

# Early BIRD Family Literacy Program Manual



## Early BIRD in Action

### A Research Study

*by* Shelagh Simpson

Hamilton Literacy Council

Early Literacy Hamilton



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## **Hamilton Literacy Council**

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# 1 Background and Rationale for the Early BIRD Research Study

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## Family Literacy Project, Phase One

The Early BIRD Family Literacy Program Manual was produced in 2003 by the Hamilton Literacy Council and Early Literacy Hamilton, with funding provided by the National Literacy Secretariat and the Ministry of Colleges, Training and Universities. The purpose of the Manual is to provide program support for Family Literacy Programs, Ontario Early Years Centres and any other Family Resource Programs or community programs that wish to include a family literacy component as part of their regular programming. The Manual includes background information on family literacy for teachers and program leaders, session planning guides and practical ideas for literacy materials and activities to use with children and parents. A curriculum framework and suggested strategies emphasize the importance of adult/child interactions. A set of Parent Pamphlets is included to accompany the program.

The Early BIRD Program is based on the strong belief that the best way to help young children to meet success in their literacy development is through supporting the family.

The program has ten sessions, each built around a storybook, which focus on different topics related to literacy. These topics will reassure parents that the everyday activities they do with their children, such as talking, singing nursery rhymes, shopping or cooking, are as important to their children's development as more "formal" literacy activities, such as reading stories or visiting the library. A Parent Pamphlet accompanies each Topic. It lists the key points of the Topic and provides some practical ideas for simple activities parents and children can do together at home.

**The ten topics are:**

- ▶ Playing and Learning Together
- ▶ Reading Stories
- ▶ Talking About Books
- ▶ Choosing Books
- ▶ Talking Together
- ▶ Rhymes and Songs
- ▶ Alphabet Letters and Sounds
- ▶ Words Around Us
- ▶ Writing/Drawing
- ▶ Counting

**Family Literacy Project, Phase Two**

Once the Early BIRD Manual was produced, it became clear that a second Phase of the project was needed to support and enhance the implementation of the Family Literacy program in the Hamilton community. Further funding was requested, and in 2003/2004, Phase Two extended the project in three areas:

- ▶ Early BIRD Train-the-Trainer Workshops, *Guidebook* and Video
- ▶ *Focusing On The Parent*: Linking the Early BIRD Manual with Adult Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) Programming
- ▶ *Early BIRD in Action*: a research study to examine the effectiveness of the Early BIRD Program materials.

These three sections are published as separate booklets that may be added to the Early BIRD Family Literacy Manual.

## **Early BIRD In Action: A Research Study**

This research study set out to examine the following broad questions:

- ▶ How easy is it to use the Early BIRD Manual and materials in different settings?
- ▶ What are the benefits to the parents involved in this Family Literacy Program?
- ▶ What are the benefits to the children involved in this Program?
- ▶ How have parents' attitudes toward literacy and their own commitment to learning changed as a result of this program?

As the study was evolving, focus groups were held to assist in the development of two questionnaires. These questionnaires were used to collect information from teachers and parents on the effectiveness of the Early BIRD Program, as it was being implemented in several Hamilton Family Resource Centres.

Throughout the year, workshops and training sessions were held at several Early Years Centres, Family Resource Centres, as well as through the ASCY Early Childhood workshop series, to introduce the Early BIRD Program to early childhood educators in the Hamilton area. When Centres decided to implement the Early BIRD program, the teachers involved were asked to consider participating in the research study.



## 2 Research Study Participants

The staff from four of the Centres where the Early BIRD Program was being used, volunteered to take part in the Study. The teachers all participated in Early BIRD training sessions and, in some cases, had previously participated in the field test for the Early BIRD Manual in 2003.

The following Centres agreed to participate in the study:

- ▶ Stoney Creek Ontario Early Years Centre (OEYC)
- ▶ Hamilton East OEYC
- ▶ Sanford Resource Centre (Hamilton East OEYC neighbourhood site)
- ▶ Robert Land YMCA Preschool Drop-in Program

**TABLE 1: Number of Participants in the Early BIRD Research Study**

Program	Staff	Children	Age range	Parents
Stoney Creek OEYC	2	8	0 – 5	8
Hamilton East OEYC	2	7	3 – 6yrs	7
Sanford Resource Centre	1	5	7 mos – 4 yrs	5
Robert Land Preschool	1	8	18 mos – 4 yrs	6
<b>Totals</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>28</b>		<b>26</b>

**Notes:**

- ▶ At the Stoney Creek OEYC, two separate programs were offered; one for children ages 0–3 and one for children ages 4–6.
- ▶ At Hamilton East OEYC, one staff member conducted the program sessions and the Supervisor of the Centre also completed a survey.
- ▶ At the Sanford Resource Centre, the participants were all ESL families.



