

Page Scholarship Report - 'Transforming Lives'

Adam Alexander is the 2013 recipient of the Walter Hines Page scholarship, funded by the EIS and the English Speaking Union. Adam's chosen topic of study was to research ways in which Early Years providers in North America support parents with parenting skills. Adam works as a Nursery teacher in Fife.

This report draws together some findings and information gathered on my recent trip to North America, on a topic which is receiving an increasing amount of attention in Education and in the public and political arenas, viz. supporting parents with parenting skills.

Economists are interested in the link between improved parenting skills and a healthier socio-economic situation. Educators are interested in the link between parenting skills and a child's behaviour and development in school and beyond.

I was interested to find out how early years providers engaged with parents in helping them to nurture and to stimulate their children's early development.

Those of us involved in Early Years Education are used to welcoming diverse groups of children when they start Nursery.

We are also used to differences presented by individuals when they start; for example, those who struggle to interact with their peers or with adults, those who mix confidently with others, those whose behaviour is challenging, those children who lack confidence and self-esteem, those who don't know how to play, those who thrive with play, those who don't sing or dance, those children who explore and investigate the world around them, those who show little interest in this.

Children come to us with these differences, among others, after three years of parenting. Like all other human endeavours, the quality of parenting varies enormously.

Early childhood is the most rapid period of development in a human life. The years from conception through birth to eight years of age are critical for the healthy cognitive, emotional and physical growth of children.

Brain development is at its most intense from birth to five. Equipped with some one hundred billion brain cells at birth, important neural pathways and connections are progressively developed in early childhood.

[Unicef's paper on Early Childhood Development states:](#)

"The process of eliminating excess neurons and synapses from the dense, immature brain, which continues well into adolescence, is most dramatic in the early years of life, and it is guided to a large extent by the child's

sensory experience of the outside world....if the brain does not receive the appropriate stimulation during this critical window, it is very difficult for the brain to rewire itself at a later time."

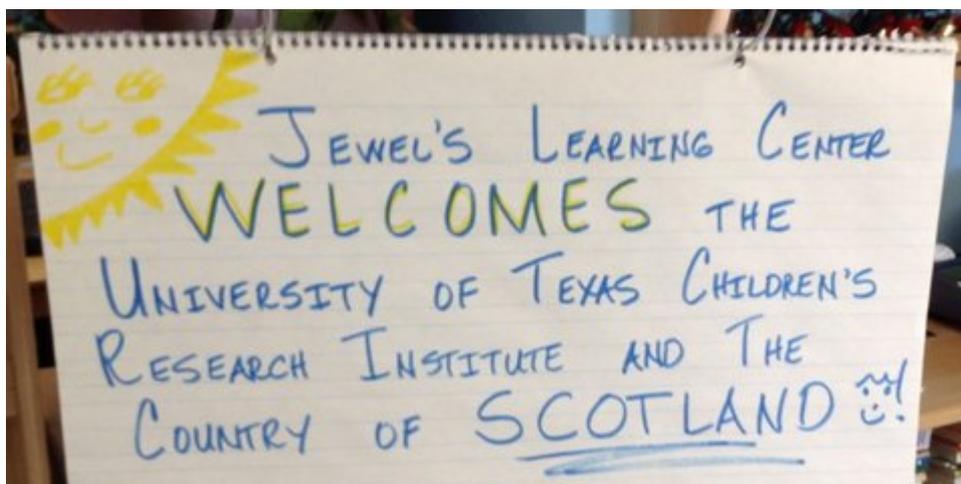
The first 3-4 years are critical for the development of sensory pathways, social and emotional development and the basic pathways for reading and mathematics.

[Dr. Kolb's research at the University of Lethbridge](#), Canada determines that if these pathways are not adequately developed in the early years, tremendous human and financial resources must be expended to address deficiencies. Normal development is often not possible.

There is a plethora of information and guidance out there for new parents, covering all aspects of child care. How do we reach the parents who either have no interest in this or have little idea about the importance of good parenting skills?

How can educators take a more proactive approach to helping parents to make the best choice for themselves as to which information and guidance is most supportive in their particular situations.

