

A Preliminary Evaluation of
The Parent-Child Mother Goose Program
as a Family Literacy Program

Prepared for
The Parent-Child Mother Goose Program

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1.0 Introduction

On behalf of the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program (PCMGP), the Canadian Institute of Child Health (CICH) undertook an evaluation of the contributions of Mother Goose programs in Toronto to family literacy and family well being. For the purposes of this report, “family literacy refers to the many ways families develop and use literacy skills to accomplish day-to-day tasks and activities” (Thomas and Skage, 1998: 6). For the purposes of this report, “family well being” is broadly defined to include the physical, emotional, social and economic aspects of family life. This report presents the methodology, background information and findings of the study. Based on this information, the report concludes that the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program makes an appreciable and unique contribution to family literacy and family well-being.

1.1 Context and Background

PCMGP is a non-profit organization that was founded in Toronto in 1986. Parents participate in the program with their infants and toddlers. The activity of the program is based on oral rhymes, stories, and songs which parents are encouraged to learn and use with their children in their daily lives. The teaching and learning in the program are done orally and through the demonstration of gestures and actions. The teaching is directed at the adults. The primary purpose of the program is to promote positive, language-based interactions between parents and caregivers and infants and toddlers. This is done with the expectation that family literacy will be enhanced and that healthier family dynamics will be encouraged. Another purpose is to link parents with resources and other community services and programs.

The target population is comprised of families with low literacy skills who do not make language an important and positive part of their relationship with their children. Demographic markers of this target population include having a low household income, having a low level of education, being a single parent, being a young parent, or being new to Canada. Another target population is comprised of parents that, for whatever reason, experience difficulty establishing a strong attachment with their child. These parents could be anyone, depending on their experiences and circumstances.

1.2 Programs Profiles

To become familiar with the Mother Goose programs, teachers and participants, the researchers engaged in a period of “participant observation”. The researchers were not full participants, in that they did not have babies or toddlers with them. However, they joined in all of the activities, they engaged in casual conversations with the parents and caregivers and the teachers, they familiarized themselves with the neighbourhoods in which the programs were situated, and they developed a picture of the demographic traits of the program participants. From the results of this participant observation, the researchers developed profiles of the different programs. These profiles were then augmented by information from the teacher interviews. Teachers were asked directly to describe, in general, the participants who attend their programs.

Program A

This Mother Goose program is located in a new community centre in the midst of a busy commercial and residential area. It is predominantly a low-income neighbourhood with many newcomers to Canada. The parents in the program reflect the neighbourhood demographics. Many come from diverse ethnocultural backgrounds. Many are newcomers to Canada and speak English as a second language. Many live in low-income households and have low levels of formal education. Many are lone parents. The age of the mothers varies, with some young mothers. They represent a high-risk population and have done so, consistently, throughout the years of the program (in part, because the teacher refers those who do not fit the target population profile to other programs). Participants are “all over the map” in terms of parenting skills, but generally, the participants benefit from improved confidence and competence as parents.

Program B

This Mother Goose program is located in a church basement. It is in a quiet residential neighbourhood, although it is not far from commercial areas. Like Program A, the surrounding

neighbourhoods are culturally diverse. The program draws its participants from both low and middle-income neighbourhoods. Although the participants in the program are from many different ethnic backgrounds (such as Polish, Italian, Asian and Middle Eastern), they are not generally recent newcomers to Canada and they tend to speak English fluently. The ages of the parents varies dramatically, with young as well as older mothers. The size of this group is surprisingly large. The pace is faster than at Program A and the noise and energy levels are higher. This reflects the English language proficiency of the group and the fact that many of the parents have been attending for a long time. In general, parents entering this program are confident and competent in their role as parents or caregivers. They need little encouragement to participate. Many parents come regularly and are very familiar with the different rhymes and songs.

Program C - Infant

This Mother Goose program is located in a community centre in the middle of a large field. There are no houses in close proximity to the community centre. The relative isolation of the community centre has been identified as a potentially limiting factor to participation in the Mother Goose programs here. The neighbourhoods near the program site are mostly residential, with a mixture of low and middle-income families. The participants are ethnically diverse. Generally, all the participants speak English fluently. Many of the mothers are young mothers. Given that these parents have babies, the pace of the program is very slow and repetitive with considerable discussion about the babies themselves during the meeting.

Program C - Toddler

There was less ethnic diversity among the participants in the toddler program. Many of the parents and the one caregiver in this group have been attending for many years. They are coming with second children now. They are very familiar with the program and all participate keenly. When new parents join the group, they quickly catch on by watching the others. Perhaps because of this familiarity, the pace is moderately fast, with quite a lot of material covered at each session. Space is always set aside for old favorites. In this group, unlike the others, the parents listen to a story while their toddlers spend time playing in another room. There is a strong sense of belonging and community in the group that is extended to teachers and participants alike.

Program D

This Mother Goose program is located within an assisted housing complex. The parents and caregivers who attend the program are all residents of the housing complex. As such, they are all from lower income families. The residents are generally newcomers to Canada, many arriving as refugees. They represent an astonishing array of nationalities. The majority of the residents speak English as a second language. They tend to confine their activities to what is available in the housing complex. The program is unique among the Mother Goose programs in that only some of the parents regularly attend with their children. As a result, teaching is aimed more at the children than at the parents. Skills such as taking turns and listening are emphasized. The program is similar to other preschool programs in this respect. The pace of the program is faster than at any other location, but parents still report finding the atmosphere supportive and welcoming. This Mother Goose program is embedded in a L.I.N.K. program and it was difficult, though, for the mothers to talk **only** about the Mother Goose program. They did not think of it as a separate entity from L.I.N.K.

