Jonathan Cape, 32 Bedford Square, London, England

*It hurts!* (one in a series) Anne Sibley O'Brien, Henry Holt and Co. Inc., 521 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10175, U.S.A.



## 6. Advocacy

From the beginning of the Literacy and the Parent project, some members of the Family Issues Group expressed a strong interest in working on advocacy projects linked to their community. They expressed particular interest in:

- working with the Toronto Board of Education on improving communications between the schools and under-educated parents
- working with anti-poverty groups on nutrition issues
- expressing concerns around health to doctors and hospitals.

Three learners became very involved in advocacy projects. All were parents living on social assistance. One volunteer tutor and two staff members provided support to the learners doing advocacy projects.

### Home-school communication

Parents who do not have much education have trouble understanding written communication coming from the school, and this affects their ability to help their children. Often, the material is written at a college or university reading level and is completely inaccessible to parents who attend literacy programs. When parents cannot act upon such information, they can give the school the false impression that they do not care about their children's education.

**Above: Debbie Sims collects signatures for the "hot lunch" petition at an International Women's Day event**

The Adult Basic Education Consultative Committee (ABECC) is an advisory body to the Toronto Board of Education, composed of literacy providers, school officials and trustees with an interest in furthering adult basic education policies. East End Literacy has been a member of this committee since it was formed in 1985. In the fall of 1990, we placed the issue of home-school communications on the ABECC agenda. The committee invited us to do a presentation on this issue. Debbie Sims, a parent member of our Family Issues Group worked with the staff to prepare a two hour presentation that clearly showed the reading difficulty of materials coming to her home. She also demonstrated how changing the wording and design of the materials, as well as using alternatives to print, could improve parental understanding and response to school information.

As a result of this presentation, the Toronto Board of Education set up a clear language team in its Adult Basic Education Unit to train school personnel in the use of clear language and design. At the community level, members of the Family Issues Group visited local schools to raise this issue.

### **Hot Lunches in the Schools**

During Family Issues Group discussions in January, 1991, parents stressed that good nutrition was essential to children's learning, but that poverty gets in the way of good nutrition. The group knew from experience that there are many badly nourished children in our schools.

Through her work with the Toronto Board of Education, Debbie Sims was told by our school trustee of a campaign to institute hot, nutritious lunch programs in all Toronto schools. Debbie spoke with Fiona Knight of FoodShare and decided to help organize community support. Debbie brought the issue to the attention of the Family Issues Group and obtained support from the Literacy and the Parent project for some of the childcare, transportation and meal costs she would incur, as well as tutorial support with making print materials for the campaign. Debbie recruited Lloyd, another learner and parent, to help with the organizing and public speaking. Tutor Myra Partridge and staff members Anna Thompson and Michele Kuhlmann acted as resource people.

It is important to note that Debbie and Lloyd's work focused on building community support for the Hot Lunches campaign from parents who do not normally enter the public forum because they do not respond to traditional ways of building community awareness. This is what Debbie and Lloyd did:

- Debbie met with Fiona Knight to look at the campaign flyer. It was far too difficult for Debbie and many other parents to read. Debbie rewrote the flyer with other parents from the neighbourhood.
- Debbie talked with children in the schoolyard across from her house to find out what they wanted: a breakfast program, a snack program, or a hot lunch program.
- Debbie and Lloyd went to the Hospital for Sick Children and The Wellesley Hospital to talk to nutritionists about what makes a nutritious lunch or snack.

