



MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

This HCZ early education program for four-year-olds was easy to name. We named it after the children themselves, **Harlem Gems**, each one precious and beautiful. They are the treasure from which we will build a brilliant future for our community, nation, world. They are our true fortune, who must be cultivated carefully and skillfully and lovingly in order to bring out their deepest worth. And that is what we are aiming to do in the Harlem Gems program.

We put a great deal of effort into designing Gems, researching best practices and programs, developing an approach that incorporates elements of the most successful systems, customized for the needs of our children. We put even more effort into implementing the program, working day by day, with the most highly skilled and trained staff, to make sure the approach is being employed most effectively for every child.

There's a lot at stake. The future belongs to those people, communities, nations with the best education. And all research points to the fact that early education is critical to later success in school. According to the U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Research and Improvement, children who graduate from preschool programs do better than non-participants in a host of areas, including having greater social and emotional maturity and academic motivation; better self esteem; lower incidence of illegitimate pregnancy, drug use, and delinquent acts; more frequent high school graduation; and higher future aspirations.

We've put everything we've got into making the Harlem Gems program successful: our best thinking and strongest efforts, our minds and hearts. And we've enlisted partners who give the same: dedicated outside experts who help train and inform us; the most capable and caring staff to carry out the program; and, especially, the children's parents, whose wise, generous, and wholehearted participation in this program is the most critical element of its success.

The results have been richly rewarding. One hundred percent of children graduating from Gems are assessed to be school-ready, a rate well above the national average. Also rewarding, but more difficult to measure, are the enthusiasm for learning, pride in work well done, loving warmth and attention that characterize the everyday activities of the program. In this issue of *A Look Inside*, you'll have a chance to learn how the program measures up according to the staff members, children, and parents who know it best, because they have given it their best to make it successful.

GEOFFREY CANADA
President/CEO



Harlem Gems

As Falisa and Robert Evans crossed Lenox Avenue and walked down 117th Street toward PS 149, they were slightly apprehensive. They were taking their daughter Daeija to her first day in the Harlem Children's Zone Harlem Gems universal pre-kindergarten program for four-year-olds. Daeija, walking between them, one hand in the hand of each parent, seemed calm and happy. But with experience gained from raising two older sons, Falisa and Robert knew that separating from parents on the first day of school can be a wrenching, painful experience for young children.

"I was bracing for tears," says Falisa.

"I had prepared some words to comfort Daeija when she had to let go of my hand," says Robert.

"But we were totally shocked," says Falisa. "As soon as we got inside the school, Daeija ran toward her teacher. She looked back at us and said, 'See you later, Mommy, Daddy,' and then raced into the classroom. She could not have been more carefree, excited, and exuberant. She was ready to go."

Perhaps Falisa and Robert Evans should not have been so surprised. After all, they and Daeija had been preparing for this day for a long time. In 2005 the family entered, and won, the early lottery to admit children born in 2002, like Daeija, into the HCZ Promise Academy charter school. Children slated to enter kindergarten at the academy are automatically offered the opportunity to enroll in HCZ's Gems or Headstart early education programs. And for the past two years, those children and their parents have also been invited to participate in a 12-week preparatory course called the Three-Year-Old Journey. In that course, which meets for two hours on Saturday mornings, parents work



notably the Bracken Basic Concept Scale. The framework that we constructed from all this incorporates elements of these excellent, proven systems customized to fit the needs of our specific program.”

The underlying concept in the Harlem Gems approach is that children are active learners who learn best from activities they themselves plan, carry out, and reflect upon. In this view, the adult’s role is to plan activities based on children’s interests, facilitate learning through encouragement, and interact with children in ways that promote educational and social development. The concept of active learning rests on a belief that children learn from personal engagement with ideas, direct experiences with physical objects, and the application of logical thinking to these experiences. The Harlem Gems curriculum addresses all areas of childhood development, including social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and language.