I travelled to North America to seek some answers to these questions. I spoke to practitioners, parents, children, Program directors and visited many Early Years settings, from family homes to Childcare Centres - the equivalent of our Nurseries in Scotland. The people I met were so very welcoming, friendly and enthusiastic to share ideas and to introduce me to their different cultures. [\[top of page\]](#)



Texas:

In Houston, Texas, I was introduced to the Play and Learning Strategies (PALS) program. My host, Ursula Johnson, Assistant Professor at the Department of Paediatrics, Medical School, University of Texas Health Science Center, based at the Children's Learning Institute, is a primary trainer for the PALS program with experience as a PALS supervisor and as a coach/facilitator.

The [PALS Infant curriculum](#) was developed to facilitate parents' mastery of specific skills for interacting with their children. The program consists of sessions, using videotaped examples of real parents and children, attended by parents and facilitated by a parent educator.

Session topics include: "attending to babies' and toddlers' communicative signals, responding appropriately to children's positive and negative signals, supporting infants' and toddlers' learning by maintaining their interest and attention rather than redirecting or over stimulating, introducing toys and activities, stimulating language development through labelling and scaffolding, encouraging cooperation and responding to misbehaviour, and incorporating these strategies and supportive behaviours throughout the day and during routine activities such as mealtimes, dressing, and bathing, as well as at play times. Throughout the program there is also an emphasis on educating parents about typical behaviours to expect from children at different ages."

The effectiveness of the PALS program in changing parents' behaviours and enhancing their children's development is well documented. ([See footnote for references](#))

The program also reaches out to Child Care Centres, where training is given to staff whose qualifications are often no higher than a High School diploma.

At one of these centres, a small family home, the manager had introduced curriculum-based take-home packs, containing games and ideas for activities.

"Do many parents take them?" I asked. "Some," she replied, "Some we have to encourage." I asked if it made a difference; "It does. 'Hey, I did this'. They [the children] want to brag about it. And parents get a lot out of it."

Ursula Johnson talks passionately about her work: *"I worked with one family; teenage mum and she had one child. She became pregnant with another one.*

"She had a low IQ and she was not comfortable reading to her son and one of the biggest things I helped her with, that this program PALS helped her with, was the ideal of using language with her son and not worrying about using the text of the book; it's all about sharing warmth and love during a book reading activity and at the least talking about the pictures and making up your own story.

"I think that was a launching pad for this mum to understand that although she may have her own personal limits, she doesn't have to limit how she parents her children... that there are ways still to provide them with opportunities - this kind of program can really empower parents; pretty amazing."

I asked Ursula how she would like to see PALS develop. *"I would like PALS to be given more recognition outside of the academic arena. The people that know research, they know that it's been researched well and it's a gold standard in a way of how to do research and how to do a parenting program but I think we need to do a better job of marketing our program to parents themselves or to groups who work with parents."*

Therein lies the rub. How do we reach those who really need it? The PALS program is promoted through training child care providers, placing flyers in child care homes / centres and paediatric clinics, through personal contact, sending postcards and through word of mouth, this last thought by many to be the most effective.

We talked about other options such as referrals from health and child care professionals, social workers and the use of social media. All channels worth pursuing.

[\[top of page\]](#)



A veritable feast, Child Care Center in Houston, Texas, April 2013

Rhode Island:

From the 23rd floor offices of the Children's Learning Institute I travelled north to Providence, Rhode Island to learn about the Incredible Years (IY) program.

Set up 27 years ago by Carolyn Webster-Stratton in Seattle, Washington, this program has spread globally, in fact reaching Fife in February of this year. Its goals are similar to those of the PALS program.

Its success in transforming lives is similarly assured by a robust evidence-based research program. My host in Providence, Stephanie Shepard, based at the Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior, Brown University Bradley/Hasbro Children's Research Center, is an IY mentor and is also carrying out research.

IY reaches out primarily to parents, children and teachers while its involvement in the community, vital to the success of its programs, involves close links with social services, the medical profession and other agencies. There is a wealth of information on their website <http://incredibleyears.com/> which is well worth a visit.

IY provides many services. At its core is the provision of workshops for parents (parent groups), workshops for children (Dino School) and training for teachers, parent group leaders and home visitors.

A snapshot of its work is best described by an account of my time spent with Stephanie, which included three meetings and a visit to the Cranston Child Development Center, a child care facility for children from birth to age five.

The first was a community planning meeting about the implementation of home visiting programs for new, high-risk moms. Home visiting programs are designed to support families and build parenting skills.

