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Emerging Literacy in a Multicultural Community

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The *Montreal Fluency Centre* (MFC) is a non-profit organization serving the needs of children with difficulties in speech, language, learning and literacy in English and French. Through speech-language pathology and psycho-educational services, our goal is to reduce the long-term risks of these difficulties and minimize the impact they may have on children's lives. The Centre follows children through all the educational milestones from preschool to adolescence and is well known for its collaboration with parents, educators and other health care providers in supporting the families that are seen at the MFC.

We believe that better outcomes are achieved by working directly with the child, by supporting and mentoring families and educators, by working with partners in the community and by collaborating with professionals from other disciplines. We believe in developing innovative practices through research-based interventions, ongoing program evaluation and training/mentoring of clinicians.

The Centre, in operation for over 20 years, reaches more than 180 families weekly through in-clinic and community outreach programs that target communities at high risk as a result of cultural and linguistic diversity.

Literacy skills develop along a continuum, beginning long before reading, writing and spelling develop. Emergent literacy skills are the precursors to conventional literacy skills. The main indicators of emergent literacy are oral language, emergent writing, print knowledge, alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness. These skills have been found to be among the most important in preparing children for later success in reading (National Early Literacy Panel [NELP], 2009).

In 2008, The Montreal Fluency Centre initiated "The Gift of Reading Program" for emergent literacy. This is a replication of Dr. Laura Justice's "Read it Again" program. Through private funding over the next 3 years, and with collaboration from Dr. Laura Justice, researcher at Ohio State University and consultant for the United States Department of Education, our speech-language pathologists will be focusing on a preventative emergent literacy program centered on storybook reading. The goal during the next 3 years is to expand the project in English and then to develop it in French. This program is not intended to teach preschool aged children to read, but rather to help build a foundation that includes a) vocabulary, b) narrative, c) phonological awareness and d) print awareness skills. These have been identified by the NELP as some of the most important factors related to later school success.

Phase 1 of Gift of Reading was a pilot project in a multidisciplinary centre located in a vulnerable neighborhood of Montreal and serving the needs of refugee families in the city. In this community, up to 83% of families speak a home language other than English or French. Our program provided parent training and therapy for a small group of preschoolers who were considered at high-risk for learning difficulties. Each family received a copy of the weekly book to review the concepts that we modeled in the treatment sessions and to add to or begin their own family library. Data collected before and at the end of the treatment phase showed that the children made significant improvement in all areas, particularly print knowledge and alphabet knowledge.

Phase 2 is currently underway in a Montreal school in another vulnerable neighborhood. This program also uses storybooks as the main focus but involves a larger number of children, offers teacher training and takes place in the preschool classroom. Results of this project were being analyzed starting in June 2009, but initial observations have shown improvements in specific areas, for example print awareness and rhyme awareness. The teacher has reported that she appreciates the simple nature of the program and that the children are having fun while learning early literacy skills.

The program will continue in September 2009 with the following recommendations: use of more culturally relevant books; encouragement of parent participation; shared book reading in the home language (L1) to support the development of maternal language; and cultural exchanges. Phase 3 will focus on the development of this program in French. The goal of the program is to ensure that children are ready to learn by the time they enter kindergarten.