- Mary Gordon, who co-ordinates the Toronto Board of Education's parenting programs, met with Debbie and helped with distributing the new flyer.
- Parents came to Debbie's house to stuff envelopes and send out information packages to community groups.
- Debbie and Lloyd enlisted the support of community groups to donate photocopying, paper and stamps to distribute the flyer. The Toronto Public Library system agreed to distribute the flyer through their mail.
- Debbie and Lloyd helped to form the Coalition for Student Nutrition at a meeting in Trustee McConnell's office. The coalition was made up of community groups concerned with poverty, such as FoodShare and LIFT (Low Income Families Together).
- There were weekly meetings with the Family Issues Group and spontaneous meetings with staff to check how things were going and get advice.
- Debbie asked the local food banks to start keeping a record of the number of parents who ask for food for their children's school lunches. This is the first time that food banks have kept statistics on parents' needs.
- Debbie and Lloyd met with the principals of the following local schools: Rose Avenue, Winchester, Regent Park, Duke of York, Park, and Lord Dufferin.
- The coalition organized a public panel for the March 18 meeting of the Toronto Board of Trustees. Debbie agreed to speak on the panel as a community representative. Four hundred people attended. Many of the parents who had helped Debbie with the flyer lacked the confidence to go downtown to a public meeting. Debbie decided to act as a bridge for them. She met with them in her home and got their input. She worked with about 50 parents this way.
- Debbie asked for help to design a petition so that parents who could not go to the Toronto Board meeting would still be heard. Debbie recruited teenagers from the Cabbagetown Youth Centre to circulate the petition. Four thousand parents signed.

In the fall, parents all over Metro Toronto were asked if they wanted the nutrition project in their children's school and if they want a breakfast, hot lunch or snack. In order for the parents to respond to this proposal they needed to know they had the choice. Debbie worked with the Coalition For Student Nutrition on how this information could get to parents who cannot read or are very basic readers. With support from staff at East End Literacy she rewrote the proposal in clear language and made a very simple flyer for parents. She also suggested ways to get



information to parents through the local parent/child drop-in at Regent Park School, and they agreed to provide a phone line for parents on this project.

As of January, 1992, 10 schools were doing pilot projects over four years. In each school, parents decided whether to set up a breakfast, hot lunch, or snack program. The Coalition for Student Nutrition members, including Debbie, worked with the parents in making their proposals, helping them to think through what they would apply for, what menus they wanted, and the costs for their projects.

Debbie remains a spokesperson on the Coalition for parents who cannot read. She is very concerned about the menus, which go home with the children so that parents can choose, as there are many different communities that may need very different kinds of food. Debbie has repeatedly reminded the coalition members that the roles are reversed for non-reading parents and their children. For these parents, the child is reading information from the school to the parent. Literate adults take confidentiality for granted if their child gives them a note. The non-reading parent is in the position of depending on the child to read notes and maybe to write them too. Debbie keeps fighting for clear language and design in print information, and alternative communications such as phone information lines. Our area School Trustee, Pam McConnell, has been very much affected by Debbie's work in this area and has herself become a spokesperson for clear language and design.

Debbie feels that the Coalition members changed their outlook on her as a non-reader over the time she worked with them. They respected her and her abilities and she has become a vital member of the Coalition. She learned an enormous amount about the workings of the Board of Education, the City of Toronto, Metro, and the Provincial government, as the proposal was made to each in the cost sharing arrangement. She also went through the complete process of budgeting the project. She took part in public meetings, deputations, presentations at government meetings, and press conferences. She was able to make a contribution to every phase of the process.

Debbie chose this project because it directly affected her children and the families in her neighbourhood: "It will be better for the children." The Coalition is now working to create nutrition programs in schools throughout Ontario.

### **City of Toronto**

Debbie's presentation to the Toronto Board of Education on the need for clear communication sparked the interest of the Equal Opportunity Office at the City of Toronto, which had established a committee to help plan activities during International Literacy Year. Debbie and Lloyd gave workshops to City Hall employees on the importance of clear language and design in public communications. They also field test materials produced by City employees after they had taken the workshops to give them feedback on readability.

Debbie was invited to join the Mayor's Committee on the Status of Women as a spokesperson for literacy, clear language and design, and alternatives to print. The committee looks at issues such as violence against women, rape, poverty, health, safety, and disabilities, and brings these issues to the public through the media.

Debbie says that when she works with professional people in a group like this, she tries to make them aware of the needs of a non-reader. She always tries to give them real examples of experiences she and other people have had in not being able to read information and the often disastrous results of not getting the message. She feels that it is a long process, but people are beginning to listen.