Program E

The Mother Goose program in Scarborough is located in the administration and resource building of a housing shelter. The participants in the program are the parents, infants, toddlers and children of the shelter. Many of the participants in the program are new comers to Canada. Others are from families that have recently experienced major financial or personal challenges. In this group, children of all ages are in attendance - the program represents something to do one night a week in a place where entertainment is limited and living conditions are cramped. The pace is slow, with the program starting late as participants are gathered by the teachers (often going door-to-door). Once started, the program uses standard Mother Goose materials to unify the diverse group and create space for teaching

and learning. There are many interruptions and some of the younger children fall asleep. Against the odds, a sense of belonging and sharing emerges in the group

Although these profiles reveal the distinctiveness of the different programs, there are important similarities within them. Each group is very welcoming. All of the participants are given the opportunity to introduce themselves and their babies at the beginning of the class. Teachers often sit next to newcomers, making sure that they feel included. Rhymes and songs are demonstrated, practiced and repeated. There is no pressure to learn quickly. The teachers interact regularly with the parents, commenting on the responses of the babies to the different materials. Whether the group is large or small, teachers create a relaxing space for parents and children. As one teacher explained, a very high level of energy can be turned into complete attention through the act of storytelling. All the teachers agree that, as parents and children participate in the program, they grow together. Even those who come to the program competent and confident as parents take something away from the program that can benefit them and their children. In these and other ways, the Mother Goose classes support and promote strong bonds between children and parents or caregivers.

1.3 Methodology

From February to May 2000, the Canadian Institute of Child Health attended Mother Goose programs in Toronto, developed interview guides and conducted interviews with the teachers and the parent- participants. The staff and teachers of PCMGP assisted in arranging the interviews. The teachers encouraged parents and caregivers to participate and participated themselves. Interviews were either face-to-face or by telephone. The face-to-face interviews were conducted immediately before, during or immediately after the regular Mother Goose class. Telephone interviews were conducted at the convenience of the participant.

The guides for the interviews were developed in consultation with PCMGP in February and March 2000. One interview guide was developed for all parent and caregiver participants. Two interview guides were developed for teachers - one for teachers who first attended PCMGP classes as parents or caregivers and one for teachers who never attended as parents or caregivers. The interviews with the teachers were approximately one hour in length. The interviews with the parent participants were approximately one half-hour in length. The interviews were tape recorded with the permission of the participants. Care was also taken to make detailed notes and record many comments of the interviewees at the time of the interview. To respect the privacy of the participants, all names were suppressed.

It should be noted that there are many relevant differences between the teachers and the parents that must be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. The teachers have all been involved with the program for many years, whereas most of the parents have attended for relatively short periods of time. The teachers based their responses on their own experiences and their observations of program participants. The parents based their responses on their own experiences alone. Many of the teachers had strongly held views on the power and relevance of oral stories before joining Mother Goose. We do not know the views of the parents on this subject, but only one mentioned any pre-existing beliefs about the value of oral language. These differences are reflected in the views that they express. Every effort was made to retain the language used by participants and to preserve their unique voices. However, their ideas are often presented in summarized form. This was necessary if the richness of the answers was to be preserved without overwhelming the report. Limited outside research has been included. However, it was deemed most important to direct the reader's attention to the findings of this project.

1.3.1 Research Hypotheses

The Canadian Institute of Child Health worked with PCMGP to develop research hypotheses in relation to family literacy and learning. Family literacy is, according to Thomas and Skage (1998: 5), "a social movement based on social equity and the empowerment of families." At PCMGP, they believe that they are part of this movement. Certainly the founders and staff share the movement's philosophy. However, until this evaluation, there was no research establishing the contributions of PCMGP to family literacy. This evaluation study tested three

hypotheses in relation to family literacy.

Hypothesis 1: That participation in PCMGP classes promotes positive language-based interactions between parents and children.

Hypothesis 2: That participation in PCMGP classes contributes to a culture of literacy within families.

Hypothesis 3: That family literacy is strongly associated with family well being.

Hypothesis 4: That participation in PCMGP classes builds language and social skills and confidence, increasing the likelihood that parents will use other community resources.

Overall, to the extent to which these hypotheses are accurate, reflecting the realities of the teachers and the parent participants, PCMGP must be considered a family literacy program. However, the limitations of the study's methodology must also be considered when evaluating findings.

2.0 Literature Review

PCMGP compiled an annotated bibliography of literature relevant to their philosophy, goals and objectives. This annotated bibliography was used as the basis for a literature review focused on the family literacy aspects of PCMGP. Family literacy refers to the many ways families develop and use literacy skills to accomplish day-to-day tasks and activities. The purpose of this literature review is to situate this study in the context of relevant research. It is not intended to be a comprehensive review of the literature. Those seeking a more detailed review of the literature should refer to the annotated bibliography.

The annotated bibliography makes reference to a body of research that demonstrates the importance of oral language as a building block of literacy. Anderson and Rolston (1994), in fact, argued that the definition of literacy should be broadened to include oral language. They suggest that familiarity with nursery rhymes, playground songs and traditional songs and stories is the foundation for later literacy. They call this concept "emergent literacy". Booth (1994) stressed the importance of oral language in the development of the cognitive abilities related to reading. Bryant et al (1990), for example, concluded from their research that oral language builds awareness to phonemes which in turn assists children in learning to read. They also concluded that rhymes make a direct contribution to learning to read that is independent of phoneme awareness. Tannen (1987) argues almost two decades ago that orality and literacy are interrelated domains. The teachings of PCMGP are consistent with the prevailing research in the area of orality and literacy.

The annotated bibliography also makes reference to a body of research that describes the relationship between parent-child attachment and the language. This research has tended to focus on how a positive parent-child bond contributes to the development of language (Locke, 1993). There is less research, reported in the annotated bibliography, looking directly at the contribution of language-based interaction between parent and child and the development of a healthy attachment. It mentions Bruner (1983), who found that infants learned about reciprocity through their interactions with their parents and that this reciprocity contributed to healthy attachment. The rhymes and songs used by PCGMP teachers are designed to promote reciprocal exchanges (for example, reading and responding to each others cues) between parents and children. Further, Honig (1990) argued, based on her experiences with the Head Start Program, that language development and family well-being are inter-related. Fallis (1998: 4) states that "language is one of the family's most precious and far-reaching teachings, affecting all subsequent learning, as well as social interaction and communication".

