

Get Set Learn!

A Case Study of A Family Literacy Program in
Waterloo Region



Project READ Literacy Network
Waterloo-Wellington

Lorri Sauve, January 2005
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Abstract

"I hope the program can continue to help other parents learn to help their children and to help themselves." Comment from Parent on Final Evaluation of *Get Set Learn!* Program

Despite increased public awareness about literacy and literacy issues, there remains a high risk for parents with low literacy skills to have children who grow up to have low literacy skills themselves. This case study focused on determining the effectiveness of an intergenerational family literacy program called *Get Set Learn!* a program designed and implemented by the Project READ Literacy Network, Waterloo-Wellington and funded by the Regional Municipality of Waterloo, Social Services Division in Ontario. This program targeted parents on Ontario Works (welfare) with pre-school aged children in hopes of breaking the cycle of being disadvantaged because of parental low literacy levels. Research stresses that children from poor families are already at a disadvantage by the time they start school.¹ A family literacy approach recognizes the interconnectedness of literacy with other issues affecting families and encourages community collaborations that build on existing programs and services.²

For some, being on social assistance or Ontario Works (OW) provides a temporary income between jobs. For others, it is a long term necessity.³ It has long been shown that having a low socio-economic status (SES) often goes hand-in-hand with having low literacy levels. Not that low literacy skills depend on SES, but rather people who have low literacy levels are often relegated to the ranks of the working poor or the unemployed poor. *"People with low levels of literacy are restricted in their access to certain labour markets, while those with high levels are more likely to obtain high-paying jobs."*⁴ Low literacy levels often correspond to low income levels.⁵ *"Ontario children in all socioeconomic levels are not doing as well as children in the rest of Canada, based on vocabulary tests at age four and five and mathematics tests at age six to 11. Performance in vocabulary tests is a measure of early brain development and tends to predict how well children will do in the school system, and math scores at a young age are predictive of math achievement later on in school. We now know that a substantial base of mathematical understanding is set in the first few years."*⁶

1 Jay, C. *Family Literacy Literature Review*. Ontario Literacy Coalition: Toronto, 2001.

2 *Foundational Training in Family Literacy*: Practitioner's Resource. Centre for Family Literacy Society of Alberta: 2002.

3 Norton, M. *Literacy, Welfare, and Popular Education*. In *Voices from the Literacy Field*. Draper, J. and Taylor, M. (eds). Toronto: Culture Concepts Inc, 1992.

4 Statistics Canada. *The level of literacy in a society is a key social and economic indicator*. Stats Canada: 2002.

5 Jay, C. *Family Literacy Literature Review*. Ontario Literacy Coalition: Toronto, 2001

6 Mustard, F. and Norrie, M.. *Reversing the Real Brain Drain Early Years Study Final Report*. Toronto: Publications Ontario, 1999.

One of the major barriers to employment is not having the skills necessary to obtain and keep the job. Another barrier to employment is having free childcare available. Further, parents often subjugate their own needs, such as low literacy, to the needs of the family. They are reluctant to enroll in education or training programs just for themselves. *Get Set Learn!* is a program that addresses both barriers by inviting parents to enroll in a literacy program that provides childcare while they are in the learning program. It is hoped that they will gain confidence in their own parenting skills and will learn strategies to help their children become more literate and school ready, thus providing them with a better chance to have success in school and later in life. Also, it is hoped that they too will enroll in a subsequent educational program so that they have the chance to further improve their own literacy skills to get a job or to get a better job.

This case study details a successful family literacy program in Waterloo Region that has run on three occasions: Fall of 2003, Fall of 2004, and Spring of 2005. It provides background information on learning theories and how *Get Set Learn! (GSL)* incorporates the various learning theories into its curriculum and presentation methods. By comparing the research and case studies surrounding family literacy programs in Canada, the United States, and abroad, it was determined that GSL is a viable family literacy program. It can serve as a model for family literacy practitioners and their communities in how to partner with and successfully implement a “first step” family literacy program for parents and their children.

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Get Set Learn!
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In Waterloo Region**

“A prime indicator of a child’s future literacy skills is the level of literacy attained by their parents.”⁷

PART 1 – Background

According to Canada’s National Literacy Secretariat, 42 percent of Canadians aged 16 – 65 do not have the literacy skills required to participate fully in everyday life. **Literacy** is being able to use the word to decipher the world or being able to read, write, communicate and do math. In short, being able to function in society. *“Literacy means more than knowing how to read, write or calculate. It involves understanding and being able to use the information required in today’s society.”⁸*

IALS and Literacy Statistics

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) was a seven country initiative in 1994 to create comparable literacy profiles across national, linguistic, and cultural boundaries.⁹ Since then two more rounds of data collection have ensued in an additional 16 countries. It has shown a link between literacy and a country’s economic potential. In 2000, the Organization for Economic and Cooperative Development (OECD) published a report *Literacy in the Information Age* based on the IALS that included data on 20 countries. It was the largest comparative literacy survey ever done. According to the OECD, a literacy skill is defined as *“The ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work and in the community – to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.”¹⁰* The assessments were done to measure proficiency within three domains of literacy skill:

- Prose literacy - reading materials for pleasure of information: (e.g. brochures)
- Document literacy - reading materials for specific purposes: (e.g. job applications)
- Quantitative literacy - math

⁷ Project READ Literacy Network. *Literacy in Waterloo Region*. Kitchener, March 2003

⁸ Project READ Literacy Network. *Literacy in Waterloo Region*. Kitchener, March 2003.

⁹ Statistics Canada. *International Adult Literacy Survey Database*. Stats Canada: 2004

¹⁰ Suda, L. *Policies and Pedagogies for Lifelong Literacy International Perspectives for the 21st Century*. ALNARC: Australia, 2001.

Literacy levels were also assessed and people were placed into one of five levels:

- Level 1 – has poor reading, writing, math and thinking skills
- Level 2 – can read simple material; generally have coping skills to manage every day tasks but their low literacy level makes it difficult to learn new tasks or skills
- Level 3 – can cope with demands of everyday life and can solve more complex problems
- Levels 4/5 – has a command of higher order information processing skills

The report provides valuable data on many different variables and highlights countries that have higher and lower literacy levels while discussing more complex reasons for such findings. The following table details information on the five countries from which data for this case study has been analyzed.

Table 1: Literacy Levels of Five OECD Countries

Country	Level 1 Prose Skills	Level 4/5 Prose Skills
Sweden	7.5%	32.4%
Canada	16.6%	22.7%
Australia	17.0%	18.9%
United States	20.7%	21.1%
United Kingdom	21.8%	16.6%

This table shows how each country performed at both the low end and the high end regarding prose literacy skill. Level 4/5 is considered the level required for effective participation in society. Overall, Canada ended up in the top half of the 20 countries; however, Sweden fared the best of all countries with less than 8 percent of adults not having basic literacy skills. The researchers analyzed education compared with literacy levels and concluded that a strong correlation exists regardless of country. The research also considered other variables such as age, gender, parents' literacy level, other languages spoken, participation in adult learning and their relation to literacy levels. It was found that higher levels of literacy equal higher income levels and higher participation in the workforce. Finally, they discovered that higher literacy skills equal greater health and social cohesion. Therefore, literacy directly relates to education, health, job prospects, and income.¹¹

¹¹ OECD. *Literacy in the Information Age*. Final Report of the International Adult Literacy Survey. 2000.

One feature that is often overlooked when discussing literacy skills is that these skills must be used in order to be maintained or improved. You've heard the adage, "*if you don't use it, you will use it!*" This is also true of literacy skills. This is why it is so important to get people involved with reading daily with their children. It not only improves their children's literacy skills, but it improves their skills as well.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared that by the year 2015, boys and girls everywhere would be able to complete a full course of primary schooling and that children would have equal access to all levels of education. This requires a renewed commitment to promote literacy for all. UNESCO is convinced that literacy is vital to acquiring essential life skills that enable people to address life challenges, regardless of age or gender. UNESCO affirmed the right to education for girls, which is a problem in many countries. Nearly two thirds of the world's adult illiterates are women.¹² Because of this, UNESCO has appealed to all governments to ensure that women have full and equal access to education. They also appeal to governments to "*...devise innovative strategies for reaching the poorest and most marginalized groups and for seeking alternative formal and non-formal approaches to learning with a view to achieving the goals of the decade.*"¹³ This also reaffirms that creating literate societies is essential for achieving these goals:

- Getting rid of poverty
- Reducing child mortality
- Curbing population growth
- Achieving gender equality
- Ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy¹⁴

Following this General Assembly of the United Nations, it was proclaimed that January 2003 – January 2013 is the "United Nations Literacy Decade." What does this mean for policy makers and the general public? It means that serious changes are necessary if we are to undermine low literacy levels in people around the world.

According to the 2005 International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (ALLS), 3.3 million Canadians still do not have the literacy skills necessary to meet the demands of modern life. Fifteen percent of Canadians, about one in seven scored in level 1, the lowest level which is a two percent decrease from IALS 1994. However, the research maintains that these Canadians struggle with printed materials on a daily basis.¹⁵

¹² UNESCO. *Report of the General Assembly of the United Nations*. 56th session: January 2002.

¹³ UNESCO. *Report of the General Assembly of the United Nations*. 56th session: January 2002.

¹⁴ UNESCO. *Report of the General Assembly of the United Nations*. 56th session: January 2002.

¹⁵ Statistics Canada. *Building on our Competencies: Canadian results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey*. Stats Canada: November 2005.

Literacy Programming in Various Countries

Literacy in Australia

*“Lifelong learning is a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills, and understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and to applying them with confidence, creativity and enjoyment in all roles, circumstances and environments.”*¹⁶ The modern concept of lifelong learning involves both informal and formal learning and occurs in many places including workplaces, homes, community places, and educational institutions. Barriers exist that impede the progress of lifelong learning. They include:

- Negative attitudes of many towards learning
- Cultural barriers
- Funding barriers
- Administrative barriers

Achieving a learning culture in Australia will require a learning revolution in Australian society with action involving all stakeholders.¹⁷ Australia has developed a set of policy settings that assist lifelong learning in that they do not discriminate on the basis of age. The level of adult participation in education and training is high however; a sizeable proportion of the youth population does not have a sound educational background. Educational participation later in life is correlated with having an educational background so while Australia is successful in providing second chances to everyone regarding education, not everyone chooses to take the opportunity.¹⁸ A new approach that uses different models of learning needs to be considered if Australia is to respond to the challenge of lifelong learning.¹⁹

Literacy in Sweden

Sweden is a country unlike any other in the world. It has a strong commitment to literacy and lifelong learning. The result is a high level of participation in learning programs, somewhere near 50 percent of the population. The **study circle**, one form of lifelong learning is a non-graded form of adult education. The model is informal learning based on discussion around issues of mutual interest. The study circle group is self-governing.

¹⁶ Kearns, P., MacDonald, R., and Candy, P. *VET in the Learning Age: The Challenge of Lifelong Learning for All*. Government of Australia: Australia, 1999

¹⁷ Kearns, P., MacDonald, R., and Candy, P. *VET in the Learning Age: The Challenge of Lifelong Learning for All*. Government of Australia: Australia, 1999.

¹⁸ Karmel, T. *Australia's approach to lifelong learning*. National Centre for Vocational Education Research Ltd: Australia, 2004.

¹⁹ Suda, L. *Policies and Pedagogies for Lifelong Literacy International Perspectives for the 21st Century*. ALNARC: Australia, 2001.

The concept is to use the experiences of ordinary people as a starting point for exploring socially relevant topics. These study circles are led by a trained facilitator who also participates in the study circle. This type of education often leads to further education. Because one does not gain qualifications by participation in a study circle, improving the practice of the study circle has been the goal rather than receiving a measure of educational attainment. Their effectiveness is measured in their capacity to lead to increased involvement.²⁰

Folk High Schools are free and open to all adults over 18 years of age. Studying at these schools is often the first step on the road to higher education. Adults can live at these schools as well and are able to study for up to three years to gain skills necessary to enter the workforce. Sweden is unique in that it stresses informal methods of learning. Most other governments do not put as much hope in informal learning methods as Sweden.

