

An Equity Accelerator Strategy: Parents Developing Careers in an Early Childhood Literacy Program

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Deborah Roderick Stark

Consultant, Writer, and Advocate

Miriam Westheimer

Chief Program Officer, HIPPY International

Introduction

Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) is an early childhood literacy program delivered through home visits to families who have children ages 2-5. The program was founded in Israel in the 1960s by Avima Lombard as a research project at Hebrew University. Lombard believed that parents – or other adults who have primary caregiving responsibility such as grandparents or other relatives -- have an innate desire to do all they can for their children. She sought to develop a program to support families in their most important role as their child's first teacher. HIPPY is now operating in 15 countries and 7 languages, offering tools so that families can help their children learn foundational concepts that will ready them for school.

Health and social service organizations are increasingly realizing the importance of cultivating an equitable and diverse workforce that identifies with or comes from the communities they serve (National Academy for State Health Policy, 2021). This is especially true for the field of early childhood home visiting where the preparation, recruitment, and retention of qualified and motivated home visitors is key to the success of the home visiting program (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2022; Connolly & Chaitowitz, 2022). One of the features that makes HIPPY unique among similar programs is an emphasis on hiring home visitors from its pool of participating families. HIPPY is mindful of the importance of providing supports to these community-based home visitors, who are often entering the workforce for the first

What is Early Childhood Home Visiting?

Home visiting is a service delivery strategy that connects parents and primary caregivers to a designated support person – a home visitor – to help adults and children thrive. Home visitors work with families in their homes or at another location identified by the family. As frontline staff, home visitors use an assortment of tools to assess needs and then, with the families' input, tailor services and support. They provide direct education and assistance to encourage positive parenting practices, support a strong parent-child bond, and make homes safer. In addition, home visitors help to connect families to services in the community such as early care and education, health and mental health care, domestic violence resources, and other needed services.

The Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness project of the US Department of Health and Human Services reviews the research on home visiting models and identifies those – like HIPPY – that have strong evidence of effectiveness. Effectiveness is demonstrated in many ways – positive parenting practices, child development and school readiness, improved child and maternal health, reductions in child maltreatment, and reductions in juvenile delinquency and family violence.

For general information on home visiting including the numbers of families served, please visit the [2022 Home Visiting Yearbook](#). (National Home Visiting Resource Center, 2022) For specific information on the effectiveness of individual home visiting models, please visit the [Home Visiting Evidence of Effectiveness \(HomVEE\)](#) website of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022)

time. As such, HIPPY offers opportunities for program participants-turned-home visitors to continue their own personal and professional development as well as career planning.

Because of its positive impact for both children and parents, HIPPY has become recognized by the federal HomVEE research review as a replicable evidence-based two-generational program (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). HIPPY can also work as an *equity accelerator* – a program that can help individuals transition out of poverty and into careers. As such, it accelerates equity at the personal and program levels.

- *Individual equity accelerator.* Individuals who have an especially positive experience with the HIPPY program and want to share that with their peers, apply for and are hired to work as home visitors. While working for HIPPY, they learn essential hard and soft skills that can help them find future employment which can enhance the economic well-being of their family. Some HIPPY programs in the United States are connected with the AmeriCorps program which offers its members education awards that can be used for college costs or student loan payments.
- *Program equity accelerator.* Typically, social service programs struggle to build an equitable and diverse workforce that is reflective of their customers. HIPPY participants-turned-home visitors over time may transition into jobs in child care, education, health care, and social services bringing their lived experience and diverse backgrounds to those fields.

As local communities, states, and even countries seek to promote opportunities for advancement that embrace equitable approaches for both children and parents, HIPPY provides a promising model that is worthy of consideration. What follows is a description of the HIPPY model, a summary of the evidence, and examples of how the model is implemented in Australia and Canada in ways that emphasize the essential role HIPPY can play in accelerating equity at the individual and program level. The paper ends with quotes from HIPPY parents-turned-home visitors illustrating the many benefits to participation as articulated by them, and insights on future directions for practice, research, systems, and policy.

The HIPPY Model

Lombard started the HIPPY program in Israel at a time when families were immigrating to the country from all over the world. She was a leader in the Israeli early childhood field and recognized that children had very different abilities and readiness to engage in the classroom. Some children walked in and were ready to learn, and others needed much more support. Lombard realized that the home countries had different approaches to, and philosophies of, education and she thought that was contributing to the disparities. To ensure all children could be successful in the Israeli education system, she believed they needed to start earlier -- and in the home -- to ready children before they arrived at school. While Lombard had experience in the early years of Head Start in the United States, she wanted something different in Israel. In the 1960s Head Start approach, children went to the Head Start center as the place for learning; HIPPY would focus on the parent as the teacher and the home as the classroom.

