

How can I help develop an interest in reading and writing with the children who attend the Launch Pad Program?

Karen Perrin

Biography



Karen Perrin is the facilitator of the Launch Pad Program at Major Ballachey School. She has been in the field of Early Childhood Education for the past 17 years. She spent 7 of those years as an E.C.E teacher in a local childcare centre and another 6 as a supervisor of a childcare center. For the past five years, Karen has been employed with The Children's Aid Society of Brant as a Child Development Worker. The Launch Pad Program opened at Major Ballachey School in September 2004. Karen has had many positive experiences working with children aged 0-6 and their parents in a variety of settings.

Abstract

Karen wanted to provide activities for the children that would be interesting and fun to manipulate. Her goal was to provide a wide variety of materials for the children to openly explore while being exposed to the written language. She researched the question, "How can I help develop an interest in reading and writing with the children who attend the program?"

What is a Launch Pad?

A Launch Pad is an Early Child Development & Parenting Centre for Parents/Caregivers and their Children 0-6 years. The Launch Pad Program is based on the successful school-based parenting centers in Toronto, located in school settings. The program builds on the research and vision of Dr. Fraser Mustard in his internationally acclaimed Early Years Study. The research stresses the importance of parents as the child's first teacher and the goal of the program is to have children "ready to learn" when they start school. The Launch Pad Program gives children the opportunity to interact socially, develop listening and communication skills so they are better able to understand the world around them.

Activities at the Launch Pad include; creatives, sensory stimulation, gross motor, social interaction, imaginative play, blocks, puzzles, puppets, circle time and reading centre.

The Importance of Early Child Development

"There is powerful new evidence from neuroscience that the early years of development from conception to age six, particularly for the first three years, set the base for competence and coping skills that will affect learning, behaviour and health throughout life" (McCann & Mustard, 1999).

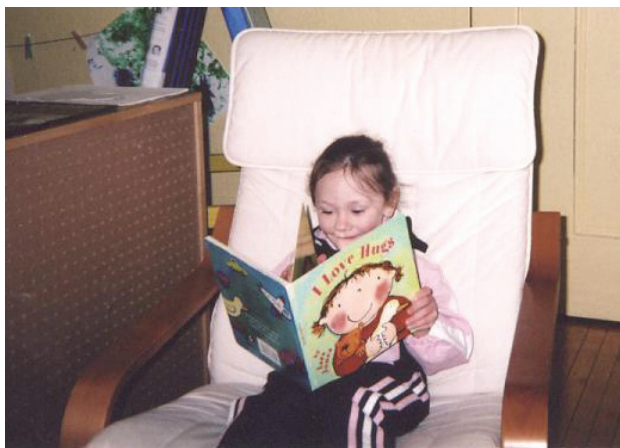
Starting the process

I began by looking at how I, as an Early Childhood Educator, could foster the growth and development of pre-literacy skills in the children involved in the Launch Pad Program. I also wanted to show parents the importance of their role as their child's first and most important teacher.

The parent/child relationship is the first and most important influence on literacy learning. "A parent reading to their child is valuable and can help foster life long readers" (Parenting and Family Literacy Centers Pamphlet Toronto District School Board).

Providing children with opportunities to express themselves both orally and in writing gives them the opportunity to express their thoughts, feelings and emotions. In the Launch pad program I was able to provide opportunities for the children to express themselves both verbally and non-verbally. These included role-playing, puppets, rhymes, finger plays, and stories.

"Research has shown that there are two critical components to language development: the number of words kids hear and the amount of encouragement they receive" (Berman, 2003). A strong foundation of oral language is essential for early reading and writing skills. I wanted to provide opportunities for the children to experiment in classroom activities, hoping that their parents would continue to do so at home and in the community. I actively encouraged each child to verbally express themselves during the many activities provided.



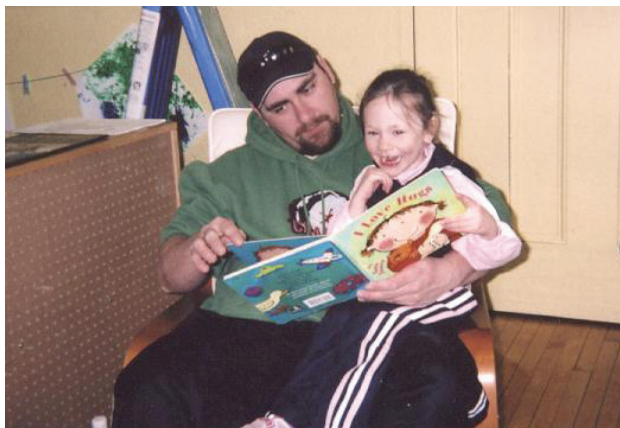
The library area has become a very popular centre recently, due to one particular child who attends the Launch pad daily.