Literacy in the United Kingdom

Skills for Life is the Government's strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills in the United Kingdom. Their mission is to provide all adults with the opportunity to acquire skills for active participation in the 21st century society. *"Seven million people have poor literacy and numeracy skills, including around half a million or more who struggle with English because it is not their first language. This has disastrous consequences for the individuals concerned, weakens the country's ability to compete in the global economy and places an enormous burden on society. People with poor literacy, numeracy and language skills tend to be on lower incomes or unemployed, and they are more prone to ill health and social exclusion."*²¹

The Government of the United Kingdom is committed to making literacy and learning a priority. Funding will help all adults who have literacy needs access to free classes. Identifying the one in five adults with literacy and numeracy issues and bringing them back to learning is crucial. This plan includes helping unemployed citizens upgrade their skills. They also support prison education. They plan to continue to work closely with organizations to ensure that homeless people are not excluded from having access to learning opportunities. Also, the UK plans on providing 80 percent of their basic skills courses online in order to increase the number of participants. Finally, support for families will be provided through family literacy and numeracy programs which was expanded in 2002. The goal of this initiative is to provide England with one of the best adult literacy and numeracy rates in the world.²²

²⁰ Suda, L. Policies and Pedagogies for Lifelong Literacy International Perspectives for the 21st Century. ALNARC: Australia, 2001

²¹ Read, Write, Plus. Skills for Life. Government Strategy for Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy Skills, 2000.

²² Read, Write, Plus. Skills for Life. Government Strategy for Improving Adult Literacy and Numeracy Skills, 2000.

The evaluation of the Basic Skill Agency's demonstration programs in the UK showed that following participation in the family literacy program, parents reported an increase in ability and confidence in helping their child with language and literacy activities. Additionally, the vocabulary of the children, aged three to six also increased significantly.²³ These programs involved 150 parents and their 180 children.

Literacy in the United States

Since 1990, the US Government has promoted the idea of vocational skill development in the broader scheme of education as a means of creating stronger communities, healthier families, and more fulfilled people. The **Equipped for the Future Framework** (EFF) includes competency statements for communication skills, decision-making skills, interpersonal skills, and lifelong learning skills. This is an effort to prepare individuals to participate effectively in family, job and community life in a fast-changing world.²⁴ Despite these renewed efforts, the goal of eradicating illiteracy by the year 2000 has not been achieved. Twenty-one percent of Americans can be found at the lowest level of literacy skills. If you look at functional literacy in the Information Age, 79 percent of the population is a level three or lower compared with Canada at 77 percent, and Sweden at 68 percent, the best of all OECD countries. This data shows that many individuals struggle worldwide with literacy issues.

Three types of adult literacy classes are offered in the US provided by either family literacy programs or workplace literacy programs. Family literacy programs provide integrated educational services for families that include education for parents and children. Also inherent in these family literacy programs is a focus on developing the parent's knowledge and skills as their child's first teacher.²⁵ Anecdotal reports from parents participating in Kenan-model programs state increased ability to promote the value of education to their children, improved relationships with them, and more reading with their children. In follow up studies, 75 percent of these "at risk" children were ranked by their teachers as being in the upper half of their classes regarding motivation to learn, attendance, behaviour, self-confidence, and probable success in school.²⁶

²³ Brooks, G. Gormon, T., Harman, J., Hutchison, D. and Wilkin, A. *Family Literacy Works*. London: Basic Skills Agency, 1996.

²⁴ Suda, L. *Policies and Pedagogies for Lifelong Literacy International Perspectives for the 21st Century*. ALNARC: Australia, 2001.

²⁵ Suda, L. *Policies and Pedagogies for Lifelong Literacy International Perspectives for the 21st Century*. ALNARC: Australia, 2001.

²⁶ Darling, S. and Paul, S. *Implications for Family Literacy Programs*. In D. Dickinson (ed) *Bridges to Literacy: Children, Families, and Schools*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1994.

In the past decade in the US, family literacy programs have received substantial amounts of money from both the state and federal governments. “**Even Start**” is a federally funded program with four components:

- Adult education
- Early childhood education
- Parent education
- Parent and child time together

The “Even Start” program is quite versatile in its approach to adult education. In one city, the parents work on job readiness or work activities as part of their adult education component. Sixteen “Even Start” programs have been evaluated and the outcomes include:

- Many parents became more interested in education
- Employment rate increased
- Wages increased.²⁷

Similarly, Hayes (cited in L. Suda) analyzed families who had finished a family literacy program up to six years earlier. He found:

- A high percentage achieve high school equivalency after leaving
- A significant percentage obtain and retain employment
- Participants continue to enroll in education and training programs
- Participants become more self-sufficient.

Literacy in Canada

According to the statistics just released from the IALS, Canada is in the middle among OECD countries. Fifteen percent of Canadians are at the lowest level of literacy.²⁸ This translates into three million Canadians aged 16 – 65 who have problems using printed materials. Adults at the lowest literacy levels have a 50 percent chance of finding a job, even after being unemployed for a year. In 1994, 17 percent of Canadians were at the lowest level. Unfortunately, in the last ten years, we have not improved the overall literacy levels of Canadian adults in any great manner.

Provincially, Ontario has 19 percent of adults at the lowest levels of literacy. This means that these individuals have difficulties on a daily basis with print including reading to their children, reading and completing job applications, reading and following medical instructions, and reading other everyday printed materials such as bills and lists. Locally, in Waterloo Region, 24 percent of adults, aged 16 and over are at the lowest level of literacy.²⁹

²⁷ Suda, L. *Policies and Pedagogies for Lifelong Literacy International Perspectives for the 21st Century*. ALNARC: Australia, 2001.

²⁸ Statistics Canada, *IALSS 2003*. Literacies (2), Fall 2003.

²⁹ Literacy in Waterloo Region, Project READ Literacy Network, March, 2003.

“...it is clear the early years must be a high priority for investment if we wish to have a competent, educated population for the future and that the Ontario government must put in place a long-term policy to make early child development and parenting a priority for public and private investment.”³⁰

Learning and Learning Theories

Learning is a personal process and it occurs in both formal and informal settings. Learning is a relatively permanent change in behaviour as a result of experiences.³¹ Well over 50 learning theories exist. Listed below are some of the theories upon which *Get Set Learn!* is based. They include:

1. Multiple Intelligences – Cognitive
2. Experiential Learning – Cognitive
3. Brain-based Learning - Cognitive
4. Vygotsky Social Cognition - Constructivist
5. Andragogy and Pedagogy - Constructivist
6. Piaget Developmental Stages - Constructivist
7. Control Theory - Constructivist
8. Observational Learning – Behavioural
9. Emancipatory Learning – Transformational
10. Mezirow’s Transformation Theory – Transformational

1. Multiple Intelligences – Gardner (1984)

Gardner proposes that we all have the ability to learn but not everyone can learn in a traditional classroom focusing only on reading, writing, and math abilities. Instead, he suggests we focus our attention on the many different types of intelligence that we encounter in order to help children and adults achieve their full potential. The eight primary intelligences include being:

- Word Smart
- Music Smart
- Number or Reasoning Smart
- Picture Smart
- Body Smart
- Self Smart
- People Smart
- Nature Smart³²

³⁰ Mustard, F. and Norrie, M. *Reversing the Real Brain Drain Early Years Study Final Report*. Toronto: Publications Ontario, 1999.

³¹ Merriam, S.B. & Caffarella, R.S. *Learning in Adulthood A Comprehensive Guide*. (2nd ed). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999.

³² Gardner, H. *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York: 1993.

Gardner stresses a change in thinking. Instead of asking someone “How smart are you?” he suggests asking him or her “How are you smart?” Gardner believes that we should find each person’s strength and realize that they will find it easy to learn things if taught in that method. According to Gardner, the learning/teaching should focus on the particular intelligence of the person in order to further develop their abilities. Using the eight intelligences, we should offer learning activities that address the many ways in which children and adults are smart.³³ *Get Set Learn!* uses this philosophy by incorporating a variety of instruction methods in each class. Also GSL provides various centres such as a music and a math centre that parents and their children are encouraged to explore following the circle time.

2. **Experiential Learning** – David Kolb (1984) and Edgar Dale (1969)

Experiential learning is an approach that has the participant “experience” the learning by either seeing, hearing, or doing something. Kolb believes that instruction methods should incorporate all three learning styles. Usually people come to prefer one style over others and find it easier to learn in that method. Kolb also saw learning styles on a continuum that include:

- Concrete experience – being involved in a new experience
- Reflective observation – watching others develop observations about own experiences
- Abstract conceptualization – creating theories to explain observations
- Active experimentation – using theories to solve problems and make decisions

Although Kolb believed that people move through these styles over time, usually people prefer one style over others.³⁴

Included within this experiential approach is Edgar Dale’s “Cone of Learning” which basically states that 90% of what we say and do we will remember.” This is why *Get Set Learn!* includes lots of “hands-on” activities for both parents and children. The facilitators approach all sessions with learning styles in mind and attempt to offer various ways for both parents and children to learn by practicing the skills taught.³⁵

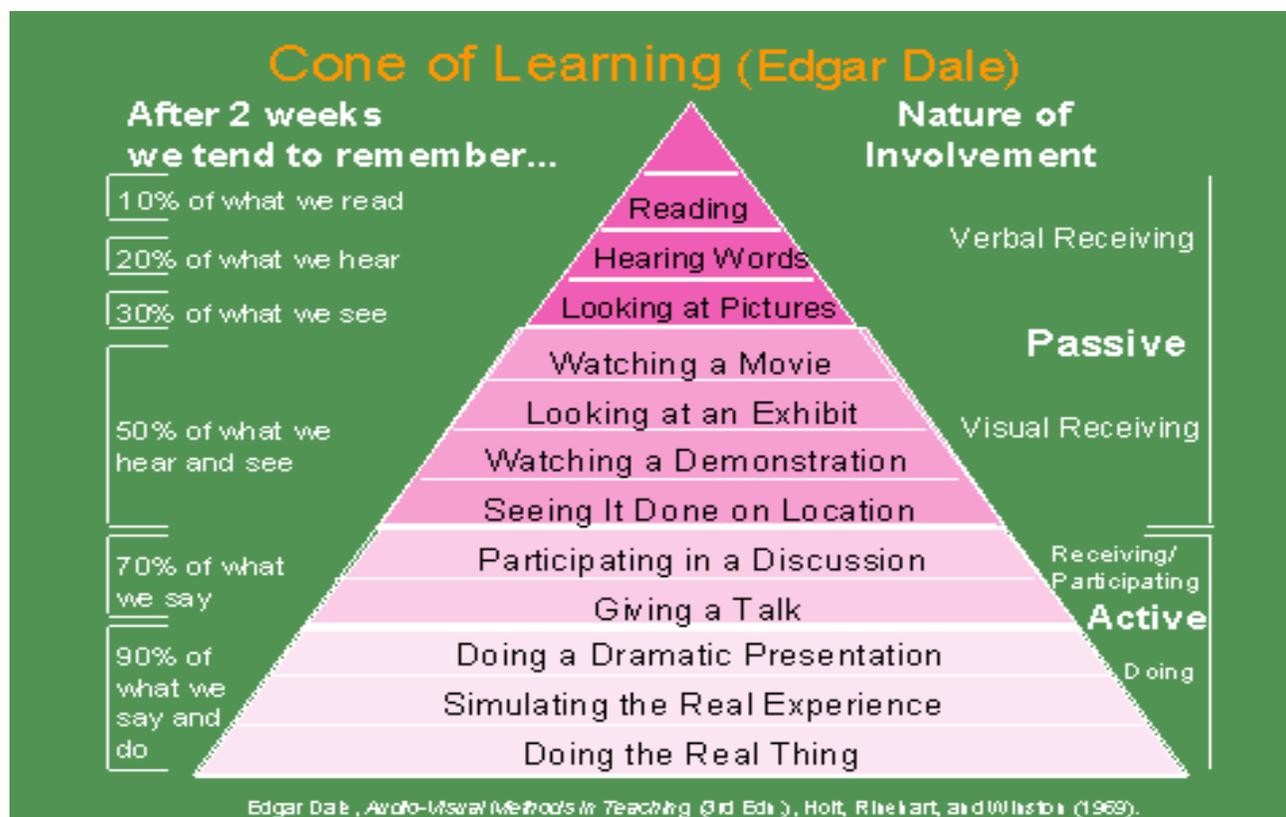
³³ Miller Nielson, D. *Preschool Multiple Intelligences Activities to Nurture Various Abilities in the Early – Childhood Classroom*. Michigan: McGraw-Hill Children’s Publishing, 2002.

³⁴ Kolb, D. *Experiential learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1984.

³⁵ Edgar Dale, *Audio-visual Methods in Teaching* (3rd ed).. Holt Rinehard and Winston, 1969.

This is in hopes that parents and children will remember 90 percent of what they did in class.