# 3

## Methods

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At the outset of the study, the investigators met with Nancy Jackson and Sheila Stewart from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Nancy and Sheila are part of the Festival of Literacies, and offer advice and guidance on appropriate research methods for family literacy programs. The advice we received from them helped us to gain some rich and detailed information from our survey.

### Developing the Surveys

A Focus Group was held at the beginning of the study to help identify key issues involved in implementing the Early BIRD Program. A group of teachers met and discussed two very broad questions:

- ▶ What parts of the Early BIRD Program work well?
- ▶ What challenges did you meet in implementing the Early BIRD Program?

The discussion was recorded and the information gathered was then used to develop the survey instruments.

The survey for teachers was designed to gather some quick information using a Likert-type scale, as well as eliciting more specific observations of literacy behaviours and attitudes towards literacy, as shown by the families in the programs. Other questions focused on the delivery of the program, and on the challenges and solutions that teachers found in implementing the program.

The survey for parents was also designed to collect some “quick impressions” as well as to collect more detailed information about the range of literacy activities enjoyed by the family. Our aim was to address the key research questions outlined in our Proposal, and also to collect more detailed information about families’ literacy activities that may be helpful to other program leaders and program developers in the family literacy field.

Copies of the two surveys may be found in the Appendix at the back of this booklet.

## **Distribution of the Surveys**

The research study surveys were delivered to the teachers at each participating Centre. The teachers, in turn, gave the parent surveys out to parents in their program, or interviewed the parents and recorded their responses.

Six staff surveys (100%) and eleven parent surveys (42%) were returned. We were disappointed in the low rate of returns from the parents. Some of the reasons given by staff for this low response included low literacy skills of the parents, or a lack of interest in the study. Parents were assured that participation in the study was voluntary. The parent surveys that were returned, however, do give some good information about their involvement in the Early BIRD program, and the literacy activities carried out in the home.

# 4 Summary of Results

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## Teacher Survey

Generally, the teachers found that the Early BIRD Program was appropriate for the Family Resource Centre setting, and all participants plan to use the program again. The teachers found the Manual practical, and the program sessions and materials appropriate for the families attending.

All teachers commented on the positive interactions they observed between parents and children during the sessions, and noted an increase in the children's interest in, and attention to, the literacy materials and activities. The teachers also described a wide range of literacy behaviours they observed in the children during the program sessions. There were, however, differences in the amount of parent participation observed in different locations of the city and these differences will be discussed more fully in section 6 of this report.

Some teachers reported on the challenge of finding sufficient planning and preparation time for the Early BIRD Program, among their other duties. Other teachers described the challenge of encouraging consistent attendance, and suggested that a shortened program (less than 10 weeks) may be more appropriate for some families.

## Parent Survey

Although the number of Parent Surveys returned was small, there were some returned from each of the Programs. Of the parents completing the Survey, all checked story time as one of the "most enjoyable activities", and most listed story and book activities among things they had learned about at the Early BIRD program. In ten of the eleven surveys parents described looking at books with their child on a daily basis. Talking and singing with children were also listed frequently as activities

used at home. These three items, looking at books, talking with children and babies, and singing together, were also listed frequently as things parents learnt about from the program. This is encouraging, as stories and talking about books, conversations and rhymes are consistently quoted in the research as having the greatest impact on children's literacy development, and are a key part of the Early BIRD program.

# 5 Results from the Surveys

## Teacher Survey

### Section A—Delivering the Program

#### 1 Briefly describe how the Early BIRD materials were used at your centre:

- ▶ integrated into our regular program once a week; ABC points were listed in the classroom and parents participated directly in the activities
- ▶ used once a week with drop-in families and CCAS supervised visit families in the regular circle time and activity time slot
- ▶ 10 weekly sessions held separately from regular drop-in program; families signed-up to attend; a weekly literacy display was prepared for the front lobby incorporating ideas and suggestions from the program topics
- ▶ families signed up to attend 10 weekly sessions, held separately from usual drop-in activities (2 programs)

