



INSTITUTE FOR INFANTS, CHILDREN & FAMILIES
Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services



35% of America's children are estimated to reach kindergarten with challenges so severe they interfere with learning and relationships¹. THE MISSION OF THE INSTITUTE IS TO CREATE A SAFETY NET FOR THE VULNERABLE 35% — TO CATCH, HOLD AND HELP THEM SO THEY FLOURISH, RATHER THAN FAIL.

RELATIONSHIPS FOR GROWTH AND LEARNING

Approximately 35% of children arrive in kindergarten unready to learn. Waiting until they are five years old to address problems that are already evident in preschool misses a critical opportunity to make the greatest difference in their lives and those of their families — as well as for our schools and society as a whole.

Children's social and emotional capacities develop interactively with their cognitive and linguistic capacities and are significantly influenced by their early relationships and experiences, first with the significant adults in their lives and then with their peers. The *RfGL* program is based on developing those relationship-capacities and motivational learning experiences for those children who most need them.

What is the RfGL program?

A team composed of preschool staff, RfGL senior clinicians and students in our advanced RfGL Training Program (playgroup leaders) carefully observes all the children in a class across a variety of situations. They identify children who are not learning, socializing or functioning at age-level, assess the nature and severity of their problems and develop action-plans for them. For some, the action-plan includes participation in RfGL's peer playgroup therapy program.

Playgroup leaders work with three or four children out of the classroom twice a week. They foster the trusting relationships that enable them to coach the children in communicating and cooperating with peers and adults and expressing and containing their emotions. Through skilled questioning about, and many "re-dos" of, hurtful, antagonistic or inappropriate behavior, they help children to understand each others' needs, behave fairly and accept differences in each other. In effect, the playgroup leaders teach the children how to function as a member of a group and create a positive interpersonal and stimulating-learning environment. They help the children develop the capacities that are critical to school-readiness.

The ECGT team also forms partnerships with parents and school personnel, working to create a comprehensive, fully-integrated support-system focused on the healthy social-emotional-cognitive development of the children in both school and home environments.

Does the RfGL Program work?

NYC's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) funded evaluation of a four-year RfGL pilot in three Head Start centers. Conducted by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health, among its findings were that

- RfGL screenings accurately identified both diagnosable and at-risk children; 98% of their parents agreed to Rx.
- After one or two school-years in RfGL, parent and teacher reports ***and*** psychological assessment instruments all agreed that the treated children had made significant, demonstrable progress across social, emotional, communication, self-regulation and play domains, ***in many cases catching up to their peers.***

With enthusiastic appreciation to the Harris Foundation and the Lynn & Philip Straus Foundation for their ongoing support and guidance!

Additional Information about RfGL's *RELATIONSHIPS FOR GROWTH AND LEARNING*

Where do you offer the program?

Currently, the *Relationships for Growth and Learning* Program operates in two daycare and three Head Start centers. The centers serve children of diverse ethnicities—largely African and Caribbean-American, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Haitian Creole and new Chinese immigrants—from poor families, living in under-served, dysfunctional neighborhoods and working in service-sector minimum-wage jobs.

How many children have been screened and participate in playgroups?

On average, we annually

- Screen approximately 885 children and identify children at-risk of school failure due to social and emotional challenges that interfere with cognitive development and ability to succeed, and
- Work with approximately 80 children in 23 playgroups facilitated by 16 candidates in our advanced RfGL Training Program (who often include preschool staff).

What else does the program do?

It provides support, education and team-development for all school staff members, plus guidance and support for children's families.

Who are the playgroup leaders?

Relationships for Growth and Learning playgroup leaders are students in a two-year advanced professional-development program that couples intensive classwork with a supervised apprenticeship. The program is solidly rooted in the mental-health disciplines—psychoanalysis and psychodynamic-psychotherapy, social work, clinical psychology and community psychiatry—but integrates fundamentals from all relevant early-childhood disciplines—such as physical, occupational and speech-language therapies and progressive early childhood education.

Integration of classroom-knowledge into the students' practice is a key element of the program. To facilitate this, students participate in one-on-one and group discussions with senior clinicians in which they analyze their application of classroom-learning to specific situations they encounter in the playgroups. This brings the theory home.

Because relationships are central to social-emotional health, the program teaches techniques for building a strong, knowledgeable, relationship-based support-system for the children, their parents and key caregivers and the early-childhood professionals who serve them.