

TLC3 Program in St. James Town – Growing Together EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The TLC3 program was a part of Growing Together from September 1997 to August 2002. The goal of the TLC3 program was to enhance the cognitive and language development of children identified with particular concerns in these areas. The TLC3 program provided a variety of interventions for children identified with developmental concerns including a preschool program, home visiting, Parent- Child Mother Goose groups, and speech and language service through our partnership with Toronto Preschool Speech and Language.

Growing Together Background

Growing Together is a prevention, health promotion and early intervention program in St. James Town, Toronto. The overall goal of the Growing Together project is to improve the health, well-being and development of infants, young children and their families living in St. James Town and the surrounding area. The project is a collaborative partnership between the Hincks-Dellcrest Centre and the Toronto Department of Public Health. Growing Together was created in 1993 to serve the needs of families with young children living in the high-risk St. James Town area of Toronto. Families in the area are exposed to multiple risk factors that may jeopardize the health, language, cognitive, social and emotional development of children. These risks include over-crowding, poverty, low education levels and crime. Also, being an area of great cultural diversity, with a non-official language group making up 60% of the population, social isolation and lack of support are common. Consequently, many women with young children develop a fear of others in the neighbourhood, particularly those from other culture. Furthermore, with few child-friendly areas and high rates of crime, many parents keep children in their apartments for extended periods of time. Children, therefore, have restricted opportunities for learning and little to no contact with peers.

Growing Together provides a unique model of early intervention and prevention. An ecological or transactional theoretical model guides the assessment and treatment of the clients and the evaluation of the project so that a variety of risk and protective factors for children are considered in the initial and ongoing assessment and evaluation of the child, family and intervention. In partnership with Toronto Public Health, Healthy Babies Health Children and Toronto Preschool Speech and Language Services a range of services, open to the whole community, are delivered by a multidisciplinary, multilingual and culturally diverse team in languages representative of the community. This goal of universality and enhancing the development of all children avoids stigmatizing families who participate in program components. Programs and services available at Growing Together strive to overcome isolation and enhance development by increasing parenting knowledge, teaching skills, optimizing children's health, development and potential for learning. Community prevention and early intervention services are delivered in consultation and collaboration with existing community programs and services. This partnership is fundamental as it

facilitates parents' seamless access to a range of non-stigmatizing services that aim to support growth, change, and the development of collaborative networks, while also minimising duplication. Through its non-intrusive, preventative approach, services reach many children and families who would not otherwise be helped, increasing parents' access to a variety of professionals and resources, and their opportunities to link with other parents. Every year there are 500 infants, children and their families receiving services from Growing Together either through home visits, group interventions, community development activities, infant monitoring system and developmental clinic.

The TLC3 program at Growing Together

The TLC3 program was a part of Growing Together from September 1997 to August 2002. The goal of the TLC3 program is to enhance the cognitive and language development of children identified with particular concerns in these areas. Some of the children involved may have severe developmental delays that are genetic, while the delays of others are less severe and related to environmental risks.

The objectives of the TLC3 program were:

- To assess and identify infants and young children with cognitive and language delays.
- To develop recommendations for identified children to ameliorate these cognitive or language delays in the preschool program, and in home and group interventions for the parents.
- To provide a variety of interventions for children identified with delays including a preschool program, home visiting, and Mother Goose groups.
- To refer children to other agencies for more intensive services as needed. These include daycare, occupational therapy and speech therapy.
- To monitor children in order to reassess their progress and development as resources allow.

Altogether, there were 110 children who participated in the TLC3 program at Growing Together. Among them, over ninety five percent of the children showed at least one concern in one of the language or cognitive dimensions based on the Diagnostic Inventory for Screening Children done at program entry.

In stressing on a "holistic" view of the child and family in the community, the TLC3 program had been a joint effort in integrating the family, community, and our multi-disciplinary team in enhancing the cognitive and language development of the children.

Evaluation

Findings in the evaluation provide initial evidences that the TLC3 program at Growing Together had a positive impact on the language and cognitive development of the participants. The single group pre-program and post-program comparison indicated that participants showed significant improvement in receptive language, expressive language,

and visual attention and memory as measured by the Diagnostic Inventory for Screening Children.

The initial assessment of the Preschool Behavior Questionnaire suggested the behaviour problem was not a significant concern of the children in the program. The majority of the participants did not show initial problem in this area made any improvement in this area very minimal and not statistically significant after the program.