### **Health Communications: Southeast Toronto Health Project**

In August, 1992, parents and project staff from East End Literacy met with Jackie Edwards and Margot Frances of the Southeast Toronto Health Project. The purpose of this project was to work with community organizations and three east Toronto hospitals that wanted to know how they could improve their services to the community. Parents from the Family Issues Group had identified the difficulties that non-readers have using hospitals as a serious issue very early in the project. We organized three discussion sessions at East End for literacy learners to talk about their health concerns and difficulties reading information when going to the hospital.

The Southeast Toronto Health Project organized a workshop at the 519 Church Community Centre. Learners and staff from the Literacy and the Parent project presented our concerns to representatives from The Wellesley Hospital, St. Michael's Hospital, and Central Hospital. As a result of this workshop, East End Literacy was asked by The Wellesley Hospital to help them with the re-design of one of their emergency department forms

### **Future Advocacy Projects**

Responding to the need parents expressed for clearer and better communication with the Children's Aid Society, East End Literacy redrafted the Children's Aid Society's basic policies in clear language format. This was passed on to Ken Sosa, Community Worker with Toronto East Branch of the Metro Children's Aid Society.

In the summer of 1993, East End Literacy began to explore the possibility of a project involving the Catholic and Metro Children's Aid Societies and a Parent's Rights Group. The project would generate awareness of literacy issues and improve communication between parents and the children's aid societies. Public education projects of this kind are a way to continue to work on family literacy issues after the Literacy and the Parent pilot project is completed.

Parents who took part in the Family Issues Group talked about their activities at the East End Literacy Program Committee meetings during 1991. During our organizational review that year, people began to think a great deal about the need for clear language communication at East End Literacy and in the community. We decided to form an Advocacy Committee that would train volunteers to do clear language workshops in the community. This committee was formed in 1992 and named itself the Working For Change Committee. To date, members have done clear language and design consultations and workshops with the Riverdale Housing Action Group, the Wellesley Hospital, and educators from the Canadian Federation of Housing Co-operatives.



## 7. Community outreach

### Parent outreach to parents

In the Advocacy section of this report we described how the Hot Lunches in the Schools campaign involved learners in the Literacy and the Parent Project. The following anecdote from project co-ordinator Michele Kuhlmann and learner Debbie Sims shows how parent-learners involved in advocacy can help break down the fear and resistance many parents from our community feel about getting a basic education:

*Debbie brought the Hot Lunches issue to the Family Issues Group. As a parent living on assistance, this was a very important issue for her. Debbie knows that there are many parents in her neighbourhood who cannot read well but are afraid or not able to come to a literacy program. She wanted to include these parents in the work of the Family Issues Group. Debbie told me how she went to the Cabbagetown Youth Centre and showed parents the Hot Lunches in the Schools flyer as they came in to pick up their kids. Getting suggestions for the flyer was one way she was able to reach out to other parents:*

**Above: Volunteers read to children and paint faces at the Word on the Street book festival**

One woman who doesn't do anything - she is a total drop-out and loser - came up to me. She was very excited and she said that the flyer was a good idea. She said, 'I can't afford to feed my kids. I think I want to say yes, yes!' She kept saying 'yes!' So I said to her, 'What would you like on the flyer so that you can understand it?' She said, 'Yes, yes all the way around.' Because she couldn't read the flyer, she couldn't even spell yes. I wrote yes and she wrote it all the way around and she said yes, that's what she wanted. But she couldn't read it. She couldn't write her son's name. So she never attended any school meetings. She never attended anything. She didn't know how her child was doing or anything.

When she saw the new flyer (with the 'yes' border) she cried. She said, 'I've never seen anything I've done on paper. I didn't think I was important enough to do anything like this.' When I actually told her that I couldn't read very well, she didn't believe me. She didn't think other people had a problem with reading, only her. This woman is afraid to go out and stays home most of the time.

That's when I started getting involved with the parents. They would come to me and I would go and make a presentation to the people at the (school) board. A lot of people want to do it but they are afraid to come out (to meetings). They would come to me and say what they wanted or 'what could I do?' That's when we started doing things like stuffing envelopes... Parents would come to my house... this is how I got the parents involved. I had about 50 parents participating, phoning me. We put together the (new) flyer for 'Hot Lunches in the Schools' in a day.