The annotated bibliography also makes reference to research relating to the links between family literacy and parental empowerment. Brooks (1998) found that family literacy programs contribute to parental confidence and competence, improving communication skills and employment opportunities. He also found that parents who participated in these programs continued to be involved in their children's education as well as society generally. Zigler (1970) found that many parents had experienced social isolation and alienation. He expressed a need for programs that gave parents and children alike experiences that would help them self-actualize. Parents needed to feel socially connected and to transmit this feeling of connection to their children.

By situating the study in the context of relevant research, the significance and meaningfulness of the research hypotheses becomes apparent.

3.0 Teacher Interviews

The findings from the teacher interviews are presented in seven sections. First, composite profiles of the teachers are delineated. Second, teachers adherence to the core elements is examined. Next, four topics are investigated in relation to the three family literacy hypotheses.

The “heart” of the program, according to teachers.
The promotion of positive language-based interactions.
The promotion of family literacy.
The empowerment of parents.

Finally, a summary of the family literacy findings from the teacher interviews is provided. The information provided by the teachers was extensive. It offered unique insights into the value of the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program.

3.1 Composite Profiles of Teachers

The Parent-Child Mother Goose Program is strong, in part, because of the people that it attracts as teachers. The teachers in the Mother Goose share some important characteristics. In particular, they are articulate women with a commitment to building community and to helping others. Many have a keen interest in the inner lives of children and adults, their imaginations and their ability to express themselves. Some of the women are involved in storytelling outside of the Mother Goose program. Others are involved in other helping occupations or activities outside of the Mother Goose program.

About half of the teachers interviewed first came to the Mother Goose program as parents. These women felt that the program was special, different from other programs they had attended. Aside from being fun, the program was “empowering”. It taught parents how to play with and communicate with babies and young children. It showed parents that they did not need toys or books to entertain their babies and young children. It helped parents establish strong bonds with their babies and young children. Because the program empowered parents, it had the potential to make a difference in their lives and the lives of their children. These women, thus, strongly believed in the program even before they become teachers.

The other half of the teachers traveled diverse paths to the program. Some were already storytellers and joined the program because of their belief in the power and importance of stories and storytelling. Some were involved in other creative activities (art, expressive art therapy, and theater). Most of the teachers in the Mother Goose program are parents. The majority of the teachers speak warmly and with conviction about the role of rhymes and songs and stories in their interactions with their own children (or grandchildren).

3.2 Core Elements and Teachers' Adaptations

There are core elements that are required components for all PCMG groups. These core elements ensure that the program delivered in each location is truly a Mother Goose program. They ensure that the philosophy behind the program is respected and brought to life. All teachers are trained in the philosophy and delivery of the program. This philosophy is summarized in seven key points.

Activity focuses on interactive rhymes, songs and stories, all presented orally.

No toys, books or other props are used during the program.

Parents and children take part together in age-appropriate ways.

Storytelling is an integral part of the program and is usually directed at the adult audience.

The teaching is directed at the parents/caregivers. The pace is relaxed and each class involves plenty of repetition of materials.

The atmosphere is warm, open and supportive with the intention of building the confidence of the participants.

The teachers strive to build a feeling of community and mutual support within the group and to connect the group with other community resources and programs.

During the evaluation process, CICH did not ask teachers to define the core elements.

Instead, CICH asked the Mother Goose teachers to describe the ways that they **adapted** the program to meet the needs of a particular group. (It was assumed that the teachers knew the established core elements, part of Mother Goose theory.)

The strongest message to emerge from their answers is that **a Mother Goose program is very flexible and adaptable, with a loosely defined structure and that it is not necessary to make adaptations that are inconsistent with the core elements.** The teachers indicated that they chose the day's rhymes and songs and stories in response to the mix of infants and toddlers in a group. When there were more toddlers, they tended to include more movement, more action. When there were more babies, they focused on gentle rhymes and touch. They also were responsive to the presence of parents with limited fluency in English. The main modification here is to go slower and to repeat material more frequently. The teacher might also sit next to or across from a parent who is having trouble understanding to help them. In general, the teachers felt that it was important to remember and respect the unique character of each group. They all felt that the program "worked" at that there was no need to "fix it" when the composition of the group changed.

It is clear from the comments of the teachers and the observations of the researchers that the Program is **consistently implemented**. Further, the teachers indicated that consistent implementation was easily maintained in diverse locations.

3.3 Family Literacy at the "Heart" of the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program

After asking teachers about the adaptations they made to the program, CICH asked them to describe the "heart" of the program. The intention of this question was to garner information about Mother Goose as it is practiced in each location. Teachers were free to identify more than one factor as at the heart of the program.

Although their individual backgrounds shaped to some extent what they saw as the "heart" of PCMG, their views were consistent with the established core elements. The common themes that emerged from their comments were that the Mother Goose program is essentially **a family literacy program**, that it promotes healthy attachment and positive parent-child interactions and that it encourages parents and children to have fun together and to develop their imaginations. The teachers also emphasized the supportive, accepting and warm atmosphere found in Parent-Child Mother Goose Programs. This section elaborates on these themes.

3.3.1 Oral Stories, Imagination and Literacy:

"Storytelling is 'an explicit resource in all intellectual activity,' a 'disposition of the mind,' a 'meaning-making strategy' which represents the mind's eternal rummaging in the past and its daring, scandalous rehearsal of scripts for the future." (Tannen, 1987)

Teachers identified oral stories as the heart of the Mother Goose program. According to them, stories help individuals connect with other people. The rhymes and songs are really little stories that are shared between parent and child. Sharing these stories forms and strengthens connections between them. Some teachers commented that learning these little stories helps to develop the imagination. Adults and children alike can learn to "see" the words. They believe that this skill contributes to becoming a reader as well. Comfort with oral language may increase comfort with written language for some people.