This approach seems, and in fact is, theoretically complex. But in the classroom, under the direction of the highly trained Gems staff, the system seems natural, simple, and seamless. Here’s how it looks.

The day at Harlem Gems begins at 8:00 a.m. and ends at 5:45 p.m. As children enter the classroom in the morning, they are greeted individually by their teachers and other staff members they will work with throughout the day. The daily schedule is broken down into short segments as brief as 15 minutes and up to 65 minutes. Each segment has an assigned activity, including breakfast, lunch, and supper; French and Spanish language instruction; story time; outside play; shared reading; music and movement; table toys and cleanup; and the review of the day, accompanied by hand washing.

There are currently two Gems classrooms, with 20 students in each. Those 40 students are served by two lead teachers with master’s degrees; two assistant teachers with bachelor’s degrees (one of whom also serves as a Spanish instructor); two French teachers; two family workers; five Peacemakers, Americorps workers serving in the field of education; and two consultants, a speech teacher and a mental health counselor. The student/teacher ratio is an extraordinary 4:1; the additional support staff makes the ratio of adults to children less than 3:1.

Under the observance and care of the teaching staff and Peacemakers, the students begin each day with a half hour of quiet time, which on a recent day entails low-key conversation and activity. One child spontaneously begins a conversation with the lead teacher, talking about the dinner she shared with her family the night before. The teacher, Monica Lucente, steers the conversation toward various kinds of ethnic

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with Harlem Gems staff and outside experts to study and discuss a range of issues, from early childhood development to health to discipline. During this time the children, gathered together in a separate room, actually begin the preliminary work of the program under the guidance of the teaching staff.

Developing a Program that Works

“Preparation is key,” says Caressa Singleton, senior manager, HCZ Project. “We want to start as early as we can, in every way we can, to help children get the most out of a high-quality education. By definition, that involves the parents. You absolutely cannot do it without them. So we prepare parents for the program just as we prepare the children.”

Singleton led the efforts to conceptualize and develop the Harlem Gems program. Starting in 2000, with a mandate to launch the program in 2001, she herself accomplished an astonishing amount of preparatory work in a single year, including the intensive study of various pre-k curricula, assessment tools, and staff training systems.

“We knew what we wanted in creating this program, and it was simple: We wanted the best for the children. Putting together a program that provides that was, of course, a complex undertaking. Through The Baby College, HCZ had already been working with Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, one of the country’s foremost pediatricians and child development experts. So we went to him and his staff for advice and training. In addition, after further research on my own, I took a course in a couple of the most successful early childhood education curricula—High/Scope and Creative Curriculum—as well as studying evaluation tools,





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foods, which leads the child to recall several traditional dishes from different nations prepared in the classroom during the past few months.

“Which of those meals was your favorite?” Lucente asks. “The Italian, the spaghetti,” the child replies. “What did you like best about it?” Lucente continues. “I like spicy,” the child answers. “Can you name a spice in the spaghetti?” “Pepper!” the child answers, a little more exuberantly than is encouraged in quiet time. “Pepper,” says Lucente. “What’s that letter we keep hearing in pepper?” “P, the letter P,” says the child, triumphantly, and more loudly still. “Well,” says Lucente, softly, “maybe today you would like to find other things that begin with the letter P. During circle time, which starts in about ten minutes, you could even share some of those P words with the other children. And during free play later on, you might find some pictures of things that start with P and cut them out and paste them in your journal.” “I know a P Spanish word,” says the child. “Picante. Spicy.” “Wonderful,” says Lucente. “I bet you can discover the letter P in different things all day long. I can’t wait for you to tell us all about it in review time.”

Starting with the Child’s Interests

In that small conversation, this superbly skilled and trained teacher created the opportunity to put the entire Gems approach into action. That approach is completely child-directed. As children are involved in an activity, like that conversation, adults help them to express what they are thinking and doing and continually refine and develop their cognitive and language skills. Together, the teacher and child follow a pattern called plan-do-review.