Debbie asked for help from East End Literacy to design and print an easy-to-read petition, to give a say to parents who were afraid to go to the public meeting at the Toronto Board of Education. Debbie recruited teenagers from the Cabbagetown Youth Centre to circulate the petition. Four thousand people signed it, and it was presented to the school board on March 18, 1991.

YES YES

YES YES

YES YES

# Hot Lunch at School



Would You Like Your Child to have a School Lunch Programme?

If YES Please Come to  
the meeting on  
**Monday, March 18,**  
**7:30 PM**  
**Education Centre Auditorium**  
**6th Floor, 155 College Street**  
One block west of College and University

Free Childcare

For more information,  
CALL **FIONA KNIGHT AT FOODSHARE 392-6655**



## **Project outreach and contacts**

The following is a partial list of groups we contacted in the community in connection with the Literacy and the Parent Project. This list highlights the areas where we have worked cooperatively to enrich our programs. We continue to develop our links with other groups who strengthen families in our communities. This has been one of the positive outcomes of our LAP project.

### **Gerrard Resource Centre**

We talked with the staff at the Centre to see how our parents could use the emergency daycare service and the childcare registry. They also told us of the consultation service they offer to parents privately to help with parenting issues. The co-ordinator offered our project the use of their space for our group meetings. We used the centre through the winter and spring of 1991 to hold our Family Issues Group meetings. This made it much easier for parents to bring children to the group, because the centre has a play space for children.

### **Earlscourt Child and Family Centre**

In 1991, the centre's programs in the Separate Schools in our area asked Anna Thompson, staff member from our Literacy and the Parent project to help with their flyers and to talk to parents at parent-teacher functions. This was an opportunity for us to hear the needs of under-educated parents who use the Child and Family Centre's services but are not attending literacy programs.

### **Regent Park Community Health Centre**

During 1991, Anna became a contact person with the Community Liaison Committee of the Health Centre, and brought the Family Issues Group's concerns to the committee, especially the issues of clear language and access to health information. This led to an introductory workshop on clear language and design, facilitated by East End Literacy staff, for the entire staff of the health centre. We also contacted the staff at the Health Centre for advice on parent's health issues and domestic violence.

### **Parenting Administrator, Toronto Board of Education**

We asked Mary Gordon to come to East End Literacy in 1991 to talk about how we can work with our local parent/child drop-in centres. We talked about the literacy needs of the parents who use the centres. Mary offered to set up a phone line for parents who can't read to get school information. This is now operating out of Regent Park/ Duke of York Public School.

### **The Regent Park Parent-Child Drop-in**

Joyee Allen, who co-ordinates the parent-child drop-in at Regent Part Public School, visited East End Literacy in April, 1992. We invited the mothers in the Drop-in to come to our Family Reading Group, which they did in May. Joyee, who was also a volunteer tutor, provided a very good collection of books for the the children and parents at the Drop-in Centre.

## **The Regent Park Community**

In 1991 we met with two Regent Park residents who are community organizers to discuss how we can work together. We discussed how to help parents get information in clear language about Children's Aid Society policies. In August, 1991, parents from East End displayed information about our project at the North Regent Park Community Fair. During the project, we also made contacts with the Regent Park Residents Steering Committee, the Regent Park Focus Community Coalition, the Regent Park Schools Review Project and the Parents For Better Beginnings Project.

## **Ontario Literacy and Social Change Group**

This provincial interest group was a forum for many issues discussed in the Family Issues Group. One staff and three learners took part in its monthly meetings. We worked with parent/learners in other programs on advocacy for better communication between parents and the schools. In September, 1991, two parents and two staff from our group went to the province-wide Social Change Retreat. We shared the activities of our Literacy and the Parent project and had useful discussions with parents from other literacy programs about difficulties they and their children were having with school. The parents kept in contact in order to support each other, and learners at East End Literacy hosted several meetings here. One of our parent/learners and an East End volunteer were interviewed about LAP project activities for a book on literacy and social change that was published in 1992. This book, *Choices and Changes: How literacy changes our lives*, is available through the Ontario Literacy Coalition.