Lombard initially envisioned HIPPY as a national program to serve families throughout Israel. For decades it was funded by the Israel Ministry of Welfare and Social Affairs with additional support from local communities. In 1988, Lombard spent a sabbatical year in the United States on a Ford Foundation fellowship with the idea that she would start a HIPPY pilot program in the United States. The National Council of Jewish Women was committed to working with Lombard to support the growth of HIPPY and while there was interest in some states – Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, and

Oklahoma – it did not grow into a national model in the United States with steady government funding. There was interest as well in starting the program in the Netherlands and South Africa.

Fidelity to the HIPPY model was important to Lombard. From the beginning, all coordinators were required to go to Israel to be trained by Lombard herself. They would not be able to start up their program in their home community until Lombard visited the program and personally trained all the home visitors. As demand for the HIPPY program grew, Lombard started to hold two-week workshops for aspiring HIPPY coordinators at Hebrew University in Israel. After each two-week workshop, Lombard would decide if the people trained were qualified and able to operate a HIPPY program.

As time passed, there became a need to create a broader network to support meaningful expansion of HIPPY programs around the world. Miriam Westheimer, who had spent time in both the United States and Israel working alongside Lombard, was tapped to become the first director of HIPPY USA, and later was invited to become the first director of HIPPY International. Westheimer's approach to collaboration, systems building, and network thinking supported rapid expansion such that today HIPPY is operating in 15 countries. She emphasized the core components and was careful to not over-reach to make HIPPY more than what it could do best – provide support to parents via storybooks and activities that would empower parents to ready their children for school. She encouraged HIPPY implementers to find ways that HIPPY could fit within existing programs and systems and not layer on onerous requirements such as unique HIPPY assessments, or services that could be provided more easily by others. And she helped shift the organization mindset from employing parents as home visitors because it is more economical and scalable, to employing parents as home visitors because it can influence workforce diversity and create important career opportunities for families.

Today the program is designed around four core components:

1. **A Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum:** Developmentally appropriate easy to use educational activity packets and storybooks form the foundation of the program that serves families with children ages 2 to 5. Nine storybooks and 30 educational activity packets guide parents in doing fun, engaging activities with their children. Typically, parents spend 15-20 each day for 5 days per week on these activities. Individual HIPPY programs are encouraged to adapt the materials so that they are both developmentally appropriate and culturally responsive, reflecting the culture and language of participating families.
2. **Role Play as the Primary Method of Training:** All home visitors participate in regular training by a professional HIPPY coordinator so that they can implement the model with fidelity. Training includes a review of the curriculum to be implemented the next week, explanation of the rationale behind each activity so that they can help families understand how the activity supports children's development, and role plays to practice how they will deliver the curriculum. After the weekly training with the local HIPPY coordinator, each home visitor tries out the weeks' activities with a practice child, sometimes her own child. The following week, the home visitor brings any questions or concerns about the activities to the weekly training before meeting with her assigned families.

After the training, home visitors meet one-on-one with families to provide a set of lessons that match the children's age. Through role play, the home visitors demonstrate how to share the material with their children. Families learn about what to expect in terms of their children's learning and development, how to introduce activities that are lively and joyful, and how the various activities are designed to reinforce skills and introduce children to new concepts.

3. **Coordinators and Community-Based Home Visitors:** HIPPY program coordinators are professionals in the fields of early childhood, community development, general education, or social work. They supervise and train the home visitors who are from the community. Ideally, HIPPY home visitors are former program participants who had positive experiences implementing the curriculum and want to share HIPPY with other parents. In places that are especially challenged by illiteracy, the home visitors might be community members with more formal education.
4. **Home Visits and Group Meetings:** Weekly home visits are at the heart of the HIPPY program. Families are met in the comfort of their own homes which makes the program more accessible and validates the home as an important place for children's growth and learning. During these one-on-one visits, home visitors can build trusting relationships which can then lead to connections with other resources and referrals as needed.

Group meetings are arranged bi-weekly or monthly to offer an opportunity to socialize together. These meetings typically have activities for guardians and children separately and joint parent-child activities. This gives the program coordinator an opportunity to meet all the families and observe firsthand the interactions between home visitors and families.