3.3.2 Positive Parent-Child Communication:

Teachers identified parent-child interaction as at the "heart" of the program. On a practical level, the teachers focus on showing parents how to use rhymes, songs and stories (accompanied by touch, gestures and movement) as a way of interacting with their children. They believe that good communication is important to healthy parent-child relationships. They find that the playing techniques taught in Mother Goose help to create a positive pattern of parent-child communication and mutual enjoyment. As one teacher put it, the Mother Goose program helps to "capture the child's quiet attention." The teachers believe that a habit of communication in turn contributes to the development of positive parenting techniques and

healthy family dynamics.

3.3.3 Mutual Parent-Child Enjoyment:

Many of the teachers believe that, because of the work involved in caring for infants and toddlers as well as older children, parents sometimes forget to have fun with their children. They also believe that when parents and their children have fun together it contributes to attachment and keeps the pathways of communication open. Consequently, they feel that the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program plays an essential role by showing parents that they could have fun with their infants, toddlers and older children and by providing them with effective tools (rhymes, songs, stories and techniques).

3.3.4 Gentle and Supportive Atmosphere:

The teachers in the Mother Goose program consider the atmosphere they create for their families to be a key component of the program. They describe it as a safe environment for parents and children. Babies are allowed to act like babies. Toddlers are allowed to act like toddlers. This does not mean that there are no rules, just that the expectations are age-appropriate. The teachers also describe the atmosphere as accepting. As many of the teachers explained, there is no direct intervention in the lives of the parents and their children. Instead, the teachers rely on modeling techniques. They offer parents a positive example, as well as acceptance and encouragement. There is no pressure. As one teacher phrased it, "it is the gentleness and acceptance that brings them back each week." According to one teacher, because of the atmosphere and the Mother Goose materials and techniques, she has done "some of the best social work" of her career at Mother Goose.

In sum, the findings from the teacher interviews regarding the "heart" of the program support the conclusion that **PCMGP programs are in practice what they set out to be in principle**. The teachers focus on providing parents with positive, language-based tools and strategies for communicating and interacting with their infants and children. They focus on creating in parents a love of language. They focus on encouraging parents to enjoy their children. They do these things without any props or special equipment and they do it in a supportive and accepting manner. These findings also support the first three hypotheses. Teachers report that, in their experience, participation in PCMGP programs promotes language-based interactions between parent and child, encourages a culture of family literacy and, consequently, contributes to family well being in diverse ways. The fourth hypothesis, regarding parental empowerment, was not addressed by the findings around the "heart" of the program.

3.4 Positive, Language-Based Parent-Child Interactions

The teachers identified three related themes in relation to positive, language-based interactions between parent and child. First and foremost, teachers find that the consistent use of the rhymes, songs and stories is effective in promoting parent-child attachment. Secondly, they find that the rhymes, songs and stories help parents and children enjoy each other and manage challenging situations without frustration or anger. Finally, most of the teachers consider talking to be a central component of the parent-child relationship. They have seen the program open parents' eyes to the value of communication and self-expression at all ages. These themes are all clearly associated with family literacy and family well being.

3.4.1 Promoting Parent-Child Attachment

Teachers reported that the Mother Goose program helps parents and children to connect with one another. In other words, it promotes healthy parent-child attachment. The personal testimony of one teacher is particularly powerful. Prior to her involvement with PCMGP, she had found relating to her infant son a challenge. She had been concerned that Children's Aid might remove him from her care, as had been the case with an earlier child. After attending Mother Goose for a while, she became aware of an attachment forming between them. Although she had known a few rhymes and songs, it had not occurred to her to use them in her parenting. She had found it very rewarding when her son laughed or participated in some other way when they did the rhymes and songs. Now, her son is in high school and

she has become a Mother Goose teacher and a storyteller. They are very close. Although this is an extreme case, the teachers strongly believed that the positive-language based interactions of PCMGP programs always have **the potential to effect positive changes in attachment** and each was able to present **anecdotal evidence** to support this belief.

3.4.2 Language for Fun and Distraction

The Mother Goose teachers teach that rhymes and songs are strategies for caring for and coping with infants, toddlers and small children. They believe that this is an important message for parents. Even parents who knew a variety of rhymes and songs before attending the Mother Goose program frequently told teachers that they had not considered using these rhymes and songs as parenting tools. Parents report regularly on the success that they have had using the rhymes and songs to maintain or restore good humor. Many of the teachers reflected on how this strategy had been a revelation to them as well when they had started as parents with the program. Teachers reported that some parents do not know what to do with their infants beyond meeting their basic needs. The program shows parents how to use oral language to play with even very young infants. It shows parents how to have fun with their infants. Teachers watch as children grow more confident as communicators themselves. Very small children may enjoy communicating with parents and others through the gestures associated with the rhymes and songs. They see toddlers developing their verbal skills and enjoying language. In other words, they see children learning to use language to have fun with their parents. The teachers thus indicate that program has **the potential to effect positive and long-lasting changes in family functioning**.

3.4.3 Talking as a Central Component of the Parent-Child Relationship

Teachers reported that one important consequence of the Mother Goose approach is that parents and children develop a habit of communication that strengthens their relationship throughout childhood. One teacher spoke compellingly about how the habit of communication, established in her family through PCMGP, strengthened and supported her family during a period of divorce and family restructuring. Talking kept everyone connected and helped everyone get their emotional needs met during this difficult time. One way that the program promotes positive language-based interactions is by focusing the teaching on the parents. Parents implement the program's approach in their daily lives, building a habit of communication.

Overall, the findings from the teacher interviews, regarding positive language-based interactions, support the first, second and third research hypotheses - that participation in PCMGP programs promotes positive, language-based interactions between parent and child, encourages a culture of literacy within families and, in so doing, contributes to family well being. These particular findings do not address the fourth hypothesis relating to parental empowerment.

3.5 Tools for A Culture of Family Literacy

The teachers indicated that they were not present in the homes of participants and were not privy to information about family interactions and family literacy. However, they felt that they **provided the necessary tools for a family culture of literacy**. About this latter point they were very confident. The main themes raised by the teachers in respect to family literacy were:

Family literacy and family connectedness.

