

Below is an abridged transcript of the video "Once Upon A Time: The Early History and 35 Years of the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program®", in which four key pioneers of the Program describe its origins.

This video was recorded during an online celebration of the 35th birthday of the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program® which some members of Parent-Child Mother Goose Australia were fortunate enough to attend in late 2022.

Carol Dwyer: First I'll introduce **Barry Dickson**. Barry was the person that came up with the idea for the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program after taking a storytelling class from **Celia Lottridge** and **Joan Bodger**. He worked with Joan on putting the program together and eventually got the funding from the Children's Aid Society to get the program going.

Then I'll introduce **Dinny [Dickson]**, who's there with Barry. Dinny was the one who brought the knowledge of the importance of safe and welcoming environment for families. She worked on co-ordinating with the [Children's Aid Society] Foundation, and oversaw the research and got referrals from the social workers for families to come to the programs.

Then we have **Celia Lottridge** and **Katherine Grier**. Celia and Katherine taught with **Joan Bodger** in the original programs funded by Children's Aid. When those programs ended, Katherine and Celia were sure that the program could work in the broader community, and they established a Board and they sought funding and they found a location for the first Parent-Child Mother Goose program.

Later, Katherine moved to Newfoundland in Labrador and established the program there... Celia became the director of the Toronto programs and with the support of the Board they developed the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program teacher training workshops. Those workshops began the spread of the program across Canada and beyond.

Barry Dickson: I was a social worker of Metro Children's Aid Society and a writer. I'd managed to write a few books. I heard about the Storytellers School of Toronto, as founded by Daniel Yashinsky. I was of course immediately attracted to that. He was giving a course, and I went... It was wonderful, just sitting around telling stories of different kinds of experiences. That went very well. Later on, Celia and Joan Bodger started a Mother Goose rhyming course.

Could rhymes and stories help parents who 'had not had much of a childhood'?

I did not have a Mother Goose childhood. Most of the rhymes I knew as a child were cruel or racist. So it was quite a new experience for me to go into this situation. As time went on in the course, it began to occur to me hey, wouldn't this be very useful for a lot of the parents and children of the Children's Aid Society who, their own parents had not had much of a childhood?

So I thought about it for a while, and I went to Joan Bodger and talked to her about it. She thought it was a good idea. So I took it to the Board of the Children's Aid Society in order to gain funding. They gave it to us, and we started up.

Then, of course, we had to gather up clients. I had a friend make up some signs to put around the agency to let people know the program was started.

I was very lucky because my colleagues were very, very supportive with the program. So it took off. I do remember, the first day that we started the program I had a sign on the front, almost like a billboard on my front and back, walking up and down the street on Dundas Street. It said *I am Mother Goose*, so people coming would not get lost and would be able to find the building. I also went down into the subway, and was walking up and down the platform with the sign on. Again, that helped, because some people were having difficulty finding the building, and it wasn't on the first floor. They had to go up for distances, I recall. That's simply how it started.

Promise of muffin and hot chocolate meant a lot for disadvantaged families

We had these wonderful people like Celia and Katherine and Joan and my wife. Sometimes we didn't get a big turnout, but most of the time we did, because we would phone in the morning and they would get a rhyme and they would know that when they got [there] they were going to have a hot muffin, their hot chocolate, and coffee.

That meant something to them, because a lot of them, as they say, were disadvantaged. They didn't have... we supplied the car fare. They didn't have money, or have many outings in life. So it was kind of a lovely thing for them to have every week.

Parents quickly felt happier with their children

The program simply got better and better as we went on. Eventually we ran out of funding, but the

point of the matter is that the program worked. You could see these children and the parents... you know, we could talk for months with parents or try to work with them to get to be closer, or feel more comfortable or happier with, their children. In the Mother Goose Program, it simply worked. It was, you could just see the happiness and the joy with the parent and child.

Of course, that eventually led to us starting the Father Goose group, which we managed to also get funding for.