**Table 2: Delivering the Program**

**Please rank the following statements:**

STATEMENTS	Strongly Agree	Agree	Mixed	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>2</b> The Early BIRD Materials are attractive for children and parents	4	2			
<b>3</b> The Early BIRD sessions fit the structure of your program	5	1			
<b>4</b> The goals and outcomes of the Early BIRD program are appropriate for your families	4	2			
<b>5</b> The suggested stories, materials and activities are appropriate for your families	4	2			
<b>6</b> The session sheets and background information in the Manual are helpful for planning purposes.	4	2			

**7 Please describe any challenges you met in delivering this program at your centre:**

- ▶ finding all the suggested story books
- ▶ getting parents to participate fully
- ▶ parents found it hard to attend all 10 sessions
- ▶ consistent attendance
- ▶ finding time for staff planning and preparation (2 comments)
- ▶ needed more time to talk to parents afterwards

**8 Do you plan to continue using the Early BIRD Program at your centre?**

**Yes – 6 No – 0**

**Please explain the reasons for your choice:**

- ▶ positive feedback from the parents
- ▶ children excited about attending the program
- ▶ useful and practical information
- ▶ can implement it with mixed ages, and mixed language abilities
- ▶ parents like the handouts
- ▶ the program fits with the goals of the preschool program
- ▶ families felt the children gained a lot from it
- ▶ I saw an increase in the children's attention span, interests, social skills, language and empathy
- ▶ parents and children enjoy the program
- ▶ parents are requesting the program for different age groups

**Section B—Results of the Program: Parent Involvement**

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**1 Briefly describe specific incidents or observations you have made regarding the parents' involvement in the Early BIRD Program.**

- ▶ I found that parents who do not interact with their children often in our regular program were always interacting with them in the Early BIRD sessions. All interactions were positive with lots of communication. Children loved the home activities and couldn't wait to share them the following week.

- ▶ during the sessions the parents seemed to enjoy the stories and rhymes. They participated and talked to other children [as well as their own] and read to them at book browsing time.
- ▶ parents were strongly involved in the program and socially connected at snack time
- ▶ parents learned the words to songs and were able to sing along at circle time. Parents appeared to enjoy the activities and genuinely have fun with their children
- ▶ parents were interested in learning specifically how to help their children at different ages; were interested in cost-effective ideas for literacy activities at home with the children
- ▶ parents were involved with the children with lots of conversations

**2 Briefly describe, from your observations, any barriers parents are experiencing that may affect their participation in the program activities and any solutions or suggestions you have found to meet the parents' needs**

- ▶ 10 weeks seems a long time commitment—I may do 2 sessions per week in the summer
- ▶ some second-time parents know this information
- ▶ behaviour of the youngest children was a concern for some parents; the children soon responded to the regular routine and I was able to model ways to manage behaviour
- ▶ one parent with literacy problems had difficulty with a book-making activity; I lent her a nursery rhyme book to take home
- ▶ some parents are looking for a parent-only group; I could possibly offer some adult sessions re family literacy
- ▶ some parents preferred to have whole family approach rather than dividing the age-groups
- ▶ one parent has no literacy skills and avoids participating; some parents show a lack of interest in the activities; parents often did not take the Pamphlets home; I had no reports back of home activities

**Table 3: Parent Involvement****Please rank the following questions:**

QUESTIONS	Very Much	Most times	Some times	Not at all
<b>3</b> To what extent did parents participate in the stories and activities <b>at the beginning</b> of the Early BIRD program?	2		3	1
<b>4</b> To what extent did parents participate in the stories and activities <b>by the end</b> of the program?	3	2	1	
<b>5</b> To what extent have you observed an increase in the amount of positive parent/child talk during Early BIRD activities?	3	3		
<b>6</b> To what extent have you observed an increase in the parents' interest in books and literacy materials?	1	2	3	

**Section B—Results of the program: Children's Involvement****7 Briefly describe specific incidents or observations you have made regarding the children's participation in the Early BIRD Program.**

- ▶ children are excited to be going in to the program; always engaged by the activities; enjoy the 1:1 with their parents
- ▶ children enjoy the interactive books, puppets, acting out stories
- ▶ they enjoy extended activities related to the stories
- ▶ children enjoy using props and puppets, and the action songs
- ▶ I noticed children helping each other with actions for songs and for labeling pictures in the story books; two months after the program ended children are still asking for it and for other children who were in their group
- ▶ participation at circle time increased—other staff commented on this as well
- ▶ children loved the 1:1 with mom and the home activities; they couldn't wait to share what they had done
- ▶ children always interested to touch and see all the literacy materials in the tub each week