This was a multi-agency meeting of some 12 people, coordinating information about referrals with a focus on how these parents could be supported through IY programs such as Nurse Family Partnerships, Parents As Teachers and Healthy Families America.

The second meeting, much larger, was entitled: What Do We Want to Do Next for Infants and Toddlers in Rhode Island? Stakeholder Strategy Meeting, attended by many state agencies and government offices.

This was the first of its kind and unique, bringing together educators, social and medical services, politicians, policy makers, researchers and groups such as IY, Early Learning Council and Zero to Three, the National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families.

Discussion was diverse, covering such topics as child development, poverty, depression, unemployment, substance abuse, low pay of childcare providers and ways of reaching out to parents.

We were reminded that "[a baby's early experiences shape the brain's architecture into a strong or fragile foundation for learning, health and success in the workplace](#)".

The "fragile foundation" was of sufficient concern in Rhode Island for these stakeholders to meet and to start to identify resources and strategies that could help to create stronger foundations.

It was acknowledged that stronger foundations for babies and infants would clearly have a positive impact on the state's economy, not to mention the wellbeing of all concerned.

The third meeting, an IY parent group consultation session, gave me some insight into the work of parent group leaders, assessing and reflecting on their practice as facilitators of parent group sessions.

The video tapes of these sessions illustrated well how parents benefitted from in-depth group discussions about skills and strategies they shared and which they could use to deal with many issues from anger management, playing and reading with their child, to how to help their child to walk.

Feedback from the parents was positive, one reporting how useful was her four year old's strategy of telling Daddy he needed to calm down and to breathe when he was angry. It worked.

Teachers at the Cranston Child Development Center had been working closely with IY for a few years. When I visited, IY programs were firmly in place and formed an integral part of the center's work with children and parents.

As well as supporting mums and dads with parenting skills, their work with the children focussed on key elements of the IY Dino School program, viz. social skills, emotional intelligence and problem solving.

Dino school sessions involve the use of puppets. Children respond to and interact with puppets readily and often spontaneously. The puppets, therefore, are used to stimulate discussion and thought around the key elements mentioned above.

A transcript from my conversations with a group of teachers at the Center illustrates well the success of IY's involvement:

"Between us and the parents working together it really has made a difference. We got involved through the [IY] research project."

Dino School sessions:

"Once we got through the whole year of the curriculum we could actually see that children were developing these skills."

"Ultimately that's what children need to know, they need to know how to manage these feelings and when they've gone through the whole curriculum and coming out the other side they've learned how to manage their anger, they've learned how to identify their feelings, they've learned how to be friendly, they've learned to take responsibility, to problem solve."

"Those things are really beneficial and we really see at the school year ending, children's skills are building and they're actually able to use those skills."

"Teachers don't have to look at how to manage discipline. So we were pleased with it; our classrooms have the puppets."

They told me about Play and Learn Groups:

"...once a month five domains of learning: cognitive, social and emotional, language and literacy, science... it's the teacher that draws the parents in.

"If you have your classroom teacher having this workshop with just the parents in your classroom it's more of a draw.

"They don't all come but what they have to do is they come back in and they practise what they've learnt with a group in the class.

"We started it last year and this is our second year doing it and I feel like the parents come out of it realising, 'I've learnt so much... things that I did not know before, I should be doing that to parent with my child.'

"Sometimes they might think 'I'm not qualified to do that', so we make it simplified for them and just say, 'Do the dishes [with child] they can learn a lot, just by having a conversation, sorting things and that's where they learn.'"

I asked about parents who don't come?

"We try other methods like take home activities, book bags. We explain to them, we're looking for them to spend quality time with their child."

How had the IY program benefitted their classes?

"So much! Our behaviours were just going through the roof. Our teachers were just frustrated, we didn't know how to deal with it anymore, it was just becoming so much, so after doing the training we stepped back and looked at how they were reacting to it so we're now more proactive than reactive in situations.

"Behaviours are now manageable because of how we react to it. Teaching them to label their feelings and to accept that it's ok to be mad, it's ok not to share sometimes and just to express it, to give them a voice, problem solving, not being so dependent on adults to solve all their problems, they're so used to that, so when they go on to a later grade, we're teaching them in little steps how they can build upon that to solve their own problems, so when they're in a playground and a bully comes along, what are you going to do? Things like that."

