

Study awarded \$300,000 CIHR grant – StFX researcher involved in Maritime wide study of hospital-based literacy programs for babies and their families

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The Maritime Early Literacy Evaluation Team, based at the IWK Health Centre, has been awarded a \$300,000 research grant from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) to explore the impacts of literacy programs delivered to families of newborns in hospitals.

StFX researcher and human nutrition professor Doris Gillis is a member of the research team, which is based at the IWK. The team is headed by Dr. Cyndi Brannen, research director, Centre for Research in Family Health, at the IWK and assistant professor, pediatrics, Dalhousie University.

Along with StFX and Dalhousie, other team members are based at the University of New Brunswick and the University of Prince Edward Island.

Researchers will work with the Read to Me (Nova Scotia), Born to Read (New Brunswick; Charlottetown, PEI), and Little Readers (Summerside, PEI) programs to study the impacts of these programs, which are designed to increase literacy by encouraging parents to read with their infants.



Prof. Doris Gillis

The study will take place within hospitals in eight locations throughout the Maritimes (Halifax, Sydney, Yarmouth, Charlottetown, Summerside, Fredericton, Saint John and Woodstock) over the next three years.

“Enhancing opportunities for family literacy, such as the early reading programs examined in this research, are increasingly seen as important to family health and to health literacy,” Prof. Gillis says.

“Requirements for people to have a command of the written word are increasing in many aspects of everyday life. In particular, many families face difficulties in accessing, understanding and using information in managing their health concerns.”

Recent findings reported by the Canadian Council on Learning pointed to the importance of daily reading practices as a determinant of health literacy among adult Canadians.

“Many areas within the Maritimes have lower literacy rates than national averages,” says Dr. Brannen. “People with reading difficulties have fewer educational and job opportunities which can in turn impact their health.”

According to Dr. Brannen, parents can potentially improve their own literacy and that of their children by reading together. Through this study, researchers hope to better understand how early reading programs influence reading by parents with their newborns. The long-term objective of the study is to examine how these programs impact children’s reading readiness when they enter school. Children who are ready to read often have better outcomes beyond literacy, including, potentially, better health across their lifespan.

Prof. Gillis says the research is timely as health literacy is emerging as an issue of significant concern across the country.