Figure 1. Dale's Cone of Learning³⁶



3. **Social Cognition** – Vygotsky (1978)

Culture is the prime determinant of individual development. A child's learning development is affected in all ways by the culture of family environment in which he or she is involved. Scaffolding is a type of instruction modeled in Vygotskian learning. Scaffolding occurs when a parent aids her child in learning by taking him/her to the next level; in other words, by expanding the child's knowledge base. Scaffolding decreases a child's zone of proximal development because he or she will learn more skills. Social cognition includes these premises:

- Culture teaches children both what to think and how to think
- A child learns through problem-solving experiences shared with someone else, usually a parent or teacher but sometimes a sibling or peer
- Language is a form of interaction through which adults transfer information to the child

³⁶ Edgar Dale, *Audio-visual Methods in Teaching* (3rd ed).. Holt Rinehard and Winston, 1969.

- The zone of proximal development is the difference between what the child can do on her own and with help. *Get Set Learn!* provides opportunities for parents to scaffold with their children including hand-over-hand instruction to begin writing. In addition, parents are encouraged to interact with their children using their own culture, language, and belief system. Studies have determined that the more informal education that families provide for their children the better they do in school later on. It makes more of an impact on the children's educational attainment than the formal educational system.³⁷ In other words, the family is central to what a child can achieve. If a family does a good job, then school can have more of a positive effect. In GSL, parents are told how important their job is as their child's first teacher. Videos and other materials stress the importance of their job yet they are comforted in knowing that a child's brain is a sponge and is pre-wired to learn. So, should they not be able to incorporate all of the strategies learned into their everyday lives, their child will still learn a lot of skills.

4. **Developmental Stages** – Piaget (1952)

Piaget believed that all children pass through different developmental stages. As the child passes through each stage, his or her cognitive structure increases in sophistication. The stages are:

1. Sensorimotor stage – (infancy) in this period, intelligence is demonstrated through motor activities and knowledge of the world is limited but developing
2. Pre-operational stage – (toddler and early childhood) intelligence is demonstrated through the use of symbols, language use, memory and imagination
3. Concrete operational stage – (elementary and early adolescence) intelligence is demonstrated through logical and systematic manipulation of symbols related to concrete objects
4. Formal operational stage – (adolescence and adulthood) intelligence is demonstrated through logical use of symbols related to abstract concepts

Get Set Learn! uses a curriculum that can be adapted to all different aged and staged children from birth up to about age 12. Parents are reminded that it is better to think about stages rather than ages because all children pass through the stages at different ages. Parents are taught that it is unhealthy for a child to skip stages or to rush a child through various phases.³⁸ The GSL curriculum is taken from many sources so the flexibility is enhanced. As well, parents are shown ways to adapt materials they have in their own homes to make them more literacy rich and appropriate to the stage their child is in.

³⁷ White, B. *The First Three Years of Life*. New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1985.

³⁸ Dancy, R. *You are Your Child's First Teacher What Parents Can Do With and For Their Children from Birth to Age Six*. California: Celestial Arts, 1989.

5. **Andragogy and Pedagogy** – Knowles (1984)

Andragogy is based on five assumptions about adult students and it focuses more on learning rather than teaching. These assumptions are:

1. As a person matures, his or her self concept becomes more self-directed
2. An adult has prior knowledge or experience which is a rich resource
3. An adult is more ready to learn when his or her social role has developed
4. As an adult matures, their learning focuses more on how to and where can I learn how to problem-solve
5. An adult is motivated to learn by internal rather than external factors.³⁹

Malcolm Knowles described the five main things to consider when helping adults or children to learn. They are:

1. Let the students know why something is important to learn
2. Show the students how to direct themselves through education
3. Relate the topic to student experiences
4. Ensure they are ready and motivated to learn because people will not learn until they are ready
5. Help the student to overcome inhibitions, behaviours, and beliefs about learning

Pedagogy is the art and science of teaching children. In this model, the teacher has full responsibility for deciding what will be learned, how it will be learned, when it will be learned, and if the material has been learned. The result is a teaching and learning situation that promotes dependency on the instructor. GSL employs this method during the childcare portion of the program. During that hour, the children are with childcare staff and play as well as do some structured activities. If the child is not enjoying the structure, then he or she is free to play.⁴⁰

6. **Brain-based Learning**

As long as the brain is not prohibited from fulfilling normal processes, learning will occur. The brain grows during specific stages, and grows most rapidly in the first six years of life. There are ways to enhance the brain's functioning including doing mental exercises, drinking water, and using strategies to make learning fun, which can improve our memory. Also, we use two different hemispheres of our brain when we think. Left-brain thinkers are said to be very concrete and logical and excel in math and science whereas right-brain thinkers can think more abstractly and do well in the arts. The good news is strengthening the right brain and the left brain will directly improve. The optimal is to use both sides of the brain. Family literacy programs stress using of both sides of the brain.⁴¹

³⁹ Merriam, S.B. & Caffarella, R.S. *Learning in Adulthood A Comprehensive Guide* (2nd ed). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999.

⁴⁰ Heimstra, B. and Sisco, B. *Individualizing instruction*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990.

⁴¹ Thwaites, B. *The Big Learn: Smart Ways to Use Your Brain*. Canada: MentalFlossPress, 1999.

Researchers know that a lot of brain development occurs between conception and age one. It is also known that specific stimuli from a child's experiences "hard wire" the brain's nerve cells. This wiring of the brain has a direct and long term impact on the adult this child will become. At the same time the brain is being wired, neurons that are not used are also being pruned away. Those that are not used are eliminated. This is why it is so important to provide a variety of experiences for infants and young children in order to give them the best chance at success in life.⁴² *Get Set Learn!* at times employs some "Brain Gym" exercises to improve learning in both parents and their children. It also stresses the need and provides tools and strategies for the parents to better improve their child's brain stimulation.

7. **Control Theory** – Glaser (1987)

Behaviour is inspired by what a person wants most of the time – survival, love, freedom, power, and any other basic human need. Facilitators must negotiate both content and method with students in order to shape how and what they are taught.⁴³ Cooperative learning techniques that enhance the power of learners are good techniques to use. *Get Set Learn!* has a basic curriculum that it follows but enhances its lessons based on parent input.

8. **Observational Learning** Bandura (1977)

Modeling is key in observational learning. An observer's behaviour can be affected positively or negatively by what the observer sees.⁴⁴ Commercials prey on this theory. They demonstrate someone drinking or eating a certain product. Of course, the model is healthy and attractive. The company that paid for the commercial hopes that you will purchase their product because of the images they portrayed in the commercial. This theory suggests that students must have an opportunity to observe and model a behaviour that leads to a positive reinforcement.⁴⁵ Much of what *Get Set Learn!* is based on is modeling. Examples of this include the modeling of children by their parents and other children, as well as the modeling of the parents by the facilitator, child care workers, and by other parents.

⁴² Mustard, F. and Norrie, M. *Reversing the Real Brain Drain Early Years Study Final Report*. Ontario: Publications Ontario, 1999.

⁴³ Glaser, R. "Thoughts on Expertise." In C. Schooler and K.Schaie (eds) *Cognitive Functioning and Social Structure over the Life Course*. Norwood, N. J.Ablex, 1987.

⁴⁴ *Learning Theories*. <http://tip.psychology.org/landa/html>

⁴⁵ Bandura, A. *Social Learning Theory*. New York: General Learning Press, 1977

9. **Emancipatory Learning** – Freire (1970)

In this approach, personal empowerment and social transformation are inseparable. Traditional education has teachers giving knowledge to students. This is also called pedagogy as discussed earlier. In problem-posing education, teachers and students cooperate and participate in dialogue. Central to this type of learning is a different relationship between teacher and student. They are co-learners, working for change and equity.⁴⁶ *In Get Set Learn!* this type of learning is modeled and encouraged. At the initial intake, parents are asked what topics they would like to learn about. These topics are included in future classes in both discussion and activity format.

10. **Transformation Theory** – Mezirow (1978)

This theory is about how adults interpret their life experiences and make meaning from them. *“Learning can consist of a change in one of our beliefs or attitudes (a meaning scheme) or it can be a change in our entire perspective.”*⁴⁷ Significant transformational learning involves three phases:

- Reflection on one’s assumptions
- Discourse and critical thought
- Action

⁴⁶ Freire, P. *The Politics of Education*. Massachusetts: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1985.

⁴⁷ Merriam, S.B. & Caffarella, R.S. *Learning in Adulthood A Comprehensive Guide (2nd ed)*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999.

Get Set Learn! starts with the parents' life experiences and works from there. The GSL program values the parents cultural and language experiences and attempts to provide ways parents can communicate with their children. GSL provides strategies; facilitators and child care workers provide child care practices that value parents and their children.

Summary of Principles in Family Literacy Practice

Table 2: A summary of principles in family literacy practice

	Behavioural	Transformational	Cognitive	Constructivist
Theorists	Bandura, Skinner, Pavlov	Freire, Mezirow	Gardner, Kolb, Dale	Vgotsky, Piaget, Knowles
Key Principles	Learning happens when a correct response occurs following the presentation of a specific stimulus. Observable and measurable behaviour is stressed	Learning happens when a change occurs following self-reflection	Learner is viewed as an active participant in the learning process. Emphasis is on building knowledge; structuring, organizing, and sequencing information to help optimal processing	Learner interprets the world based on experiences and interactions. Realistic settings are used. The learner uses prior knowledge to problem-solve in novel situations.
Examples	Drills and practice, associations, Observational Learning	Transformational Theory, Emancipatory Learning	Information processing model, Assimilation Theory, Multiple Intelligences, Experiential Learning, Brain-based Learning	Cooperative Learning, Control Theory, Developmental Stages, Problem-based Learning, Authentic Learning, Object-based learning, Social cognition, Emotional Intelligence
Purpose in Education	Produce a change in behaviour in the desired direction	Using self-reflection to change ones thinking	Develop capacity and skills to learn better	Become autonomous
Adult Learning Principle	Skill development and training	Teacher and student work together to facilitate learning through active discussion	Learning how to learn	Self-directed learning

What is Family Literacy?

Family literacy is about the ways families use literacy and language in their daily lives. It is about how families use literacy to do everyday tasks, help children to develop their literacy skills, and use literacy to maintain relationships with each other and the community.⁴⁸ Research has shown that by improving the literacy skills of the parent, the child is more likely to have higher literacy skills. Because parents are a child's first teacher, family literacy programs focus not only on the child, but first and foremost on the parent. Recent research has demonstrated that children develop vital thinking skills, attitudes, and knowledge between birth and the time they start school that lays the foundation for their school success and lifelong learning.⁴⁹ When parents model positive attitudes toward learning, when they read with their child, and when they play with their child and provide opportunities for learning in daily life, they are setting the stage for essential child brain development and future success in school.⁵⁰

What Do Family Literacy Programs Accomplish?

Family literacy programs:

- Help build self-esteem
- Address individual and family needs by building on strengths
- Recognize adult family members' skills, knowledge and attitudes as powerful influences on children's emergent literacy and success in school
- Promote the development of closer, stronger relationships within families
- Value families' use of first languages and diverse cultural practices
- Provide resources that increase adults' and children's motivation to learn
- Help prepare children for school
- Help families understand the school system and their roles in it
- Include as many as possible of family literacy program components⁵¹

Family literacy programs can be one week in duration or last as long as 12 weeks. They are usually not full time programs but rather occur once or twice per week for a set number of weeks. In some cases, they are a one-time only workshop. There is some confusion about child literacy programs, family literacy programs and adult literacy programs. What are they are what are the differences? Basically a child only program cannot be called family literacy because the parent is not involved. Family and adult literacy programs focus on enabling the parent improve their own skills in order to help their children; these are both family literacy programs.

⁴⁸ Literacy Facts, Ontario Literacy Coalition, August 2003.

⁴⁹ Mustard, F.J. & McCain, M. *Reversing the Brain Drain: Early Years Study Final Report*. Toronto: The Canadian Institute for Advanced Research, 1999.

⁵⁰ Jay, C. *Making the Connections: Family Literacy, Adult Literacy, and Early Childhood Development*. Toronto: OLC, 2003.

⁵¹ Action for Family Literacy Ontario (AFLO). Information Brochure, 2004.

Types of Family Literacy Programs

Family literacy programs in Canada and Ontario are varied. Basically, five different types of family literacy programs exist. **Intergenerational programs** are the programs where children are supported in their development (emergent literacy) while separate programming occurs for the parents. Then the parents and children come together to practice the skills and strategies they have learned. The second type of family literacy program is a **Focus on Parents** whereby the parents are supported in their child's literacy skill development at home. Only the parents are present in these workshops. Third, **Parents and Children Together** participate and engage in literacy activities together such as songs, rhymes, and finger plays. **Distribution of Family Literacy Resources** is the fourth type of program. In this program the parent is given a family literacy kit to take home and utilize with their child. Usually information is provided on how to use the supplies in the kit. Finally, **Community Building Workshops** focus on creating awareness about the importance of literacy and reading with children. *Get Set Learn!* is an example of an intergenerational program as well as parents and children together time because both the children and parents are supported in their literacy development.⁵²

Who Participates in a Literacy Program?