During the planning phase, children use language to make a choice about what project they are

going to work on and what materials they are going to work with. That allows them to express a choice, build on their own interests, and recognize themselves as individuals capable of acting on their own decisions. The “do” phase, work time, gives children the opportunity to carry out their plans and solve problems with the support of adults. In clean-up time, at the end of the work period, the children return the materials they are using to their proper places and begin to think about their recent actions. In this case, a conversation about food, initiated by the child, sparks a plan to explore the letter P; some practical, imaginative suggestions for carrying out the plan; and a way for the child to reflect on the work of the day while sharing with others.

“This curriculum is remarkably effective,” says Lucente. “And it’s easy to see why. The starting point for all learning is exactly at the point of interest of each individual child. And since there is no end to the interests of children, the learning can go on, well, infinitely.

“This morning, one child’s interest was food. It’s perfectly normal, of course, for her to talk about a family dinner. But it happens to relate to a larger theme we’ve been working on. A few months back, we introduced the theme of international travel. The children became interested in travel to China, and that led to our sharing a meal of Chinese food, which the children helped to prepare. Over the next few weeks we made and shared traditional meals from Mexico and Spain. Then we moved on to Brazil, which led to our study of the rain forest, which brought us to a deep interest in how things grow. And that, in turn, led to our planting all of these.” Lucente gestures toward the shelf by the windows, where 20 bean plants, rapidly outgrowing the limits of their small pots, have begun climbing their popsicle-stick stakes toward the brilliant spring-time sunlight.

The Harlem Gems classrooms are divided into several self-contained sections. In the open Circle Time area there’s a rocking chair, an easel, and a floor mat that make it comfortable for the children to sit together. The middle of the room is filled with desks for reading and writing. About a third of the room is an open play area, bordered by dividing shelves containing blocks, crayons, toys, paper and pencils. A library fills the space that joins the two Gems classrooms. And in the corner of each room is a computer that runs the Lexia early reading application. The software program is designed to help four-to-six-year-old children hear and manipulate the elements of spoken language, an ability called phonemic awareness, considered critical to developing good reading skills.





Each child is required to spend a minimum of 75 minutes per week using Lexia, under the supervision of a Gems staff member, usually a Peacemaker. On a recent morning, Layla Lynch turned on the computer, signed on to the program, and began working in the more advanced Level 2 area, in the sound/symbol correspondence section. On screen, Lexie, the cartoon lion who narrates the program, calls up a picture of an ax and says the word *ax*. Then he asks Layla to click on one of two letters, A or E, that she hears in that word. Layla quickly clicks on the letter A.

Jasmine Lynch is well versed in all aspects of the Gems program. She participated in the Three-Year-Old Journey, she regularly attends parent meetings, and she sometimes drops by during the day and just sits in on Layla's classroom for a few hours. Gems has an open-door policy that encourages parents to observe their children's class work any time. Jasmine knows about Lexia and all about the way the curriculum works. And she believes that entire system, including the use of technology, has been very effective in educating her child. But she's convinced that Layla is thriving in the program for other reasons as well.

"The environment at Harlem Gems is just beautiful," says Jasmine. "When you walk in during the day, the teacher is not at the front of the room with the children sitting at little desks arranged in rows. The teacher is sitting in a rocking chair, and she's singing in Spanish or French with the children, and they are seated on the floor all around her singing along and clapping their hands. And by the environment, I don't just mean the desks and chairs, or even the interactive quality of the teaching. I also mean the warmth and loving attention that every staff person in that program gives to every child, from the director to the teachers to the Peacemakers. When Layla sees her teachers or Peacemakers, her face just lights up. It's 'Hi, Miss Alyson. Hi, Miss Catherine.' And she'll run right up to them to get a big hug. That kind of relationship that my daughter has with the staff at Gems, I think that's the main thing that makes her so happy and excited to go to school every day."

