

PARENT EDUCATION IN THE HOME

by Charo Alarcón

Charo Alarcón speaks about the work of Lumin Education in partnering with parents, Early Head Start, and a national program called Parents as Teachers (PAT) to come together to serve low-income families. Recognizing that parents cannot prioritize their child's education when they are putting all of their energy into meeting the basic needs of the family, Alarcón created a program to go into homes to educate and support parents beginning during pregnancy. The program encourages defined work spaces in the home and inviting the child to work. The child internalizes his perception of the world, whether it be good or bad, in the first years (even first weeks) of life. Emphasizing the importance of development during the first years of life, and offering practical tools for parents early on in parenthood to foster routine, freedom of choice, repetition, beauty and order, can transform "not just the child's life experience but entire communities."

About twenty-five years ago, Lumin Education realized that children needed much more than a beautiful school environment and well-trained, dedicated teachers. Just like many of you working in primary classrooms, we could tell the difference between those children who came from homes where parents were highly involved in their education and those who were not.

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We truly believe that all parents want to do their best and wish the best for their children. We know that if parents don't make better choices to support their children's development, it is not because they don't want to. It's because they don't know there are better choices available to them. Clearly, the education of the child begins with the education given by the parents long before entering school.

By the time the children join our primary classrooms, they already come with a life experience and a self-image completely formed. When a child comes to us with undeveloped basic skills such as language, gross and fine-motor coordination, and self-control, he is denied the opportunity to take full advantage of the primary prepared environment. Time that should be available for progressive growth must be used to remediate and catch up.

We understood the need to reach out to parents and partner with them to procure a richer, more wholesome life experience for their infants and toddlers. How could we help parents understand the life-long impact of the first three years of life? After much research on different possibilities, we opted to affiliate with the nationally recognized Parents as Teachers program. This is a home visiting curriculum that provides wonderful developmental information and parenting guidance. Parent educators are trained to access an online curriculum to give parents timely developmental information and provide instructions to create materials that support their children's whole development.

Lumin Education is committed to serving low-income families. Through our work with this community, we realized that in order for parents to focus on their children's education, their basic needs have to be met first. When a mother has to worry about whether she'll have the resources to feed her family, put a roof over their heads, and keep them healthy, parent education and child development don't make it to the list of priorities. A grant from Early Head Start made it possible for us to hire eighteen bilingual parent educators to serve families with children, from prenatal to age three, by providing weekly visits in their homes. Three full-time family advocates (social workers) connect families in need with agencies that provide free resources, ranging from food banks to legal assistance. A health services coordinator keeps track of the children's

medical records and ensures that each child in the program has a medical home and receives regular well-child check-ups and vaccinations. An education coordinator makes sure children who need special services such as speech, physical, or occupational therapy are enrolled in programs that provide those services for free or at low cost. A mental health specialist is available to work with families in crisis and make referrals to specialized agencies as needed. And one of the most innovative approaches to parent education at Lumin is the Fatherhood Initiative. This is a group of fathers who get together every week to learn about child development and their role, not just as providers for the family but as nurturing role models for their children and wives.

Combining the incredible resources offered by Early Head Start, the strong parent education curriculum from Parents as Teachers, and the insightful approach of the Montessori philosophy resulted in an effective recipe for success. We pulled together everything we needed to help parents exercise their power to be their child's first and most important teachers and become strong advocates of education for life.

Our work with parents begins in pregnancy, as we recognize that the overall physical and mental health of the baby will be greatly impacted by the woman's health. A pregnant woman receives one home visit per month. Her parent educator shares information about the stage of development of the fetus, the changes in the woman's body, the importance of good nutrition and regular prenatal check-ups, the danger of using chemical substances, strategies to manage stress, and many other topics. The goal of these visits is to create awareness that she, the mother, *is* the prepared environment of her unborn child and to guide her in the process of making that environment as healthy as possible for her baby.

Unlike any other animal on the planet, humans don't come equipped with instincts to guide them in raising their young. Parenting is not an instinctive reaction or interaction. Although all of us have heard the term *maternal instinct*, that's mostly just a figure of speech. The hormonal changes in the mother's body do aid the development of maternal care by making the mother more susceptible to respond to many of the baby's cues. For example, those of

us who have children know how acute our hearing becomes once the baby is born. It can be the middle of the night and we might be sound asleep, but if that baby makes the slightest sound, our eyes pop right open. And when that newborn cries, the mother immediately feels very distinct sensations in her breasts signaling meal time for the baby. But having a physiological reaction to the baby's cues does not guarantee that the mother will know how to give the most nurturing and beneficial response to support her child's healthy development.

