

Aug, 2000



Florida HIPPY #3

Research Brief

Training & Technical Assistance Center for
Florida's Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters

Employability Skills That Matter!

The value of job training opportunities for HIPPY paraprofessionals

Introduction

The Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) is a home-based, early intervention program that helps parents teach their three, four, and five-year-old children. This free service is delivered by HIPPY paraprofessionals who live in targeted communities. Part-time paraprofessionals carry a caseload of 10-12 families while full-time HIPPY paraprofessionals will see 18-20 families. HIPPY participation mandates these activities:

- HIPPY coordinators conduct weekly in-service training sessions for paraprofessional to role-play the current week's HIPPY activity packets and to discuss the progress of families.
- HIPPY paraprofessionals visit parents in their homes biweekly to role-play HIPPY activity packets and discuss any educational or parenting concerns.
- Parents work on HIPPY activity packets for 15-20 minutes with their child for five days each week.
- Every other week, parents attend group meetings with other parents and HIPPY paraprofessionals.

Conceptualized as a parent empowerment and early childhood education program, the personal and professional development of paraprofessionals through HIPPY training opportunities was a benefit that was not anticipated during the development and initial implementation of the HIPPY model in Israel 30 years ago. As HIPPY expanded worldwide, comprehensive program objectives were articulated that specify paraprofessionals as a group that is targeted to receive benefits from HIPPY participation as well as children, parents, families, employers, and communities.

Of the eleven objectives of the HIPPY program, two directly address paraprofessional development:

- Providing parents with the opportunity of becoming paraprofessionals in their own community.
- Helping paraprofessionals develop skills and work experience needed to compete successfully for other jobs in local labor markets.

Research Questions

- **How does the HIPPY model support the development of employability skills in paraprofessionals?**
- **Which employability skills targeted through HIPPY training opportunities have paraprofessionals identified as most valuable?**

HIPPY paraprofessionals are typically recruited from the existing pool of parents; they are familiar with HIPPY and eager to share benefits of the program with other children, parents, and families from their communities. New paraprofessionals are often re-entering the workforce after child-rearing with few marketable skills and little experience. HIPPY promotes the employment opportunities of paraprofessionals by providing them with education, skills training and work experience in a flexible, comfortable environment

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to provide evidence that HIPPY, a program primarily viewed as an initiative that serves children and families, is also a viable model for job training in populations with limited work experiences, few marketable skills, and a history of poverty and public assistance.

In light of recent literature that cites challenges and problems associated with job training programs serving mothers in welfare-to-work programs, HIPPY may provide:

- a model that directly addresses some of these issues,
- individuals with basic skills that make them ready to work and employable, and
- individuals with in-depth skill development to increase subsequent employment opportunities.

Method

This research brief is based upon data extracted from the Six Sites Study, including information from:

- paraprofessional surveys,
- paraprofessional focus groups, and
- coordinator interviews.

Paraprofessionals completed an Employability Skills Instrument developed for use in program evaluation and as a planning and training tool. This instrument is comprised of ten Skill Areas with eight to ten skill items. The instrument measures gains in employability skills and also queries respondents about skills that are most valued and targeted for improvement.

Thirty-one paraprofessionals completed paraprofessional surveys and participated in 120 minute focus groups. Six coordinators, two supervisors, and two assistant coordinators were interviewed.

Key demographic characteristics of the paraprofessionals include:

- Mean age = 36.7 years
- Mean tenure = 20.2 months

Findings

How does the HIPPY model support the development of employability skills in paraprofessionals?

An article in the Economist (1997, March 8) noted that although welfare reform initiatives provide tax credits for employers who hire welfare recipients, employers would rather hire someone who is competent and motivated than spend time and resources preparing and training welfare recipients for employment.