**8a Have you observed children engaged in any of the following literacy behaviours either during, or following the Early BIRD sessions? (Check all that apply, and add to the list if necessary)**

**Figure 1: Children’s Involvement**

Literacy Behaviours	Number of Checks
a) seeking out a favourite book after it has been read to the group	5
b) talking out-loud to themselves as they look at books	4
c) using a puppet or toy to retell a story	6
b) repeating phrases from a story in their conversation	5
c) looking at books for increasing lengths of time	3
d) acting out, or referring to, stories in their play	4
e) talking to another child or adult about the story or song	3
f) talking more freely during play times	5
<b>Observations added by teachers</b>	
g) talk about books and songs when eating related snacks (gingerbread, teddy grahams)	1
h) making books	1
i) asking for words or story to be added to their picture	1
j) seeking out adults to tell about picture	1
k) borrowing story books for home	1
l) enjoying making up ‘silly’ songs	1

**8b Please add any other observations you have made about the children’s literacy development or literacy behaviours:**

- ▶ I have observed one child become interested in writing her own stories to go with her pictures; I have observed ESL parents retelling stories, repeating words and phrases with the children to practice their own English skills
- ▶ Children loved their parents’ attention and involvement; I noticed an increased enthusiasm for stories and literacy materials in the rest of our program

- ▶ I had toddlers and noticed a lot of interaction and cooperative play in the later sessions; children would choose a favourite book from the book bin; children made books at home with parents after we did this in a session
- ▶ Older children encouraged the younger ones; a very quiet child became more verbal after several sessions
- ▶ After one session the children acted out the story spontaneously at the block centre, building a house for the three pigs
- ▶ I noticed an increased interest in literacy activities

## Parent Survey

### 1a) Was the Early BIRD Program helpful to you?

Yes — 7      No — 0      (No Response — 4)

- ▶ it has been a great reinforcement for what we do at home

### 1b) Which activities were most enjoyable for you and your child? (Please check all that apply)

Figure 2: Program Activities

Activities	Number of Checks
Stories	11
Songs and Rhymes	10
Creative Activities	11
Talking with the Leader	10
Pamphlets	5
Suggested home activities	8
Talking with other parents	7

### 1c) Please list some of the things you learnt from the early BIRD Program about stories and books, songs and rhymes, talking and playing with your child etc.

- ▶ acting out stories
- ▶ using props

- ▶ letting them tell you the story by looking at the pictures (very interesting)
- ▶ to sing more at home, especially nursery rhymes
- ▶ more interaction with other parents and children; I have more friends and my children have more friends
- ▶ excellent ideas to incorporate into better learning; reinforced that my parenting/teaching skills are quite good
- ▶ most important for children to play an active role
- ▶ how to make our own books; how to select books for children; read to children often; talk to the baby often; make up stories when out walking with the children
- ▶ new ideas about making toys and books; it showed us daily ideas to do at home; spending time together is fun
- ▶ enjoyed the variety of books and learned where to buy good but less expensive books; learned new action songs; how to make play dough

**2a) At home, how often do you try to do the following things with your child?**

**Table 4: Home Activities**

ITEM	Everyday	Often	Sometimes	Seldom/ Never
Look at books	10	1		
Look at family photographs	2	4	4	
Watch TV together	8	2		
Make up stories	3	2		
Draw and write or scribble	9			
Sing songs/nursery rhymes	11			
Play with toys, puzzles	10	1		
Visit the Public Library		7	3	1

**2b) Please list any other literacy activities you and your child enjoy doing together.**

- ▶ we enjoy circle time
- ▶ painting, play dough, games
- ▶ reading and colouring together

- ▶ writing stories
- ▶ talking to the baby while breast feeding
- ▶ crafts
- ▶ talking to her about her day, favourite things and least favourite things
- ▶ alphabet puzzles
- ▶ sounding out words on everyday items
- ▶ walking and looking for street signs, recognizing letters
- ▶ looking for words when out driving
- ▶ reading books, cooking, playing trains

# 6 Discussion of Results

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## Research Study Limitations

Before discussing the results of the surveys, it may be appropriate to consider some of the limitations of this research study.

