

# **A Journal for Life, A Journey of Love**

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If you have a resource or point of view to add to this article, let us know by writing to [editor@ohpe.ca](mailto:editor@ohpe.ca). More information on our Letters to the Editor column can be found in the OHPE News section of OHPE 268.0 ([http://www.ohpe.ca/ebulletin/ViewAnnouncements.cfm?ISSUE\\_ID=268&startrow=1](http://www.ohpe.ca/ebulletin/ViewAnnouncements.cfm?ISSUE_ID=268&startrow=1)).

## I Introduction

"My Parenting Story: A Journal for Life, A Journey of Love" is an awareness-raising, educational tool developed to inspire and equip parents of one- to three-year olds in the Region of Peel to support the healthy development of their child during the critical early years of life. Direct mail, news releases, posters, a launch event, flyers and the Web were used to promote the journal, and recipients were surveyed to

measure the journal's effectiveness. "My Parenting Story" is available in English, Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu and Vietnamese.

## II Research and Planning

Scientific research on brain development and learning shows that the years from conception to age six are the most important time in a human's life for brain development. Successful and healthy development in these early years lays the foundation for competence and coping skills that will affect behaviour, learning and health. Future scholastic, career and social success are intimately-- and delicately-- connected to the early years of every child's life. (McCain, M.N. & Mustard, J.F., 1999)

These findings have profound implications for parents of young children, who are already bombarded with the competing influences of work life, child care, family, cultural and linguistic issues and more. The additional pressure of feeling that they alone hold the key to their child's success can overwhelm even the best parent.

Because public health departments across Ontario are required, by the Mandatory Health Programs and Services Guidelines, to deliver an annual, community-wide education campaign to promote children's development, this project was launched.

One target group was identified: Parents of children aged one- to three-years living in the Region of Peel. The decision to target this group was made for a number of reasons, including

- \* Existing programs served the needs of the younger and older age segments

- \* These years were identified as a challenging and sometimes overwhelming time for parents

\* No single initiative could encompass the social, physical and intellectual needs of all children (or parents) in the broader age group

Several objectives were identified:

- \* To increase awareness of the importance of the first six years of life, specifically the one- to three-year period.
- \* To improve the lives and life chances of Peel's children
- \* To inspire greater confidence and comfort among Peel parents in their parenting role
- \* To reach virtually every parent of one- to three-year olds (approximately 26,000) in the Region of Peel within one year of launch

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### III Implementation

The Region of Peel Health department developed a sixteen-page, colourful and interactive journal, titled "My Parenting Story: A Journal for Life, A Journey of Love." Each page of the journal is dedicated to a specific area of parenting and child development and covers such topics as building security and trust in children, discipline, physical development, parenting styles and safety. The journal was translated into French, Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu and Vietnamese to reach those Peel communities that have been difficult to reach with traditional public health programs. Each version was focus tested to ensure cultural relevancy. Chinese editions will be published in 2003.

Like a diary, the journal provides parents with the space to write down their own thoughts and experiences of parenting. It offers parents an opportunity to reflect on their own style of parenting, to learn from the suggestions in the journal and to try some new parenting techniques. It encourages parents to think about and describe what they already

do to promote the wellbeing of their child, and, in doing so, it strongly reinforces that parents want to be the best parents they can possibly be. Once complete, the journal acts as a nostalgic keepsake, much like an enhanced baby book, capturing the parent's many experiences.

#### A. Key Messages

It was important that the messages demonstrate respect for parents' existing skills and assume a reassuring, non-judgemental, non-threatening, understanding and optimistic tone:

- \* Raising children is a challenge for all parents--you're not alone if you sometimes feel frustrated and overwhelmed.
- \* A child's early years are critical to their future life and wellbeing.
- \* There are simple things you can do to help ensure your child's healthy growth and development.
- \* All children are unique and respond differently in various situations--try new approaches and techniques to fit their style.
- \* Take time to consider and value the relationship you have with your child and to identify the key areas or challenges on which you would like to focus.
- \* Take time to take care of you.