The first Mother Goose 'house call'

I remember the first instance of an active Mother Goose program. I prevailed upon my friend Katherine Grier to come out and do a house call. The first sort of Mother Goose house call ever. We went, and there was a father there, very nice man but very awkward.

I think he thought, you know, he would play catch with his child, or throw a ball. But this was a baby, and he was all arms and legs. So Katherine went to work with them, and it was just incredible. By the end of the session, he just had a competent, happy look on his face and the child was bouncing with joy. It was just a very proud moment.

Effort involved in starting first program

Dinny Dickson: I just want to add just a thing or two about Barry starting the program.

He's been very lovely to the Children's Aid workers, but it's not quite my memory. My memory is that Children's Aid workers said that they were so swamped and so busy — this was actually a time at the Children's Aid where there were no limits on the number of cases that you could have, so let's be fair. People probably served maybe 30 or 35 cases which, make that people, often have more than one child. You know, it's a caseload of a couple of hundred, actually, in collateral with schools and all the doctors and all the rest of it.

So they were very pressed for time. But Barry had been on intake, so he knew of a lot of parents that would benefit from this program. The worker said *Sure, contact them, go ahead, I'd love them to do something like this but I don't have time to do it.*

So it was hours. Barry spent lots of time calling, going to their houses, explaining the program. I mean, getting people out to this first group was very intensive. Barry did it. So when he was Mother Goose walking around with that sign in the subway, and on the street, he actually had met those people, and had talked to them and had encouraged them to come out to the program.

Initially an 'outreach' and 'nurturing' program

So it seems to me that it started a whole idea that this is a very outreach program, that it's a very nurturing program. When he and Joan were here — because it wasn't that they went to the Board and they got the funding, they had to put together a proposal. It had to include research, and there's a whole proposal outline (which many of you have probably done many, many times) to get the funding. It really wasn't the Children's Aid, it was the Children's Aid Foundation — obviously connected to the Children's Aid, but it's like the hospital and then the hospital foundation. So it was the Foundation that always gave the funding, and that the final research went to, and that oversaw things.

Barry found that he was doing his same case load, with those maybe 200 people, and then doing this on top of it. So he went back to the Foundation and he told them that it was too much. I had been involved in being around for all the developments and talk about it and had helped out with doing baking for the first group, and I was a social worker and had worked at Children's Aid, so they knew me. So I picked up the coordination. So my role was very much sort of behind the scenes, just coordinating every everything and everybody, and sort of more outside the group.

Reminder phone calls with a sense of fun

So there was this idea of calling all the time and just giving people a wake up call and a reminder, but not *Remember group is today, you have your doctor's appointment tomorrow*. No, it was something that was fun, that reminded people and kind of enticed them about what was fun about this group, what was joyful about the group.

All mothers at home have a hard time

Mothers, all mothers, have such a hard time being at home. It's quite a job. I was a young mother at home at the same time, so I was very aware of the struggles that mothers have.

Then on top of that, this was a research project, so the mothers had to participate in some questionnaires and things about any rhymes that they knew, or if they'd ever heard about this. They had to do it at the beginning, at the end of the group. They had to assess their parenting the beginning and the end of the group. So it was much more of a commitment than coming to a group.

Parents in program 'got off the apprehended list'

And these were also mothers who were deemed... The Children's Aid had a scale of threat to children at that time, and all of the original parents were considered in this group, that their children might have to be apprehended at some point in the future. And they didn't get apprehended, and they got off the apprehended list, because parenting really changed.

Social workers struggled to understand value of stories and rhymes

So at any rate, that was the original start of the group. So when they were doing a second group, I went around to all the teams in Children's Aid, all the family service teams' intake who could send people to the Mother Goose group, and the questions that I got from workers showed me how really difficult it is to make this idea comprehensible to them.