- 1** The original intent of the study was to involve some “action research” methods in gathering information about the effectiveness of the Early BIRD program. However, as the study was being developed, it became clear that these methods would not be appropriate at this time. The Early Years Centres in Hamilton were newly opened, so there was a considerable amount of planning, training and organizational work for the staff to do. For this reason it was necessary to design a straightforward evaluation instrument to collect teacher observations and opinions in a more time-efficient manner without adding too much to the workload of the staff.
- 2** The number of families taking part in the Early BIRD program during the study period was quite small in each of the centres, so the results should be interpreted conservatively. However, the families involved in the programs did represent a cross-section of Hamilton families, with ESL families, single parent families, low-income families and more middle-class families attending the program at various centres.
- 3** The programs using the Early BIRD program were all based in drop-in family resource centres, and although two of the centres used a registration process, inconsistent attendance was a factor. Because of the informal nature of the programs, it was not appropriate to conduct any pre-testing of the children’s literacy skills or of parent attitudes towards literacy. Instead the study relies on teacher observations and parent self-reporting to assess the perceived benefits of the Early BIRD program.

## Teacher Survey

### A. Delivering the Program

Four Family Resource Centres participated in the Early BIRD research study, with one centre, Stoney Creek Early Years Centre running two programs. Two of the centres used the Early BIRD program once a week as part of their regular program in the main classroom, involving all the families attending the drop-in program that day. The “Early BIRD” day was consistent, however, so parents knew when the family literacy program would be held. The other two centres offered the Early BIRD program separately from their regular drop-in programming, using a separate room and a registration process. One of these programs also decided to offer Early BIRD sessions twice—once for families of toddlers and once for families of pre-schoolers. The Early BIRD Manual was designed to be used in a flexible way, so it is interesting that the different centres were comfortable in adapting the program delivery to suit their local community and their centre structure. However, it is interesting that comments regarding inconsistent attendance and lack of parent participation were made by staff at the integrated programs, and comments about the lack of time for staff planning and preparation were made by staff running the separate programs. It should be noted that both of the integrated programs are located in areas that tend to have high numbers of single parent families, of ESL families and of families living in poverty. These factors may also contribute to difficulty with consistent attendance as parents struggle with many other issues. All of the centres commented on the families’ enjoyment of the program as a reason to offer it again.

The teachers were asked to rank statements on the appropriateness of the Early BIRD materials for their families, the “fit” with their broader program goals, and usefulness for teacher planning. Table 2 shows that all respondents ranked these statements in the “Strongly agree” and “Agree” categories. All then went on to state that they plan to use the program again.

## **B. Results of the Program**

### **Parent Involvement**

In this section staff were asked to comment on the involvement of the parents in the program. The intent of the Early BIRD program is that parents participate with their children in all parts of the program. Parent/child interaction is a key element in children's literacy development, and information about ways to interact is clearly described in the parent Pamphlets, and also modeled by the teacher during the sessions. The planning sheets for each session give key "messages for parents" and it is suggested that the teacher mention these points informally during the sessions. The Early BIRD program developers were aware that family literacy programs are able to encourage parent literacy skills and parenting skills more effectively when there are two program leaders, an Early Childhood Educator as well as an adult educator, leading the sessions together. However, this is an expensive option. For practical, financial reasons it was decided that the Early BIRD program would integrate the parent information into the program, using take-home Pamphlets, and informal discussions to address key points, and planning a variety of literacy activities that parents and children could enjoy together.

Table 3 illustrates the amount of parent participation observed by the teacher at the beginning and end of the program, and also describes any increase noted in parent/child conversations and parents' own attitudes towards literacy. There is a definite increase shown in the amount of parent participation in the program, and the teacher comments support this trend. Comments mention that parents "were strongly involved", and "enjoyed the activities" One teacher commented that parents who do not interact with their children often in the regular drop-in program, did interact more when in the early BIRD program. This may reflect the smaller setting or the more "talk" focused nature of the Early BIRD program.

Teacher observations of parents' interest in books and literacy materials do not show any significant increase. This may reflect the more "incidental" nature of the parent information in the program, as well as the E.C.E. teachers' natural inclination to focus on the children's program.

Teachers were asked to comment on any barriers parents are experiencing that may affect their participation in the program activities. There are a variety of comments referring to time-commitment, the organization of the group, parents' own difficulties with literacy and need for a parenting group. In several cases the teacher described a solution for the barrier; e.g. running two sessions per week to finish the program in a shorter time-frame; offering a separate parent session on family literacy; and assisting a parent with low literacy levels. The teacher from one centre reports on lack of interest and lack of literacy skills as reasons for low levels of participation at that centre. A stronger connection between the Early BIRD program and local Adult Basic Education programs may be helpful in meeting these concerns. **The Focusing On The Parent** document, produced as part of the Family Literacy Project, Phase Two, may also be helpful here. This document links the Early BIRD Program sessions to the skills matrix of Literacy and Basic Skills programs. It will also be helpful for Early Years Centres to have information about local adult literacy programs more readily available to the Early BIRD program leaders and to the families attending the programs.

