

Calgary pilot project setting up immigrant children for success ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

A new pilot project in Calgary for low income immigrant families is helping set children up for success by focusing on early learning and development in a culturally sensitive environment alongside parents and kids from different countries and cultures.

The five-month project run by the Calgary Immigrant Women's Association is aimed at immigrant mothers with children between the ages of 19 and 36 months.

The program stresses the importance of early learning for kids, helping parents prepare their children for success in kindergarten and in the Canadian school system by working together on education and learning how to support their children.

"They are learning together and the best part is they are going to learn not only in English but in their first language as well," said Jyoti Agnihotri, manager of language training and childcare at Calgary Immigrant Women's Association.

Early learning is about nurturing and developing a child's social, emotional, cognitive and physical skills, creating a foundation for lifelong learning and overall wellbeing.

Agnihotri says immigrant families face many barriers when it comes getting help and accessing early learning resources for their kids.

"The number one barrier is financial so immigrant women are not able to access childcare services as mainstream Canadians would, so we support them by giving them transit tickets so they can come here twice a week and attend workshops," said Agnihotri.

The other big barrier is language. Agnihotri says that can mean many parents and their children don't access services and programs that could help them.

"We want to prepare them through early learning. It is the foundation for what they are going to do and for mothers it is simply increasing their self confidence. They are going to get better at supporting their children, families and having that social network so they're not isolated," said Agnihotri.

Mothers say spending quality time and interacting with their children, learning what their children need and making new social connections are all important components of the program.

"How I can be more patient, what are her needs, what she needs to achieve, what are the milestones, also a lot of building community and getting to meet other moms," said Adania Reyes, who came to Canada from Mexico.

"I get to meet people from all over the world, learning about their culture and how they raise their children and what could work for me and my child, that is very precious for us," said Reyes.

The program gives women and children the chance to learn from each other.

"The way they address their children, the way they make rules, words and how they play, how they sing songs and other tips like feeding them, it really helps me as a mom to learn what other parents do," Reyes said.

Jocelyn Velasco was picked at random to take part.

"I was so happy they called my number," said Velasco, who is originally from the Philippines.

"I was just staying at home and me and my baby were quite a bit bored and everything is a new experience for both of us. I learned a lot of things to teach for my baby," she said. "It's really fun."

Jyoti Agnihotri says word of mouth plays a big part in spreading the word among immigrant communities about the project, leading to lots of calls and referrals from other mothers.

When the program ends next year a manual will be created outlining key findings and research which can be used as a tool for other organizations focused on newcomers and early learning.

"It's going to help in the overall integration of the immigrant population. Some research may come out of this so we can build some tools and support immigrant women," said Agnihotri.

The pilot program ends in March 2020.

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