

# Learning in the Early Years: Connecting Research to Practice

**Grantor:** The Lawson Foundation

**Grantee:** The Hincks-Dellcrest Institute

**Summary:** Promoting learning and development in early childhood



Nineteen-ninety one was a pivotal year for The Lawson Foundation of London, Ontario when the third generation assumed leadership. Second-generation President, Tom Lawson, and his sister Ruth, had focused their philanthropy primarily on two Ontario communities: London and Oakville.

“My father was a back-pocket philanthropist,” says Connie Gardiner, Tom’s eldest daughter and the President of the Foundation from 1996-2003, but “it’s hard work to give away money and do it well.” And the family wanted to do it well. The Lawson family members, descendants of Tom and Ruth, held a retreat, guided by a facilitator, to talk about their shared values around philanthropy and about what they wished to accomplish as a Foundation. From this retreat emerged a new strategic focus: early childhood. “We were all parents. We all wanted to be involved with a project that affected the very early years of a child’s life,” says Gardiner.

The Lawson Directors began to learn everything they could about how children could have the best start in life. Their exploration put them in contact with leaders and organizations in the field of early childhood development. The Directors learned about the scientific evidence

emerging from research on early brain development that documented the process of rapid brain cell development during the first five years of life and the vulnerability of children during that period. They also learned that the kind of care and stimulation children receive during those years is critical to children's learning and development.

**P**utting research into practice was one of the Foundation's new goals. The Foundation wanted children to benefit from new knowledge as soon as possible. "We wanted to be pro-active and preventative. Our interest was to put new knowledge into practice rather than fund research," says Gardiner.

## We wanted to be pro-active and preventative. Our interest was to put new knowledge into practice rather than fund research.

**T**he Hincks-Dellcrest (now the Gail Appel) Institute of Toronto, focuses on children's mental health and has done successful intervention work with parents and their children under five who pose challenging developmental problems. As part of their quest for information about early childhood, some of the Lawson Directors, including Gardiner, saw a television program on the work of Hincks-Dellcrest. This program gave life to the Directors' exploration. It also allowed Connie Gardiner to connect her long-time summer friend, Freda Martin, to the important

work of the Hincks-Dellcrest Institute. Before that, "we were just two mums with children at cottages on the same lake," recalls Dr. Martin, who is Executive Director of the Institute.

**T**he Lawson Foundation's Directors met with Martin to seek her advice on funding a long-term project. For Martin, the question was theoretical. "I discussed in some detail how I would go about setting up a program, exploring what area you might want to look at and who you might want to talk to...And in the course of the meeting, the Directors asked lots of questions about the Institute," laughs Dr. Martin. This meeting turned out to be Martin's informal proposal to The Lawson Foundation to manage a Canada-wide, community-based initiative focusing on language and cognition in the early years.

**D**r. Martin and Dr. Clyde Hertzman from the University of British Columbia and the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research were invited to become advisors for the Early Years project. The advisors' first task was to help identify a specific area to apply the new knowledge. The decision was made to focus on early language and cognitive development. In 1997, The Lawson Foundation made a five-year, \$5 million commitment to its new



project, TLC<sup>1</sup>: Thinking, Listening and Communicating, Tender Loving Care, and The Learning Centres.

The Foundation contracted with the Hincks-Dellcrest Institute to lead and manage TLC. Seven sites within communities across Canada were picked for TLC, ranging from rural to urban, and low income to high-income families. The settings where the programs were to be applied included child care centres, preschools, family resource centres, neighbourhood or community centres, and the children's own homes. "Each of the sites was chosen because it already had a good program going. It [TLC] wasn't starting something from scratch. It was an enhanced add-on to something that was already happening," says Gardiner.

The primary goals of TLC were to stimulate language and cognitive development among children from birth to five years, and to help professionals and parents learn useful and effective strategies that created the conditions for learning, in the communities where the children lived. Gardiner describes TLC as "an approach. It's stimulation at the right time and in the right way."

Each TLC site was expected to develop its own approach, based on the factors that support optimal growth in children: "appropriate stimulation, supportive structures and a secure, reflective, non-intrusive but reliably present relationship," says Martin. "Local sites were challenged to develop pro-

grams they thought would work best to enhance early language and thinking for the children and families in their communities. We asked them to justify their approach based on current research and best practice." She adds, "We were all breaking new ground and feeling our way. It was a new field. We were learning what would work and who we could trust."

Sharing and learning were important aspects of TLC. Every year during the five-year life of the project, a three-day symposium was held. These events brought together two or three representatives from each TLC site, the project managers, the national advisory group, and the Foundation's President and Executive Director. "We were always very pleased with what we were seeing and hearing," says Gardiner.

The TLC management team visited the sites at least annually to meet with each team, to see first-hand the strategies being developed and implemented, and, later, to help teams with their project evaluations.

TLC managers are now engaged in synthesizing each site's evaluation findings. This is a challenge because sites had different programs

---

<sup>1</sup> In the context of this story, TLC<sup>3</sup> will be referred to simply as TLC. In French, *Tandem: Langage et Cognition, Tendresse, Lien et Communication, Théorie en Liaison avec la Communauté.*

and therefore different evaluation plans and outcomes. Nevertheless, Gardiner points out that, despite the evaluation challenges, the project "has already changed a whole group of people who are involved in the early childhood field. They've seen the value of early stimulation and a new way to work together. And more specifically, staff members at the TLC sites report many positive changes in the children and their parents."

**T**he TLC managers are engaged in disseminating and communicating findings. A nation-wide videoconference in November 2003 brought together sites, government representatives, and a range of funders to discuss how to spend scarce dollars effectively, using TLC as a model. Other evaluation conferences, presentations and print materials are forthcoming.

**I**n all seven sites, early learning programs are now fully incorporated into the organizations with many spin-off projects on the go. Federal Early Childhood Development Initiative funds support some of the programs. In British Columbia, the initiative has evolved into province-wide parent-child Mother Goose associations. In Nova Scotia, the project has evolved into TLC4, in a government funded, province-wide initiative to facilitate speech

and language specialists to work in new ways directly in the community. "The programs are evolving and growing, and that is more important than the continuation of the initial program," says Martin.

**A**s the TLC project nears completion, Martin has had time to reflect on the project. "The Lawson Foundation approached this project as a learning partner and collaborator, allowing reasonable flexibility for all participants to evolve." Much as a good caregiver works with a child, the Foundation worked with its grant recipient, recognizing the need for a secure, reflective, non-intrusive but reliably present relationship. It provided a stable, supportive framework, providing consistent program and evaluation funding for the sites and funding for the project management team to provide leadership, monitoring, and support. All of the relationships created during the TLC project, among the Foundation, TLC managers, site teams, and advisors were marked by deep engagement and commitment, and by autonomy and trust. Dr. Martin concludes, "the process The Lawson Foundation followed is a model to other foundations of how to spend scarce dollars effectively."

**Much as a good caregiver works with a child, the Foundation worked with its grant recipient, recognizing the need for a secure, reflective, non-intrusive but reliably present relationship.**

**For more information visit the Foundation  
Web Site: [www.lawson.on.ca](http://www.lawson.on.ca)**