### **Children's Involvement**

In this section teachers are asked to record their observations of the children's participation in the Early BIRD program, and of the children's literacy behaviours and literacy development. The teachers commented that the children were interested in the materials, enjoyed the activities and the 1:1 attention with their parents, and increased the amount of their participation at circle times.

Figure 1 shows the range of literacy behaviours observed by the teachers. The first 8 items were given on the survey instrument, and teachers added the last 6 items. The focus on books and on talk is one promoted strongly by the program, so it is gratifying that the children are responding to this. The further comments from the teachers also highlight the children's interest in books and stories. It is interesting that the teacher involved in the program with ESL families observed the parents using the stories to practice their English skills. Another teacher mentioned

the enthusiasm for the “home activities” These were simple activities that were suggested for parents and children to do at home during the week. Each activity reinforced the key points of the Topic from the session, and could be done at home using “found” materials.(e.g. collecting leaves, stones etc, in a “treasure box” to talk about; visiting the local library; using family photos or magazine pictures to make a little book; making a paper finger puppet; looking out for stop signs and other environmental print).

In general, the teachers comments reflect an increase in the children’s interest in literacy materials over the course of the Early BIRD sessions. One or two comments show progress in the children’s literacy development (one child becoming interested in writing her own stories; a quiet child becoming more verbal; more interaction and cooperative play among toddlers during later sessions). It is, of course, hard to tease out benefits of the Early BIRD program as distinct from the benefits gained from other parts of the Resource Centre programs, and the children’s naturally developing skills. The increased interest on the part of the children and parents in literacy activities, however, is important. The literacy research quoted in the Early BIRD Manual, describes how parent interest and support contributes to increased literacy skills in children (Early BIRD Manual, p.34).

## Parent Survey

Parents were asked to complete a one-page survey that asked for their input on the Early BIRD program activities and about the literacy activities they do at home with their children. Although the number of surveys returned was small, they do contain some interesting information.

The first section of the Parent Survey asked about the program activities that were most helpful and enjoyable for them and their children. In question 1a), only seven of the eleven surveys checked that the program was helpful, though we were pleased that no one checked “no”! Figure 2 shows the responses to the list of program activities. Stories, songs and rhymes, creative activities and talking to the leader were all ranked highly.

It was disappointing that the Parent Pamphlets received only 5 checks. The Pamphlets were always received with enthusiasm by teachers at the training sessions, but are obviously not as important to the parents as the participation in the program itself. Some teachers are using the information in the Pamphlets to make displays on literacy activities for their centres, and as reminders for themselves as they run the sessions, so they may have other uses in the program. We are aware that the Pamphlets are not available in other languages, so cannot be easily used in centres with high numbers of ESL families.

In the third part of Question 1, parents were asked to comment on some of the things they learned from the Early BIRD program. All of the key elements of the program — stories, books, singing, conversations and playing together, are noted. As well, parents show that they are using the ideas from the program at home. One comment shows that, even for parents who are already doing lots of literacy activities with their children, the Early BIRD program reinforced their good parenting skills.

Question 2 asked parents to describe the literacy activities they do at home with their children. Table 4 shows parent responses to the list of activities that was provided on the survey. Again, singing, looking at books and playing together were the three items parent reported doing on a daily basis. These activities are all described in the research as contributing greatly to children's literacy development, and reinforced throughout the Early BIRD program. Question 2b) asks parents to add any other activities they do at home with their children. Many of the activities listed here reflect the various Early BIRD program topics and demonstrate that parents are using the program ideas at home. The responses and comments from the parents demonstrate that they are “tuned in” to the key messages of the Early BIRD program, and are reinforcing the ideas and activities with their children at home. The ideas are seen as worthwhile, enjoyable and inexpensive to carry out — all factors that were very important to the developers of the Early BIRD Program Materials.

## Implications of the Early BIRD In Action Study

This research study into the effectiveness of the Early BIRD Family Literacy Program materials was conducted in four family resource programs in Hamilton. Short surveys were distributed to the staff and parents involved in the Early BIRD program, towards the end of the 10 weekly sessions. The surveys were designed to collect some “quick impressions” on the program, as well as some more detailed descriptions of the observations of the teachers and parents. The study intended to collect information on four aspects of the program: ease of delivery; benefits to parents; benefits to children; and indications of parents’ attitudes towards literacy.