The social workers at that time — now we're going back 35 years, and I am more recently retired, but 35 years is a long time ago, and the whole practice of the field has changed in that time. So at that time, people focused on problems, and they wanted to bring people into group and talk about problems, and that was supposed to help people to become better. It's not like that anymore, or at least I hope not, but at any rate the workers thought at that time *How can a mother change in any way — or a father for that matter — by learning a rhyme? How can you tell a story and not have a story picture book in the room?* These were ideas that were so hard to get into the heads of workers.

Mothers in program became more responsive to their babies

Some of them, you know, outright said *No, no, you're not focusing how a mother can be more responsive to her baby, so obviously I'm not sending my mother to that.* Whereas, in fact, the people who sent their mothers, they got immediately more responsive to their babies. They had skills. For a wild child in the bank, and the mother has to be in the line-up in the bank and the kid is being a pain to everybody in the bank. The mother says *The Grand Old Duke of York*. Now the kid's marching around doing the Grand with their arms going up, and the arms going to the floor, marching around the bank and everybody thinks her child is adorable.

An educational program, an arts program, a language program and parenting bonding program

That really is one of the essences of Mother Goose. It's not just storytelling. It's not just rhyme. It's also early literature. It's early reading, in terms of rhyme. So it's an educational program, it's an arts program, it's a language program, it's a parenting bonding program — and it's all coordinated into one time that takes a couple of hours, one morning a week.

I think there are two other things.

All mothers need nurturing

One is, mothers need — regular mothers, mothers from very wealthy families, mothers who are homeless and poor and in abusive relationships — all kinds of mothers, we all need help. All of us need help. We need nurturing, and we're doing a lot of caretaking. We need things that bring joy, and take care of us in our lives.

Of course our children can do that, because when you do a rhyme with a child, you get lots of feedback, and you know right away there's something that you can do that makes you feel powerful, makes you feel in control, makes you not feel a victim.... So all of these things are important.

But so is having tea and coffee, hot chocolate and juice. So is having the smell of freshly baked food, if you can. So is having some grapes, or fruits, or something that's nourishing. A busy mom in the morning often, you know, doesn't get time, you know, to rest and to have a nurturing morning. So those things were very important to me to have in the program.

When people came, I felt that my job was to help to greet people, but to eliminate stress. So when somebody came having lost their wallet on the TTC [Toronto Transit Commission], they went into group not to worry about it, and I dealt with the TTC to see what we could do about their wallet, gave extra TTC tickets so that they could go to the return place and get their wallet...

Mothers began to support each other, develop networks

Then the mothers also grouped together. They started bringing... you know, *My baby's two years, your baby's six months, I've got some clothes.* They started bringing clothes and snow suits.

But the other thing that was really sort of wonderfully magical — I guess two other things — the other thing that was really

wonderfully magical was that many of them lived in apartments, or in supported housing, and they would go home and the women would gather together in the afternoon...

The mothers would go home remembering the folk tales, and people would come to their apartment in the afternoon with their babies and they would all sit around, and the mothers would tell the folk tales that they had heard in the morning. So that grew them a whole network. A lot of these mothers grew a bigger network. A network in their building. A network in their community. It was fantastic. That was an outcome that I hadn't anticipated, and was just thrilled about, that mothers who are often more isolated, you know, had had this kind of connection with people...

Joan Bodger's vital role

Celia Lottridge: There's a thing nobody has talked about, and that is Joan, Joan Bodger. Because Joan was actually crucial... She is no longer with us, she died several years ago. But she had this fierce determination to start a program that would build on work she had done in New York City that would spread rhymes and stories throughout the population. She believed in this so deeply.

And when she and Barry met — and certainly, it's hard for me to imagine two people with more different sort of spirit about things — but Joan was so determined to do something and Barry sort of believed in it so much, and felt it so much, that the combination really worked, I think, when you went to look for funding and so on.

I just want to acknowledge that I learned a lot from Joan and her conviction about what we were doing. That what we were doing was telling stories — and rhymes, of course, are stories in another form. I just want you all to know that Joan is built into the program...