According to research, the typical adult student is a male or female, under 40 years of age who has completed high school, enjoys an above-average income, and works full time in a white collar occupation. This student is married with children, lives in an urban area but more likely in a suburb than large city, and is found in all parts of the country.⁵³ This group was not the targeted population for *Get Set Learn!* Instead, the targeted population for *Get Set Learn!* were parents who were on welfare with low literacy skills. In all three sessions 2003-2005, the majority of the parents fell within the three lowest levels of literacy. "The lower one's socioeconomic status, the lower the rate of participation in any type of formal learning activity."⁵⁴

⁵² Merriam, S.B. & Caffarella, R.S. *Learning in Adulthood A Comprehensive Guide (2nd ed.)* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999.

⁵³ Jay, C. *Making the Connections: Family Literacy, Adult Literacy, and Early Childhood Development*. Toronto: OLC, 2003.

⁵⁴ Statistics Canada. *Adult education and training in Canada: Report of the 1994 Adult Education and Training Survey*. Ottawa, 1997.

Table 3. Aggregate background data for Three Sessions of *Get Set Learn!*

Year	Number of Students	At Literacy Levels 1 - 3	Drop Outs/Asked to leave	No Shows	Contact Hours
2003 1 location	17	11	6 (35%)	3 (18%)	192
2004 2 locations	24	17 (71%)	7 (30%)	6 (25%)	412
2005 3 locations	47	42 (89%)	14 (30%)	4 (9%)	505
Total	88	59 (83%) *	27 (31%)	13 (15%)	1109

*Please note that 70 was the total number of students used to calculate the total falling within literacy levels 1 – 3 as literacy levels were not recorded in 2003.

Why Participate in and Register for a Literacy Program?

Many reasons exist to explain why people decide to enter a literacy program. Most importantly are the features that make them want to enroll such as location and time as well as the information to be presented. The next most important reason is because they have support from family and friends.⁵⁵ Often, parents will enroll in a class because it will benefit their child. The *Get Set Learn!* program offers snacks for both children and their parents as well as bus tickets for participants, some of the barriers known to keep adults away from programs. Long and Middleton found three main reasons for people registering for a literacy program are:

- To improve their literacy skills for personal, social and education reasons
- To improve skills for a better job or for retraining
- To get help with reading, writing, and math⁵⁶

In the 2003 data, the top five reasons for attending the *Get Set Learn!* course as noted by the parents are:

- Wants to learn how to teach child to read 36%
- Wants to provide more stimulation for child 21%
- Wants to improve her own thinking 14%
- Wants to meet other people 14%
- Wants her child to learn more 14%

⁵⁵ Roussy, Y. and Hart, D. *Seeing the Need: Meeting the Need A Report on Recruitment and Retention Issues in Literacy and Basic Skills Programs*. OLC, July 2002.

⁵⁶ Long, E. and Middleton, S. *Patterns of Participation in Canadian Literacy and Upgrading Programs Results of a National Follow Up Study* ABC Canada, 2001.

In 2004, the top five reasons for attending *Get Set Learn!* are:

- Wants to get a job or a better job 36%
- Wants to improve her skills 23%
- Wants to help her child 23%
- Wants to go back to school and learn/do something else 9%
- Wants to feel comfortable speaking and reading English 9%

In the 2005 data from *Get Set Learn!* listed below are the top five reasons for attending the course:

- Wants to get a job or a better job 36%
- Wants to go back to school and learn/do something else 11%
- Wants to feel comfortable talking with others in English 7%
- Wants to raise a smart kid 5%
- Wants to help her child with reading 5%

As you can see, the data from all three sessions of *Get Set Learn!* follows the research. It is interesting to note that the order or importance may have been slightly different, yet overall, the reasons for participation remain the same.

What is *Get Set Learn!*?

Project READ Literacy Network (PRLN) has the mandate of coordinating and promoting effective literacy services within Waterloo and Wellington regions. Because of this mandate, the network is constantly searching for better ways to do this. In partnership with the Region of Waterloo's Social Services Division, and various community partners to host the program, Project READ has delivered Family Literacy Programs to parents and their pre-school age children in three different sessions spanning from Fall 2003 to Spring 2005. *Get Set Learn!* was the program that was chosen to best meet the needs of all the partners.

Get Set Learn! is a twice weekly two hour family literacy program that lasts for eight weeks (4 hours/week X 8 weeks=48 hours of instruction per session). It focuses on both the parent and the child. *Get Set Learn!* is a family literacy program that stresses three key messages:

1. Read with your child daily
2. Let your child see you reading, writing and using literacy skills in everyday life
3. Play with your child in ways that are literacy-rich

This program recognizes that parents are a child's first teacher and that in order to help a child improve his or her literacy skills, the parent must be helped with his or her own literacy skills. Utilizing dialogue and applying learning to concrete situations are two strategies used to provide a welcoming learning environment for all participants. The participant's prior knowledge is not

dismissed but rather used as information to enhance each of the classes. This program has parent and child together time, and parent and child separate time. Homework is also a requirement of this course. There is homework for the child and parent to be done together as well as homework for the parent only.

Get Set Learn! targets parents with low or no literacy skills. Did you know that almost one-third of working age Canadians at the lowest levels of literacy have a household income of less than \$15,000 per year?⁵⁷ It uses a dialogic process that enables people who have limited reading capabilities a chance to be successful in discussions and limited reading. This method is based on the belief that participants bring knowledge, values, and experience to the group. The facilitator reads or has volunteers read small sections of the text and then everyone is encouraged to discuss and share knowledge with the group.⁵⁸ Not a lot of writing is involved in the course. Most information that is in written form is read aloud to all participants before having them read it on their own. Participants are encouraged to ask for assistance if needed.

Get Set Learn! is a formal learning program but it includes discussion around topics of mutual interest like the study circles of Sweden. This type of education often leads to further education. You will notice in the following table that many parents have continued or plan to continue their education following the program conclusion, which was one of the goals for the *Get Set Learn!* program. If you look at the total number of parents who wish to further their education or training it totals 28 parents or 44 percent (Table 4 below). However, if you take the total parents in year 2003 and 2004 that totals 19 parents out of a possible 30, or 63 percent who expressed interest in further education or training. According to the research, a high percentage of these parents will continue their education and likewise, their children too. Using 2005 data skews the results in a negative fashion. The reason for this is due to the fact that two of the three sites had low numbers throughout the *Get Set Learn!* program so the site and facilitator changed the format part way through the course in one location. This only allowed the new parents a small number of classes before it was done. Therefore, no final evaluation was done with these parents. It is interesting to note that three individuals also got a job. That brings the total to 49 percent who either got a job or who wanted to continue their education. Participation in a family literacy program is a great alternative.

⁵⁷ Literacy in Waterloo Region, Project READ Literacy Network, March 2003.

⁵⁸ Suda, L. *Policies and Pedagogies for Lifelong Literacy International Perspectives for the 21st Century*. ALNARC: Australia, 2001.

Table 4. Table of Parents who wish to further their education/training or got a job.

Year	Parents who want further education or training	Parents who got a job	Parents who completed the Final Evaluation	Parents enrolled in the Program
2003	10	1	11	17
2004	9	1	12	13
2005	9	1	9*	33
Total	28	3	32	63

*Please note that in two locations in 2005 the program was modified and thus only one final evaluation was done from those two sites.

Why do Parents Stay in a Literacy Program?

Four things help parents stay in a program:

- Specific goals to work toward
- Family and friends that support learning
- Support from teachers and other students
- A good feeling about themselves and learning⁵⁹

The *Get Set Learn!* facilitators encourage parents to attend regularly and provide these parents with a number of different skills and parenting strategies. Upon registration, each parent is asked about their goal for registering themselves and their children. Therefore, the first point is addressed. The facilitator actively supports each and every one of the participants and strongly encourages them to continue reading, writing, and doing math, long after the program is done. Finally, the facilitator works hard at providing each parent and child opportunities for success so that they will feel good about themselves.

Informally, during the running of GSL in Spring 2005, it was noted that in the Kitchener program, all but two of the parents who attended the program lived with either a spouse or a parent, thus providing the support detailed in the second bullet. In the 2004 program, it was noted by two of the caseworkers that the reasons for dropout in at least three cases were that there was a language barrier. In other words, even though these parents registered and attended some of the course, they found it too difficult to be involved in a course that was grounded in English, thus they stopped attending.

⁵⁹ Roussy, Y. and Hart, D. *Seeing the Need: Meeting the Need A Report on Recruitment and Retention Issues in Literacy and Basic Skills Programs.* OLC, July 2002.

Another reason that parents continue to participate in a course is that it is enjoyable, even though this was not mentioned in the research. GSL employs lots of fun interactive activities that parents do with other parents and with their children. It makes for a fun socializing event.

What are the Best Practices in Family Literacy?

The Ontario Literacy Coalition (OLC) recently undertook primary research surrounding the Best Practices of Family Literacy in Ontario. Best practice statements outline key elements of effective, quality family literacy programs. They describe ideals and serve as guidelines. They are intended for use as a framework to guide effective program design, development, and evaluation. The Best Practice Statements for Ontario are:

1. Philosophy – A quality family literacy program has a clearly written mission statement that is built on carefully considered values and beliefs. This philosophy is communicated to everyone involved with the program and is reviewed regularly.
2. Needs Assessment and Planning – A quality family literacy program conducts ongoing community needs assessments for family literacy, identifying target groups, and exploring the potential for collaboration and partnerships, and the availability of resources. This lays a solid foundation for planning a program with goals and objectives that are in line with its philosophy, and helps generate funding and community supports.
3. Policies and Procedures – A quality family literacy program has policies and procedures to ensure that everyone involved in the program is supported in relevant ways and that a safe, welcoming environment that facilitates learning is established. It also plays an advocacy role in the community on literacy policy and family support issues.
4. Program Models – A quality family literacy program is built on a well-researched model that emphasizes the strengths of families, affirms the influence of parents on their children's learning, and empowers all generations to learn to meet their learning goals.
5. Program Content – A quality family literacy program supports the learning efforts of all family members by using a wide variety of instructional methods, strategies and research-based materials. While a program model may be followed, modifications are made continually to meet the needs, interests, and capabilities of program participants.
6. Materials, Resources and Facilities – A quality family literacy program uses a variety of age-appropriate and authentic learning materials, and provides accessible facilities where families will feel safe and comfortable learning.

7. Staff Development – A quality family literacy program has staff members who are well-qualified to meet the diverse learning needs of participating families. The staff members understand the theory and research underlying family literacy, bring practical skills to program delivery, and keep up-to-date through professional development.
8. Volunteers – A quality family literacy program recruits, trains and supports volunteers so that they contribute in meaningful ways that add greatly to the program, while meeting their own needs.
9. Promotion and Recruitment – A quality family literacy program uses a variety of methods and develops appropriate outreach materials to promote the program effectively in the community, and to recruit families to participate who have the most to gain from the program.
10. Access, Participation, and Retention – A quality family literacy program ensures that everyone who would like to attend is able to, by offering it in central, safe locations that are well equipped with relevant resources and supports. Sensitive staff create a learning environment where participants of all ages will want to attend for as long as it takes to reach their goals.
11. Working with Diversities – A quality family literacy program celebrates and supports the range of diversity in its community by providing a variety of relevant resources, and modifying program content as appropriate. Self-aware staff communicate effectively with families of all backgrounds and abilities, acting against discrimination and using language that is clear and inclusive.
12. Funding and Sustainability – A quality family literacy program plans to become sustainable by exploring long-term funding sources at local, provincial, and national levels. However, the program recognizes great value in the experiences gained through short-term funding opportunities and community collaborations.
13. Community Involvement and Partnerships – A quality family literacy program views itself as a vital part of a community, able to meet the learning needs of families most effectively when working closely within a network of agencies that have similar values and goals.
14. Assessment and Evaluation – A quality family literacy program uses a variety of methods to assess and document the progress of participants and to evaluate the effectiveness of different aspects of the program in helping them meet their learning goals. Everyone involved with the program is encouraged to participate in the evaluation.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Sutherland, K. *Family Literacy in Ontario: A Best Practices Guide*. Toronto: OLC, 2006.

Get Set Learn! already has all but one of these “Best Practice” statements embedded in the program. The eighth statement about recruiting and utilizing volunteers has not occurred in a direct manner yet since the numbers in GSL have been manageable. Project READ Literacy Network does in fact use volunteers on its Board of Directors which governs GSL so indirectly, GSL does indirectly use volunteers to contribute to the quality of the program.

