



HIPPY Mother, and now home visitor, Sacheen Point with her son, spend time role playing HIPPY curriculum. (Photos courtesy Aboriginal HIPPY Canada)

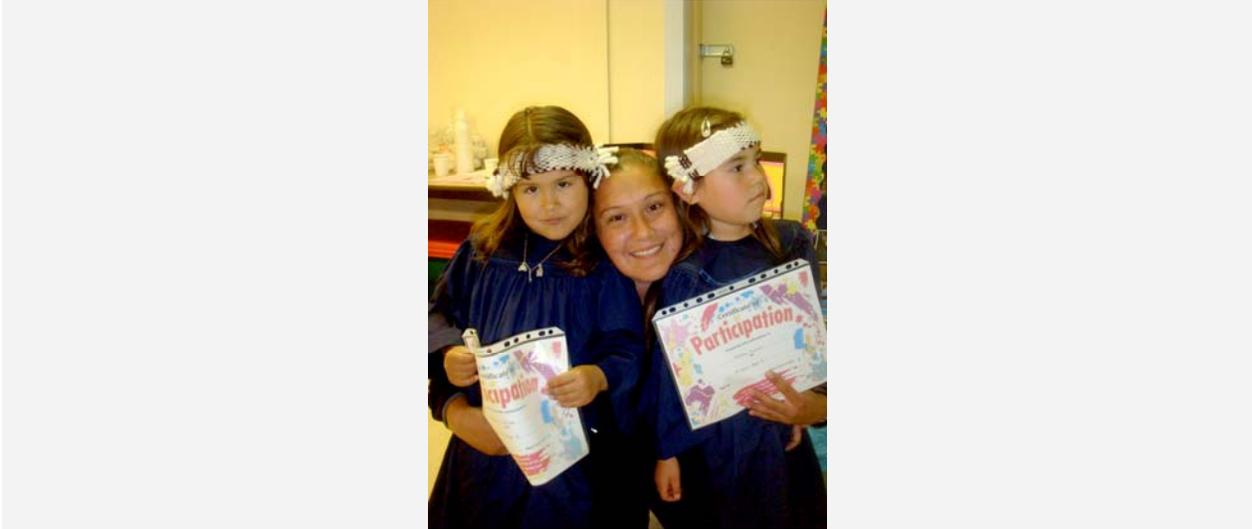
Aboriginal Homeschool Program Helps Parents Become Child's First Teacher

Lynn Armitage
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In 1969, Dr. Avima D. Lombard, a graduate of Columbia University Teachers College, started an early education program in Israel that aimed to teach parents with a limited formal education to be their children's first teachers. The premise behind HIPPY (Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters) was that early education is critical to a child's learning and helps prepare very young children from low-income families to better succeed in school.

Who better to open that door to early education than parents?

HIPPY is now a thriving international program in a number of countries, including [Canada](#), where 18.8 percent of Canadians live below the poverty line, according to a 2006 United Nations Human Development report. In 2002, after a study revealed that the fastest-growing population in Canada was in aboriginal communities, and that only 30 percent of on-reserve children graduated from high school, Aboriginal HIPPY Canada was created. Participating nations include the Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh and Squamish people.



HIPPY mother Nora Stogan with her daughter and niece at their graduation ceremony.

“The managers of HIPPY Canada saw a need for an aboriginal-specific program that works with some of the barriers that aboriginal families face,” says Vanessa Campbell, a 26-year-old Musqueam Indian Band member and national coordinator for Aboriginal HIPPY Canada. Campbell works with six Aboriginal HIPPY sites—five on reserves and one urban location. The second off-reserve site will launch in January.

The barriers that Campbell refers to go way back. Many aboriginal families in Canada are wary of the formal [education](#) system, due to the long and oppressive history of residential schools, where the government attempted to assimilate aboriginal children into the European-Canadian society by separating them from their families and indigenous culture.

Campbell is happy to report that Aboriginal HIPPY Canada, which is free for all participants, has been successful in helping more than 1,000 parents in the last decade embrace their role as the very first teachers of their children and trust in the school system. “The multi-cultural curriculum not only helps children learn necessary skills for kindergarten, but it also bridges the communication lines between parents and schools so parents feel more comfortable when they send their kids there.”

What makes the HIPPY early-learning program so unique is that the focus is on training parents. Home visitors from the community, who are well-versed in the curriculum, work directly with parents of 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds through role playing—30 weeks a year for three years—with nine storybooks per year integrated into the study program. Parents are then asked to work with their children on the skill sets they just acquired for 15 minutes per day. Every other week, parents get together for a group meeting to role-play, mingle, talk about their experiences with the program and do cultural activities together.

For 10 years, Robin Green worked as a home visitor for her tribe, the Katzie First Nation, in British Columbia. “It was my very first job.” Green says her biggest challenge was trying to get parents to the group meetings. “We had zero attendance for the first two years, but once we figured out what the parents really wanted—a meal, a guest speaker, getting immersed in their culture and language—our attendance numbers skyrocketed.” The 36-year-old mother of three

enjoyed her experience so much, that she now manages the Aboriginal HIPPY program for the Katzie Chief and Council.

National Coordinator Campbell says she has seen many positive changes through [Aboriginal HIPPY Canada](#), particularly with families who were isolated and previously had no connection to the community. “Once you have healthy families, you have a healthier community.”

She recounts her favorite success story about a 3-year-old girl who was extremely shy and quiet. After her parents participated in the program and worked with her every day on “homework,” this little girl came out of her shell in kindergarten to become a leader in the classroom. “When her mom showed me the progress report, we cried,” Campbell recalls. “She’s now 8 years old and is growing up to be a super wonderful young lady.”



Once HIPPY mother, home visitor and now coordinator (and Councillor of the Katzie First Nation) Robin Green practicing role play with HIPPY mother, Fiona Williams.

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