By the very nature of the job, HIPPY provides paraprofessionals with:

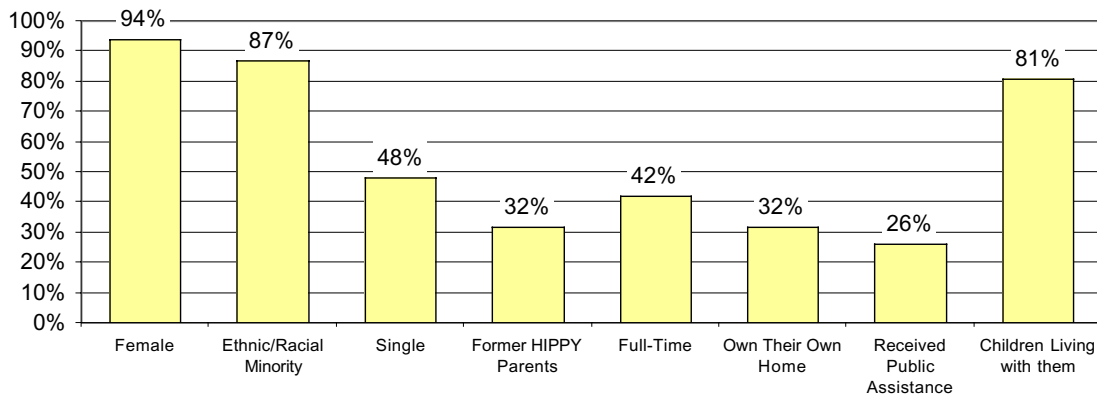
1. **the basic skills that make them ready to work** (e.g., organization and preparedness, personal development and presentation, professional work habits, interpersonal skills),
2. **opportunities for skill development that prepare them for subsequent positions that are more demanding in terms of initiative and responsibility** (e.g., leadership, office/business skills, oral expression, seeking information, thinking and learning, written expression & reading),
3. **ongoing training from coordinators and direct and indirect feedback** from families and community members that ensures:
 - ▶ skill mastery,
 - ▶ self-confidence in their abilities and
 - ▶ self-efficacy in knowing that they are the catalysts for positive change.

Lundgren & Cohen (1999) observed a mismatch between the skills in demand in the entry-level urban labor market and the skill levels of large numbers of the urban poor. Lundgren and Cohen (1999) noted that existing job training programs are unable to ameliorate this problem because employers cited poor work habits as a key problem.

HIPPY is one program that may be able to bridge the gap between employer needs and available, albeit inexperienced and impoverished potential employees. HIPPY specifically targets individuals who may be viewed as somewhat unemployable or a poor match for traditional entry level jobs. HIPPY provides ongoing, weekly training through:

- direct instruction by program coordinators on paraprofessional responsibilities (e.g., showing up on time, making appointments, professionalism, using a calendar and scheduling, how to complete requisite paperwork and record-keeping),
- debriefing and training at staff in-service training sessions (e.g., problem-solving situations with client families, professional presentation, providing courteous customer service, learning about community resources, navigating social services, using computers)

HIPPY Paraprofessional Characteristics Reported in Survey (N=31)



- weekly role playing (e.g., how to explain lessons to parents, instructing strategies, word choice/vocabulary, reading aloud, creating extension activities), and
- conducting parent group meetings (e.g., organization, assuming leadership roles, speaking in front of groups, working on a team, developing patience with others).

In addition, HIPPY paraprofessionals surveyed indicated that since becoming a paraprofessional:

- 42% (13/31) have participated in other job training programs
- 48% (15/31) have enrolled in school or taken classes for personal/professional development or towards a certificate or diploma.

Training and educational efforts in which paraprofessionals have participated (in addition to HIPPY) have included:

- ▶ Child Development Associate (CDA) Certificate
- ▶ Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN)
- ▶ Computer Workshops
- ▶ Health & Rehabilitative Services Child Care Course
- ▶ Dept. of Children & Families (DCF) Training —30 hrs
- ▶ Parent Training Academy Courses
- ▶ Health Courses (e.g., HIV Course, First AID Course, CPR Course)
- ▶ Anger Resolution Course
- ▶ Domestic Violence Advocate Training
- ▶ AmeriCorps Training
- ▶ Child Care Classes
- ▶ Parenting Training
- ▶ Enrolled for GED
- ▶ Early Childhood Education Courses
- ▶ Enrolled in University/College Courses
- ▶ Completed College Courses
- ▶ Graduated from College with degree
- ▶ B.S. in Early Childhood and Primary Education