PART II – Development of Program

Get Set Learn! was run as a pilot project in 2003, funded by the local municipal government. The facilitator based the course content on various resources but primarily it followed the resource “*Literacy is a Family Affair How to deliver family literacy workshops in your community*”⁶¹ published by Project READ a few years earlier. The program was divided into two components: the first hour the parents and children were in separate rooms. The children were with childcare staff singing, playing, doing art, and socializing with other children. The parents were in another room with the family literacy facilitator who was focusing on simple activities that the parents could do later with their children that would improve the child’s literacy skills. The wonderful thing that occurred in this program was that the parents were also building their own literacy skills. When the children joined the parents, the parents were able to practice the skills that they had been previously taught.

Laying the Foundation

Research has demonstrated that family literacy is a great way to help with low literacy skills in families. Adults who are afraid to “go back to school” to improve their literacy skills, often have no problems signing up for a program for their child. They are often quite motivated to ensure that their children have future success in school. When these parents discover that they have a vital role in helping their children develop and improve their literacy skills, they tend to become more motivated to increase their own literacy skills.⁶²

Participating in a family literacy program can often be the first step for the parent toward increasing his or her own literacy skills and perhaps enrolling in a course for herself. “*Low literacy often appears as a cycle within families. Since the parents don’t read and write well, they don’t carry out the kinds of activities with their young children that foster reading and writing. They don’t have a model passed down by their own parents for building literacy skills.*”⁶³ The nurturing of learning can be learned. In other words, even parents with low literacy skills can be shown ways to encourage reading, writing, and math in their own children.

⁶¹ Paul, M. *Literacy is a Family Affair How to deliver family literacy workshops in your community*. Kitchener: Project READ Literacy Network, 2002.

⁶² Brooks, G. , Gorman, T., Harman, J., Hutchison, D. & Wilkin, A. *Family Literacy Works*. London: The Basic Skills Agency, 1996.

⁶³ Paul, M. *Literacy is a Family Affair How to deliver family literacy workshops in your community*. Kitchener: Project READ, 2002.

Family literacy programs build upon the strengths already present in a family. The objective of a family literacy program should be to affirm what families already do and extend their existing repertoire of strategies.

Family literacy programs work best when they:

- Start from families' own experiences
- Build on families' own literacy practices
- Support families with their needs⁶⁴

A family literacy approach recognizes the inter-connectedness of literacy with other issues affecting families, and encourages cross-sectoral community collaborations that build on existing programs and services for community.⁶⁵ Research findings from numerous sources point to the importance of adult literacy education and to having educated parents as keys to improving family literacy. The main reasons for focusing on both the child and the parent in family literacy programs is because education programs that utilize parent participation, increase the child's chances of success.⁶⁶

Objectives and Data from Three Sessions of *Get Set Learn!*

The original objectives of the *Get Set Learn!* pilot project which was begun in 2003 were to offer this program to as many parents on Ontario Works (OW) with low literacy skills as possible and to provide these parents with tools and strategies to enable them to help their children succeed in school. *The literacy levels of parents registering and attending a portion of the programs in Spring/Summer 2005 had the majority of parents falling within the three lowest levels of literacy which is 20 out of the 24 parents (83 percent).*⁶⁷ In the fall programs held in 2004, 17 out of 24 parents (71 percent) had literacy levels in the lowest three levels of literacy as well. In the 2003 session, there wasn't data on the literacy levels of parents but it is known that the facilitator looked to register parents in the three lowest levels of literacy.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Literacy Facts: Family Literacy. Toronto: OLC, August 2003.

⁶⁵ Foundational Training in Family Literacy: Practitioners' Resource. Alberta: Centre for Family Literacy Society of Alberta, 2002.

⁶⁶ Nickse, R. Family and intergenerational literacy programs: an update of 'The noises of literacy.' Columbus: ERIC, 1990.

⁶⁷ Sauve, L.A. Summary Report 2005 Get Set Learn! A Family Literacy Program. Kitchener: 2005.

⁶⁸ Cartwright, Cyndi. Summary Report 2003. Kitchener: Project READ, 2003.

When comparing the data of the three sessions of *Get Set Learn!* 2003, 2004, 2005, it is interesting to note the similarities and differences between and within the sessions. First, in 2003, 20 parents registered for the program to be held in one location. In 2004, 24 parents registered for *Get Set Learn!* to be held in two locations.⁶⁹ In 2005, 47 parents registered for *Get Set Learn!* to be held in three locations.⁷⁰ The numbers and percentages of parents on OW was 15 (90 percent), 17 (71 percent), and 42 (89 percent).

Attrition or dropping out is a big problem in Literacy and Basic Skills programs. Various studies suggest that between 10 and 60 percent of all students drop out before they have achieved their goals.⁷¹ Because *Get Set Learn!* is a family literacy program, the parent and child are both involved. Often times, the motivation is higher for the parent to attend a class in the first place because their child is involved. The number of parents who dropped out was relatively unchanged between the three sessions of *Get Set Learn!*. In 2003 it was 16 (22 percent). In 2004 it was seven parents (30 percent) and 14 parents (30 percent) in 2005. According to the research it was found that of those adults who drop out of programs, the lower the age of the participant, the higher the drop out rate.⁷² In our data, the dropout rate is not a true one as some participants were asked to leave because of poor attendance. This may have been their way of dropping out (See Table 3).

In registering parents in 2005, the facilitators pre-screened all of the participants over the phone before registering them for the program. The number of “no shows” dropped dramatically from 18 percent in 2003 and 25 percent in 2004 to 9 percent in 2005. Over the phone, much more detailed information regarding expectations and course content was given which may have had parents making a better informed decision about whether or not to register. Also, because this is the third time around for the program to run, the caseworkers were more informed about its content. As well, there are more parents who have already taken the course. These parents may be encouraging others to take the course. According to Roussy and Hart, having former students promote the program is one of the best ways to get other people enrolled in the program.⁷³

⁶⁹ Sauve, L. *Get Set Learn! Summary Report 2005*. Kitchener: Project READ, March 2005.

⁷⁰ Sauve, L. *Summary Report 2005 Get Set Learn! A Family Literacy Program*. Kitchener: Project READ, July 2005.

⁷¹ Roussy, Y. and Hart, D. *Seeing the Need: Meeting the Need A Report on Recruitment and Retention Issues in Literacy and Basic Skills Programs*. Toronto: OLC, July 2002.

⁷² Long, S. and Middleton, S. *Patterns of Participation in Canadian Literacy and Upgrading Programs Results of a National Follow Up Study*. Toronto: ABC Canada, 2001.

⁷³ Roussy, Y. and Hart, D. *Seeing the Need: Meeting the Need A Report on Recruitment and Retention Issues in Literacy and Basic Skills Programs*. Toronto: OLC, July 2002.

Project Staff Development and Certification

Family literacy facilitators need to have an understanding of both **andragogy**, meaning “*the art and science of helping adults learn*” and **pedagogy**, “*the art and science of helping children learn.*”⁷⁴ At present, there is no certification required to be a family literacy facilitator, although there are many different certifications that one can acquire to run a specific family literacy program. At present, there is a *National Foundational Training in Family Literacy* that is offered provincially in Canada. It was designed to offer family literacy facilitators an overall thorough grounding in family literacy rather than providing specific course training such as *Family Math or Early Learning Canada*. It covers everything from definitions of family literacy to the administration of a family literacy program. The facilitator must undergo a certain number of hours of training and then will receive a certificate.

A family literacy facilitator should have had previous experience working with adults as a facilitator and ideally, working with young children as a coach or running a children’s group. In order to facilitate the *Get Set Learn!* family literacy program, it is suggested that the facilitator have experience teaching adults and children as well as have read the entire manual “*Literacy is a Family Affair How to deliver family literacy workshops in your community.*” Having had training in other family literacy programs is strongly suggested as well.

Project Read Literacy Network Development

Project READ Literacy Network (PRLN) was developed in 1988. Since then, it has promoted the need for basic skills programs and supported the growth of quality literacy services. PRLN is a regional network whose members include agencies and individuals who are directly or indirectly involved with literacy delivery services in Waterloo Region. PRLN is committed to the development of lifelong literacy. Additionally, PRLN understands the importance of every person’s ability to function and use the daily print found in society.

Since the late 1990’s, PRLN has been offering family literacy workshops to parents. These two-hour workshops called “First Steps” help parents understand how to help their young children attain or improve their pre and early literacy skills.

⁷⁴ Knowles, M. *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy* (2nd ed). New York: Cambridge Books, 1980.

They are sponsored by the local newspaper as part of their annual support of PRLN. Ten years later, PRLN developed and delivered “Next Steps” workshops for parents to enable them to help their school age children with homework as well as provide them with strategies and suggestions for talking with the child’s teacher. Both of these two workshops have been offered on a continual basis for the past six years.

Over the past 15 years, Project READ has been developing and refining family literacy materials for these two workshops. As well, Project READ has provided tailored workshops to organizations and workplaces that request information about how to help parents help their children. This is how Project READ became involved and remains involved in family literacy programming.

Get Set Learn! Development

In 2003, the pilot was developed. First, a detailed work plan was developed in hopes that the twenty weeks allotted to conduct the pilot program were used as wisely as possible. The first eight weeks were designated to accomplish several important tasks. In order for the program to be successful, it was necessary to conduct research, locate and plan with a host program, make contacts, write letters, make phone calls, design and distribute outreach materials including flyers, posters and brochures and to begin registration. Time also had to be set aside for scheduling pre- program intakes with each participant prior to class start, lesson planning, designing forms and activities as well as purchasing and organizing the materials required for class.

Our Place, a Family Resource and Early Years Centre in Kitchener, Ontario was the first location that was approached with the idea of partnering with Project READ to offer this Family Literacy Program. When the proposal of hosting the six-week family literacy pilot program was presented to Our Place’s Executive Director, the idea was welcomed and planning details promptly ensued.

The next six weeks were set aside for the twelve classes to be organized and delivered. During this time, three evaluations would be completed by the participants - pre, mid and post program evaluations. Conducting pre program intakes as well as these three evaluations was an integral part of measuring and demonstrating the successes of the parents and children who attended this program.

The final six weeks were set aside to conduct host agency and Early Childhood Education staff evaluations, caseworker evaluations, as well as to create a facilitator’s guide, compile all information that was gathered,

summarize all of the completed evaluations and lastly, to prepare the summary report.⁷⁵

In 2004 and 2005, the program was expanded to 16 classes from 12. There were two weeks designated to plan for delivery of the program because promotion of the program had taken place already. In 2004, the program had expanded to two locations and in 2005, to three locations in three different locales. Two were in city locations and one in a neighbouring rural town. Eight weeks were designated for the program and a final two weeks were left for analyzing the data and writing a summary report.

Literature and Materials Development

In 2001, the Starbucks Foundation provided the funds for Project READ to develop a manual that would help other organizations and family literacy facilitators run a family literacy workshop that modeled one of their two workshops. Outlines of workshops, handouts for the workshop, tips for workshop leaders, as well as information about how young children learn are all included in the manual "*Literacy is a Family Affair How to deliver family literacy workshops in your community.*" This document is the premise around which *Get Set Learn!*, the eight-week program was designed. This manual is a very thorough and detailed compilation of information necessary to organize and deliver a family literacy program.

Another text that was used to gather further ideas and suggestions for this program was *Early BIRD Family Literacy Beginnings in Reading Development Program Manual*.⁷⁶ Since the pilot project, facilitators have gathered and compiled an extensive library of resources and have no problems adding in or finding other materials requested by the parents. The curriculum development has been successful for GSL as there is a basic manual to follow "*Literacy is a Family Affair How to deliver family literacy workshops in your community*" yet materials can be added depending on parental preference. This allows for flexibility and makes it both formal and informal since some of the information will be provided by the participants during the discussion portions of the course.

For the host sites and the childcare workers, an eight week overview is provided. The parents, for the first time in 2005, were provided with a calendar that listed each day's theme and topic. It seemed to alleviate some of the attendance problems in one site, which was a by product of its inception.

⁷⁵ Cartwright, Cyndi, *A Summary Report, 2003*. Kitchener: Project READ, 2003.

⁷⁶ Simpson, S. *Early BIRD Family Literacy Beginnings in Reading Development Program Manual* Hamilton: The Hamilton Literacy Council & The Family Literacy Network, 2003.

Promotion of the Program

In 2003, numerous organizations and people that were contacted to promote this program. A number of letters, posters, flyers and brochures were designed and distributed to twelve local schools, eleven community centres, two libraries and one shopping mall in the area. The same were also distributed to the Employment Resource Centre, Healthy Babies Healthy Children, the Volunteer Action Centre, the New Canadians Program, Project READ members and other surrounding literacy and community agencies. Public Service Announcements and Media Releases were also written and distributed to local newspapers and radio stations. Press releases were sent to Member of Parliament and Members of Provincial Parliament. Two Child Health Fairs and two Early Years Centre openings were also attended in order to network and share information about the program with other agencies.

