

The *Get Ready for School* program provides children with the opportunity to participate in activities that orient them towards the fundamentals of reading, through a curriculum that focuses on two indicators of a child's success in literacy development: **phonological awareness and vocabulary development**. Strong Start offered the 2012 *Get Ready for School* program in four community centres within Waterloo Region, for 3-4 year olds who were entering junior kindergarten in the following September. Of the 65 children who participated in the entire 44 class duration, 16 children did not speak English on a regular basis at home, and 10 children spoke English as well as a second language. The program delivery staff consisted of nine paid instructors and 14 volunteers, with the volunteer commitment combining for a total of 369 donated hours.

To help determine the **impact and effectiveness** of the program children were assessed prior-to and following the program on a number of literacy measures, and changes in the children's literacy development were identified. On average, letter-sound knowledge significantly improved from approximately 3 letters to 13 letters after program completion. On a word reading measure, there was an improvement in the number of children who made an attempt at identifying letter sounds in words, which indicated a better understanding for reading, but needing more practice at blending sounds together. This result is encouraging because the program places more emphasis on children feeling successful and positive about making an attempt at reading versus having perfect word reading performance.

A significant improvement was observed on a verbal short-term memory assessment, which is related to phonological processing skills. On this measure, children were more successful at repeating two-word pairings after they had been through the program. There was also a significant increase in scores on a measure requiring the children to segment the sound parts in words, and more children were able to attempt this measure at the end of the program. These improvements illustrate how listening to words and the sound parts in language is promoted through the program activities. This skill is important for the development of reading and writing.

Vocabulary knowledge is important for reading because it is related to reading comprehension. Children's receptive vocabulary was evaluated through a standardized measure that involved a series of picture identification questions. There was a significant improvement in children's scores, with an average score increase from the 59.0th percentile to the 66.0th percentile. It is interesting to note that children's average age-equivalent score was greater than their average age at program entry, 4.0 vs. 3.5. This indicates a high level of skill from the children who entered the 2012 program. Since a wide range of skill levels can overshadow the larger improvements, it is important to consider that there were 19 children whose scores demonstrated a full year improvement in vocabulary skill over the 5-6 months.

Children were further assessed on their **classroom learning behaviours**, such as movement in the classroom, raising hand, following instructions, lining up, and separating from their parent. Children's behaviour ratings significantly improved after being in the program, and their scores reflected the impact that the *Get Ready for School* program has for encouraging children to use appropriate learning behaviours and demonstrate independence on a consistent basis. Families gain a small glimpse into what is expected from their children when they enter the school system, and they can explore and learn with the support of many instructors.

On a **parent feedback** survey, parents indicated that they 'Liked' a number of elements in the program, and when asked to rate the program instruction staff, the activities, and the materials, a majority of parents rated them as 'Excellent' or 'Good'. A majority of parents indicated that their child was excited to get their new letter cards when new letters were introduced, and excited about getting the little books and reading them. Some parents suggested the program run for a longer duration such as September to June, and some suggested a longer time during the day such as three hours. All parent respondents said they would tell a friend about the program.