Family literacy and family functioning during hard times.

Family literacy and success at school.

According to the teachers, Mother Goose contributes substantially to family literacy. Their responses indicate that the program has the capacity to promote the use of language, oral and written, in daily life. Further, they associated family literacy with family well being.

3.5.1 Family Literacy and Family Connectedness

The teachers reported that telling and listening to stories, even little stories like those

encapsulated in nursery rhymes, creates a special kind of family time. This family time is characterized by attention to one another. Given a culture hemmed in by television, computers and Nintendo, some families may not make regular time to pay attention to each other. Time spent sharing stories is also characterized by creative, expressive language. Rhymes and songs and stories are the basis for interaction and play and can be instigated by parent or child. The teachers felt that one consequence is a shared love of language. Another consequence is the development of communication skills. Communication skills include both the ability to express ideas and the ability to listen to others. The teachers cautioned that many parents instill a love of language without attending PCMGP classes. What is important, exciting and a little scary is that, for many parents, the messages in Mother Goose are a revelation.

3.5.2 Family Literacy and Family Functioning During Hard Times

Some of the teachers expressed the belief that the skills of self-expression and communication can support you through difficult times. They stated that an amazing amount of communication can go on between parents and even very young children. What parents need are the tools and the strategies that help them build their ability to communicate. The program shows them that language-based strategies are very effective for disciplining children and helping children to overcome behavioural problems. Language-based strategies are also effective at reducing parental frustration and stress.

According to one teacher, memorizing specific rhymes and songs is not the goal. Instead, what is important is “learning to be confident in the creative and playful use of language to interact with babies and children”. What is important is learning to be attentive when the baby or child interacts with you. One teacher indicated that, without the lessons that she learned at Mother Goose, she would probably not have been able to raise her son. Because of the culture of family literacy that developed through her participation in the program, she and her son developed a very close and supportive relationship that has sustained them through his childhood and adolescence. Another teacher stressed the importance of family literacy in helping her and her children weather the difficulties involved in family restructuring. She believes that the habits of communication and self-expression promoted by the Mother Goose program helped her and her children stay attuned to one another. According to this teacher, a culture of family literacy “is not just about reading, it is about using language to understand the world and to bring people closer together.”

3.5.3 Family Literacy and Success at School

Many teachers indicated that their own children tended to do well in school and to have a positive attitude about learning. As parents, they attributed this success to the language-rich environment in which their children developed. Some of the teachers indicated that it was the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program that encouraged them to create such a language-rich environment at home. Other indicated that they had always done so. In either case, they recognized the benefits they and their children gained from positive language-based interactions. One teacher, for example, spoke of how both of her own (now adult) children have learning disabilities. She believes that the language-rich environment that she established in the home was crucial to their eventual success at school.

Many of the teachers commented that parents who are comfortable with oral and written language are better able to assisting children with their homework and may also feel more confident in dealing with their children’s school teachers. Helping with homework and communicating well with teachers and other school staff are two ways that parents can help their children succeed at school. The fact that teachers reported that the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program lays the foundation for these activities is noteworthy. Finally, learning to feel comfortable with oral and written English is an issue as well for parents who are learning English as a second language. The teachers indicated that many parents came to the program with the express purpose of preparing themselves and their children for the school years.

In sum, as all families may at sometime undergo challenging periods, the skills described by

these teachers, skills that are taught in the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program, are features of family literacy that promote resilience and positive family functioning. Thus, the teachers' comments support the second and third research hypotheses – that participation in the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program encourages a culture of literacy within families and contributes to family well being.

3.6 Family Literacy , Parental Empowerment and Social Equity

As mentioned earlier, family literacy is a social equity movement, that seeks to achieve its goals first and foremost through parental empowerment. In answering the questions regarding empowerment, the teachers stressed that they did not know what the parents did on their own time. They also didn't know the extent to which decisions and actions of the parents could be attributed to the parents' participation in the Mother Goose program. Most felt that the parents must answer this for themselves. However, they emphasized, first, that PCMGP classes provided a starting point for many mothers and, second, that it was a place where they could learn about the resources available in the community. They do know from talking to mothers that many come to PCMGP classes, who have not been going anywhere else.

3.6.1 A Starting Point

According to the teachers, in some programs, the majority of parents are socially confident and competent. They have experience in the workforce and have concrete plans for returning after a personally determined period of time. However, even in these groups, there are some women who are less confident in different social environments. In other groups, many of the parents are struggling in some way – struggling financially, struggling as parents or simply struggling with difficult life situations. In some cases, the parents lead lives that are isolated (for example, many of the parents who attend one program do not leave the housing complex). According to the teachers, the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program is a safe environment for them to develop a sense of confidence in themselves. By participating in the program, these parents can make contributions to a larger social group. Parents may also come to see themselves as “learners”, an important first step towards education or employment. According to the teachers, the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program also prepares parents for when their children go to school. They feel better able to talk with the school teachers. They better understand what is expected of their children.

(The teachers stressed that the seemingly confident and competent parents are probably also taking something useful from the program – if this were not so, they would not attend as regularly as they do. There are faster, flashier programs available.)

3.6.2 Information Exchange

In most of the programs, teachers observed an active exchange of information about the resources and activities in the community as well as the sharing of personal information. The teachers indicated that the relaxed pace of the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program encourages parents to talk with each other. They can talk before the program, during the snack time and, at some locations, after the program. According to the teachers, these parent-to-parent discussions foster a sense of community. This sense of community, and the accompanying sense of belonging, may also contribute to social confidence and competence, encouraging parents to try more programs and, perhaps, look into educational or employment opportunities.

The comments of the teachers indicate that the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program does contribute in some way to social confidence and a sense of community. Essentially, they feel that the program provides parents with opportunities to develop socially. They were unable to report, however, on the extent to which parents avail themselves of these opportunities. They were unwilling to speculate on the extent to which parents needed these opportunities. Thus, the third hypothesis – that Mother Goose builds language skills and confidence and empowers parents to use other community resources – is only partially supported by the teachers' comments.

