



Parent Companion Program

A Support Program for Parents of Young Children

The national longitudinal study of children and youth, *Growing up in Canada* (1996), reported that positive parenting had a significant impact on children despite living in at-risk situations. Family situations considered at risk included single parenthood; teenage parenthood; low income; lack of social support; family dysfunction; being recent immigrants; having four or more children; difficult temperament of the child; and prenatal problems. Risk factors are of great concern because *children exposed to four or more risk factors demonstrate dramatic reductions in their abilities and their competence level over time, and they often have a diminished IQ and increased social problems.*¹ The *Growing up in Canada* survey reported that *parenting practices significantly contributed to child outcomes and acted as a protective factor for children in at-risk environments. Children in at-risk situations who enjoyed positive parenting practices achieved scores within the average range for children in Canada.*²

To encourage the development of positive parenting practices, the **Parent Companion Program** was established in **January 1994 by Mothercraft Ottawa**. Modelled after the successful **Birth Companion Program**, the **Parent Companion Program** matches a trained volunteer, one-on-one, with a young, single, or otherwise isolated parent. The Companion provides emotional support and encourages the parent to set goals, utilize community resources and plan for the future. The work of a Parent Companion varies with the needs of each individual family. This support is unique in that it includes home-based visiting along with normalizing experiences (visits to library, parks, regular doctor's visits, museums and so on) and can last up to two years. Parents have, time and time again, reported that they benefit from this comprehensive mentoring relationship. Options such as parenting classes, books and videos all assume that a new parent has a base set of skills to build on. Many of the parents in our program are not sure how to budget or cook a meal and may be unaware of the importance of routine and reading bedtime stories, simple opportunities that were missed in their own childhood. The volunteer also encourages the parent to upgrade their education, enter training programs and access quality child care. The obvious result is one of future independence from social assistance, positive parenting and children who are given the opportunity to develop skills so they may become happy, self-sufficient adults.

This program is offered to the parent at no charge and referrals come from a variety of sources, including the parents themselves. They want to parent differently than they were parented but are not sure how to do this.

Some areas in which our volunteers are trained to help are: *parenting skills, behaviour management, problem solving, accessing community resources, health, safety and nutrition for themselves and their children, stress management, setting goals, and returning to school or work. The volunteers are also taught to watch for signs of major problems such as abuse, motivation problems and depression and are able to assist the parent in finding support in these areas.*

Additional program supports include outings, informal drop-in activities, workshops, and newsletters.

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- (1) Sannon, A., F. Oberklaid, R. Pedlow and M. Prior. 1991 "Risk indicators: assessment of infancy predictors of preschool behavioural maladjustment." *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 32:609-626.
- (2) Lanky, S., K. K. Tam. *Growing up in Canada: National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth*, pg. 109.

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