

# Learning English the family way

Studying English together in a special program at Havenwood Public School has helped a number of Vietnamese refugee families adjust to their new homeland this summer.

The unique program serves preschoolers, kindergarten to Grade 6 pupils and adults. Some families new to Canada have participants in all three sections of the course who can share the lessons they've learned when they return home following classes.

The program ended last Thursday and by all reports, was a tremendous success.

Perhaps the most dramatic examples of adjustment have come among pre-schoolers. "They just came in here as uptight and intense as you've ever seen anyone," says teacher Helen Helfernan of the 35 children. "As the course progresses, you can just see them relax as they become familiar with the activities." The classroom contains a sandbox, climbing area, games room and piano and offers the opportunity to get elbow-deep in glue and cardboard paper.

"The learning of language is a byproduct of that process but to see them relax when they get over their initial fear of school, oh that's something," says Helfernan.

Surveying the classroom on the last day of the course, she sighs and remarks, "now they're ready to learn anything. They can go into kindergarten in a relaxed frame of mind." In that way, the course provides an orientation to Canadian schools which doesn't have to be provided later in other classes.

One child who cried for two days straight and wouldn't venture from his mother's side was playing with other children and volunteering to paste and cut on the third day. "Even his mother doesn't believe it," says Helfernan.

There were some traumatic moments during some of the field trips which took the program's 156 students to the Metro Zoo, Bronte Park, the local bakery and to the firehall on Dixie Road.



**John Stewart**

A fireman disappeared behind an engine and reappeared in a few moments in full black uniform wearing an oxygen mask. There were some astonished gasps and some tears before the youngsters realized they were seeing the same friendly fireman they had talked to earlier. The children were also dubious about the room where the firemen's bunks were located: they were afraid someone was suggesting it was bedtime.

Loretta Meaker, co-ordinator of the program, says the students' progress has been remarkable in the four-week course. Students of all ages are allowed to use their native language at the start of the program. For most of the Vietnamese families, who make up about half of the students, that language is Chinese.

Once the students got used to experimenting with English without being severely reprimanded for errors, they come out of themselves, says Meaker, whose first language was Ukrainian. "My group is now using English all the time," she says.

With the thematic approach, students in all three sections of the course studied the same subjects, and could share their new discoveries over the dinner table.

Lydia Brown, one of three kindergarten to Grade 6 teachers, says a simple discussion about a can of tomatoes teaches valuable lessons.

"From that one can you are teaching reading, spelling, labelling and weight," she notes. One of the first things studied is the Mississauga Transit bus route which brings many of the students to class, some of them after a night of shift work. Peel's director of

education, John Fraser, has seen the program in operation and praises the "marvellous idea of putting parents and children together in one locale and using a theme that's applicable to both groups."

"They are gaining a vocabulary they can share. The course has been really well thought out," he says.

Meaker and the other teachers spent two months planning exactly what would happen. "It may look free and easy," says Meaker of the activities, but it is all highly structured.

As well as teaching language, the teachers say the course provides an introduction to the Canadian cultural experience, and removes the "mystique" many immigrants feel about the Canadian school system.

The experimental program may be expanded in the future.



Huy Cuong learns painting and English from Lisa Poirier, 16.

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