## **Ontario Family Literacy Interest Group (FLIG)**

This provincial organization supports the development of family literacy in Ontario. Our Project Co-ordinator was a member of the FLIG Executive for its first three years. The Executive supported the writing of a manual on family literacy as a resource for organizations developing family literacy programming. Our project co-ordinator worked on the sub-committee that organized this publishing project. *Learning Together* was published in 1992. East End Literacy parents, volunteers and staff were interviewed about our Family Literacy Program for the manual. It deals with the issues in family literacy and describes a variety of programs. We also worked with the group on a script for a family literacy video that was being planned.

The discussions at the Executive Committee meetings and working on the manual helped our view of Family Literacy programming to develop. The Executive Committee members were able to evaluate their programs more effectively because of the contact with programs across Ontario.

In May 1992, Michele completed her term on the Family Literacy Executive. Debbie Sims is now working with the Executive, talking to the provincial ministries about Family Literacy. She is also taking part in networking meetings at the Ontario Literacy Coalition between Family Literacy, Social Change, Small Group Literacy and other Special Interest Groups.

## **Riverdale Coalition Against Violence Against Women and Children**

During 1991, we were asked to give input into the plans for this support group. One staff and one learner from our project attended their meetings. We advised them on how to produce information in clear language.

## **East Toronto Coalition on Literacy**

This community organization developed over 1990-91 on the initiative of the Toronto Public Library. Through their meetings we were able to communicate our Family Issues Group concerns on health and work with the South Riverdale Community Health Centre. In 1992, Literacy for East Toronto was created from the work of this coalition.

## **Central Neighbourhood House (CNH)**

In the first year of our project, we spoke to Ruth Mott, Co-ordinator of the Women's Program, about the issue of wife abuse and the women she works with who are staying at the Robertson House Shelter. We also explored ways that we could work together in our programs on the literacy needs of women and families. In March, 1991, we attended the Women and Food Banks workshop given by CNH Women's Program. In September, Ruth and Debbie gave a workshop on ways to communicate information between readers and non-readers, using group discussion and pictures. Thirty-five people attended this workshop at the Literacy and Social Change Retreat.

They gave the workshop again in October for the staff of the Ontario Literacy Coalition. During the summer of 1992, Michele was in contact with three of the program staff about services for parents and support for abused women and children.

## **Parent/Child Resources and Centre in the Sky, Moss Park**

We talked to the staff and mothers who use this child/parent drop-in centre about how the mothers can benefit from our Literacy and the Parent project and how we can work together. In the spring of 1991, they formed their own reading circle for parents at the Centre.

## **Better Beginnings, Better Futures Project**

Regent Park and Moss Park public housing residents have received funding as part of this provincial health research project. They named their project **Parents for Better Beginnings (PFBB)**. We became one of their resource groups and attended coalition and community support meetings in 1991-92. This project is interested in literacy and we talked with them about ways that we can work together. One concern parents were raising was how they are treated at the hospital. This concern was also raised in our Family Issues Group. We will be working with this group in future on issues of communication and family services.



## **Working Group on Domestic Violence**

During 1992, Michele attended the monthly meetings of the PFBB Community Resource Committee. She contributed the view of literacy and clear language communication to the committee. Out of this committee, the Working Group on Domestic Violence was formed in response to the violence that was being brought up by women in the project. In My, the group began to plan a domestic violence support group in the Parents For Better Beginnings project. A resource group met with other community organizations that had set up support groups for abused women. In the fall, a group of women began to meet weekly to talk about violence in their lives, with Michele co-facilitating until staff were hired. It was a multicultural group of women from Regent Park. A group of Vietnamese speaking women requested a similar group. It is now facilitated by a Vietnamese counsellor.