It is, in fact, impossible to sit in a Harlem Gems classroom for more than a few moments and not feel the effect of the warm, loving attention noted by Jasmine Lynch. It's there in the way the staff quietly attend to and respond to each child individually and in the exuberant but thoughtful way the children play together in the schoolyard. It's in the pride the children take in their own achievements and the way the staff share and reinforce that pride. It helps to make learning a happy experience and every experience a source of learning. And it seems to motivate everyone, children and staff alike, to do and be their best.

Peacemaker Catherine Brown explains: "Class starts at eight in the morning. I'm here at seven-thirty every day. I literally can't wait to get here. I've always wanted to work with children, to do something to help children. My first job was with HCZ's Booker T. Washington Beacon Center. I was 15 years old and I was tutoring sixth-graders. My friends and I who worked there would ask each other, 'What do you want to be, a teacher or a family worker?' Teachers and family workers were the coolest people in the world to us; we saw that they knew how to help kids.

"Because of that experience, I was really motivated to become involved in education. I knew early on that I wanted to work with very young children. But until I got into the Harlem Gems program as a Peacemaker, I did-

"Good job," Lexie says. "Yeeees," says Layla, with a big smile, "yes, with the letter E."

Making Progress Every Day

"I am amazed at the progress my child has made at Gems," says Jasmine Lynch, Layla's mother. "Layla was always an outgoing child, very social—she always liked to talk. But there's just been such a huge increase in the size of her vocabulary. Her conversation is more mature. She attended a private child care program before going to Gems. When she'd come home from there, I'd ask her, 'How was your day? What did you do?' And she'd have a short answer: 'I played. We went outside.' Now I don't even have to ask her about her day. She's so excited when she comes home, and she wants to talk about everything. 'Today Allen and Gloria and I were counting sets, and then Miss Alyson read with us, and then we learned a new song in French. Do you want to hear it?' And on and on she'll go. It's just a joy to see.

"Sometimes, her verbal abilities just make me laugh out loud," says Jasmine. "The other day we were leaving the house together, and I said to Layla, 'It looks like it might rain.' She looked up at me and said, 'That's not what the meteorologist said.' I almost had to sit down. I couldn't believe what I just heard. I said to her, 'Layla, what's a meteorologist?' And she answered, 'A meteorologist is somebody who really knows about the weather.' And I thought to myself, 'God bless the Harlem Gems.'

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n’t have that much confidence that I was going to be great at this, which is what I want to be. At Gems, they give us very thorough, very intensive training, ongoing. Different staff people have different roles—teachers, assistant teachers, Peacemakers. But we work as a team. The Peacemakers participate in everything, from drawing up lesson plans to working with individual children. Every staff person in this program is completely dedicated to this job, to the curriculum, to the children. I think, I know, the dedication comes from a real love of the children and a real desire to want the best for each and every one of them. It’s that love that motivates me to push myself beyond what I know I can do and try to do still better. I’m in college full time, and sometimes my schedule is so busy that I’m up until four in the morning working on a paper for my classes, or thinking up ideas for a lesson plan at Gems. But when the alarm clock goes off at six in the morning, I still get out of bed with a smile on my face. To get the chance to work here, learning all the skills I’m learning, to really feel like I’m making a difference in the lives of these children, and doing it in this loving atmosphere—it’s been the greatest experience of my life.”

Setting Standards for Success

Undoubtedly, the Harlem Gems program is carried out with gentle, loving warmth. But the program has also established ambitious goals for the children. And it measures each child’s progress toward those goals meticulously, according to rigorous, well-tested standards, and in the light of cold, clear benchmarks.