Here is her story.

Hi, my name is Danika. I am 3 1/2 years old. I will be starting Junior Kindergarten in September 2005 at Major Ballachey School. I come to the Launch Pad every day with my dad.

My favourite activity is reading books with my dad. We get to snuggle together as he reads me stories. I have a favourite book, "I Love Hugs". Dad reads me the story everyday and I follow along helping him turn the pages.

After two weeks, I can look at the pictures and tell my dad the story. He says "Way to go!"



Karen, that's my teacher's name, read us the same story at circle time one day. The next day I asked if I could read the story, "I love Hugs," and she said, "Yes!"

I sat in circle time with all my friends and their moms and dads watching me. I used the pictures to help me remember the words, and I told the whole story!

Everyone clapped their hands. Liam's mom said, "Danika that was a great story."

The next week I asked if I could read the story again and Karen said, "Sure you can, you do such a great job at telling that story." So, I told the story again, but this time I didn't have to look at the pictures. My dad asked if we could take the book home so I could read to my Mom and brother and Karen said I could.

The next day, my Dad told Karen "Danika is doing a great job with the reading, and was so proud to show her mom and brother what she could do. She is so much more interested in books, I only wish she would show as much interest in cleaning up her toys." (Personal Journal, 2004-05)

Wow! What a great opportunity to build on her love of literature!

"Eager to Learn!" Another Story

Chris and Aaron attended the program several times a week with their mom and baby brother Jason. Aaron attended Junior Kindergarten every afternoon at Major Ballachey School. Aaron loved to show and tell all the things he learned at school. Aaron enjoyed using the magnet board to spell simple words like cat and dog. He also loved to draw letters on the chalk board.

Chris began to show interest in the alphabet. He will draw a C for Chris. His mom encouraged him to try other letters. Aaron sometimes helped Chris as they worked together on the chalkboard or magnet board. Both Aaron and Chris enjoyed activities related to the alphabet. They began to choose puzzles, matching games and books. Chris liked to connect the dots to form his name and could write a few of the letters on his own.

Moving On

After these inspiring incidents, I chose to focus on how to introduce activities to continue to promote their interest in reading and writing.

Children love squishing play dough through their hands and drawing lines and shapes in shaving cream on a flat surface so I set about to introduce these new activities to the children. I demonstrated how you can draw lines, shapes and letters in the shaving cream. We drew Danika, Chris and Aaron and my own name.



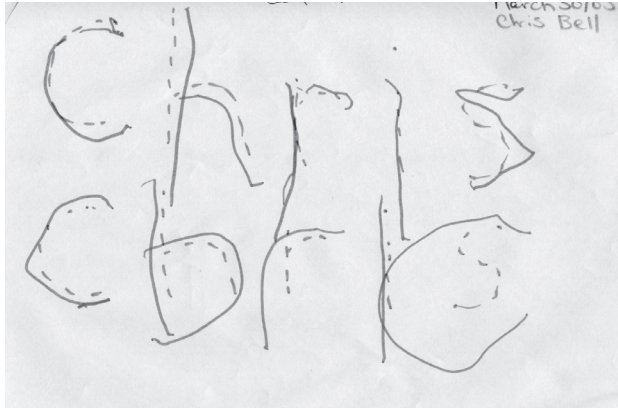
Danika was able to draw a "D", Chris enjoyed making shapes and lines.

We all sang the alphabet song as we practiced our letter formation.

Next, we moved on to forming letters with play dough. Again, I modeled for the children, showing them how to shape the letters. We did Danika, Chris and Karen in the play dough. Both Danika and Chris explored the play dough. Danika was able to form "D", Chris continued to roll and squish the dough.

It gave both children an opportunity to experiment with different types of materials to form letters.

Each day at the Launch Pad, the magnetic letter board is set out for the children to use. Moms, dads and children often sit together spelling out simple words like cat and dog. Frequently they spell out their child's name and encourage their child to say the letters. You can sometimes hear the alphabet song being sung very quietly between mom and child.



I recently attended a workshop on implementing a writing centre into the program. The purpose was to introduce materials to the children, allowing them to experiment and become comfortable using them. It consisted of using a variety of materials for letter formation, markers, pencils, crayons, paper, wipe off sheets, connect the dot letter sheets, and stickers. When introduced the first day, many children came over to investigate. Chris and Aaron had lots of fun using the different types of writing materials, along with their friend Connie, the two sat for twenty minutes. In March, Chris had his first opportunity to explore the new centre. We did dot to dot for Chris to practice forming his name. He did an awesome job.