### **1 Program Delivery**

Staff at the four centres felt comfortable in adapting the program delivery to meet the needs of their families. All staff members enjoyed using the materials, and reported that they plan to continue using the program. Several teachers noted barriers to participation experienced by some parents. A future challenge will be to address these barriers in a more systematic way, and to plan for some different, more flexible delivery models. Teacher suggestions given in the survey include shortening the time span of 10 weeks and planning some adult-only sessions for parents,

It is clear that there is a need for materials to support a family literacy approach, and that this “family literacy” approach is appropriate for family resource centres and the Ontario Early Years Centres. The Early BIRD materials were produced through grants from the National Literacy Secretariat and the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, and are now all distributed to resource centres and children’s programs in the Hamilton area. We were, in fact, not able to meet the demand for the materials. There will be a need for other program developers or funding sources to produce similar materials to support family literacy programs.

### **2 Benefits to Parents**

In general, teachers noted that parents were involved and interested in the program, enjoyed the activities and showed an

increase, over the course of the program, in their participation in the story times and activities. . Parents also reported that they found the program enjoyable and useful. The information parents reported learning about included the key factors in children’s literacy development; factors that were constantly reinforced throughout the Early BIRD program.

Of some concern, however, is the low response rate of the parent surveys, and the comments from one centre about lack of interest and participation on the part of parents there. Also of concern are the comments describing parents’ low literacy levels as a barrier to participation in the program. Practical ways to link parents with Literacy and Basic Skills programs, and ways to encourage and support parent participation, will be an important addition to the program. The Early BIRD program was originally developed to be a practical and positive response to some of the concerns about low literacy levels of children in inner-city areas. The results of this survey suggest that it will be important to modify the program and to add strategies that will support parents in the inner city areas and encourage them to be involved in literacy activities with their children and also to develop their own literacy skills.

### **3 Benefits to Children**

Teachers were enthusiastic in their comments on the children’s involvement and participation in the Early BIRD program. Children were obviously comfortable in the program, as they sat on their parents’ laps for story time and had their parents alongside them during the creative activities and snack. The language focus of the program encouraged the children to interact with the adults and other children. Teachers noted increases in children’s participation and in their interest in books and literacy materials.

An important goal of the family literacy program is to encourage families to use the literacy activities and strategies every day at home, and the “home activities” are included in the Early BIRD program for this purpose. At one centre in particular, the teacher commented on the enthusiasm the children showed for these home activities. Another centre commented that there were no

reports of home activities. It will be important for teachers to adapt and modify these activities, or to add their own ideas for home activities, to ensure that they are appropriate and attractive for the families in their programs. Most of the centres involved in the study were using the Early BIRD materials for the first or second time. As the staff run the program again over the next year and become more familiar with the materials, it will be interesting to see how they are able to adapt or modify them to accommodate the needs of the particular families they serve.

#### 4 Parent attitudes towards Literacy

The survey was probably the least successful in collecting information about parent attitudes towards books and literacy materials. In the results of the Teacher Survey, there was only a slight increase in interest reflected in Table 3, question 6. The Parent Survey gathered a lot of information from parents about activities they are doing at home with their children, and shows interest on the part of the parents for the literacy activities and storybooks they shared with their children. The study was not able to capture information about parents' own literacy interests. Unlike some other family literacy programs, the Early BIRD program as implemented in Hamilton, is conducted with children and parents together and with one E.C.E. leader. The focus is naturally on the children, though with a strong emphasis on family activities. The parents participate in all the activities with their children, but there is no adult education component. As stated earlier in this report, this approach was a financially feasible one for the Hamilton community and has enabled the program to be implemented in many resource centres. As the Early BIRD program was being developed, it was anticipated that this lack of direct service to parents may prove to be a "gap" in the program. It was for this reason that Phase Two includes the **Focusing On The Parent** document which will encourage more of a focus on parent needs. Further work on implementing the links between the family literacy programs and the LBS programs in the Hamilton area, will be important in giving more specific literacy support to some of the families in our community.

### Conclusions: Areas/Topics for further Study

In summary, the Early BIRD Family Literacy program has been generally very well-received in the Hamilton area. Teachers and families found the program enjoyable and practical and parents reported that they gained useful information about literacy development, and about literacy materials and activities to share with their children. Teachers and parents observed that the children were enthusiastic about the stories, songs and activities in the program and demonstrated an increase in their interest in books and literacy materials.

