

The Wings of Early Education

In Dublin's inner city, parents and children find a new resource for learning.

Isabelle curls into her mum's lap, eyes wide with anticipation as the pages of "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" take her through the life stages of an ambitious little butterfly. Sitting next to them on the sofa is Jilyn, from the National College of Ireland's Early Learning Initiative (ELI). Jilyn comes to their home twice-weekly as part of the Parent-Child Home Programme. The initiative, with roots in Boston and funded in part by a Flagship Grant from The Ireland Funds, mentors and coaches parents to support the early education and development of their young children.



Early Learning Initiative
National College of Ireland

Parent Child Home Programme (PCHP)





“The program is brilliant.

Isabelle is getting on great! Her language is really coming on and she's flying with the books. She just loves them and when I read a story wrong, she corrects me. I've learned a lot from the visits. I now know how to read to my child.”

— Isabelle and her mother, Christine



Working in marginalized communities of Dublin such as the Docklands, the program has demonstrated a proven track record for increasing educational development in children. 82% of children exhibited an increase in positive verbal interaction over a two-year period. Language skills have been shown to significantly increase and 83% of children meet their developmental milestones once in the program. Research shows that intervention in early childhood is the most effective way of influencing the success of children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Each family receives an average of 48 home visits per year. As a result, trust is built between the parent, the child, and the Home Visitor. To the child it may seem like a terrific hour of play. However Home Visitors are trained and supported by the National College of Ireland's Early Learning Initiative to teach parents innovative ways to interact constructively with their children. A new book or educational toy is introduced at intervals and remains with the family, building a “library” of materials for the child and parent to grow with.

Some of the Home Visitors and administrators have grown up in the very communities they now serve which is an added benefit for all involved. “I'm from the south side,” says Michelle Moore, a Coordinator at ELI. “So forty years ago I would've been one of the children we help now. Because of the program, the families here really feel as if they are part of the community and when they visit, they feel as if the college is theirs. For many of them it is the first time they have ever been inside a college.”

The National College of Ireland runs additional programs that mentor older children to aspire to third-level education. Through corporate volunteers and local partners, hundreds of local children now engage in activities that instill in them the excitement of going to college. The hope is that the spark can grow into an excitement for lifelong learning.

The Flagship grant from The Ireland Funds will provide core support for two more years of the Parent-Child Home Programme. “We have been very grateful for the latest support of The Ireland Funds Flagship Grant,” says Dr. Josephine Bleach, Director of ELI. “Interestingly, almost seven years ago we received Ireland Fund support as well. That support bought toys and books for local families. It's amazing to be able to tell you that we've gone back and learned that those toys and books are still being used by their siblings. You have given families a resource that they really appreciate.”

To Isabelle, the baby caterpillar in her book gets big and grows beautiful wings. The Ireland Funds believe that early learning is the key to growing educational wings for children in inner city Dublin and beyond.