The specific year-end goals set for the Gems program parallel the New York State Learning Standards, established by the Board of Regents. They include environmental, academic, social, language, and personal health and fitness standards. For example, to meet the state environmental standard that students that learn geography as well as the history of the United States and New York State, Gems children will

learn, among other things, about their neighborhood, community, borough, city, state, and world; about travel on public transportation; will know the cardinal directions—north, south, east, and west; and will come to understand that there are cultural and economic differences from community to community. Some specific Gems goals for meeting the state academic standard that children will read, write, listen, and speak for information and understanding include the following: children will recite the alphabet and recognize capital and lowercase letters, will develop the use of complete sentences, write their first and last name, and read and respond to 15 or more books a month. Gems addresses state health and fitness standards by requiring that children master simple tasks including brushing their teeth, crossing the street safely, washing their hands, and covering their mouths when sneezing.

The primary evaluation tool used by the Gems program is the Bracken Basic Concept Scale, which measures a child’s school readiness and knowledge of English-language verbal concepts. The instrument measures 258 basic concepts in such categories as comparisons, time, quantity, and letter identification. It is administered twice during the school year. The first time is in October, as the program is beginning. The results indicate a child’s ability on a five-point scale, from very advanced to very delayed. Those rankings are used by the teacher to form five groups of children, placed according to their ability. These groups, in order, starting with very advanced, are called Jades, Emeralds, Sapphires, Rubies, and Diamonds.

Group characteristics are clearly identified, and the category definitions also name or infer areas for improvement in each. Sapphires, for example, are characterized as non-verbal and shy, low in confidence, with abilities standing on middle ground. These children need primarily academic support, verbal improvement, and social enhancement. Rubies, on the other hand, are described as children who tend to focus on one or two details and who need help in every area, from alphabet to fine and gross motor skills to language.

Grouping children in these categories, according to the Bracken scale, helps Gems staff to target specific areas where children need the most help and guidance and to formulate specific strategies to support each child. Testing at the beginning and end of the school year allows staff to gauge how much progress each child has made. The results of the Bracken testing are shared with each child’s parents.

The Harlem Gems also employs the Creative Curriculum Developmental Continuum Assessment System to evaluate children’s progress in 50 objective areas within four developmental categories: social/emotional, physical development, cognitive development, and language development. The





each child's progress and needs," Watkins continues. "Every member of our staff is trained to observe carefully, with an educated eye, the moment-by-moment activities of every child under their care. They're not just looking for educational development. They're attuned to changes in a child's feelings; they're looking to see if, for a few days, one child is suddenly eating a lot less or more, becoming withdrawn or uncommunicative, acting out, even unusually spirited. If they spot potential problems, they might bring in one of our speech or mental health consultants, and then, if appropriate, the parents. We want to be right there, working with the child wherever they are in that moment, supporting and helping them along. We need to get things going in the right direction for children at this young age, get them off to a good start, head off problems before they begin.

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teacher records information about each child on a profile form twice a year, in October and March. That information is used both to assess progress and to plan for appropriate individual learning experiences. Harlem Gems also uses the system internally to determine how well the curriculum is meeting its goals and meeting the needs of every child.

The results of this extensive testing demonstrate that Harlem Gems has been remarkably successful. Since the program began in 2001, every child who has participated has made improvement toward school readiness. For the last four years, 100% of Gems children tested school ready at the end of the year, compared with 84% of children nationwide.

Evaluating Results on Every Level

"Of course we're very proud of these results," says Eric Watkins, Harlem Gems director. "But we view the testing the way we view everything in the Gems program, as another opportunity for learning and improvement. We look at the results of testing for each child and then look at the ways in which we support that child's learning and development. With every score, on every test, in every category, we ask ourselves, 'Are we doing our best for this child? Is there some other technique, some other way of relating, some way of additionally involving the parents or staff or consultants that would be even more helpful, more successful?' We are continually examining, refining, trying to improve our best practices.