The next step for family literacy in Hamilton will be to address some of the issues around the identified barriers to participation in the program that were experienced by some families. Key topics for further investigation may be:

- ▶ The development of different models of delivery for a family literacy program, to accommodate specific community needs.
- ▶ The development of a wider variety of home activities.
- ▶ Development of parent meetings based on the Early BIRD materials.
- ▶ Use of the booklet, **Focusing On The Parent: linking the Early BIRD Family Literacy Program to Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Programming** to enable family literacy programs to meet the needs of parents, and to develop partnerships or links with local LBS programs.



## *Related Publications*

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Brooks, G. et al *Family Literacy Works. The NFER Evaluation of the Basic Skills Agency's Demonstration Programmes*. London, U.K. Basic Skills Agency, 1996

Family Literacy Action Group *Guide to Evaluation for Family Literacy Projects in Alberta*. F.L.A.G. 1997

Thomas, A. Ed. *Family literacy in Canada: Profiles of Effective Practices*. Soleil.  
Retrieved on 08/10/02 from Internet site, <http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/family/famlit/htm>



*Appendix*



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**Teacher Survey** ..... 37

**Parent Survey** ..... 41



# Early BIRD Family Literacy Program Evaluation

## Teacher Survey

<b>Name of Program/Child Care Centre</b>					
<b>Number of children involved</b>			<b>Number of parents involved</b>		
<b>Age range of children</b>					
<b>Section A: Delivering the Program</b>					
<p><b>1</b> Briefly describe how the Early BIRD materials were used at your centre: (on a weekly basis; integrated into your program; different groups for different ages of children; staff deployment etc.)</p>					
<p><b>Please rank the following statements:</b></p>					
<b>STATEMENT</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Mixed</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
<b>2</b> The Early BIRD Materials are attractive for children and parents	4	2			
<b>3</b> The Early BIRD sessions fit the structure of your program	5	1			
<b>4</b> The goals and outcomes of the Early BIRD program are appropriate for your families	4	2			
<b>5</b> The suggested stories, materials and activities are appropriate for your families	4	2			
<b>6</b> The session sheets and background information in the Manual are helpful for planning purposes.	4	2			
<b>7</b> Please describe any challenges you met in delivering this program at your centre:					

**8** Do you plan to continue using the Early BIRD Program at your centre?    Yes     No  
 Please explain the reasons for your choice:

**Section B. Results of the Program**

**• PARENT INVOLVEMENT •**

**1** Briefly describe specific incidents or observations you have made regarding the parents' involvement in the Early BIRD Program. (e.g. participation in circle time/activities; positive parent/child interactions; reporting of home activities)

**2** Briefly describe, from your observations, any barriers parents are experiencing that may affect their participation in the program activities, and any solutions or suggestions you have found to meet the parents' needs.

**Please rank the following questions:**

QUESTIONS	Very Much	Most times	Some-times	Not at all
<b>3</b> To what extent did parents participate in the stories and activities <b>at the beginning</b> of the Early BIRD program?				
<b>4</b> To what extent did parents participate in the stories and activities <b>by the end</b> of the program?				
<b>5</b> To what extent have you observed an increase in the amount of positive parent/child talk during Early BIRD activities?				
<b>6</b> To what extent have you observed an increase in parents' interest in books and literacy materials?				

**Section B. Results of the Program** (continued)

**• CHILDREN'S INVOLVEMENT •**

**7** Briefly describe specific incidents or observations you have made regarding the children's participation in the Early BIRD Program.

**8** Have you observed children engaging in any of the following literacy behaviours either during, or following, the Early BIRD sessions? (Check all that apply, and please add to the list if necessary)

- seeking out a favourite book after it has been read to the group
- talking out-loud to themselves as they look at books
- using a puppet or toy to retell a story
- repeating phrases from a story in their conversation
- looking at books for increasing lengths of time
- acting out, or referring to, stories in their play
- talking to another child or adult about the story or song
- talking more freely during play times
- 
- 

Please add any other observations you have made about the children's literacy development or literacy behaviours: (e.g. specific incidents or interactions, significant changes)

**Please feel free to use the back of this sheet for further comments.  
Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey**

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS FOR TEACHER SURVEY



ADDITIONAL COMMENTS FOR PARENT QUESTIONNAIRE





**Hamilton Literacy Council**