

Child coaching brought home

How Parents as Teachers nurtures the minds of children during key years

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[This is the second in a series of three stories on Parents as Teachers, the Sullivan County program for helping parents of young children learn ways of encouraging their children's growth.]

What it's all about

Children learn more, and at a faster pace, in their first five years of life than at any other time in their lives. It's vital, therefore, that parents understand the ways and stages that a child's brain

develops in this key period of life and know how to help their child realize full potential.

Begun in the 1970s in Missouri, Parents as Teachers has translated ongoing research findings on child development into a practical coaching program for parents and their children. The P.A.T. "Born to Learn" curriculum is keyed to children's typical month-by-month brain development and to concrete suggestions on ways parents can understand, teach and nurture children.

P.A.T. provides monthly home visits mixing play, modeling and discussion with parents and their children by trained and certified parent educators. They hold group meetings with parents and children, offer developmental and health screenings, and offer referrals to other community resources that families might need.

In Sullivan County and the towns of

the Fall Mountain Regional School District, the service is available at no charge to all families with children from prenatal to entrance into kindergarten.

How the monthly visit works

Each month's visit, while informal and pure fun on the surface, is designed for and matched with the stages of development that the child (or children) are going through at that time and that the parents need to understand.

At 31 months, for example, the "Born to Learn" curriculum leads the parent educator through points related to fine motor skills (what the children are ready and able to do with their hands) for writing, building with blocks, etc., and to emerging language development.

The parent educator, often sitting on

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the floor and playing with the child and parent, observes the child and points out behaviors typical of the age to sensitize the parent to what things to be watching for in their growing child. Next, the parent educator discusses fine motor skills appropriate for the child's age — what they are learning to do with their hands and fingers — and offers suggestions for specific age-appropriate activities.

At 31 months, for example, the child is encouraged to do scribbling. This initiates discussion with the parent about where the child is in fine motor development and its importance.

The parent educator also shows how fine motor skills are stimulated by using a variety of implements (pencils, crayons, markers, chalk, brushes, etc.) on a variety of surfaces (smooth paper, construction paper, sandpaper, paper bags, wood, cement sidewalks etc.) Eventually, when the child gains the intellectual skill of representation, he begins to say that his marks (either written words or drawn images) mean something.

Next, at the 31-month visit, using blocks the parent educator has brought along for proper size keyed to the child's age, the child is encouraged to play by stacking them up and letting them fall down. Through this process, parents learn how playing with blocks is important to their child's learning about spatial relationships and construction — placing larger

objects on the bottom and lining pieces up for stability, etc.

Through all the play, the educator observes and comments to the parent on the child's level of language development and what is expected at his or her particular age. At 31 months, for example, most children are speaking in sentences, even some complex sentences. They're even using plurals, past tense, possessives and articles. Further, parents get some guidance on how to encourage language skills.

Finally the visit includes reading to the child by the educator using age-appropriate books.

What local parents say about P.A.T.

Eighty-nine percent of local families using the P.A.T. program have said they are better understanding their child's development and 79 percent are enjoying parenting more as a result of the program. Sixty-eight percent notice an increase in their children's interest in books, and 100 percent would recommend P.A.T. to other families with young children.

For further information on the local Parents as Teachers program, contact director Jana Gillespie at Parents as Teachers, (603) 542-4885 or at jgillespie@sau6.k12.nh.us.