

The Program

Our initial plan for the 2022 *Get Ready for School*™ program year was to deliver a full in-person program. However, with the resurgence of COVID-19 cases, we had to amend our delivery plan. Our goal was to provide the children with as many opportunities as possible for in-person, in-class learning, with the contingency plan to support the children online if in-person classes were not possible. This model ensured that we were prepared to deliver this important program, to help mitigate the significant adverse impact the pandemic had on many young children.



Typically, the program begins each January. The pandemic necessitated that we delay the start of the program to March 2022 and extend the program further into June. As a result, the 2022 cohort of 282 children attended a **shortened 32-class program** (full program 44 classes) in a classroom of their peers and were provided with materials to support online delivery, which also made it easier for parents to extend learning to home. The program continued to be based on the three curriculum pillars of our core program: **phonological awareness, vocabulary development** and **self-regulation (classroom learning behaviours)**. The program remained **intensive** and **curriculum-focused** to deliver the maximum impact. It continued to support children who are learning English and those from low-to-middle-income families. Returning to in-person instruction meant that we needed to re-engage with our program partners and work together closely, to plan a safe return of children to the classroom. For many locations, we were the first preschool program offered at their site in almost 2 years. For the first time, we delivered a program outside of our region, namely at an elementary school in Owen Sound.

The Participants

Our program continues to serve diverse populations. The 2022 cohort was comprised of 282 children, with 126 children (41%) learning English as a Second Language.

- **282 participants:**
 - 41% from ESL families
 - 22% referred by support agencies
 - 24 referrals made for early identification
- **20 programs in total**
- **1 pilot program in a new Region**

This year, a high percentage of participants (22% / 37 children) were referred to the program by KidsAbility or other support agencies. Additionally, the highest number of referrals (24 children / 8%) to supporting agencies and family physicians were also made this year by Strong Start, encouraging families to investigate possible challenges. This was a direct impact of the pandemic as it made accessing services and early identification very difficult during lockdowns.

Out of the 282 enrolled children, 267 completed the program, resulting in a completion rate of 95%. The total of 15 children who started attending classes withdrew part-way through the program, and this year's attendance variability range was higher than in previous years (ranged from 6 to 18 days), which can be directly attributed to the COVID-19 self-isolation requirements.



The Gains

To help determine the impact and effectiveness of the program, each child was given a **virtual pre-test** and **post-test** on a number of literacy measures (e.g., phonological awareness and vocabulary knowledge) and on one behaviour measure.

While the analysis of the data shows the children made statistically significant gains on all tasks as a result of participation in the program, the assessment results for the 2022 *Get Ready for School* program have to be seen in light of the limitations of the virtual testing conditions, specifically the non-standardized setting, the reliance on technology (stable internet), and parental presence during testing..

Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness is one of the best predictors of children’s reading ability and a foundational skill for reading success. The children in the *Get Ready for School* program received explicit instruction that followed a carefully planned progression of skills.

Assessment	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Gain
Letter Sounds Knowledge (x/26)	2*	9	7
Receptive Vocabulary Task (percentile)	59%*	67%	8%
Learning Behaviours (x/36)	23	29	6

Through activities that involved identifying letter sounds, segmenting syllables, rhyming words, and blending sounds to make words, the children improved their phonological skills and identified, on average, 7 more letter sounds by the end of the program.

**We anticipate the true score to be lower as parents were more likely to jump in to support child at pre-assessments*

Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary knowledge is a critical prerequisite for reading comprehension and reading achievement. The children in the program were exposed to new words and concepts linked to previous knowledge. They were provided with many opportunities to experience words in a meaningful context, through play, sorting games, storytelling, book reading, and conversations.

The improvements the children made in their knowledge of word meanings was demonstrated by the growth of their receptive vocabulary and was assessed using the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, 4th edition (PPVT-IV). The children showed an increase in vocabulary knowledge that went beyond what is expected during natural development over a 3.5-month period.



On average the children’s age equivalency score changed from 4:2(y:m) to 4:8(y:m), indicating a 6-month improvement in receptive vocabulary over the course of 3.5 months. Of these, 21% of children increased their vocabulary by 1 year (12 months) or more. This accelerated rate of vocabulary acquisition is essential in bridging the gap in vocabulary knowledge that often exists between vulnerable children and their same-aged peers. Participating children who completed both the pre- and post-tests completed the program with a vocabulary larger than 67% of same-aged peers. The increase in the children’s scores at post-test and more importantly, the accelerated rate of acquisition of new word knowledge, demonstrates the effectiveness of the program in narrowing the disparity that existed at start of the program.

