

# JN strengthens early-childhood support

**E**ARLY-CHILDHOOD PRACTITIONERS have begun to focus on providing stimulation within the home environment to enrich the learning experiences for children, Dr Didacus Jules, registrar of the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC), disclosed recently.

Over the past 15 years, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of such initiatives, he said in his address to the International Conference on Education for CARICOM countries held in Montego Bay earlier this year.

Jules stated that early-childhood education represents “the overlooked sinkhole in which the cognitive and physiological potential of our children is crippled, even before formal education begins.

“All the research shows that zero to five is the period in a person’s life when your potential and your capacity for life is established,” he emphasised in a 2002 report for the Caribbean Support Initiative.

For this reason, several organisations within the Caribbean region are undertaking pre-emptive work to allow for the provision of social services geared at early-childhood development.

In Jamaica, the forerunning Roving Caregivers Programme (RCP), implemented by the Clarendon-based Rural Family



This young child participates in the Roving Caregivers Programme.

Support Organisation (RuFamSO), has been lauded as an innovative and regionally recognised best practice in early-childhood development and parenting.

Since its inception in 1992, more than 20,000 Jamaican families and 24,000 children, from birth to three years old, have benefitted from the programme, which is currently

being supported with a \$7-million grant from the Jamaica National Building Society (JNBS) Foundation over three years. In the past, the programme was active in approximately 73 communities in Clarendon, Manchester and St Catherine.

However, the programme currently operates in 15 communities in Clarendon only, including Goshen, Mocho and Top Hill.

Utealia Burrell, executive director of RuFamSO, said that the programme grew out of the absence of nurseries in rural communities and the need to support families with limited economic resources, who would not otherwise have access to daycare and other early-childhood development facilities.

## SEVERAL BENEFITS

“Through this programme, children have access to the development of motor, perceptual, emotional, cognitive and social skills; and parents and guardians gain knowledge about the practices necessary for effective parenting,” she explained.

According to the executive director, RCP is based on the premise that early-childhood development and effective parenting are directly correlated; and, therefore, cannot be separated.

“The focus of the RCP is to provide early stimulation within the home environment, to enrich

learning through parent participation; and create a culture of care, inclusiveness, accountability, and sustainable interest in the education of the child throughout his or her school years,” Burrell said.

Rovers, a group of eight caregivers trained in principles of early-childhood education and child development, visits more than 15 communities each week with kits that include child-stimulation materials and toys. Some of the materials are designed through a collaborative process with Rovers and parents, and are often handmade at home, using throw-away items found in typical households.

Three-year-old Ashley and her mother Tashana Bent have been participating in the programme for two years. Her mother is confident that she will be at a great advantage when she commences basic school later this year.

“Her language skills are much better; and she already knows her colours and shapes; and has gotten used to interacting with other children her age. I have also learned how important it is to go at her pace and hug and encourage her,” Bent said.

Saffrey Brown, general manager of the JNBS Foundation, believes that the programme is an invaluable developmental asset for vulnerable rural communities.

She pointed to the 2009 **Child**

**Poverty and Disparities Report** commissioned by UNICEF, which cited data collected on family life by the **Jamaica Survey of Living Standards** in 2004, and sought responses from parents on a list of activities that they regularly shared with their children. The list included reading books, telling stories, singing songs and play time.

“The study indicates that severe deprivation constituted parents’ participation in three or less activities with their children. By those standards, 89 per cent of children in the sample were severely deprived of effective early stimulation,” the general manager said.

The wide benefits of the RCP, she affirmed, are not restricted to the immediate families who receive weekly stimulation sessions. “It also extends to members of the wider community who are invited to participate in monthly parenting workshops,” she added.

She said that a recent visit to the RCP in Lionel Town revealed that “aunts, sisters and godmothers also come out to participate in home-visitation sessions. This is very encouraging to see first-hand, as the community members are themselves enacting the old adage ‘it takes a village to raise a child’”.

The JNBS Foundation is the sole grant-funding agency for the programme, and will extend its support for RuFamSo through to November 2012.