3.7 Summary of the Findings from the Teachers' interviews

The teachers in the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program supported all four of the research hypotheses that guided this evaluation. They spoke eloquently about their own experiences and about their observations of and discussions with diverse participants. It is clear from their comments that participation in the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program does in many cases promote positive language-based interactions between parents and children. Basing their conclusions mostly on their own experiences, the teachers also offered many examples of how the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program encourages a culture of literacy among families. Of all of the hypotheses, the weakest evidence was presented for the one on empowering parents to participate in the social environment outside the home. Finding new ways to address this hypothesis in further stages of the evaluation will be important. Overall, the teachers presented a picture of the parent-Child Mother Goose Program as a successful and effective family literacy program, contributing to family well being in a variety of ways.

4.0 The Parent-Participant Interviews

The findings from the parent-participant interviews are discussed in four sections. The first section provides background information about the parents. The remaining sections each address one or more of the four research hypotheses.

Composite profiles of the parents participating in PCMGP programs.

Valued features of PCMGP programs.

Parent-child benefits of participation in PCMGP programs.

Parental empowerment through PCMGP programs.

The parental interviews proved to be very fruitful, garnering exciting information about the impact of the Parent-Child Mother Goose program on the lives of participants. However, the evaluation found a number of areas where further investigation is warranted.

4.1 Composite profiles of the parents participating in PCMGP programs

Three composite profiles of parents are examined: parents new to Canada who speak English as a second language, parents from low income households and parents and caregivers who value the Mother Goose approach. These three composites are not mutually exclusive. However, the third profile is intended to capture those parents who attend the program regularly but are not obviously part of the target population.

Parents new to Canada, who speak English as a second language

Many of the parents in the Mother Goose programs are struggling to acquire English as a second language. These parents are often socially isolated in their communities. They are often reticent about talking in public. They tend to appreciate the slow and gentle pace of the program and its atmosphere of acceptance. Most feel that it is a good place to practice their English skills. These parents are encouraged to introduce rhymes and songs from their own cultural and linguistic tradition and their contributions add breadth and depth to the program.

Parents from low income households (often with limited education)

In some programs, many of the parents are from low-income households and have limited education. (In other programs this is not the case.) Some of them have tried other programs, but have felt like they do not fit in. For this and other reasons, these parents often need encouragement from teachers to come and try the program and to participate once there. Many of these parents are also new to Canada and coping with cultural and language challenges. Many of these parents become very involved with the program over time and find ways to contribute to it.

Parents and Caregivers Who Value the Mother Goose Approach

In many programs, there are parents and caregivers that attend the Mother Goose program because they value its approach or philosophy. They like the gentle pace and the supportive atmosphere, with no pressure on parents or children to "perform". Many of the mothers attend

the program regularly over a number of years, contributing in a variety of ways to the program.

4.2 Valued Features of PCMG

The parents indicated that they liked many features of the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program. Some features of the programs were commonly identified by parents as enjoyable or valued. Others were identified by fewer parents – although other parents may in fact share the sentiment. This section reports first on the commonly identified features valued by parents and then on the less commonly identified features. The features that parents indicated that they liked were consistent with the features identified by the teachers as the “heart” of the program and with the overall goals of the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program. In other words, the parents valued the features that contributed to family literacy and family well being.

4.2.1 Commonly Valued Features

Nine features of the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program were commonly identified as liked and valued by parents. These features relate to the oral emphasis of the program, the emphasis on positive parent-child interaction, the language-rich environment promoted by the program and the acceptance and warmth experienced at the programs.

Parents like learning the rhymes, songs and stories. They find them fun and useful. They are glad to have more activities to do with their children,

Parents like learning parenting strategies that incorporate the rhymes, songs and stories. For some parents, this idea is revolutionary, changing dramatically the way that they handle parenting situations throughout the day.

Parents like learning ways to enjoy the company of their infants and children. A parent's daily caring activities can be very demanding. The program helps parents take time every day to enjoy the company of their children.

Parents like the acceptance (of parents and of children) and support they experience at the program. At the Mother Goose program, infants are allowed to act like infants and toddlers are allowed to act like toddlers. There is no pressure to make everyone sit still and be quiet. Parents feel welcome and accepted.

Parents like the fact that both infants and toddlers can enjoy the same program. For parents with an infant and a toddler, a program that appeals to both ages is a gift. Everyone is engaged in some way with the program.

Parents like the way that the program empowers children to communicate. Parents learn that preverbal children can communicate in many ways. They learn ways to interact with their preverbal children. Some parents indicated that their children started using gestures to communicate. Some parents commented that the program, and the use of the materials at home as well, stimulated their child's interest in talking. One parent of a child with a hearing impairment spoke of how the program contributed to strengthening her daughter's language skills.

Parents appreciate the opportunity to learn and practice English – without any pressure. Many parents for whom English was a second language indicated that the Mother Goose program was a comfortable place to speak and be spoken to in English. They also appreciate the opportunity the program provided for their children to learn to socialize in an English-speaking environment. They are impressed with the speed with which their children learned the rhymes and songs.

Parents like the simplicity of the program. For many parents, the focus on interaction between parent and child is refreshing and relaxing after programs like Gymboree or toy-centred playgroups. They like the fact that they can use the program materials anywhere and anytime without needing any equipment.

Parents like the opportunity to socialize with the other parents. Without these opportunities, they would feel isolated and alone at a time in their lives when they need other people for support.

4.2.2 Less Commonly Valued Features

Five other related features were identified by some parents. The fact that these were less

commonly mentioned than the others may be immaterial. Future interviews may show that these features are also widely appreciated.

For some parents, learn by doing is essential. Thus, the Mother Goose emphasis on parents doing the gestures and the words during the class helps them to learn new material. The repetition helps as well.