First and foremost, however, a pre program outreach plan was executed in cooperation with staff in the Social Services Department to contact and recruit potential participants. Letters of introduction were written and sent to the Region in order to inform them about *Get Set Learn!* including start and end dates. The hope was that in giving these workers several weeks' notice, more referral opportunities would be available. Upon conducting the case worker evaluations, however, it became apparent that the letter of introduction had not reached them. The only information they received regarding the program was a brief email and the actual flyer that had been sent in the mail to the Ontario Works clients.⁷⁷

In 2004, outreach was still vital to having as many people know about *Get Set Learn!* as possible. The promotion started in August and continued until the first week in October. First, a cheque insert was put into all August Ontario Works cheques. This meant that anyone who received a cheque would get the insert. The facilitator of *Get Set Learn!* discussed in advance the date and format for the cheque insert and then hand-delivered these inserts to the regional office in Waterloo. This has been a huge success. In addition, flyers were created and put up at both the Kitchener Early Years Centre and at Popcorn House in Cambridge. The Early Years Centre published information about the program in their monthly calendars. In addition, brochures were left at both sites for interested participants. As well, outreach workers at the Kitchener Community Centres were given brochures so that they could distribute them to interested parents. Brochures were also left in local churches in Kitchener. In Cambridge, brochures were sent home to all parents of children in junior kindergarten and senior kindergarten at the school across the street from Popcorn House. In late September, the Family Literacy Facilitator attended the Cambridge Child Health Fair.

⁷⁷ Cartwright, Cyndi. *A Summary Report, 2003*. Kitchener: Project READ, 2003.

This proved to be an excellent forum for promoting the program to not only workers, but also to interested participants. Simultaneously, all Region of Waterloo Caseworkers were personally phoned and given information regarding the *Get Set Learn!* program as well as in brochure form at their caseworker meeting.⁷⁸

Table 5. How did you find out about Get Set Learn?

Year	Cheque Insert/Caseworker	Flyer at Centre	Friend	Child Health Fair
2003	14 (82%)	1 (6%)	2 (12%)	0
2004	17 (72%)	2 (8%)	3 (12%)	2 (8%)
2005	24 (51%)	18 (38%)	5 (11%)	0
Total	55 (63%) *	21 (24%) *	10 (11%) *	2 (2%) *

*Please note that 88 is the total number of parents used to calculate the total percentages.

Get Set Learn! was also promoted in many different ways during the Spring of 2005. The promotion started in March and continued until the start date of the courses. Again, a cheque insert was put into all cheques distributed to Ontario Works clients. In addition, flyers were created and put up at all three sites. The Early Years Centre published information about the program in their monthly calendars. In addition, brochures were left at both sites for interested participants. As well, outreach workers at Community Centres were given brochures so that they could distribute them to interested parents. In Elmira, the Early Years Satellite Centre displayed brochures for interested parents. In April, one of the Family Literacy facilitators attended the rural Child Health Fair. This proved to be a forum for promoting the program but attendance by parents was low so it did not garner any new participants. Simultaneously, all Region of Waterloo Caseworkers were personally phoned and given information regarding the *Get Set Learn!* program as well as in brochure form at their caseworker meeting. They were encouraged to refer clients to this program. They had many questions regarding the program and some of them had not received the brochure at their case meeting. It brought the program to their attention. Many of them said that they would ask for the brochure and call back if they had clients or more questions. The third best form of advertisement was the Child Health Fair. This brought in two new clients for the Cambridge program.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Sauve, L. *Get Set Learn! Summary Report 2005*. Kitchener: Project READ, March 2005.

⁷⁹ Sauve, L. *Summary Report 2005 Get Set Learn! A Family Literacy Program*. Kitchener: Project READ, July 2005.

It was noticed that for this program, in all three cases, **the best form of advertisement was the cheque insert**. Each time *Get Set Learn!* has been offered, many phone calls have been received immediately following parents receiving the cheque insert. The next best form of advertisement was the personal phone call to all of the caseworkers regarding the program. We have found that caseworkers who have previously had clients attend *Get Set Learn!* refer other parents to the program.

On intake, it was noted that some parents may need a personal reminder to attend. These parents were telephoned to remind them to attend the class on a class-by-class basis. Additionally, all participants were given a calendar that listed the themes for the classes and the dates so that they could refer to it when needed.

Evaluations Developed

Both formative and summative evaluations have been developed for the *Get Set Learn!* program. Formative evaluations enable people and agencies to make judgements about the work undertaken. They allow you to evaluate whether or not the project is meeting its intended purpose and what might need to change further to improve the project. The primary focus of a formative evaluation is for further improvements in the project. A summative evaluation is used for decision – making. It enables people and agencies to demonstrate that they have fulfilled the objectives of the project.⁸⁰ Initially, an intake or registration form was developed that could be completed in person that would take no longer to complete than one hour. Eventually, as the program grew, it was determined that a screening form could be completed over the telephone and then, if further information is required, an intake interview could be conducted at a later date. The evaluations developed and used follow below:

1. Parent Initial Intake or Registration Form
2. Child Initial Evaluation of Behaviour Form
3. Parent Mid-Program Evaluation Form
4. Parent Ongoing Comment Form – What did you learn today
5. Child Mid-Program Evaluation of Behaviour Form
6. Parent Final Evaluation Form
7. Child Final Evaluation of Behaviour Form
8. Caseworker Final Evaluation (Telephone Interview or faxed evaluation)
9. Host Site Final Evaluation Form
10. Child Care Worker Final Evaluation Form

⁸⁰ Bibliography of Terms. Accessed Summer 2005. <http://www.infed.org/biblio/b-eval.htm>

PART 3 – Program Impacts 2003 – 2005

Project Unfolding

After the pilot project ended in 2003, it was uncertain whether the Region of Waterloo would fund *Get Set Learn!* again. After reading the report, the Region did indeed fund it again following another proposal submission. While the second session of the program was running, approval was given for a third session of *Get Set Learn!* so it was great to be able to provide advance notice for future participants and sites. Now *Get Set Learn!* has been given continuous funding. This allows more time to go into the planning and delivery of future programs rather than spending time re-writing an old proposal.

Impact on Participants

In participating in the *Get Set Learn!* 2003 program with their children, the parents received many benefits and their lives became more enriched. The participants accomplished the pre-program goals they set for themselves. Not only did their children gain necessary and invaluable reading, writing and math skills during this program, but the parents' skills, knowledge and confidence also increased. Many learned how to be more patient when teaching their children. Each participant was given an occasion to meet with someone familiar to discuss further learning opportunities and 91 percent of those who completed the program are now interested in furthering their education, thus increasing employment possibilities and therefore standard of living. All participants were also given important teaching tools to use with their children. Both the parents and children gained valuable insights into how to prepare for kindergarten. The parents also appreciated having the opportunity to get out of the house and meet new people; some became friends. Although brief, certain moms enjoyed a much-needed break away from their children. *"I feel saner. My patience level is much better after being in class. Therefore I am ready to sit and calmly help my child with her reading, etc."* Others enjoyed the atmosphere, the feeling of learning in a classroom environment and participating in various group activities. *"I learned so much. I am satisfied. Everything was covered..."* All of the participants were pleased with the positive results and improvements they saw in themselves and in their children. (I have learned) *"...my child is not the only one having problems sitting to learn. Also ways to get him interested and to continue to have fun learning. Also I've learned ideas to identify problems and overcome them and how to handle things when he is older and in school."*

Employment

By attending the Get Set Learn Program, helpful and beneficial programs and services became available and accessible to several parents and their children. During the program in 2003, one participant noticed a job posting, applied and was hired full time as an office administrator; she no longer receives Ontario Works. In 2004 and 2005, one parent in each session became employed and no longer receives OW.

Parenting and Child Development

A participant approached the program facilitator and indicated that she was having some difficulty controlling her child. After some research was done, a suitable program was found and she and her daughter were referred to counselling. She later explained that this program would provide day care services for her daughter while she attended night classes in order to obtain her secondary school diploma. She was thankful for the help she had received from the GSL facilitator. One mother indicated a concern for her child's lack of speech. The program facilitator had information at hand about the upcoming Child Health Fair. She and her son were able to attend the Fair and gained some valuable information regarding local parenting programs. She was appreciative of the information that had been relayed to her through the *Get Set Learn!* facilitator. In Fall 2004, all twelve participants said the program has helped them and their children. In this session, there were eight participants in the Kitchener and four participants in the Cambridge program who completed the final evaluation. The majority of all participants noticed a change in their child's attitude towards books. *"I have noticed that she loves to read more often."* All of the parents said that they felt more confident in their abilities to help their children with reading, writing, and math. This is a definite key in breaking the cycle of illiteracy. *"I think anyone could benefit from just understanding how enriching it is to a child's learning, just by reading to them."* In the Spring 2005, again the responses were similar from the parents. They felt that they were given help regarding parenting and now had more knowledge about their child's development and how to continue to make his/her environment literacy-rich.

Further Education

It is a known fact that individuals who have completed their secondary and post secondary education have many more employment opportunities than those who have not. In pursuing further education, these Ontario Works clients are opening many employment and other doors. When clients re-enter the workforce and no longer require Ontario Works assistance, everyone benefits.

Of the eleven parents who completed the program in 2003 and completed the final program evaluation, ten of them indicated a desire to continue their education in some way. Since the program has ended, one has been referred to Conestoga College's Focus for Change program for women and three have been referred to the St. Louis Adult Learning Centre in Kitchener. Two will attend their Literacy and Basic Skills program and one will attend their Personal Support Worker program. Two parents explained that had the *Get Set Learn!* program not been made available to them, they would still be at home only thinking about continuing their education; they would never have found the courage to register for an educational program and to further their education on their own. In 2004, seven out of 12 wanted to continue to further their education not including two who had already done so before *Get Set Learn!* was completed. They went from GSL directly to another program. In 2005, the number was lower, however there were still five who were planning to further their education and/or training. GSL is definitely a springboard to adult education.

Impact on Caseworkers

In 2003, seven of the ten (70 percent) caseworkers completed the evaluation. According to these caseworkers, the effects of the program on their clients were very positive. *"It was difficult to get my client motivated before but she is now willing to get out of the house and do things. She is more motivated now than I have seen her before. She would now love to volunteer and will be calling Project Read to see about her options to do this."* *"Clients are sometimes apprehensive. She is now continuing with things and I am hopeful that she will pursue them"*.

In 2004, seven out of nine caseworkers (79 percent) responded to the caseworker evaluation, however, only five were able to answer the questions as the other two had their caseloads changed part way through this program so they were unable to comment. When asked if they noticed any changes in their clients who attended the Fall 2004 *Get Set Learn!* Program, two commented positively. *"Yes she is more confident and expresses the desire to attend other programs."* *"Yes she is now attending an educational program."* The other three hadn't seen their clients since the program finished. Both of these comments fall within the research that shows that these parents are well on their way to breaking the cycle of illiteracy for their children as they have attended a family literacy program. One hundred percent of the caseworkers would recommend offering *Get Set Learn!* again.

In 2005, six out of ten (60 percent) caseworkers responded to the evaluation. *"Yes, overall scope positive about themselves and their potential."* Overall, the caseworkers either noticed a positive change in their clients self-esteem or found that it was too early to tell as they hadn't seen their clients since GSL was completed.

Success Factors

“Both my daughter and me enjoy coming so much to the program. It is good for us, and fun.” Many success factors exist with this program that include:

- Both adult and child success (confidence in the parents and improved behaviours in the children)
- Childcare staff approval of GSL
- Host site support of GSL
- Caseworkers who support the program are referring more clients and there are more caseworkers doing so now
- GSL is meeting its objectives of helping parents to help their children be school ready as well as helping to build confidence in these parents to continue their education or to find a job
- A decreased number of “no shows”
- Increased contact hours
- Securing sustainable funding

Each success factor will be discussed in further detail below.

Parent and Child Success

“A whole new world of learning has opened for the both of us thanks to Get Set Learn.” After completing the program, all of the parents who attended the *Get Set Learn!* program in any of the sessions, stated that they now have more knowledge about and strategies for what is involved in fostering their child’s pre and early literacy skills. In addition, in their homes, they now have literacy kits that they created in class. *“I am really glad to be here with my child. I feel that I am a better parent because of this course. I gain valuable experience that is necessary to be a good parent.”*

Overwhelmingly, all final evaluations have been positive. The parents really gain confidence in what to do with their children in order to improve their literacy skills and make their children school ready. Self-efficacy is a vital component to learning. In participating in the Get Set Learn program with their parents, the children have received many benefits and their lives have therefore become more enriched. Not only did the children themselves gain necessary and valuable reading, writing and math skills, but their parents’ skills, knowledge and willingness to continue their education also increased.