"These standardized tests are not the only way we take stock of the program, of our performance, and of

"This is serious business, but I hope it doesn't sound like things are severe or gloomy here. We're working with very young children. It's important for them to enjoy themselves. We want learning to be associated with happy experiences. So there's a playful quality to all our work. We want children to read, so we start a Book-a-Day contest, in which children read with their parents every night and draw a "book report" about the story. We want the children to know about the world outside their neighborhood, so we take them on trips to plant flowers in the city's botanical gardens or to pick apples in orchards in the country. We want the children to experience other languages, so they study Spanish and French every day, but they're learning those languages through song and story. Walk into any classroom here, any time, and you'll come to believe that learning is a truly joyful experience."

The French class is a prime example. On a recent morning, the children are sitting in a tight circle surrounding Madame Kouaka, who is seated in a rocking chair. They are singing, at the top of their voices: "Alouette, gentille alouette. Alouette, je te plumerai. Je te plumerai la nez. (And here they all put their hands on their noses.) Je te plumerai la tete. (All but one put their hands on their head. One small boy touches his mouth. The girl sitting next to him, Melaysha Green, discreetly points to her own head, and he quickly corrects his mistake.)

"That's Melaysha," says Malinda Williams, Melaysha's mother. "She is really into setting things right. She loves to correct me. The other day, I said to her, 'Just wait a minute.' And she said, 'You mean wait a moment.' She just blows my mind.





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“She has done so much growing up since she got into Gems,” Malinda continues. “It’s like she can’t get enough learning. It was obvious from when she was a baby that she’s

a very bright child. But the program has given her so many ways to develop her natural abilities, so many ways to grow and mature. She loves school. She loves homework. She especially loves the Book-a-Day program. I love it too. It gives us an incentive to read together every night. The goal is to read at least 15 books a month. She’s exceeded that goal every month. She usually gets either the first- or second-place prize for reading the most books in her class. They’re nice prizes, like a gift certificate at a book store or some educational toy. But it just makes her so proud and happy when she excels, and when she’s recognized for her achievements.

“As much as this program has done for

Melaysha,” says Malinda, “it’s done a lot for me as well. I went to the Three-Year-Old Journey, and I learned a lot. It helped me to understand my child better. The classes were very informative, and it was helpful hearing the different points of view expressed by different parents. I’m still learning about Melaysha. Now the Gems teachers and Peacemakers and other staff help me out. Sometimes, if she’s not having a good day, I can get very concerned or overly worried. They talk to me when I drop her off or pick her up. They’ll say, ‘It’s okay, Mom, when she goes through her little changes. We’ll take good care of her and watch over her.’ They leave me smiling. I know that they will take care of her, very good care of her.”

Involving Everyone in the Process

Perhaps the most striking thing about this program is just that: the sense that everyone who participates is in it together—parents, children, and staff members. The often-quoted African proverb tells us that it takes a village to raise a child. Harlem Gems shows us what that means. It offers a blueprint to turn the proverb into a program.

“This program is highly personal for every one of us,” says Shirley Brown, family worker. Brown has been in the program from the very beginning. A neighborhood resident, she has been personally involved with every child who has participated in the program, and with their parents. “This is truly a family program, and everything that affects the family affects the child. So if I know that a parent is unemployed, I’ll connect that parent with an HCZ program, like the Employment and Technology Center, to help them find work. I’ll check every store in the community when I’m doing my errands during the week. And if I see a “help wanted” sign, I’ll call that parent and tell them about it. Is it a young parent who may not have been able to complete high school? I’ll help them get into a GED program. Whatever it takes.

“I love working with very young children,” Brown says. “I got into this work for two of my favorite reasons: love and curiosity. I love children at this age. And I learn something every day from them, from their parents, from my co-workers.

“It seems like every day there’s what I call a ‘light bulb moment.’ It’s when a child first learns something important—recognizing a letter sound, tying their shoe, counting to one hundred—doing it all by themselves, without help. You see their faces light up with that “wow” look. You can see the wheels turning inside their heads. They’re thinking, ‘Did I do that? How did I do that? Let me try that again. Isn’t that amazing!’