HIPPY can be a stand-alone program, or it can be integrated into existing early childhood programs or community-based family support organizations. This flexibility ensures that each place the model is implemented can determine the most appropriate use of the program. For example, in some cases, HIPPY is tied to the school system as with the [Dallas Independent School District](#). In other cases, HIPPY is linked to social service programs as in [Milwaukee's Youth and Family Centers](#). A video about HIPPY in the United States can be found [here](#). Links to HIPPY programs in each of the countries can be found [here](#).

Evidence of Impact

Decades of research shows that the HIPPY program works. Children who participate in HIPPY do better in school, and families who participate are better prepared to support their children throughout their education and feel more confident in their parenting. Home visitors, themselves once parents in the program, also benefit from their experience in HIPPY.

Major areas of impact:

Child Outcomes

- School readiness
- Promotion to first grade
- Social-emotional development
- Academic testing

Parent Outcomes

- Knowledge of child development
- Parent-child engagement
- Social-emotional development
- Social connections

Home Visitor Outcomes

- Employability
- Social Mobility
- Community advocacy

Recent studies of the model in Australia demonstrate that HIPPY contributes to a transformational experience for parents, building their self-confidence and readying them for workforce participation. The Australia study found that only 30 percent of home visitors nominated ‘wanting a job’ as a reason they became a home visitor, but after serving in this capacity, almost 65 percent indicated a desire to obtain further employment (Connolly & Chaitowitz, 2022).

Outcomes for children are noteworthy as well. A recent quasi-experimental of HIPPY in Florida demonstrated that the odds of passing the Florida school readiness screening process were almost two times greater for children who participated in the HIPPY program, and their odds of being promoted to first grade were almost five times greater than a matched sample (Payne et al, 2020). In Australia, where HIPPY is a federally funded program operating in communities with greatest need, a recent study showed that after two years of program participation, HIPPY children were at or slightly above the national norm (Connolly & Chaitowitz, 2022).

While HIPPY focuses primarily on school readiness, it has been found to have social-emotional outcomes as well. For example, in a study of HIPPY in Wisconsin during the COVID-19 pandemic, program participants demonstrated reduced parental stress, reduced child externalizing behaviors, and improve child adaptive functioning over the course of the program. Additionally, parents who reported significant symptoms of depression at baseline demonstrated a decline in depression over time (Koop et al, 2022).

An Emphasis on Equity – The Unique Role of Community-Based Home Visitors

Most evidence-based home visiting programs hire staff who have degrees in nursing, social work, early education, or related fields. HIPPY, on the other hand, hires and trains program participants to become home visitors. By hiring mothers (and sometimes fathers) who are from the community and who successfully participated in the home visiting program with their children, HIPPY can employ staff who have the lived-experience and cultural awareness that is important for relationship building with new parents.

Lived-experience matters. HIPPY home visitors travel the same roads – literally and figuratively – as the families they support. They speak the same language, share the same customs, and know well the joys and challenges of navigating parenting. They may have struggled to access services and supports, and likely have suggestions for how to overcome barriers. This gives them unique perspective to understand what families in their community are facing and to know the best ways to offer guidance and support.

HIPPY recognizes the importance of investing in building the skills of the community-based home visitors so that they can feel prepared, stick with the work, and use the HIPPY experience as a launching pad for future employment. HIPPY teaches the home visitors about essential hard and soft skills. Hard skills include things like setting up meetings, keeping a calendar, planning an agenda, taking notes, and reporting on progress. Soft skills include things such as building trusting relationships, listening, understanding and holding boundaries, practicing resilience, and expressing agency. What follows are two concrete examples of the HIPPY program in action in Australia and Canada.

Australia Demonstrates the Concept of the Individual Equity Accelerator

HIPPY Australia was started in 1998 by the Brotherhood of St. Laurence, and since 2008 has enjoyed stable funding from the Australian government. From the beginning, the program focused

on building capacity and innovations, including with their parents-turned-home visitors, or tutors as they are called in Australia.

Australia's Pathways to Possibilities (P2P) program represents the most targeted approach to ensuring HIPPIY tutors are supported to develop skills to match their personal and professional goals. "When creating P2P, it was important that it help parents to build their confidence and skills to support their journey, whatever that might be. Some might have a goal of getting a degree in mental health, others might want to be better at public speaking, and still others might want to know how to make nutritious meals for their family. Whatever their goal, P2P is there for them," said Laura Romeo-Cocciardi, Manager of Network Engagement, Brotherhood of St. Laurence.