For the parents, there was positive improvement in parental distress on the Parenting Stress Index, and language stimulation from the Home Observation Measurement of the Environment Inventory (HOME). However, there was also a significant decrease in the Modeling dimension on the HOME. The lack of significant improvement on other dimensions of the HOME and Parenting Stress Index could be due to the fact that the majority of the parents did not show significant concerns in the areas measured at the beginning of the program and therefore did not have much room to improve.

A major limitation of the present evaluation is the limited number of completed assessments. Only 32% of the children in the program had completed both the pre-program and post-program assessment. The low percentage of completed assessments significantly limits the representation of the evaluation results.

A single group pre-program post-program design posed a limitation in drawing conclusions about the effectiveness of the intervention. Children may be improving due to maturity or other means. Although in the final analysis we tried to incorporate a comparison group to tackle this problem, the small group size of the comparison group seriously limited the power in the analysis. In a future evaluation we would suggest building in a waitlist/minimal intervention comparison group so that we can compare those who are participating in the program vs. those who are not.

Sustainability

Sustainability is a challenge on multiple levels. Local fundraising is difficult as we primarily serve a community of first generation immigrants who tend to leave the area after a few years. Initially these families are struggling to achieve financial stability, often while also supporting family members who have remained in their country of origin. Then, they become focussed on saving to buy a home in a different area and, while they are appreciative of the services we have provided, it is not feasible for them to sponsor a program that they will not be around to benefit from. Further to this, there appears to be a perception that Toronto is the "land of plenty" so provincially funding is often allocated to more remote areas.

Fortunately, as we are a part of Growing Together and the Hincks-Dellcrest Centre, we are included in their long-term plans and, in the short-term, they will provide bridge financing until more secure funding is obtained. Related to this, we are now integrating TLC3 into the

Growing Together model and including it in funding proposals for Growing Together. Specifically, we applied for and were successful in obtaining funding through the Early Years Challenge fund, which will last for three years. Hincks-Dellcrest has also set a five-year goal for Growing Together that includes solid, sustainable funding for staff salaries. In the interim, we will continue to collaborate with other service providers as well as institutions such as the University of Toronto to creatively combine our resources to provide services to young children and their families. Finally, collaboration with Toronto Speech and Language Services is ongoing and children with language difficulties can continue to benefit from their services.

Summary and Conclusions

The aim of this project was to optimize early child development in a positive relational context and to maximizing the child's readiness and potential for learning and social competence. Towards this end, programs responsive to the age, stage and specific needs of young children were provided to enhance and expand the range of existing services offered through Growing Together. In part, our successes were due to the in-kind contributions, community partners, parents, volunteers and students in training who augmented and supported the team's initiatives. A primary lesson has been the power of such collaborations, without them programs like TLC3 could not exist. Within this model there is a mutual dependence between team members and between the team, the family and the community. For example, volunteers in the Parent Child Mother Goose Program were past participants and, therefore, reflected the culture and language of the group. In addition, the program assistant was from the Tamil community. As she is also a mother and past participant, many of the mothers remembered her attending with her children. This parent is highly respected within the group of mothers attending the program and in a sense our hiring practice reflects this respects and shares ownership for programs with the community.

In keeping with our belief in formulating a "holistic" view of the child and family, parent involvement became an increasingly stronger focus of the Jumpstart program. Parents were involved from the beginning and participated in the initial developmental and speech language screens. Then, starting with the first home visit and continuing as parents accompanied their children to the program and came to pick them up, a close and trusting relation evolved between parents and the program staff. Parents were also invited to meet with program staff at least twice during the block of service to discuss goals and their child's progress. In-service workshops on topics such as dental care, speech language development and occupational therapy were regularly offered to parents. In addition, a Jumpstart newsletter was developed and resource information on topics of interest to parents were provided. Parents who volunteered as translators and contributed articles for the newsletter also facilitated this. TLC3 family picnic was a popular annually event wonderful attendance, sometimes by the entire child's family. Parents' commitment to the program was reflected both in the wonderful attendance rate of children and in the number of parents from the community who have volunteered in the program.

TLC3 has also been a bridge to other services offered through Growing Together and the community. The program became a safe place where parents could come to share concerns regarding their own well-being as well as issues affecting family life and other family members. On the strength of the relationship that evolved over time, team members could also approach parents about availing themselves of other programs. This may have included parenting classes, English or computer classes as well as therapeutic interventions offered by public health nurses or clinicians at Growing Together. Being committed to viewing the child within the context of his or her family, community and cultural background had a positive influence on our ability to support the development and well-being of both children and their families.