[\[top of page\]](#)

Connecticut:

My last port of call was New Haven, Connecticut, where I met Eliza Halsey. Eliza is the New Haven Network Director of All Our Kin (AOK) and heads Early Head Start, a federal program designed to enhance Early Years opportunities.

AOK was of interest to me because of its focus on parent education, in the context of its training and support programs for community child care providers. Its Annual Report 2013 states:

"From our providers, we have learned that they are not just educating children; they are educating parents too... They are the first to identify potential developmental delays and have those tough conversations.

"And they are also the ones who, at the end of a long day, invite a parent to sit down and just talk about their kids... Through the curriculum [created by AOK], providers will build on these already strong relationships... to give disconnected parents and families what they need.

"In one parent's words: 'My family child care provider is my main resource person. So what she says, I take to heart.'"

The Friends Center for Children, an early childhood education center for children aged 3 months to 5 years, has had close involvement with AOK.



Children, April 2013

Friends Center for

Their executive director, Allyx Schiavone, talked to me about some of their initiatives designed to support parents:

- Working with local family support agencies to provide a series of family workshops, open to all parents in the community. The workshops cover such topics as Behaviour Management, Fathers and Parenting and Language Acquisition.
- Employing a full time social worker to work with all teachers, families and children at the Center.
 - Melissa Bailey's report on this initiative in the New Haven Independent states: "The goal is to address Adverse Childhood Trauma (ACEs) – instances of early childhood trauma that research shows harm brain development and make it harder for kids to succeed in school and life..."

- "An ACE is an instance or pattern of abuse (emotional, physical or sexual), neglect (emotional or physical) or household dysfunction (such as parents who divorce, suffer from alcoholism, addiction or mental illness).
- "Exposure to ACEs creates a constant 'fight-or-flight' state in a child's brain, making it hard to stay focussed in school or control impulses. The more ACEs kids are exposed to, the more likely they are to suffer health complications and engage in risky behaviours that lead to adolescent pregnancy, addiction, attempted suicide and jail."
- Working with the Yale Center for Emotional intelligence on a new method of teaching emotional intelligence to Pre-K staff, families and children.

These are pilot projects whose success is yet to be determined but they make perfect sense and chime very much with the goals and aspirations of PALS, IY and, no doubt, many other programs which exist to support parents with the knowledge and skills they need to provide a rich and nurturing learning environment for their children.

The Friends Center for Children include a leaflet in their welcome pack entitled *Five is Too Late*, outlining findings from Nobel Prize winning University of Chicago Economics Professor James Heckman's work:

"If society intervenes early enough, it can raise cognitive and socio-emotional abilities and the health of disadvantaged children.

"Early interventions promote schooling, reduce crime, foster workforce productivity and reduce teenage pregnancy.

"A critical time to shape productivity is from birth to age five, when the brain develops rapidly to build the foundation of cognitive and character skills necessary for success in school, health, career and life.

"Creating an environment that supports healthy development in early childhood is more effective than treating problems at a later age.

"The economic benefits of quality early childhood interventions are significant, producing a \$14-17 return for every dollar invested."

Reflecting on the practice I saw, involving practitioners engaged with the development of young children to the extent of proactively involving parents and carers, the following questions come to mind:

- How often do we engage on a more than superficial level with the parents of children in our care?

- What knowledge do we share with the parents of children experiencing any and all kinds of home difficulties?
- Should we re-think our 'homework' policies to include much greater emphasis on social skills, emotional intelligence and problem solving?
- Should teachers be given a lot more TIME to spend with parents? I know of at least one Primary School where parents have been invited in every Friday afternoon to participate in their children's learning and to sit down and talk with teachers, with huge benefits.
- Should teacher training place more emphasis on how we support parents with parenting skills?
- Should there be much stronger communication links between all the services that support children?

As mentioned earlier the Incredible Years programme has just started up in Fife.

There are a number of other programmes running and no doubt similar initiatives in other parts of Scotland.

The benefits to be gained from supporting parents with parenting skills are acknowledged at many different levels. It is now up to politicians and policy makers to accept the 'parent' dimension of education into their own thinking!

My thanks to the Educational Institute for Scotland and to the English Speaking Union for funding my trip to North America to undertake this study. My special thanks to Ursula Johnson and Stephanie Shepherd for looking after me so handsomely.

Footnote:

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