“We’re about helping children learn and develop and grow. The foundation of all our work is love for the children. They say if you build your own house, you enjoy it more. Well, this is our house, which holds the children. And we build it, every one of us, with our





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own sweat and tears, smiles and hugs, teaching and learning. We put everything we’ve got into the children. We watch them and work with them and at the end of the year, we want to know that they did well. And you know what? They have done well. That’s why the last day of school is a joyful as well as a very tearful experience for all of us.

“I love all of this job, but if I had to choose, I’d say I like working with the parents best. Parents today are desperate to get a good education for their children. They know that’s what they’re getting here, and that’s why we have parents and children in this program from as far away as Staten Island. They’d commute from Alaska if they could. I love working with the parents. I talk with mothers and fathers every day. They are often so busy with work and other family members. They’ll come home from work and their little four-year-old wants, and deserves, all their attention. But they might be tired and on edge. I tell them, ‘Just take a few minutes to relax. Then maybe you can let your child help you set the table or make the salad.’ Children love to help out, and they will imitate what their parents do. Parents ask, ‘What’s the best way to encourage my child to learn?’ I say, ‘Set an example. Read books, and your child will read books. Let your child see how much you love to learn, and they will love it too.’ Harlem Gems is an educational program for four-year-olds, but it’s also a learning program for everyone—parents, children, teachers, and everyone else, from the director to the custodian. We are all learning how we can help one another to reach for and achieve our best.”

Creating a Love of Learning

Falisa and Robert Evans agree. “From the very beginning, when we attended the Three-Year-Old Journey, this program has been about educating all of us,”

says Falisa. “Take discipline. My mother was a ‘spare the rod, spoil the child’ parent. We didn’t want to follow that path with our children, but the Three-Year-Old Journey gave us so many effective strategies for dealing with discipline issues, like “time outs” and discussing with our child how her behavior makes us feel.”

“Our daughter Daeija has two older brothers, twenty and fourteen years old,” says Robert. It has always been important to us that she not get into that syndrome of being the baby in the family. We wanted to steer her away from that and raise her to be confident and self-sufficient. She was in another pre-school program before Gems. In that program, she’d leave in the morning a little lady and come back to us at the end of the day a baby. Not at Gems. They’re developing real leadership qualities in her. A few weeks ago her teacher told us that during nap time, two of the boys in class were being a little disruptive. She said that Daeija quietly got up and asked them to calm down and rest. And they did. Daeija looks at the long picture now. She thinks to herself, ‘If some people in the class are misbehaving, maybe the teachers won’t let us go outside during play time.’ So she acts; she gets up and does something about it. The other children seem to listen to her. She seems to have a real feel for leadership, and the staff at Gems helps bring that out in her.”

“We were blown away by this program from the first,” says Falisa. “We’re all in love with it. Even our two sons got into it. Daeija is very excited about the Book-A-Day program. She asks everyone in the family to read with her, and now our sons read with her almost every night. They really encourage her in school, and I think it’s affected their own feelings about school, made them more interested in reading.”

“We are deeply involved in this program,” says Robert. “My wife and I both work, and we work different schedules. But we make it a point to go to Gems parent meetings together. We want Daeija to know how seriously we take this. We want her to understand this: your teachers, your brothers, your parents—there is no limit to what we will all do for you to help you get a good education. And she gets it. She’s grown tremendously in this program, from her vocabulary to her drawing to her social skills. And she’s just so enthusiastic about going to school. She’s always hurrying us out the door in the morning to get to her class. It’s like she’s going to the circus every day.”

“Sometimes the teachers ask how we think the program might be improved,” says Falisa. “I always say the same thing. I wish that the program had been around for a few decades so that our two sons could have had the advantage of participating in it. I wish all four-year-old children everywhere had a Gems program. That’s the only way I think the program can be improved. If we could make it available to all children everywhere.”

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