For some parents, listening to the stories is a valued part of the Mother Goose experience. They feel that the teachers are talented story tellers and they enjoy the opportunity to simply listen. (Parents generally report that they do not try to tell stories at home.)

Some parents feel that the program offers an effective blend of movement, touch, and language that benefits children. Parents spoke of the pleasure combining these things gives infants and children. One parent spoke of how the program's activities helped her child who has an information processing disorder. The activities in the program, particularly the ones that involved crossing arms or legs over the centre line of the body, were similar to therapy for this little girl.

Some parents feel that parenting is a difficult and draining experience and that parents need to replenish themselves regularly. The Mother Goose program replenishes parents. One way the program helps is by sending parents the message that they and their children are valued and respected. The gentle, supportive atmosphere and the quiet activities help parents regain perspective.

One parent emphasized how nice it was to come to a program like Mother Goose and receive reassurance that you are doing well.

These aspects of the program are similar to the four features identified by teachers as at the heart of the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program: oral literacy, language-based parent-child interaction, parent and child enjoyment and a gentle and supportive environment. These parallels demonstrate that the goals of the program are, in many ways, being met. The responses of the parents also tend to support the first three hypotheses set forth for this evaluation. They suggest that participation in the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program does promote positive, language-based interactions between parent and child, encourage a culture of literacy within families and contribute to family well being.

4.3 Parent-Child Benefits of Participation in PCMGP

The parents interviewed for this project have varying degrees of confidence and competence in speaking, reading and writing English. They have different personal resources for promoting literacy in their children. However, they are all committed to supporting the language development of their children. Many of the parents, particularly those who are new to Canada, are committed to helping their children become fluent and literate in two or more languages. All the parents want their children to be well prepared for school. They want them to be ready to learn to read and write. They keep reading materials in the home and, many, spend time every day reading to their children (or at least talking about the pictures in a book).

The Mother Goose program, its materials and approach, are part of a family's overall activities in relation to language development and literacy (for example, many of the parents regularly make use of the local library and attend other programs in the community). In some cases, parents' participation in the Mother Goose program was instrumental in changing their use of and comfort with language. The findings from the parent interviews reveal three ways that participation in the Mother Goose program impact on family literacy. First, it helps parents to create an oral tradition that contributes to a language-rich environment. Second, the oral traditions of Mother Goose compliment the reading activities of a family and prepare the way for the child's own reading and writing. Third, the rhymes and songs of the Mother Goose program help parents who are learning English as a second language incorporate English into their daily activities. The impacts of the Mother Goose program described in this section are also clearly related to overall family functioning and well-being.

4.3.1 Orality and a Language-Rich Family Environment

According to participating parents, PCMGP programs help parents create a language-rich

family environment.

Mother Goose introduces parents to an oral tradition that many had not really experienced before. This includes talking to infants and small children as well as doing the rhymes and the songs or telling stories. These activities are pleasurable for both parents and children. The parents indicated that the rhymes and songs help them get through the day, on the one hand reducing boredom and frustration, and on the other hand, increasing playfulness and enjoyment. The result is improved family functioning.

Parents share this oral tradition with other members of the family, who can, in turn, use the rhymes and songs to strengthen their relationships with the child. Parents also use rhymes and songs to “break the ice” with other children that they meet. Having positive relationships with adults other than their parents can benefit children.

The Mother Goose materials are a way of spending calmer, quieter time with toddlers. It captures their attention and opens the door to communication. It gives the child tools, such as gestures and sounds, with which to participate in “conversation”. By participating, children can expand their identity within the family.

These findings from the parent interviews demonstrate the link between the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program, its materials and approach, family literacy and family well-being. They strongly support the first three research hypotheses - that participation in PCMGF programs promotes positive language-based interactions between parents and children, encourages a culture of literacy within families and, in so doing, contributes to family well being.

4.3.2 Orality and Literacy

Many parents interviewed indicated that they viewed the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program as part of an overall strategy within the family for assisting their children in language development. Some parents who had attended the program at an early time with an older child were particularly explicit about the role of Mother Goose in supporting language development. They commented that participation in the Mother Goose program, and the consistent implementation of Mother Goose strategies at home, were a contributing factor to their children’s success at school.

The Mother Goose materials strengthen or compliment the reading activities of the family.

Reading to the child, is for some parents, a logical extension of the oral rhymes and songs. They feel that books are made more enjoyable by their child’s oral language skills. Some small children cannot sit still for books. They need to be interacting with the parents or they need to be moving around or making noise. For these children, the rhymes and songs and stories in Mother Goose are an active and engaging way to develop their language skills. Because they are developing their language skills, they are also preparing themselves to be readers later.

Where reading has not been a strong family tradition, or when reading is a challenge for a particular reason (such as learning disabilities), the Mother Goose materials can build confidence and enhance comfort around telling and listening to stories. This may be a first step towards reading and writing.

For some parents, the Mother Goose materials and approach, when consistently applied, help children to overcome barriers to language development and the acquisition of reading and writing skills. One parent indicated that the family’s consistent use of interactive, language-based activities helped her daughter develop advanced language skills even though she had a substantial hearing deficit. Another parent indicated that the mix of movement, touch and language found in Mother Goose activities helped her daughter improve her language skills even though she has learning disabilities. This child, now in grade 1, still has trouble reading and writing, but she has improved her language skills and is better prepared to master more. She is less discouraged than she might have been.

These findings demonstrate the role of the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program as a family literacy program. They show that many parents are aware of the connections between orality and literacy and use the materials and approach offered at Mother Goose to the advantage

of their children.

4.3.3. Orality and Learning a Second Language

According to some parents who attend, the Parent-Child Mother Goose program represents an opportunity to practice English and to incorporate English language activities into their day.

The Mother Goose materials allow families learning English as a second language to use English in playful ways throughout the day. The children often learn the rhymes and songs quickly, which impresses their parents. The parents are also pleased to learn the rhymes and songs themselves. Many parents use the Mother Goose approach of rhymes and songs and little stories to play with their child in their first language. Many parents speaking English as a second language felt that they could only share a love of language with their child in first and most fluent language. The Mother Goose materials and approach can also introduce children to other languages and cultural traditions. Some parents make it a habit to do rhymes and songs in two or even three languages. For some parents coming from different cultural traditions, family reading activities centre on religious instruction and religious worship.

