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## THE MAGIC OF MOTHER GOOSE

### The Winnipeg School Division

#### Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

**T**he Winnipeg School Division encompasses a large, high-need inner city population. It was the first school division in Canada to adopt the Parent-Child Mother Goose program as an early childhood intervention and as a positive strategy to strengthen the home-school connection. The Parent-Child Mother Goose Program provides parents with the knowledge and skills to support their child's early literacy development and prepare them for a successful start in school.

The Parent-Child Mother Goose literacy program is an interactive program intended for infants to five-year-olds. The program is a ten-week group experience for parents and their young children. A typical Parent-Child Mother Goose session begins with parents and their little ones, along with the group leaders, participating in various rhymes and song activities. During this first half hour, parents are encouraged to interact physically with their children in a positive way, cuddling and rocking while they sing and rhyme. Quieter rhymes are interspersed with those involving more active movement. Break time with a special snack allows time for visiting and sharing. Following snack, while moms are engaged in a storytelling session, the children have an opportunity to make simple crafts related to the rhymes they have just learned. Each session ends with a story told

to the parents—giving them the same sort of pleasure in language and listening that they can give to their children with rhymes and songs. The stories, usually folk tales, often prompt discussion of important issues.

Schools in the Winnipeg School Division are encouraged to send teams of a staff member and a parent to a two-day training session. The training session prepares them to become leaders of the program in their home schools. Since 2000, 106 people have been trained and 34 schools are currently utilizing the program.

The Parent-Child Mother Goose training involves an intensive program of learning and committing to memory the rhymes and songs, which are such an integral part of childhood. Storytelling also forms an important part of the experience. The philosophy of the program is to build these skills so that parents have a ready repertoire of language-enriching activities to use with their child. Because everything is committed to memory, parents don't have to rely on costly resources to engage their child.

Twenty participants are trained at each of the workshops. This year, the cost of training was covered by a special grant from the provincial Department of Education. The cost of running the program in individual schools has been funded by the Early Years Parent Project.

Schools in the Division have adapted the program in various ways to meet the particular needs of their school communities and to accommodate school space and schedules. For example, some schools invite children who have been pre-registered for nursery to a spring session of Parent-Child Mother Goose. Not only does this serve as a very positive introduction to the school, but it also provides the parents and children with an opportunity to strengthen the child's literacy skills prior to the start of school in September. A similar spring session can also provide an opportunity to bridge the gap from nursery to kindergarten and provide additional opportunities for language development of these young children. In addition, early childhood teachers, as well as teacher-librarians, can incorporate the concepts of the programs into their regular classroom instruction. The Parent-Child Mother Goose program can be adapted to reflect the culture of a particular community. In communities with a large Aboriginal population, native elders and storytellers have participated in the program. Parents have shared stories and rhymes from their own childhoods and cultural backgrounds.

Since introducing the program to the school division, parents and staff have responded enthusiastically. Schools find the program to be a very non-threatening way to get hard-to-reach parents into the school and involve them in their children's education. The parents who participate in the program might not otherwise have come into the school. In one school, a parent involvement committee was formed to build upon the con-

nection that was started as a result of the Parent-Child Mother Goose program.

Participation in a Parent-Child Mother Goose program increases the skill level and self-confidence of parents in terms of parenting their young children. A comment from one program evaluation explains, "Initially, you could sense the apprehension of some of the parents learning new stories, songs, and rhymes, but as each session progressed, so too did the confidence level of all adults in the room. The parents had also developed connections with other parents attending the program and had begun to interact much more freely after a couple of sessions." As parents gain a large repertoire of songs, stories, and resources they become more confident and competent in their parenting.

The school is no longer the fortress in the community. Schools actively seek the involvement of families realizing that the parent is the first and most important teacher of the child. Schools and families need to work together in partnership to provide optimal development for children. The Parent-Child Mother Goose program provides such an opportunity.

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