That's where our parent educators come in. We know that although there is no such thing as maternal or paternal instinct, parents do seem to have a sensitive period to develop an ineffable sensitivity for understanding child development and developing parenting skills. It is during pregnancy and the first three years of life that parents are most receptive to guidance on how to understand their baby and how to develop effective parenting skills.

One of the most important, and certainly most impactful, stages in child and parenting development is the symbiotic period that takes place during the first eight weeks of life. It is characterized by a flowing and, hopefully, nurturing interdependence between mother and child.

At a physiological level, baby depends on mother for survival altogether; and mother depends on baby for a speedy and natural return to hormonal balance. For example, breastfeeding produces natural contractions in the uterus that help it return to its original size and position. The quantity of milk consumed by the baby in each feeding determines the quantity and quality of milk produced for the next feeding. The mother offers vital sustenance in the form of breast milk, and the baby, by taking the milk, helps the mother's body return to hormonal balance.

At a psychological level, mom continues to be the prepared environment for baby, but now she is much more than just the physical environment. She also is the social-emotional environment in which the child will develop the first psychological pillar that will define his entire outlook on life and the world: basic trust in the environment. The development of this basic trust marks the newborn's



transition from the biological to the psychological birth in which the child achieves a basic body-mind integration and acquires a fundamental knowledge about the environment.

When the child's physical and emotional needs are met in a timely and loving fashion, the child perceives the environment (the world) as a safe place and views himself as a valued individual. He learns to trust that when he asks for help, he will receive it and feels empowered by his ability to assert his needs. The child learns to associate the discomfort of need for food, attention, mental stimulus, etc., with the pleasure of having his needs met. By the same token, a child whose attempts to communicate his needs gets no response, or worse they get a hurtful response, will perceive the world as a violent and uncaring environment. Depending on the child's temperament, he may develop a sense of helplessness and choose to withdraw. He

may even resort to aggression and violence to interact with it. The perception of the nature of the world developed during these first few weeks of life, good or bad, will define the child's entire outlook on life. Does that mean that there is no hope for children who are unfortunate enough to be born in undesirable home situations? No, there's always hope. But we must remember, the absorbent mind is at work. It will take in the good, the bad, and the ugly and process it as true. Through therapy, supportive interventions, and a good supply of positive experiences later in life, an individual can learn to respond to or cope with challenging circumstances in socially acceptable and productive ways. But the initial emotional reaction (even when not acted upon) will be the one established during the symbiotic period.

We all have seen the child that has a hard time separating from mother, choosing work, or interacting with other children. We all have met that child that seems to be on a mission to pick a fight or that little one who cannot wait for his turn and will take things away from other children by force. These types of behaviors can often be traced back to the symbiotic period and the first two years of life. The time of the psychological birth is crucial in the development of the child's personality, and, sadly, it is the time when adults, even loving, caring adults, give the least amount of attention and positive stimulation to that developing personality. There seems to be a widespread misconception that newborns can't do anything, don't know anything, are not aware of anything, and won't remember anything about their first few weeks of life. Child psychology informs us otherwise. The memories of the newborn and the child of up to two years of age don't belong to the cognitive realm. These memories exist in the individual at a cellular level that cannot be explained with words or images because at the time they were formed, the child had no command of the language or long-term memory. But the emotional imprint of those memories, good or bad, will remain embedded in the child's psyche forever.

Part of the mission of the parent educator is to bring this fact to the forefront of the parent's awareness while offering guidance to provide the best possible life experience for the child. Parents learn about the importance of gentle touch and mindful handling of the baby. They learn to create materials that capture the baby's attention

and encourage her to move and discover possibilities of interaction with the environment. They learn to observe their babies, identify developmental needs, and respond accordingly.

The Parents as Teachers (PAT) program supports and promotes cultural sensitivity. It provides training and resources for parent educators to honor, celebrate and work within each family's cultural background while emphasizing play as the vehicle to nurture the bond between parents and children. Their well-thought out and beautifully presented online curriculum offers parents invaluable information to support their children's learning process at each stage of development. PAT gives us the *what*: what is important to share with parents. The Montessori approach gives us the *how*.