Seninger (1998) observed single parenthood, teenage parenthood, and lack of work experience as factors that negatively impact the ability of mothers on public assistance in securing employment. As demographic data indicate (see Method), many HIPPY paraprofessionals have successfully overcome these and other challenges. HIPPY may be an ideal welfare-to-work program because no requirements or

assumptions are made about applicants' prior life course, work experiences, or employability skills prior to employment. HIPPY recruits paraprofessionals from the communities to be served, provides all of the ongoing supports and training necessary for them to do their jobs well, and sets paraprofessionals up for success (not failure). HIPPY coordinators:

- Continually encourage paraprofessionals to take advantage of training and educational opportunities,
- Help paraprofessionals to negotiate, organize, prioritize, and problem-solve their family, work, and educational responsibilities, and
- Encourage paraprofessional initiative and creativity as they provide opportunities for paraprofessionals to take on roles of increasing responsibility and leadership.

Riemer (1997) asserted that one problem with many welfare-to-work programs is the low status of available positions. Nearly all HIPPY paraprofessionals had held jobs in the past, but most were very low status positions in the service industry with:

- significant repetition,
- no ongoing training,
- little opportunity for the mastery of new, marketable skills, and
- little room for advancement,

During focus groups, paraprofessionals commented on the high status of the HIPPY paraprofessional position in their communities. They reported that community members see HIPPY paraprofessionals as people:

- who are one of us and role models for us,
- who do something important and have a measurable impact on the community,
- who are well-known, approachable, and available to help with any problems, and who are knowledgeable about navigating community resources.

Through HIPPY, paraprofessionals remarked that they had come to see themselves as leaders in their communities. They noted that they are well-respected and the positions are high status, even though their wages may be associated with a lower status position. Indeed, many paraprofessionals expressed reluctance at moving up into positions that may be higher in pay, but that they viewed as lower in status, responsibility, and possibly satisfaction.

Which employability skills targeted through HIPPY training opportunities have paraprofessionals identified as most valuable?

In each of the ten skill areas on the Employability Skills Instrument, the 31 paraprofessionals were asked to select the one skill item that has been most valuable to them. This table shows the two skill items in each category that were selected with the highest frequency.

Skill Area	Most Frequently Selected Item	N	Second Most Frequently Selected Item	N
1. Interaction with Others	Giving positive feedback to others	4		
	Communicating effectively with supervisors and coordinators	4		
2. Leadership	Being a good role model for families	12	Modeling the behaviors I expect in others	5
3. Office/Business	Keeping records in order	12	Returning messages promptly	4
4. Oral Expression	Presenting information in front of large groups	7	Learning & using new words	4
			Using appropriate tone of voice or loudness	4
5. Organization & Preparedness	Arriving for Meetings/Appointments on Time	4		
	Arriving prepared and Ready to Begin	4		
	Using a Calendar to keep track of activities	4		
6. Personal Development & Presentation	Appearing confident and happy	5	Being confident in my abilities	4
7. Professional Work Habits	Accepting constructive criticism	6	Completing assigned tasks on time	4
			Keeping information confidential/no gossip	4
8. Seeking Information	Asking for clarification when I am confused	8	Staying informed about available community and family resources	6
9. Thinking & Learning	Being creative and innovative	7	Problem solving	5
10. Written Expression & Reading	Taking notes when someone is speaking	6	Enjoy reading books, magazines and newspapers	5

- Paraprofessionals indicated that detailed record-keeping was a skill that was a new and valuable skill. HIPPY requires significant record-keeping (e.g., weekly home visiting plan, charting progress, hours, mileage) and provides ample opportunity for the development of documentation skills.
- In focus groups, paraprofessionals commented that skill items associated with organization and preparedness were most valuable in the current positions. Scheduling families, keeping track of progress, and preparing materials were critical for being a good paraprofessional.
- Many paraprofessionals elaborated that their attitudes changed because of HIPPY participation. Prior to HIPPY, some indicated that they were not open to any type of criticism and were usually embarrassed to ask for clarification when they didn't understand something.
- Role-playing HIPPY packets with parents and being a role model for HIPPY families is part of the HIPPY paraprofessional job description. Paraprofessionals are provided with the opportunity (and supports) to develop and become community leaders.
- At parent group meetings, paraprofessionals learn to become comfortable speaking in front of groups of people. Role-playing during staff in-service training sessions helps them to develop courage and comfort and provides an opportunity for practice.
- Many paraprofessionals who have second jobs (55%, 17/31) indicated that they have come to realize the value of skills learned through HIPPY because they are using them in their other employment settings particularly skill areas of oral expression, organization & preparedness interacting with others, and leadership.