#### B. Tactics

Health-promotion programming can be highly effective when mass-market messages are combined with community-based interventions. "My Parenting Story" was mass marketed to every home and business in the Region of Peel through municipal water-bill inserts. All homes and businesses (nearly 300,000) were reached over a three-month period (December 2000 to March 2001). Traditional mass media alternatives, including radio, television and newspaper advertising, were not used due to cost.

It was also promoted by distributing posters and flyers to day cares, libraries, family resource centres, community centres and a host of community agencies that provide services to parents of young children. "My Parenting Story" was also promoted on the Region of Peel Web and Intranet sites, through news releases to the local media and at a launch event on November 20, 2000--National Child Day. All four local newspapers covered the event.

### C. Budget

Each journal cost \$2.40, including all production, promotional materials, translation and staff time. The production budget for the journal was approximately \$80,000. This amount represents the costs associated with the production and printing of 40,000 English copies and the associated promotional flyers and posters. Preparing, focus testing and printing 12,000 translated copies cost \$45,000, including staff time.

### D. Major Challenges

- \* Transforming a publication created for English-speaking audiences into a publication that is culturally appropriate for each of the other language groups

- \* Significant, unforeseen problems with translations delayed production of four languages (Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi and Vietnamese) from March 2001 to December 2001. Production of French journals moved to the spring of 2002 and Chinese to 2003.

- \* The positive public response was overwhelming, and more than 9,000 journals were requested in the first six weeks of production necessitating intense clerical support.

- \* The large file size of the Web version limited access to only those

with high-speed connections.

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#### IV Did We Achieve Our Goals?

A written and a telephone survey were conducted in August and September 2001 to evaluate the success of "My Parenting Story." The survey was conducted with existing internal resources, which limited the sample size (n=86).

The evaluation showed that most of the project objectives were met:

- \* Increased awareness of the importance of the first six years of life
- \* 81.4 percent of survey respondents read all or parts of the journal, and 33.7 percent wrote in all or parts of the interactive portion.
- \* 80 percent of those who used the journal reported they found it of value.
- \* 57 percent of those surveyed indicated that they used the tips in "My Parenting Story" and were able to recall the ones they used without prompting.
  
- \* Improvement in the lives and life chances of Peel's children
- \* 92.4 percent of survey respondents reported they made positive changes in their child's life or their parenting approach, with an average of five to six changes per respondent.
- \* Further, those respondents who wrote in the journal each made an average of 6.43 changes, while non-writers made an average of 4.54 changes.
  
- \* To inspire greater confidence and comfort among Peel parents in their parenting role
- \* 31.8 percent of survey respondents indicated an increase in

confidence after using "My Parenting Story." This result is artificially low due to a flaw in the survey design. Respondents who indicated that their confidence was excellent prior to reading "My Parenting Story" did not have an option to increase their rating after reading. 15 per cent indicated that their confidence was already excellent.

\* To reach virtually every parent of one- to three-year olds (approximately 26,000) in the Region of Peel within one year of launch

\* 28,750 English journals have been distributed in the first year: 12,700 were distributed through direct mail to individuals and agencies, while 16,000 were delivered directly to parents by Peel Health staff.

\* 86 percent of those surveyed had one or more children in the one- to three-year age group.

"My Parenting Story" prompted parents to act on parenting tips, make positive changes, use community resources, seek out more in-depth resources and take a more active role in their child's healthy development.

A second edition of "My Parenting Story" (English version) has been printed based on the results of the evaluation and the excellent feedback received from journal users. Several enhancements were made: A two-page spread entitled "Do you need new snack ideas for your 1-3 year old?" includes food-safety tips and addresses iron deficiency in children. The Community Resources and introduction page were also revised.

Finally, "My Parenting Story" will continue to be resource for parents in the Region of Peel. It is hoped that parents and children in Peel will continue to make positive changes during the critical early years as a result of our efforts. Our children's future scholastic, career and social success depends on it.

## V References

McCain, M.N. & Mustard, J.F. (1999) Reversing the real brain drain. Early Years Study Final Report. Publications Ontario.