'We have to go on with this'

When the program stopped, having the Children's Aid umbrella went away and we didn't have it. Katherine and I, we... were two storytellers, trying to figure out what to do with storytelling. I mean, for us it had a certain personal element. We needed to be able to use storytelling in a practical way, so we could earn some money, because we didn't have jobs telling stories. If we could create a program where we could do storytelling, it would be helpful. So we did have a personal motivation, as well as believing in the whole program.

And so then Katherine and I got together and thought we have to go on with this...

Connecting with kids at risk through stories

Katherine Grier: There was one story about Barry that I wanted to make sure gets down. I remember you, Barry, ... telling us about driving kids during your work doing the intake... I remember you saying that you were frustrated with how difficult it was. If anybody could connect with little kids, it would be you. I mean, you were such a warm man, and you were frustrated. I remember after you started using the rhymes with your kids, with your sons, you started using them with the kids that you were transporting, so you said. Those kids responded. They responded in ways that they didn't respond when people simply talked, you simply talked with them.... The stories did something and the rhymes did something. That really hit me....

Barry Dickson: I used to tell the kids *The Gunny Wolf*. They loved it. When I was driving them...

Dinny Dickson: They were being chased...

Katherine Grier: *Hunka-cha, hunka-cha, hunka-cha....*

We learned so much from the process of doing those pilot projects. It was called the Mother Goose Enrichment Program at that time. We learned an awful lot about what worked and what didn't work, and about... that the whole point of telling the stories was to give the parents an experience parallel to what we were asking them to give the kids. And it was really clear that it did that.

For funding, program had to be available to 'broader community'

So the program sat. After we did those initial projects, you were off doing other things, Barry. I think you've had enough for the time being... Joan was having a... there was some hard stuff happening in her life. Her husband was dying. It sat for a time.

I remember thinking *We really need to do something with this*. Celia and I went to you and to Joan and told you guys what we wanted to do. I went to a friend who was a social worker and she gave me the name of Marg Gilbert who was the woman who got us hooked up with city funding for the first time.

What really shifted then was that we had to broaden it out. It couldn't be simply to people who were clients of the Children's Aid Society. It had to be available to the broader community.

Focus on people with less strong parenting backgrounds

It didn't mean that we stopped doing outreach to people who probably could use it maybe more than people who had, you know, strong parenting in their backgrounds, but it meant that it was, when we finally got it off the ground, we were looking for just a broad variety of people.

But then it was a question of finding a place to do it, and getting the funding going. Do you want to continue with that Celia?

Celia Lottridge: Sure. Well, we were very lucky. I think we were lucky, but we also had a really good idea.

So getting a Board together is one of the things you have to do if you're going to seek funding. So we had a good Board, and I won't go into how we did that.

But I think we discovered, well, two things.

You have to go out into the community to find locations. Because to have a location where you can do a program once a week, it's not easy. So we learned a lot about communities and where you can find places, and so on.

But also, I think we learned how to do outreach, because we did want to reach people who maybe wouldn't think of coming to a program, or wouldn't think a program would suit them.

Notices in libraries have their drawbacks

One thing we learned was not to post in libraries, because if we posted our program in libraries, we got people who went to library programs. We were trying to get people who were kind of stuck at home with their children. So we learned to go to, like, low-income apartment houses and put things on the bulletin boards. Go through other community agencies. So it was a very, a huge learning experience for us.

The other thing I'll say, one other thing we learned, is if something falls into your hands, grab it, you know. Because one thing that happened was that somebody, the Rotary Club in Etobicoke, was wanting to fund something and give a certain amount of money every year for three years, and it was several thousand dollars.

Katherine Grier: Ten thousand. Ten thousand dollars.

Celia Lottridge: Ten thousand dollars a year. That's a huge amount of money.

And so we ended up inviting people from the Rotary Club to come to our program... and so there were these men from Rotary Club, three men, perched on little tiny chairs watching us do rhymes with these babies. They gave us the money. So, for three years, we had ten thousand dollars. Then of course we were looking for other kinds of grants... The Rotary Club, in addition, went on giving us help with computers and, you know, helping us make tapes...