We took the PAT home visit model and infused it with Montessori principles to help parents provide developmentally appropriate learning experiences at home while fostering the child's natural need to be independent.

THE MONTESSORI HOME VISIT

Up until about six years ago, we were adhering to the PAT home visit model where we show up at the home visit with a big bag full of activities for the child and a folder full of handouts to share with the parents. This is a great model to encourage parents to play with their children, and when parents have a parent educator in their home once a week for an hour and a half, they rapidly develop a close relationship of trust and mutual respect.

After a few months of making home visits, I realized there was so much more we could be sharing with parents. To maximize the impact the weekly PAT activities had in the children's development, the children would have to work with them regularly and consistently.

My Montessori certifications include assistants to infancy and lower elementary. Years before working as a parent educator, I was the guide in an infant community for seven years, then taught lower elementary for eight years. I have first-hand experience of the positive results obtained with the Montessori approach on child development. I wondered what would happen if I started introducing

Montessori presentations from the infant community to my home visits. Of course, if I was going to give a Montessori presentation, I would need a proper work space for the child, and the child would have to have free access to choosing the work. Additionally, the activity would have to stay in the home so mom could work with the child and mom would have to understand the value of fostering independence at this early stage of the child's life. Through trial and error, I created a Montessori mentoring program to share with parent educators the basic principles of the Montessori philosophy, give them ideas of how to transfer these principles to parents, and how to make modifications to the home environment. The goal is to provide their children with learning experiences that would not just support motor, cognitive, and language development but would also foster independence as well as the development of social skills through lessons in grace and courtesy.

The idea is not to give parents a full-blown Montessori training or turn their homes into Montessori classrooms. Those would be unrealistic expectations. The home is an environment that must be functional for people from birth to old age. It must respond to everyone's needs, not just the baby or toddler's. And mother is not a Montessori teacher whose only job is to guide her child's learning experience. More than likely, she has other children, a home to take care of, meals to prepare, clothes to wash, errands to run, and so forth.

I picked four Montessori principles that I thought could have the greatest impact on the development of the birth to three child and that would be easy to model for parents:

1. Predictable routines
2. Freedom of choice
3. Possibility of repetition
4. Beauty and order

The first step was to create a structure for the visit and make it predictable by giving the child points of reference that could help him understand the flow of the visit. We provide a "work cycle" to make the expectations clear so that he could begin to

develop self-governance and so the mother could see the value of a predictable routine.

Transporting Materials

The way we transport our materials to and from the visit became a point of reference for the child. All parent educators use the same style of tote bag. This might seem like a trivial detail, but in our program it is not uncommon to switch families from one parent educator to another due to an extended leave of absence such as maternity leave. When the child learns to connect the bag with the opportunity to work independently, the transition to a new parent educator is more manageable.

Greeting the Family

The simple act of greeting the family became a lesson in grace and courtesy. Many parent educators were used to greeting mom with a handshake or a hug and then pick-up the child lifting him up in the air with enthusiastic and effusive greetings. Now we greet the child in the same manner we greet the adults, with a handshake or a hug making sure everyone gets the same kind of greeting, thus modeling socially acceptable behaviors.

Promoting healthy habits is part of our mission, and we start by making hand washing part of our arrival routine in the home. To ensure this practice is presented in a consistent manner, parent educators carry hand soap and paper towels in small containers that toddlers can open easily. They place them on a tray that the child carries to the bathroom or kitchen sink. Everyone, mother, child, and parent educator wash their hands using these materials.

Parents are more receptive when they can clearly see the impact of purposeful work on their child's development while the parent educator explains how each developmental stage is the foundation for subsequent stages. Parent educators guide parents in learning the nuances of objective observation while sharing basic principles of child development, thus giving them the tools to identify and respond to the child's developmental needs.

Setting Up Activities

Not all the families we serve have an extra space or shelf that can be used to display the materials, so we use a cloth table runner of a solid color that can be placed on the couch, a coffee table, or the floor. The only consideration is that it must be at a height where the child can clearly see and reach the materials. All the materials come out of the bag at the same time to provide freedom of choice to the child and they are presented in baskets, trays, or boxes that the child can successfully carry to his work space.