As such, P2P focuses on preparing parent tutors to implement the HIPPIY program with fidelity, while at the same time supporting them in building human capital (new skills and knowledge), extending social capital (new networks and relationships), deepening psychological capital (new understanding of self, values, and motivations), all in service of readying parents for futures of their choice, including but not limited to enhanced labor market competitiveness. The motivation for this comes from the Australia Commonwealth's desire to increase education and labor force participation among women with children and to reduce welfare dependence.

Tutors and the site coordinator develop a Working Together Statement that clarifies the role of the tutor and the coordinator and what can be expected of each. From this, they develop a Pathways Plan that spells out the goals and aspirations of the tutor related to five areas of skills and knowledge including: core HIPPIY tutor skills, self-development, learning, relationships, and work. The plan is reviewed by the HIPPIY program coordinator four times over a two-year period to ensure the tutor is on track with learning. "The reason this works so well is because tutors are able to practice the skills that they want to build as they are working," said Romeo-Cocciardi. In addition, an on-line learning management system includes modules that support tutors in developing new knowledge related to their goals and aspirations. Flexible funds are available at each site to support the tutors' continued learning, development, and job readiness.

A study of 412 tutors employed in 2019 found HIPPIY improved confidence and increased job readiness because of their participation as a tutor (Connolly & Chaitowitz, 2022):

- 95% agreed or strongly agreed that their job readiness had improved.
- 92% agreed or strongly agreed that HIPPIY had improved their confidence.
- 65% indicated they would like to obtain employment after the HIPPIY program (just 30% were employed prior to working for HIPPIY)
- 26% plan to enroll in further study.

Oftentimes, at the end of their two-year position with HIPPIY, tutors are hired for other positions within the host organization. Others choose to continue their education, and often do their student placement in the host organization. "I have seen tutors go on to become nurses, or work in the field of mental health or drug rehabilitation. They are doing extraordinary things in their communities," said Romeo-Cocciardi.

Becky Belcher started as a tutor in 2017 and moved up to become a coordinator overseeing a team of four tutors and a play helper in 2018. She describes her role supporting the tutors with P2P:

Within the first few months of employment, I invite the tutor to complete a self-assessment where she can indicate her skills across the five areas. We then sit down together and use that as the basis of conversation. We look at opportunities for setting goals. Oftentimes in the first year the goals are about work-life balance and health and well-being; the second-year goals might be about looking for training opportunities

and employment. Regular check-ins during supervision meetings offer encouragement and provide accountability.

Belcher also shared her reflections on working with another tutor:

Steph started with us as a young parent. She had previous inconsistent work as a cleaner and limited other workplace experiences. During her first year as a tutor, she and her partner focused on getting healthy. Then in the second year, she set high goals and enrolled in a dual diploma course for business and human resources. HIPPY provided funding to help her enroll in the program. Some of us wondered if it would be the right fit for Steph's bubbly personality, but she loved data entry, scheduling, organization, and project management tasks. A few weeks before the end of the school year, she was hired by a company for an administrative role. Twelve months later she was promoted to be a manager over 25 people. Steph tells us that it's the support and scaffolding of P2P that helped her develop the self-confidence and motivation to build her career.

The HIPPY program is working hard to provide opportunities personal and professional growth.

HIPPY Canada Partners with Red River College to Offer Badges for Home Visitors

HIPPY Canada was started in 2001 and since that time has transformed more than 40,000 lives, providing isolated mothers opportunities to connect with peers, receive support in their critical role as their child's first teacher, and develop the agency to be change-makers for their families. The program is funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. It is a project of the Mothers Matter Centre (MMC) and is offered at 38 sites in 7 provinces (Mothers Matters Center Fact Sheet).

In partnership with Red River College (RRC) Polytechnic, MMC created an accredited professional development program to provide cohort-based training to graduates of HIPPY who are hired to be home visitors in their communities. Home visitors can receive micro-credentials and digital badges upon completion of the professional development series, setting them up for further study in post-secondary institutions and additional employment opportunities.

Expert instructors and a learning management system ensure home visitors receive quality, accessible content. The core training series includes two levels of study delivered during 42 hours of instruction. Courses addresses: basics of home visiting; adult education; science of early childhood development; violence against women; immigrant, settlement, and integration; and building bridges with first nations peoples. Additional courses focus on recognizing signs of mental health challenges (Mental Health First Aid); building self-confidence, problem-solving, and motivation; and leadership strengths and capacity.