Community agencies played helpful role

There were community agencies that also helped us. So anyways we did get one program going. Then we looked for another place to do a program. The people on our Board who were involved, a lot of them, in social, beneficial organizations, they had ideas about where we could go. So we also took advice from a lot of people. But we also, as somewhere somebody said, we pounded a lot of pavement as well.

Katherine Grier: An understatement. We pounded an awful lot of pavement.

Celia Lottridge: Once we got that one program on the Lakeshore, then we looked for other locations. And I would say if anybody is looking to set up some-thing like this program, you have to try and fail and then try again. Because there was at least one place where we ran a program and nobody came. It was a building that wasn't... people did not feel comfortable coming and being in a group in that building. And so you have to keep going.

And just one other thing that you would never in a million years think you would do. We were offered space in a shopping mall in in Rexdale, which is a low-income area of Toronto. They said there'll be an empty store. Well, the empty store they gave us was a huge store. It had been a clothing store, and it had been cleared out but not cleaned. In order to run a program there, we had to isolate an area using lights, because otherwise we were just surrounded by this vast store...

Every time we came, we had to scrub the floor in the area that we were using. People would come by, you know, and look in the window and see this group of little children and women sitting on the floor in the middle of this empty store...

Katherine Grier: It was under the lights, because we didn't turn the lights on for the whole space. It was huge. It was just immense. There were dust bunnies everywhere and we had this sort of pool of light over these blankets that we had on the floor... It still created this warm space, and people had a good time. They brought their strollers in and got

their kids out and we sat down and had a good time. But it was very odd...

Celia Lottridge: We were not working within another agency. Our time was limited. We were paying ourselves. We were in the budget, in other words, but we didn't have time to follow up every possible way of attracting clients and stuff, and a lot of it was by what you might call word of mouth...

I guess that's something everybody who works in social services has to accept, that they're always people out there you won't reach... Katherine was here for several years doing the program. We were doing it together, and adding people, and so on. But then you went to Newfoundland, right?...but when Katherine left, our program was attracting a lot of attention...

Birth of the training workshop

I was the director, in a way, although I don't think the position had really been created yet. But we were getting all these inquiries. Our office was a desk in a studio that was an art program for disabled people. We had a desk. I was getting a lot of inquiries about our program.

So one of the people on our Board, Doreen Hamilton, and I decided we should be offering workshops so that the program could be done elsewhere. So, you know, I worked out the workshops and Doreen helped me.

And there are two things that really helped me.

One was, the first workshop that I did, she just sat and took notes the whole time. So later, I had a record of what I had done. Believe me, that is very helpful.

The other thing was that at some time in this period, I was invited to go to do more of a presentation than a workshop at the University of British Columbia. Which I did, and in which I was kind of trying to convey everything that we had learned about this program. That stirred up a lot of interest in British Columbia.

That made me think — that, and having Katherine in Newfoundland also being consulted about these workshops — that the program could spread if we did workshops in many places. And as you, most of you, know that's what we did...

Doreen is also not with us anymore, but she took notes at the first workshop that I did... and it really is basically the workshop that we do now that I worked out at that time. Because by then I knew what we were doing...

What makes the program powerful: a basic way to create joy

I think one thing that makes [the program] powerful is some of what Barry and Dinny were saying... The program is about a basic relationship between a parent and a child, and giving language to it, and giving ways of touching and giving ways of really looking at a child. That's basic to everybody.

So you can take the program and run it in another place, in another country, in another language, and that basicness is still there. Of course, you could just say well it's in the relationship, but if it's missing from the relationship, then just instead of *telling* people to look at their child, you're giving them a way to do it...

The basic always has been there. The basic of the parent-child relationship, and the joy of language, you know. The joy of, specially, language with rhythm, and language that instructs you how to look at a child and how to touch a child. I mean, that's sort of the thread that runs through Mother Goose wherever it's done.

Transcribed and edited by Peter Dann

December 2022