Setting Up a Work Space

A few of the families we visit have a child-size table and chair that the child can use to work. Most families don't have them, and depending on the materials chosen for the visit, it is necessary for the parent educator to bring along a work rug or breakfast tray to appoint the child's work space.

This work space serves several purposes. First, it serves as a point of reference as the child is used to playing with his toys all around the house. After a few visits, the child understands the clear expectation that the materials belong on the shelf or on the work space and nowhere else.

Second, it gives the child the opportunity to practice control of his body as he sits down to do his work. Third, mom gets to see the child's response to a predictable prepared environment, clear expectations, and consistent routines.

For infants not yet walking, we use a "tummy time" blanket made of fabrics with different textures, and the materials are placed a few inches from one side of the blanket to encourage the baby to move and reach them.

Inviting the Child to Work

Parent educators use a song or a poem of their choice to announce the beginning of the "work cycle." They use hand movements to give the younger toddlers the opportunity to follow along even if they can't say the words yet. The song or poem ends with move-

ments that leave the child in a sitting position or a ready-to-work posture.

There will be four or five activities on the shelf that have been presented in previous visits and are familiar to the child. This gives her the opportunity to experience freedom of choice and independent work. During the first few visits, the child receives lessons on how to carry materials from the shelf to the work space. She begins to understand the expectation of working with one activity at a time and returning materials to the shelf before choosing a different one. The child is introduced to the concept of “beginning, middle, and end” of an activity where the end of the activity is when she returns it to the shelf.

In each visit, the parent educator introduces a new activity not to the child but to mom, so she may offer it to the child in the time between visits. Parents are instructed on the basic considerations to give presentations to toddlers: (1) Isolate the concept you are trying to teach. Any activity can be used to teach a variety of concepts. For example, a shape sorter can be used to identify geometric shapes, to learn the names of the colors, to count, etc. We understand that parents cannot afford to buy or create a different piece of material



for each concept they want to teach. We do ask that they choose one concept to work on first before introducing any others. (2) Move just one hand at a time. Toddlers cannot follow the different movements of each hand to complete an activity. Moving just one hand at a time helps the child understand each movement and increases the chances of success in his efforts to imitate it. (3) If your hands are moving, your mouth is silent. Toddlers are masters of observation, but they can only observe one thing at a time. Either they focus on your hands or they focus on your mouth. (4) After presenting the activity, engage the child with the work by saying, "Now it's your turn." We have noticed that many parents have the impulse to correct or prevent the child from making "mistakes." Giving the parent a "turn" to remodel for the child the proper way to use the material helps them control that impulse. We ask them to make a mental note of the parts of the activity the child might not be understanding, and once the child finishes her work, ask for a turn to show it again. Then the parent can call attention to the part the child seems to be missing, "Watch me. Watch my hands."

Sharing Information with Mom

Parent educators use the time when the child is working independently to share important developmental information with parents. This is a great opportunity to tie the information from the handouts to the actual activity of the child. Parents are more receptive when they can clearly see the impact of purposeful work on their child's development while the parent educator explains how each developmental stage is the foundation for subsequent stages. Parent educators guide parents in learning the nuances of objective observation while sharing basic principles of child development, thus giving them the tools to identify and respond to the child's developmental needs.

End of the Visit

Experiencing predictability and freedom of choice to work with the beautifully presented activities is such a joy for the child that announcing the end of the visit can result in cries of protest and temper tantrums. Here again, we use a song or poem as a point of reference to help the child prepare for the transition and, depending on the child's age and attention span, we invite her to help return the materials to the parent educator's bag.

The introduction of Montessori principles to our parent education program is yielding the results we hoped for. Four years after we opened Lumin Bachman Lake Community School, we started hearing from the principals in the neighborhood elementary public schools. They could tell the difference between the children that had been in our program and those who hadn't. The children whose parents had participated in our home visiting program showed better developed executive functions as well as better social, emotional, and cognitive skills. The impact was felt not just in the children's development but in the parents as well. Parents from our program were more involved in school events, had higher attendance to parent-teacher conferences, and did more volunteer work for the school.

Parent education transforms not just the child's life experience but entire communities. The wisdom of the basic principle of the Montessori philosophy, "Help me do it myself," applies not just to children but to all human beings. Parents want to learn to teach their children themselves. All they need is a loving, caring, knowledgeable parent educator that can take the *what* of developmental information a step further and give them the *how*.