Vocabulary Development	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Gain
PPVT-IV Percentile Score	59%	67%	8%
PPVT-IV Age Equivalency (y:m)	4:2	4:8	0:6
Growth Scale Value			8
PPVT-IV 1 year (12-month) Vocabulary Growth			21%

**It is important to note that the averages exclude children who were unable to complete this measure at the beginning of the program but who had valid post-test scores. While this did not allow for score-to-score comparison, it demonstrated the children’s significant growth in the acquisition of critical and foundational early learning skills, which allowed the children to be successful in completing this measure at the end of the program. Had these children provided valid pre-test scores, we anticipate that while the mean scores at each time-point would have been impacted, the average gains would have remained consistent.*

Classroom Learning Behaviours and Self-Regulation

Researchers have found that intentional self-regulation predicts school success and that it is a foundation for a child’s long-term physical, social, psychological, and emotional well-being. The children in the *Get Ready for School* program experienced the expectations that will be set for them in the formal school system. They had many opportunities to practice classroom learning behaviours, such as raising their hands, cleaning up, transitioning between tasks, following instructions, negotiating play, and sharing.

Through effective support and by setting developmentally appropriate expectations, children in the program experienced significant improvement in their ability to self-regulate. At the end of the program, children were more independent, attentive to the class routines, and engaged with the learning materials. Improvement in these social competencies helped the children feel confident and thus, shaped the attitudes and views they will have towards school and education.

Parent Involvement and Engagement

Family engagement in the learning environment and school is strongly associated with academic success across all socio-economic groups. It is also a focus for educational improvement in Ontario. The *Get Ready for School* program continued to promote and facilitate parent education and involvement.



The Impact

Our consistent program results provide evidence that the *Get Ready for School* program uses effective strategies that promote emergent literacy skills and school readiness. The program assessment results demonstrate statistically significant gains for the children in the areas of phonological awareness, vocabulary development and self-regulation (improved classroom learning behaviours).

The gains of the children in the shortened program although statistically significant, did not equal the gains made by the children who in the past have participated in our standard, 44-class, in-person, in-class *Get Ready for School* program. Given the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, this shortened program has proved to be an effective intervention when full length in-person programming was not possible. The program continued to promote the acquisition of vital skills, thereby helping to ensure the children's successful transition into Kindergarten and their readiness for formal reading instruction.

A multitude of parent testimonials have cited the importance of the program for their children during a time of increased stress and limited in-person programming. From the first day, it was evident how much the children AND their parents needed this program. The effects of the pandemic were unmistakable. The children entering the program this year, experienced more separation anxiety, were less independent, and often lacked the language for social play and/or had a limited ability to sustain play. This went way beyond what we encountered in previous years. As the program progressed, we observed an increase in children's confidence and social competencies, including social language. Many parents openly discussed the positive impact the program has had, not only on their child, but on the entire family. Ultimately, this program impacts child development, self-regulation, reading achievement and school success.

"This gave her some exposure to a classroom setting and the expectations that will be expected of her when she starts kindergarten. We are thankful to have had this opportunity as she never attended daycare and with the pandemic, didn't have the exposure to these types of environments." – **parent, 2022**

"It has been so much beyond learning sounds and letters. He has learned how to follow a school routine and comfortable separation from parents. It's truly prepared him for school." – **parent, 2022**

"She did not know anything about English language. She learned many words. She started making friends and basic sentences in English to communicate with people." – **parent, 2022**

"My child could not read any words at the beginning and now can read many words!! My family has been shocked with his progress as it has more than anyone could imagine for such a short period of time." – **parent, 2022**

"My first child who completed the program is in grade 1 and is reading several levels above his grade level expectations. For my current child in the program, they have become a lot more interested in letters and learning sounds after completing this program." – **parent, 2022**

"My daughter is starting to sound out words she sees in her environment. But most of all she is excited to go to preschool. And is looking forward to starting kindergarten in the fall." – **parent, 2022**

***A comprehensive version of this program report is available upon request.**



Get Ready for School.™

A Strong Start to reading™ program

*Based on the research of Dr. Luliana Baciu

Strong Start® Charitable Organization # 825948060 RR000

1-565 Kumpf Drive, Waterloo ON N2V 1K3

www.strongstart.ca | Tel: 519-743-9578 | Contact: info@strongstart.ca