## **The Wellesley Hospital**

In 1991, members of our group put up a display and gave information about our project at the hospital's annual Education Fair. In the spring of 1993 the East End Literacy clear language committee, Working for Change, consulted with the hospital on the language and design of their emergency room forms.

## **Canadian Bar Association of Ontario**

East End Literacy attended a workshop in 1991 on domestic violence. In the discussion we stressed access to information for women with low literacy skills. This workshop highlighted the importance of women knowing their rights around family violence and the courts. This workshop related to our work with the Riverdale Community Coalition Against Violence Against Women and Children mentioned above.

## **Kid's Helpline**

Kit Caffelle came to East End Literacy to give us information about the Helpline that we can give to families. We gave her advice about training volunteers.

## **Southeast Toronto Health Project**

This action research project looked at what people need in the community with a focus on literacy and health. East End Literacy staff, learners and parents contributed to a meeting with three local hospitals (see Advocacy section).

## **Beat The Street**

Beat the Street's Women's Committee needed support in their request for a nondiscrimination policy to stop sexual harassment in their literacy program. Michele was asked to come and discuss the issue of sexual harassment and how to write a clear language human rights policy. This request came through Michele's involvement on the Advisory Committee of the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CLOW), and its Women and Literacy Research Project. Beat the Street is one of the programs doing "women-positive" programming as part of the research project. She gave them examples of policies from East End Literacy and the ALFA literacy centre.



## 8. Networking & professional development

East End Literacy has consulted with many groups interested in learning about family literacy programming. They include:

- More Than Child's Play, a parent/child drop-in in Parkdale, Toronto
- Scarborough Board of Education, Adult Basic Education Department
- New Westminster Community College, British Columbia
- Children's Aid Society, Toronto
- Capilano College, British Columbia.
- Laubach Literacy Action, Syracuse, New York

### **Practitioner Training: Ontario Family Literacy Conferences**

Project Coordinator Michele Kuhlmann, as a member of the Ontario Family Literacy Executive helped organize the 1991 Family Literacy Conference in January 1991. She gave a workshop with Adele Thomas from Brock University on Community Based Research in Family Literacy Programs at the conference. Michele also helped to plan the 1992 conference, held in May in Gravenhurst, Ontario. She planned a workshop with Robin German from the Kingston Open Book Project and Jessie Wilson of Opportunity for Advancement.

**Above: Michele Kuhlmann accepts an award on behalf of the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women from Robin Silverman of Beat the Street's Women's Committee**

## **Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CLOW).- Women and Literacy Research Project**

As an Advisory Committee member Michele has been involved in all the phases of this three year, national research project. This is an action research project which documents 'women-positive' programming. East End parents, tutors and staff were interviewed for the publication of the first phase of the research, *Discovering the Strength of Our Voices, Women and Literacy*. The final project report, *The Power of Women-positive Literacy work; Program-based Action Research*, will be available early in 1994 through the CLOW.

**1991 Winnipeg Workshop:** Michele worked on the organization and evaluation of this four day training workshop for women taking part in this project across Canada. Thirty-five women attended. Participants in the workshops are all designing 'women-positive' programming, that is, programming that will make their literacy programs more accessible to women. Michele and popular educator Jenny Horsman gave three workshops on Documenting Research in Community Programs as part of the training.

**1992 Ottawa Workshop:** This was the last workshop in the research project. The research material was analysed for the report and organized by the participating programs. The workshop was facilitated by the project researchers, Betty-Ann Lloyd and Frances Innes. Michele and Jenny Horsman facilitated one of the working groups at the workshop.

## **Literacy 2000, Douglas College, British Columbia**

East End Literacy staff member Sally McBeth gave a presentation to this national conference in October, 1990 on the theme of including learners in program design for family literacy projects, based on our experience in designing the Literacy and the Parent project.

## **Family Literacy Manual**

In the spring of 1992, the Family Literacy Interest Group published a resource manual called *Learning Together: Family Literacy in Ontario*. Michele served on the subcommittee that supported the writing and production of this manual. A questionnaire was sent out to all the known family literacy groups in Ontario and from these, programs were chosen to be interviewed. From these interviews, issues were targeted to form a central section of the manual. The committee worked to make the language and design of the manual accessible. It was printed in a binder format so that information could be added by future family literacy groups. It was launched at the May 1992, Family Literacy conference in Gravenhurst, Ontario. The conference workshops were planned to relate to the issues presented in the manual.