Both the parents and children learned valuable insights into how to prepare for kindergarten. Although some adapted more easily than others to being away from their mothers and being part of a large group, at the conclusion of the program, all of the children had grown to love attending classes and did not want to leave the classroom. The children also learned other social skills such as listening, sharing, forming a line, waiting for their turn and participating in various group activities.

“If it wasn’t for this program I would be wondering what to do with my children but now I know I can help my children to become great students and we feel very lucky to have people who care about our future.” The participants accomplished the pre-program goals they set for themselves. Not only did their children gain necessary and invaluable reading, writing and math skills during this program, but the parents’ skills, knowledge and confidence also increased. Many learned how to be more patient when teaching their children.

Childcare Staff Approval

“I hope the program can continue to help other parents learn to help their children and to help themselves.” The childcare staff that worked closely with the children completed a separate evaluation. Progressive improvements in behaviours were observed in the children during all sessions of the *Get Set Learn!* program. It was important that the childcare staff be briefed about the goals and approach of the program in order to get their full support for its success. Comments from 2003 include: *“Children separated easier as the group went along. Their play skills improved, they adapted to routine and they understood expectations and their listening skills improved. One child felt comfortable at the last group to express himself verbally.”*

In 2004, the childcare workers were again positive about the positive changes occurring in the children. *“Children who attended regularly became more confident with separation and more trusting of the environment. They were also more able to play appropriately with toys, peers, etc.”*

Comments from the childcare staff in 2005 did not differ from the previous two years. *“We saw an overall improvement in listening skills, separation anxiety decreased. Appropriate use of materials increased.”* So according to the childcare staff, participation in *Get Set Learn!* had a positive impact on the children.

Host Site Support

The hosts for *Get Set Learn!* have been pleased with hosting the program. In 2003, the Early Years Centre in Kitchener offered to be the pilot host site. *“This program is an excellent fit for the services offered at Our Place. We would appreciate and welcome the opportunity to host this program again ... Overall, Our Place was very pleased with the success of Get Set Learn and glad to have had the opportunity to connect with the participants and children, and be a part of this worthwhile program.”* They offered to be a host site again in 2004 and 2005 and in all cases, were supportive of the program.

In 2004, Popcorn House, a community centre in Cambridge agreed to host the second program. *“Get Set Learn! was very easy to host and we enjoy having the program here at Popcorn House.” “Project READ fit in well with our focus and programs here. It really added to what we offer here – a fantastic program!”*

In 2005, another community centre in Cambridge, Preston Heights Community Group as well as a Church in Elmira agreed to host in addition to Our Place in Kitchener. The results from the two new sites weren't as overwhelmingly positive but this may have occurred as there were many problems that arose because of the low numbers of parents and children attending *Get Set Learn!* *“Content was great – very helpful to young families. Good balance between parent learning time and parent/child practice time.”* Two out of the three host sites said that they would be willing to host this program again. The third site did not put an answer for this question. This may have occurred in that this site was more “hands off.” This site did not arrange the childcare and the site organizer was located on a different floor than where the actual program took place. This may have meant that the host did not feel as much a part of the program. There is a definite success in the host sites in that all but one have agreed that they would like to host *Get Set Learn!* again. Also, just by the fact that there has been one site that has hosted every time and in the upcoming session of *Get Set Learn!* two out of the three host sites are repeats.

Caseworker Referrals

There have been a number of caseworkers from the Regional Municipality of Waterloo who continue to refer clients to *Get Set Learn!* session after session. There has been one caseworker who has referred clients for all three sessions. In 2003, there were ten caseworkers who referred clients to the program. In 2004, there were nine caseworkers who referred clients and in 2005, there were ten caseworkers who referred clients. In 2005, it was interesting to note that of those ten caseworkers, many of them referred two or more clients to one of the three programs that ran in Elmira, Kitchener, or Cambridge.

Overall, caseworkers in all three sessions have been satisfied and happy with *Get Set Learn!* and its approach with OW clients. In 2003, seven out of ten responded to the final evaluation. Of these seven, four responded very positively about the possibility of having the program offered again. Three caseworkers had no comment because they felt they did not have enough information about the program. One explained: "I cannot comment because I don't know enough about it to know if it was worthwhile. I can't keep up with everything". In Fall 2004, seven out of nine completed the final evaluation of the program. Of the seven who completed the evaluation, they all wanted *Get Set Learn!* to continue. "I would have liked more information at the beginning of the program so then I could have referred more clients." In Spring 2005, six out of ten caseworkers completed the final evaluation. Of those six, only one wasn't sure if the program should run again.

Meeting Objectives

There were many objectives inherent in running the *Get Set Learn!* family literacy program. They include:

- Helping parents improve their skills and self-confidence
- Referring parents into either further education and/or training
- Improving parents comfort level with literacy and being their child's first teacher
- Improving the school readiness of children involved in the program
- Linking families with other programs or agencies that can help them
- Partnering with community agencies who have similar philosophies
- Modeling appropriate parenting skills and strategies

Two objectives of the program were to refer parents into either further education and/or training programs or help them to find a job that would eventually provide them with an independent means to take care of themselves and their families. Each session of *Get Set Learn!* has seen at least one person become employed and many others enroll in an educational program following the *Get Set Learn!* Program.

In 2003, one person got a job and ten of the eleven participants who completed the program indicated a desire to continue their education.

In 2004, seven out of 12 wanted someone from PRLN to contact them regarding an educational assessment and referral to another literacy program. One person got a job and two people enrolled in an educational program directly following *Get Set Learn!* Therefore, nine out of 12 were interested in furthering their education; a huge success, similar to 2003.

In 2005, two out of 16 parents in Kitchener wanted someone from PRLN to contact them regarding an educational assessment and referral to another literacy program. Another three parents were expecting a baby in the next month so they were not able to continue their education right now but they were going to look into it in the future. Therefore, five out of 16 were interested in furthering their education. One person became employed in the last week of the program. One person enrolled in an educational program while still attending *Get Set Learn!*

In all three sessions of running the program, significant outcomes occurred. In every session, one person became employed and numerous others arranged to continue their education or were planning on doing that following an assessment. That is an overwhelming success.

The next objectives were met as well. In all sessions of GSL, all of the parents were given the tools necessary to help their children become better readers and writers when they are ready. Both the children and parents' reading, writing and math skills and abilities have increased, as has the number of learning activities and resources that are now available in the home for the children. The children have gained many valuable social skills and the parents have gained many valuable parenting skills at the same time. In addition, parents were linked with other beneficial programs if need be.

Finally, the last objective, linking with other community agencies that have similar philosophies has also met with great success. The Early Years Centres in Waterloo, Kitchener, and Cambridge and Elmira are aware of the program and support its continuation. Each session of GSL has had the Kitchener Early Years Centre as one of the hosts. As well, the last two sessions (2004 and 2005) has seen the Early Literacy Specialist or one of her staff provide instruction to parents on a specific topic for one of the classes. As well, the Early Years Centre in Waterloo and Kitchener have both loaned resources to the GSL facilitators. The Early Years Centre in Elmira, a satellite centre has displayed flyers advertising the program. Two community centres in Cambridge have hosted and agreed to host the program in the future. Community centres in Kitchener have agreed to display flyers describing the program.

Lutherwood's Family Literacy Coordinator has also partnered with PRLN and has agreed to share the provision of literacy services in Cambridge since the two family literacy programs are different. Lutherwood provides a drop in program whereas *Get Set Learn!* is an eight week continuous program. As you can see, the linkage with other community agencies and experts with similar philosophies has occurred. This further enhances the spread of literacy throughout Waterloo Region.

Decreased No Show Rate

The "no show" rate dropped from 18 percent and 25 percent in 2003 and 2004 to 9 percent in 2005. The reason for this may be that an initial phone screening was done to explain in detail what the program was about and how it would run. The homework expectations were also stressed so that parents would know that in every class, homework would be taken up. Because more information was given at the outset, this may have had parents register who were willing to do all of the course requirements.

Increased Contact Hours

The contact hours have increased every time the course has run. Contact hours are the amount of the time parents are in the room with the facilitator. For example, if five parents attended *Get Set Learn!* for two classes of two hours each, the total contact hours will be 20 hours. This is primarily due to having more locations and more parents registered for the course. In 2003, contact hours totalled 192; proportionately, each adult attended 11 hours on average. In 2004, they totalled 412 with each adult learner attending 17 hours on average. In 2005, the contact hours totaled 505; however, each adult learner attended for just under 11 hours on average. This may be the result of two factors. First, having a rural location which usually tend to have lower numbers and it was the first time hosting it there. Second, there were major problems with regular attendance at the Cambridge site so the total contact hours are not large for that site either.

Sustainable Funding

In this case, *Get Set Learn!* has met with great success. The Executive Director of Project READ has written proposals on two occasions to secure funding from the Region of Waterloo Social Services Department. After receiving summary reports from the first two sessions of the program, the Region agreed to fund *Get Set Learn!* as one of their programs. Therefore, PRLN is not responsible for writing a proposal to secure funding each time although the service agreement must be reviewed annually. Instead, the coordinator of the program can promote the program year round and the executive director can put her energies into supervising the program and ensuring that it meets with success.

PART IV – Recommendations and Conclusions

During each session of *Get Set Learn!* there have been recommendations given in order to avoid some of the difficulties encountered and improve upon the upcoming program. Whenever possible, these recommendations have been undertaken during the next session of GSL. In 2003, the pilot project, hurdles were encountered. These hurdles were merely minor detours on the pathway to success. What is important is that lessons were learned from the challenges and that a new and improved version was offered in 2004 and again, in 2005. The recommendations suggested for each of the years 2003, 2004, and 2005 respectively follow below.

Recommendations Following the Fall 2003 Session

1. ***Have an outreach meeting.*** If possible, all caseworkers should be called to attend a brief meeting with the program's facilitator as soon as possible before the program begins. This meeting will allow each caseworker to receive all pertinent information, brochures and pamphlets directly as well as answering questions and answers.
2. ***Find the marketing linkage.*** It would be beneficial and time saving if the region's marketing officer's name and contact information could be made available upon initial confirmation of funding. This way, both parties can contact each another as soon as a program facilitator is hired.
3. ***Continue to have the cheque insert as promotion.*** The insert is a vital marketing tool to clients. Details surrounding the cheque insert should be confirmed with the marketing officer as soon as possible. This will alleviate any last minute mailings and other possible conflicts.
4. ***Ensure that the timing of inserts are received by Ontario Works clients at least two or three weeks prior to the program start date.*** This will allow the program facilitator ample time to coordinate all registration details and schedule initial intake interviews prior to the first class.
5. ***Establish a host agency partnership prior to planning the program details.*** It is a good idea to first establish the host agency's requirements, availability and limitations. Get Set Learn's start date, time, days, and size all needed to be revised once things were finally confirmed with the host site. The class start date had to be pushed back three times. The time had to be changed from mornings to afternoons and the days we wanted to offer the program also had to be altered. We would have liked to sign up more participants than we did, but at the last moment the site limited registration to 17 children. Much of this change and hassle could have been avoided had more direct communication and agreements been made prior to further planning.

6. **Schedule a follow-up class.** In the post program evaluations, several of the participants recommended that a follow up class be held several weeks from the program's final class to see how others had progressed and to catch up.
7. **Change the class time to mornings and add some weeks to the duration of Get Set Learn!** Some parents suggested changing the class time to mornings, due to naptime conflicts during the afternoons and a majority of the participants also wanted to see the program made longer by adding several more weeks.
8. **Offer the program again.** It was strongly recommended by all who were touched by this program that it be offered again. Not only do the program's facilitator, participants and families agree, but the host agency's staff and most caseworkers who were involved do as well.

