The Parent-Child Home Program – Dublin!

By Beth Fagan, Parent Child Home Program Coordinator, Early Learning Initiative, National College of Ireland

The Parent-Child Home Program (PCHP) is a home visiting program that allows parents and their preschool children to learn through play. Trained home visitors visit the parent and child over a two-year period and bring age-appropriate books and toys to encourage verbal interaction and creative play.

There are PCHP sites scattered throughout the U.S., and many of them purchase the books that are used to model ways to enhance a home literacy environment from Scholastic Literacy Partners. I worked in Watertown, Massachusetts for seven years and got most of my books during this time from Scholastic. I particularly liked the way Scholastic gave us extra bonus books to try. This allowed us to keep things interesting for the Home Visitors and offer a greater range of books without risking further expenses from the small funds we had available.

After twenty-five years in the U.S., I came back to Ireland to start the first Parent-Child Home Program in the inner city of Dublin. PCHP – Dublin is part of a suite of programmes offered by the Early Learning Initiative to try and address the educational disadvantages that exist in the inner city of Dublin. Dublin is a port city and the traditional dockhand jobs have long since left the area.

The Early Learning Initiative has many components. It starts at birth, with a Welcome Home Baby Packet that includes safety items and a book for the child. The programme continues through third level, where participating students can receive a grant to help defray the costs of going to college.

I have the most involvement with preschoolers. We visit children as young as eighteen months and continue to visit them over two school years. As we began our second year something happened which has surprised everyone. Toys are expensive in Ireland and the toys we need have to be open-ended, durable, age-appropriate, and help foster a child’s natural curiosity. Needless to say, none of them have batteries. While the toys are popular, it is the books that have made the most impact. I worried about buying books that would be appropriate in Ireland but good children’s books have universal appeal. One of the first books we bring to families is Sue Williams’ I Went Walking. While the author and illustrator, Julie Vivas, are both Australian, the book appeals to the very youngest reader as all the animals are familiar. I Like It When by Mary Murphy is wonderful for its primary colors, its lack of gender (the ‘adult’ penguin could be either male or female, and similarly the ‘child’ could be either a boy or girl), and for its ability to talk about things within the child’s worldview.

After all my years in Massachusetts I had to include a number of Eric Carle books (FYI, his museum, The House the Caterpillar Built, is in Western Massachusetts and is a must see sight for anyone visiting the state). Brown Bear, Brown Bear was written by Bill Martin Jr. but illustrated by Eric Carle. While illustrating this book, Eric Carle realized that the drawings were as important as the words and he went on to a long and colorful career as an author/illustrator. How could anyone live without Where’s
*Spot?* by Eric Hill, where the mother has to search everywhere for her little one to come and have his supper. By the time we get to the fifth book, *No, David!* by David Shannon, the children are completely hooked on reading. They ask their parents to read these books again and again. This has taken the parents completely by surprise.

The Home Visitors understand the importance of reading to children but the level of engagement truly surprises them. Reading to a child is such a lovely thing to do. It is an opportunity for time together, one-on-one attention for the child, and perhaps for today’s children, a much-needed rest from the hustle and bustle of daily life. The books chosen are all classics, perhaps not in the traditional sense as some of the books were written quite recently, but classics in the sense that they have no commercial connections. They do not have television characters, they do not have endorsements attached to them, they speak for themselves and they speak to the children. If children learn to enjoy books at an early stage, that love of reading will stay with them for the rest of their lives. For young parents, finding the time to sit and read to their children is rewarding and the bond that is created during that special time lasts a lifetime. We live in stressful times and children see and hear more than ever before about the state of the world. They watch more television than previous generations and are thus are bombarded by more advertising than before, so perhaps they are trying to tell us something by embracing these books!

It’s easy to get kids hooked on reading—quite a refreshing realization.