## 9. Evaluation

### **Project planning and monitoring**

During the summer of 1990, the Literacy and the Parent planning group, composed of project staff, volunteer tutors, and learner/parents, met regularly to review project activities and plan future programs. In addition, project staff brought programming concerns to weekly meetings of the Direct Service staff, and reported on the project activities to the Program Committee of the Board of Directors.

The planning group began to meet again in December 1990 to evaluate the fall sessions of the Family Issues Group. The group also met every two weeks from May through July, 1991 to plan the group work for the second year of the project.

Throughout the project, the staff met periodically to analyse how the Literacy and the Parent project impacted on our core program. We talked about the parent's need for health and hospital information, and this led to a literacy and health research project at East End Literacy in 1993-94. We incorporated more family-related information into our tutor training, revised our intake forms to collect more family-related information, and revised our policy on providing childcare for tutoring. We committed ourselves to continuing the Children's Library and Parents' Resource Collection, and to providing children's activities at our events. We decided to continue advocacy work on issues arising from parents' discussions, and to keep working in co-operation with other community groups to offer support services for parents and children.

### **Learning from parents' fears or resistance**

The fears and concerns of the parents in the Family Issues Group during the fall of 1990 set a direction for many of the activities of the project. The parents said repeatedly that they could not learn to read as fast as their children were learning in school. There was a lot of anger about struggling to be a good parent and trying to keep the respect of their children. Parents didn't know what was happening at their children's schools because they couldn't read the notes sent home. Also, we heard stories about how they couldn't get information about their child's treatment at the hospital.

From the Family Issues Group we learned that parents who can't read need help now to deal with the systems that affect them. Our parents needed clear, simple and direct communication from the services they used.

During our evaluation sessions, we talked about why the idea of a storytelling group was not working as we had hoped. Although storytelling has a relationship to literacy, for the adult literacy learner at East End Literacy, it seemed to bring up fears about reading. Resistance in the Storytelling Group seemed to come from parents' embarrassment about trying to read or tell a story.

We realized that this happened when the group was learning imaginative storytelling and playing with words and language. Yet when the parents were telling oral history about their families, they were much more relaxed and got into their own stories. They were able to share family memories with other parents. This type of storytelling was very natural for our parents and could be developed in a family literacy group. The parents and caregivers were most involved when they were permitted to offer something of themselves and their cultures.

We could also see that reading children's books and storytelling happened better when there were children in the group. However, the parents usually didn't have their children with them in the group, because they were in school or daycare. The project staff benefitted from working with the storyteller, but we had to acknowledge that it didn't 'take' with parents who came without their children.

Reading to children and telling stories is of great value in developing a quiet, sharing time. This is one of the ways children learn about their world and develop language. In the right setting, such as a parent/child drop-in that the family could regularly attend, this would be a good family literacy activity.

### **Advocacy and Clear Language Communication**

The parents who took part in public education reported on their activities at monthly Program Committee meetings. A great deal of interest and support for these activities developed at the committee. This interest and support was reflected at the East End Literacy Organizational Retreat in December, 1991. It was at this retreat that a recommendation was made to develop a public education program on clear language, and a working committee of the Board was formed to support this activity in the organization.

### **Community Literacy Integrated Programming**

In January of 1993 the direct services staff at East End held a full day planning meeting to look at how our family literacy project was affecting our core program. We realized that the project had changed how we wanted to describe all of our programming at East End Literacy.

All the different program areas at East End Literacy come from the idea of working with the whole person. Literacy is not an isolated part of a person's life. It affects our work, our families, our health, how we feel about ourselves and how we are able to express ourselves. The work we do in our tutoring program and in our groups, and the issues we take on in our public education work, are all rooted in the community we serve. They are all linked to one another.