Recommendations Following the Fall 2004 Session

1. **Change the format of the course to include reading books beginning with the first class.** This was done during class one and it was discovered that parents and their children cherished the donated book that they were given in the first class. Since one of the main messages of the course is "reading with your child daily is vital," by modeling circle time around the book it was found that parents and children really increased their reading amounts.
2. **Provide an initial course for OW clients on "How to register and be part of a course."** An initial overview was designed and submitted to OW caseworkers but there has been no progress on this account.
3. **Explain during initial intake that parents need to call the facilitator whenever they cannot attend a class.** During all initial intakes, this was done. In the Kitchener program, the calling when not able to attend did occur more frequently. Also, attendance was much better. During the initial intake of all clients, attendance and being on time was also discussed. We did not see this improve in the Cambridge class though.
4. **Create an evaluation for the childcare staff to complete and share this information in written form with the parents as well as verbal form.** Parents were happy and excited to receive the written report on their child's behaviour during childcare.
5. **Use the resources available at the sites and within the community.** Parents utilized the resources at the library of the Early Years Centre on a weekly basis. We had an initial tour of the facility which made the parents and children aware of all that was available. Also, an additional tour was given during the second last class to re-acquaint these parents with the facility and its resources. Some of these parents now continue to use the library services and were planning on attending other programs at this site. The Early Literacy Specialist was also invited to do a class on "Fridge Fun."

- This was well-received by all parents who attended. Mary came with many inexpensive and creative ways to make utilizing your fridge a literacy-rich activity. This was a super class. I also used many of her literacy resources including videos and multi-sensory books that were especially liked by the parents in my classes.
6. ***Continue to offer this course on an on-going basis throughout each year.*** A lot of time was taken up at the start up of this course the first two sessions to obtain participants for these classes. Because community members who make referrals (i.e. caseworkers, site coordinators) knew the dates for the upcoming courses, we received referrals in locations that we had been in previously. The Cambridge and Elmira sites still needed a lot of promotion. We hope that this promotion will continue year round.
 7. ***Partner with Lutherwood's Family Literacy Facilitator to ensure that the tri-cities are being serviced with different family literacy programs.*** Lutherwood offers a drop in family literacy program whereas PRLN offers an eight-week course. A meeting was set up in early Spring before programming began to ensure that Preston and Hespeler were serviced by two different family literacy programs. Because Galt has the Early Years Centre located within it, we felt that Galt had access to great family literacy programs already.
 8. ***Offer this course in three locales including Kitchener/Waterloo, Cambridge, and a rural location.*** This would provide a good location for all three cities including the possible rural parents. Also, some of the parents on the waiting list would have attended were the course offered closer to their home so offering *Get Set Learn!* throughout the tri-cities would help this. We tried offering a program in Elmira for the first time. We are hopeful that a repeat in other rural locations or offering it once per week may improve attendance. We have discovered that most other rural programs are offered either once per week or once every two weeks.
 9. ***Develop and offer a Get Set Learn! Part Two so that skills can be reviewed and strengthened. Literacy statistics show that "if you don't use it, you will lose it!"*** In other words, if people do not practice their literacy skills regularly, then they will likely lose them. We were unable to create a part 2 but that may be something that is created in the future.
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Recommendations Following the Spring 2005 Session

1. **Continue to offer a Get Set Learn! Program at the Early Years Centre in Kitchener.** This host site is extremely supportive and they continue to refer appropriate clients for the program.
 2. **Continue to provide a calendar to participants that includes the themes of the classes and the dates for the classes to run.** Attendance seemed to be more consistent at the Kitchener site. Cambridge and Elmira's attendance was inconsistent but that may have been the result of it being run there for the first time.
 3. **Create a postcard to send to each participant one week before Get Set Learn! starts.** This would be a quick reminder for parents about their start date and the location of the course.
 4. **Create a brochure for caseworkers that is different from the brochure for clients.** Ensure that the data on the brochure details how it will benefit their client as well as how it links into the mandate for them.
 5. **Revamp the brochure and cheque insert for clients to ensure positive and correct messages are on the promotional material.**
 6. **Create some craft ideas/sheets that have easy to understand instructions so that parents can follow the instructions at home.** Use pictures as well as words so that parents with low or no literacy skills can understand and do the activity with their children.
 7. **Do not start a program unless there are at least 6 registered clients for the program.** If you do not have at least 6, when 3 or more clients drop out for whatever reason, the program does not run as well. Most of the activities are designed for larger groups to work together. We know that some parents always drop out.
 8. **In the rural locations, offer Get Set Learn! once per week instead of bi-weekly and extend it to a 10 week program.** This format seems to be the way most rural programs run. We noticed this at the rural Child Health Fair as well as when talking to the rural participants. With the parents that attended on a regular basis, most were only available for one day per week.
 9. **If offering Get Set Learn! in Elmira again, try offering it at a location where parents and their young children already frequent in order to ensure familiarity with location.**
 10. **Attempt to offer a Get Set Learn! program in Cambridge in the afternoons to see if attendance would be better.** We have felt that mornings are usually better for mothers with young children, but perhaps an afternoon time would work better. At the Kitchener location, we have run it during the afternoon and have had reasonably good attendance.
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11. **Continue to provide parents and children with a homework book.** The parents who attended the Kitchener program did their homework on a regular basis and seemed to take it more seriously than in previous sessions of *Get Set Learn!* Continue to ensure that the homework matches the lesson of the day. The children enjoyed their number books. Perhaps add in some letters of the alphabet too.
12. **Purchase more supplies (i.e. quality books, flannel boards, videos, magnetic boards, large books) so that the facilitators do not have to spend so much time looking for appropriate books and videos.** A lot of time is spent searching libraries, book stores, Early Years Centres, and other children's resource centres for appropriate books and other resources.
13. **If host another Get Set Learn! Program in Elmira, consider offering it at the Early Years Satellite Centre.** Because parents are already familiar with attending at that location, they may be more likely to come to a program for them and their children. Perhaps we could offer Get Set Learn on a day when the program would normally not be open so that we could use a divider to separate the parents and their children for the initial hour. This would increase the usage of the facility as well.
14. **Do a six-month follow up to determine the clients' future prognosis. In other words, did they find a job or enroll in another educational program?** This will ensure that there are more far-reaching effects following the program's end date. In literacy literature, it is a well known fact that "you must use it or you will lose it." In order for parents and children to maintain their skills, they need to practice. One way to do this is to continue to attend programs or practice the skills learned at home.
15. **Meet with all childcare staff prior to the course start up in order to ensure that all staff involved know what the 8 week course outline will entail.**⁸¹

⁸¹ Sauve, L. *Summary Report 2005 Get Set Learn! A Family Literacy Program*. Kitchener: Project READ, July 2005.

Lessons Learned

Following the three sessions of *Get Set Learn!* these lessons learned prevail.

1. **Start promoting the program early.** Telephone each of the caseworkers personally. Send a flyer to caseworkers who have previously referred clients to this program.
2. **Ensure that the cheque insert occurs within one month of the program starting.** Include locations and dates and times of the program.
3. **Before program starts, meet with the childcare staff to share ideas for programming.** Then as program is going, meet briefly face-to-face to communicate issues arising, things needed, etc.
4. **Pre-screen clients on the telephone to ensure that they understand all the requirements of their attendance including the need to complete weekly homework.**
5. **Send a reminder postcard one week prior to the course start date.** Include the address of the location as well as dates and start times. This would be a quick reminder for parents about their start date and the location of the course.
6. **Once classes start, keep in touch with host site administrators to ensure that they are apprised of everything going on in the course.**
7. **If a parent misses a class, call them to ensure that they return or at least find out why they missed a class.**
8. **Ensure that all clients feel comfortable.** Therefore, when presenting any information, ensure that you are facing the clients as well as demonstrating what they are going to do. Ensure that they have understood the information.
9. **Provide fun classes with varied hands-on activities.** Ensure that you have extra supplies in case parents want more than one activity.
10. **Provide nutritious snacks for both children and their parents,** including water as some families may not be able to afford this kind of food. It also is good modeling.
11. **Provide a written report card of child's behaviour at end of course.**
12. **Provide a certificate to participants at end of course including their name and the names of their children.**
13. **Ensure that you have age appropriate crafts for the parents and children to do and that you have crafts for infants as well.**
14. **Formally thank all people involved in the running of the program.**
15. **Continue to offer a Get Set Learn! Program at the Early Years Centre in Kitchener.** This host site is extremely supportive and they continue to refer appropriate clients for the program.

16. **Continue to provide a calendar to participants that includes the themes of the classes and the dates for the classes to run.** Attendance seemed to be more consistent at the Kitchener site. Cambridge and Elmira it was inconsistent but that may have been the result of it being run there for the first time.
17. **Create a brochure for caseworkers that is different from the brochure for clients.** Ensure that the data on the brochure details how it will benefit their client as well as how it links into the mandate for them.
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21. **In the rural locations, offer Get Set Learn! once per week instead of bi-weekly and extend it to a 10 week program.** This format seems to be the way most rural programs run. We noticed this at the rural Child Health Fair as well as when talking to the rural participants. With the parents that attended on a regular basis, most were only available for one day per week.
22. **Continue to provide parents and children with a homework book.** The parents who attended the Kitchener program did their homework on a regular basis and seemed to take it more seriously than in previous sessions of *Get Set Learn!* Continue to ensure that the homework matches the lesson of the day. The children enjoyed their number books. Perhaps add in some letters of the alphabet too.
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24. **Do a six-month follow up to determine the clients' future prognosis. In other words, did they find a job or enroll in another educational program?** This will ensure that there are more far-reaching effects following the program's end date. In literacy literature, it is a well-known fact that "you must use it or you will lose it." In order for parents and children to maintain their skills, they need to practice. One way to do this is to continue to attend programs or practice the skills learned at home.

Conclusions

In conducting this case study, I had hoped to answer these questions:

1. Did the *Get Set Learn!* program meet its objectives?
2. Did parents and their children benefit from participating in the program?
3. Have parents learned strategies to assist their children in being school ready?
4. Have recommendations from previous Summary Reports been put into place and has this improved the program?
5. How does *Get Set Learn!* compare as a quality family literacy program?
6. Should the program continue?

The current research has provided some definitive answers to and observations about the above questions.

First and foremost, the *Get Set Learn!* family literacy program has met with many successes. They include:

1. Some individuals have gained employment following participation in *Get Set Learn!*
1. A number of parents continue their education or training
2. Parents state that they are implementing reading strategies with their children that they have learned in the program
3. Parents state that their confidence has improved
4. A decrease in the number of parents who do not show following registration has been seen
5. A cry to increase the program from six to eight weeks has met with success
6. The curriculum is flexible yet provides a solid grounding in school readiness for the child and confidence building for the parent
7. Community partners are aware of the program and are supportive
8. The majority of the previous host sites would like to host the program again and one has done so three times
9. The childcare workers involved with GSL are supportive of it
10. The funding from the Region of Waterloo is sustainable
11. The promotion via the cheque insert is effective
12. The caseworkers who have referred in the past continue to do so

However, there are places where the *Get Set Learn!* family literacy program is falling down. They include:

1. It is still difficult to recruit large numbers of parents and children to take part in the programs, except at the Kitchener location
2. Recruitment of the target population is still an issue – this course should be jam-packed each session because of the high numbers of clients on OW with low literacy skills
3. Not all caseworkers know about this program even though it is funded by their workplace. Therefore, some OW clients who could use this program may never attend it because they don't know about it
4. Drop outs still occur at about 30 percent of the registrants
5. Communication with one of the host sites was not effective
6. This course is only offered in English which leaves out the ESL population if they do not have reasonable communication skills in English
7. There is no second course available for parents who are comfortable with this format and who would like to take it again
8. The contact hours haven't increased proportionately, only in a general manner
9. Parents are not tracked once they leave the *Get Set Learn!* program or following a referral from Project READ. How many parents really continue to further their education and if so, in what areas do they study? Also, what literacy practices do they continue to engage in at home with their children? Finally, have any other parents gained employment?

According to Thomas, few comprehensive evaluations of family literacy programs exist, even though there are indications that these programs have positive effects on the participants. More work is needed to systematically collect evidence about the effectiveness of these programs.⁸² Following my analysis on the pros and cons of *Get Set Learn!* I think that it is now reasonable to answer all six of the questions. Answers to the first four questions are definitively “yes.”

Get Set Learn! has continually met its objectives and improved on itself with each session in most areas. The program fares well as a quality family literacy program in that it has 13 out of a possible 14 aspects of the “Best Practice” statements found within the first part of this case study. Finally, although there are nine areas where *Get Set Learn!* has fallen down, all is not lost. More data could be gathered on the long term effects of participation in *Get Set Learn!* by implementing a follow up evaluation, six months and one year following parent participation in the program. This would detail if in fact the parents maintained or improved their literacy skills and in so doing, improved their child's chances for success at school and in life. This would also provide long-term quantitative and qualitative data which will satisfy the funder and other researchers even more. So, in conclusion, I think that *Get Set Learn!* should continue to run, albeit with some modifications to its evaluation and delivery.

⁸² Thomas, A. *Family Literacy in Canada: Profiles of Effective Practices*. In A. Thomas (ed) *Family Literacy in Canada: Profiles of Effective Practices*. Ontario: Editions Soleil Publishing, 1998.

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