These findings lend weighty support to the hypothesis that PCMGP promotes family literacy. Further, they demonstrate that the program provides these language opportunities to a difficult to reach group – parents with infants and small children. Finally, they indicate that the learning that goes on through Mother Goose is not stressful. It is relaxed and fun.

4.3.4 Communication with Babies and Toddlers – Watching for Cues

All of the parents were able to identify favorite songs and rhymes. Some of the parents were able to identify favorite stories. From their responses, it was clear that most parents were able to pick up cues from their infants and toddlers about what they liked or didn't like. They recognized attentiveness, excitement, anticipation and pleasure in their babies and toddlers. They also recognized signs of disinterest or boredom. With older children, they were able to comment on the songs and rhymes that the children chose to do either on their own or with someone. This ability to see and respond to the cues of babies and toddlers is an important aspect of parent-child communication. Communication is, in turn, an important factor in family literacy. The role of PCMGP in strengthening the capacity of parents and children to recognize and interpret each others cues is an important area for future evaluation.

In sum, PCMGP contributes to a family literacy. Unlike most family literacy programs, its approach is inclusive of infants and small children. Parents are encouraged to introduce language and other forms of communication (through movement, touch and gesture) to even the youngest infants. One of the strengths of the program is its ability to minimize the impact of a range of problems (such as learning disabilities and hearing impairment) in relation to literacy through its **regular** activities. Another strength of the program is its ability to encourage newcomers to Canada to enjoy English with their children.

4.4 Parental Empowerment

The parents were asked about their **involvement with other programs and resources** in the community, and about their education and employment related activities. It is important to remember that many of the parents interviewed were well educated and had experience in the work force. They may not have been looking for this kind of social empowerment. It is also important to note that many of the parents attending the program were involved with other programs and activities in the community before and after they began attending Mother Goose. For whatever reason, most parents did not connect their involvement with other programs and activities in the community with the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program. It may be that the questions about parental empowerment asked during the interview were not meaningful to the parents. It may be that another approach is needed to garner information about parental empowerment and Mother Goose.

One group where some information of this kind was forthcoming was at one program in a

housing complex. The parents who attend this program did not indicate much involvement outside of Mother Goose and L.I.N.K. However, it was clear from their discussions that they received confidence and opportunities for growth and development through their participation. The line between the L.I.N.K. program and the Mother Goose program is blurred for these mothers. A more in-depth look at this particular program might provide more useful information about the relationship between participation in PCMGP programs and parental empowerment.

The fourth hypothesis – that participation in PCMGP programs builds language skills and confidence and empowers parents to use other community resources (such as adult education programs and employment programs) – was not effectively supported by the research conducted for this evaluation. The information gathered did not address this hypothesis in a way that allows us to draw conclusions. A different approach, such as a longitudinal study with a high-risk sample of parents, is needed to draw conclusions about the relationship between PCMP and parental empowerment.

4.6 Summary of the Findings from the Parent-Participant Interviews

The findings from the parents participating in PCMGP programs solidly supported the first three research hypotheses. Some parents, in fact, offered moving testimonials regarding the benefits of participation. Parents reported that they enjoyed learning rhymes, songs and stories and doing them with their babies and toddlers. Many parents hadn't realized that these games were appropriate for babies. The findings, thus, support the first hypothesis. They talked about the ways that they used oral language skills to accomplish daily tasks. For example, they reported using rhymes, songs and stories to entertain children while they finished household chores or completed errands. The findings, thus, support the second hypothesis. Parents also reported that the positive patterns of parent-child interaction that they learned at PCMGP contributed to family well-being. For example, parents reported that the rhymes, songs and stories reduced frustration for both parents and children. They also reported that doing the rhymes, songs and stories gave parents and children opportunities to enjoy each others company. The findings, thus, support the third hypothesis. The findings neither supported nor contradicted the fourth hypothesis. The survey design was inadequate to address the issue of parental empowerment.

5.0 Conclusions

The interview-based research undertaken by the Canadian Institute of Child Health on behalf of the Parent-Child Mother Goose Program addressed four inter-related research hypotheses dealing with family literacy. These hypotheses were:

That participation in PCMGP classes promotes positive, language-based interactions between parent and child.

That participation in PCMGP encourages a culture of literacy within families.

That family literacy is strongly associated with family well-being.

That participation in PCMGP builds language skills and confidence and empowers parents to use other community resources.

The findings from both the teacher and the parent interviews strongly supported the first three hypotheses. It was evident from their comments that PCMGP has the potential to help parents change the way they interact with their infants and small children. This potential is realized in small or big ways, depending on the individual people in question and their circumstances. It was also evident that PCMGP has the potential to encourage family literacy. This potential is also realized in small or big ways, depending on the people and their circumstances. Positive changes in family language use and literacy contribute positively to family functioning and child and family well-being. Teachers and parents alike spoke of the benefits of parents and children having more fun together, parents and children experiencing less frustration and parents and children learning to communicate with each other. The fourth hypothesis was only slightly supported by this research. Further research is needed to understand the role of PCMGP in empowering parents.

One of the great strengths of the PCMGP is that its benefits are diverse and do not need to be anticipated and planned to be achieved. For example, the program is not designed to enhance the language skills of hearing-impaired children – yet according to one parent interviewed, it has the power to do so. The program is also not designed to assist children with learning disabilities or communication problems. Yet, according to some parents, it has the power to do so. Thus, according to this research, PCMGP achieves its immediate family literacy and family well-being goals but, because of its generalized capacity to support parents and children, it also produces other, unplanned positive benefits for children and parents. PCMGP is a simple program that parents and children enjoy. At the same time, it is a powerful program with the capacity to positively affect people's lives in diverse, sometimes unpredictable, ways.

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