Parents Finding Their Power and Exercising Their Leadership

Across the continents where HIPPY is implemented, parents are finding their power and exercising their leadership as they transition from program participant, to HIPPY home visitor, to employment in related fields. Power and leadership show up for HIPPY parents in all aspects of their lives and persists over time. Interviews for this spotlight that were conducted with HIPPY families makes this abundantly clear:

Increasing Social Connection: "I moved to Alabama when my son was born. I didn't know anyone. I was a stay-at-home mom. When my son was four-years-old, one of the ladies at the library asked me if I would want to do HIPPY with them. I was excited because it would give me a chance to meet other moms in the community. I was feeling really isolated, secluded. A girlfriend and I started HIPPY together. The home visitor came to my friend's house where we had weekly meetings. I loved

the program, and my son loved it too. It got me out into the community and around other people, which was important.”

Building Self-Confidence: “HIPPY helped me develop my voice and opened a doorway for me to find my path to go further and pursue a nursing career. I always wanted that, but as a young mom, I felt lost in a bubble with the baby, and I didn’t have the self-confidence to move forward. My program coordinator gave me the guidance and encouragement that I needed to build confidence in myself. When I was nervous about going to a placement during my mental health studies, she ringed me the day before, the day of, and the day after to tell me all would be fine. She believed in me, and that helped me to believe in myself.”

Helping Other Parents: “Having HIPPY in my life helped to build my confidence and power. Now I can work with other HIPPY parents to help them build their power and be involved in their children’s lives. I can help them feel confident in showing up for parent-teacher meetings, reading books to their children, and advocating for their family.”

Sparking a Commitment to Helping Community: “HIPPY was so much more for me than a job or a program I could share with my children. Everyone was an ‘auntie,’ ‘grandma,’ or ‘cousin.’ We supported and encouraged each other. They wrapped their arms around me. Now I’m paying back and wrapping my arms around other families in my community.”

Expanding Exposure to New Work Opportunities: “Without HIPPY, I would have never found my way to the first pre-kindergarten position. It was HIPPY’s work with parents and kids, and realizing just how much you can help them, that made me want to be in the classroom.”

Future Directions for Practice, Research, Systems, and Policy

When HIPPY was originally developed in the 1960s, its goal was to help young children develop their cognitive skills so that they would be able to engage actively in quality early childhood settings which would then prepare them for success in school. Its uniqueness, at the time, was to focus on parents and the home environment. Today and moving forward, this focus on parents has become another central goal of the program. Promoting parents to become home visitors is now a core component of the HIPPY model, even if the extent to which programs invest in this parent-home visitor component varies greatly from country to country. Looking ahead, this will play a more central role in describing and training for program implementation.

There are countless success stories of parents who grew and developed because of their HIPPY experience. The generally accepted wisdom is that individuals who persevere and thrive when doing an activity that at first felt intimidating they become more confident and secure in their own abilities to change and grow. In HIPPY, parents are highly motivated because they start working with their own child. And they feel safe doing the activities because it is unsupervised and in the privacy of their own home. Many of them then feel they could do the same for others, their neighbors, and peers. The training for home visitors is structured and supportive with ample time for role play so that it almost guarantees success. At present this developmental flow remains a strong hunch of people with much experience. This is an important new area for future research.

As social systems grapple with ongoing learnings about and exposure to systemic racism, there is an increasing call for including service recipients in the design, development, promotion, and research on social programs. A simple phrase that captures this notion is “Nothing about us, without us.” HIPPY, like all social programs, needs to undergo a serious review of the underlying assumptions embedded in the early years of its development. HIPPY is still somewhat deficit based. It assumes that schools are okay, and children need to be helped to get ready for them. The question we should really be asking is not are children ready for schools, but are schools ready for all children. HIPPY

parents-turned-home visitors can also offer this growing movement a ready-made pool of potential parent leaders -- parent leaders who have had firsthand experience teaching their own children, working with other parents in their community, and engaging in community development activities. These parents need to hold schools accountable to teach all children.

More broadly, the decades of experience working with community-based home visitors have much to share with the field of family support and home visiting. Too often, one hears about debates whether professional or community-based home visitors are best suited to deliver home visiting services to families. Rather than an either/or decision, HIPPY offers a both/and approach. Both bring valuable expertise to any community-based program. The professionals bring significant content expertise in child development and school readiness, and the community-based home visitors bring their expertise of the lived experiences in their communities, its strengths and challenges and their own awareness of systemic barriers.

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