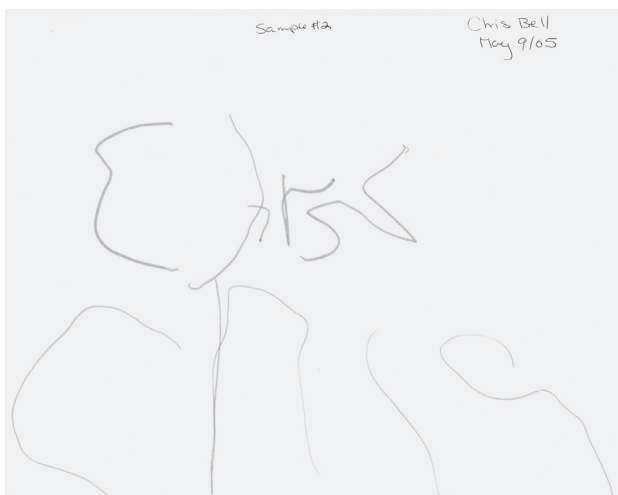


He was so excited that he let me keep the paper he was working on.

Chris continued to practice his name connecting the dots and has now worked up to forming the C and H on his own. Chris enjoyed showing his friends how he could use the materials in the writing centre and he encouraged the other children to come and join him.

By the month of May Chris had clearly developed some pre-writing skills, he was able to print his name without using the dot-to-dot format.

He also used the magnet board and chalkboard to fine-tune his new skill.



Chris's mom Laura commented " I am so pleased with his progress, he concentrates so hard and enjoys practicing writing at home too" (Personal Journal 2004-05).

Other ways to introduce reading and writing into the program included inviting Sheila Wiggins to attend the program once a month. Sheila worked for the Brantford Public Library and once a month she attended the program with stories, fingerplays, action games and rhymes. She provided opportunities to participate in the stories and songs.

The children especially enjoyed the chance to participate in, "I have a dog and his name is Rags". Rags is a puppet who attended every session. During the circles, Sheila had a written version of each song and fingerplay posted for the children and parents to follow along. This provided a visual cue for the parents and exposed the children to the written version of each song. Parents were provided with information on library programs that were happening each month. Sheila even arranged a Birthday Party for Rags at the library, where the parents had the opportunity to see all the resources available to them.

Sharing the knowledge!

I approached a teacher at the school to have two students join in the program every Monday. The two girls from the special education class began coming each Monday to read stories to the children who attended the Launch Pad Program. The children got very excited to see their Big Friends and would immediately climb up to couch for a story.

Student "L" had limited reading abilities. Each week she chose a book from the library and was assisted in her classroom to learn the story. "L" loved to share the new book each week with the children. I asked "L" what she liked most about coming into the program to read and she responded by saying, "I like to learn a new book. It helps me with my reading and I feel good that I can learn it for the kids." It definitely showed when she arrived happy and excited to share her new story. Chris liked when "L" snuggled on the couch with him, as he got lots of attention and enjoyed repeating the words in the story back to "L".

"A" has a quieter personality, and was a good reader. She read the books that the children picked out from the bookshelf. "A" always had a big smile on her face and enjoyed reading to the children. "A" stated that she liked to show the children how much fun reading can be and she liked getting hugs from the kids when she was finished the story.

I would definitely say that this has been an awesome opportunity to build the self-esteem of "L". She was so proud of accomplishing the task of reading a new story each week. It was a great opportunity and has benefited both the two girls and the children. It has been a win-win situation for everyone involved!

The parents involved in the program appreciated the dedication these two girls showed and were thankful that their children had been involved in an enriching, positive learning opportunity.

Conclusion

This was my first action research project and I must admit that I learned a lot about myself and the program that I implement in the Launch Pad. It is amazing how much of a difference I have seen in some of the children since the program started.

It was never my intent to have any of the children reading and writing before entering Kindergarten, but only to provide a variety of opportunities where they can have fun, expanding their knowledge of the written language. What I found out is that all children learn in different ways, some more quickly than others and that the more opportunities provided for children to experience language, the more ready they are to take on new challenges.

Danika, Chris and the other children who attend the program will have a great start when they begin school. They are confident, experienced and love to share their experiences with you.

What more can you ask than a child who is eager to learn and more excited to show what he/she can accomplish!

Next Steps

I believe that the children in the program have grown and developed some excellent pre-reading and writing skills with the implementation of the writing centre. My goal for next year is to expand the materials to include more opportunities for exposure to language. Perhaps there is an opportunity to involve other children from the school to assist children with some of these tasks. Having the two girls who came into read was perhaps only the beginning of the learning that can be shared. I am positive that many more exciting and rewarding experiences are just waiting to happen.

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