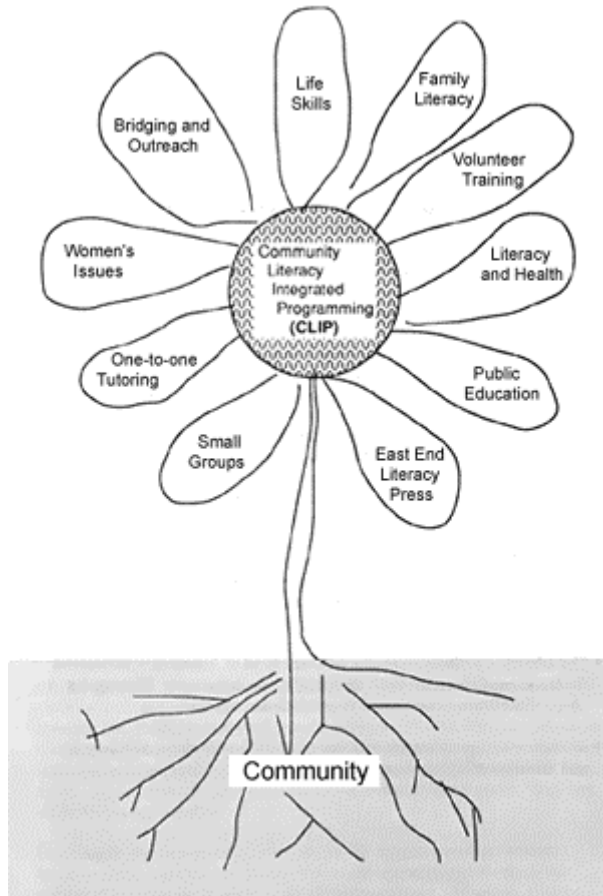
Community literacy means including the life experiences that learners bring to literacy programs. Family literacy programming brings up the subject of families in all areas of the literacy program and allows a space and opportunity for this subject to be talked about. Through family literacy we are able to respond to more areas of the learners' lives as they related to our mandate.

This model of programming, which we call Community Literacy Integrated Programming (CLIEP), is described as a flower with each petal or program area connected to the central mandate, and the roots of the flower planted firmly in the community. (See [page 45](#).)

### **Some ways that parents and caregivers benefitted from the project:**

- Parents in our program met each other as parents and shared experience and advice.
- Some parents practised reading to their children during their tutoring sessions and became more comfortable reading with them as a result. They learned to use the parents' and children's resource collections.
- Parents learned about themselves and their children by watching their children with other parents and East End Literacy staff. We began to see that behavior modeling was a valuable part of the parents' groups.
- When children came to the groups, parents enjoyed listening to stories with them and being together with children in this way.
- The parents learned about the systems and services that affect their lives. They used East End Literacy as a resource to help them become better connected to the schools and more informed about services in their community.
- The advocacy projects created a different kind of learning environment for the parents because they were out in the community. They spoke about their literacy needs and people listened to them.

Women in our program became more knowledgeable about self-defence and the issue of violence against women.





### **Some things the staff learned from the project:**

- We learned from this project that it makes a positive difference in our programming to include family literacy at East End Literacy. It has made us look at the whole person in our community literacy programming.
- Parents and literacy learners in general need to have a voice that has been denied to them in the community. They want to ask for clear language and effective communication from the education and health services that they are a part of and must use.
- The project directed us to give tutors more support with family related problems that come up in tutoring sessions. We recognized the need for better supports and referral information in family related areas.
- The Reading and Storytelling Groups gave us the opportunity to see how these activities fit into our program. We recognized that we are not the best setting for parent-child programs, although we will continue to look for ways to support parent-child reading and storytelling. We learned that parents and caregivers became most involved in storytelling when their children could come to the group, and when they were could offer stories about their own families and cultures.
- In making a resource collection available for parents we saw how much they need this in our program. The resources are used a great deal.

We could see from our group work that parents and caregivers enjoy meeting one another and sharing experiences. It is important to them that their families feel welcome and comfortable at East End Literacy.



## 10. Thank you

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