Implications for Research & Practice

- Paraprofessional training that is part of the HIPPY program may be able to bridge the gap between the entry-level employment needs of employers and the lack of basic and employability skills of entry-level workers that traditional job training programs have not addressed successfully.
- HIPPY helps paraprofessionals build basic skills which make them employable. Next, HIPPY helps paraprofessionals to develop traditional, higher level employability skills that would help them secure and sustain employment in other settings.
- Paraprofessionals are aware that HIPPY provides a unique opportunity to develop skills that make them more employable. They can identify these skills and value their impact on their personal and professional development.
- Findings from this preliminary investigation could be used by Florida HIPPY sites for:
 - ▶ program improvement related to paraprofessional training,
 - ▶ evidence-based grant writing and justification to funding agencies for expanded and continued support and funding, particularly with respect to parent involvement, paraprofessional training, welfare-to-work initiatives, and community building.

- A study to investigate changes in paraprofessionals using standardized measures (e.g., self-esteem, locus of control) through the course of their tenure as HIPPY paraprofessionals may be useful in understanding how the HIPPY training model prepares them for subsequent personal satisfaction and employment successes.
- Some paraprofessionals stay in the HIPPY program beyond the three-year guidelines whereas others leave HIPPY to assume new positions. To determine the HIPPY model's success with helping HIPPY paraprofessionals in the future employment endeavors, it is important to document:
 - ▶ The types of positions that former HIPPY paraprofessionals now hold,
 - ▶ The types of employers within each community that have hired former HIPPY paraprofessionals, and
 - ▶ How HIPPY training and experiences helped paraprofessionals secure and retain subsequent positions.

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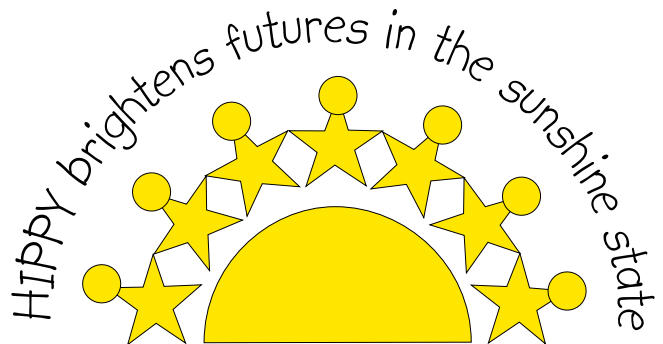
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Special Thanks to:

- **Coordinators, paraprofessionals, and supervisors** at the 18 Florida HIPPY sites and agencies for participation
- **Dr. Diane Powell & Dr. Glen Dunlap**, University of South Florida faculty, for ongoing advice and support.
- **Dr. Mary Lindsey, Florida HIPPY State Director**, for special vision and guidance through ten years of experience as a HIPPY coordinator.
- **Mr. Dabaram Rampersad, Florida HIPPY Assistant State Director and National HIPPY Trainer**, for assistance in project coordination.



About Florida HIPPY

The Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) is a home based, parent involvement program designed to help parents provide educational enrichment for their three, four, and five-year-old children.

The Florida HIPPY Training and Technical Assistance (T&TA) Center, based at the University of South Florida (USF), works in collaboration with HIPPY USA's National Office in New York to provide training, technical support, and guidance to all of the HIPPY programs in the state of Florida.

The Florida HIPPY T&TA Center, in conjunction with USF, HIPPY USA, and Florida HIPPY sites, began this research initiative to evaluate the efficacy of the HIPPY model, measure and describe changes in program participants, and provide evidence-based support for HIPPY programs.

Data from selected Florida HIPPY programs have been collected and analyzed. The purpose of these research briefs is to share knowledge on topics of interest with HIPPY stakeholders. Findings from this research may be used to develop "best practices" in service delivery, for program improvement and enhancement, to describe program functioning and impact to stakeholders, and to support program sustainability.

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