

Childcare **TODAY**

ADCO THE ASSOCIATION OF DAY CARE OPERATORS OF ONTARIO

**ENGINEER TURNED
EDUCATOR
RECOGNIZED FOR
EXCELLENCE IN
EARLY CHILDHOOD
EDUCATION**



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By: Andrea Hannen



Prime Minister Trudeau presents Sabrina Rehman with her Certificate of Excellence.

On May 3, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau presented the Prime Minister's Awards for Excellence in Early Childhood Education. Certificate of Excellence recipients are recognized for their leadership, exemplary early childhood education practices, and their commitment to help build the foundation children need to make the best possible start in life. This year's Certificate of Excellence recipient for Ontario was Sabrina Rehman of Little Scholars Montessori in Ottawa, a long-time ADCO member.

Rehman is an engineer-turned-educator. She has pioneered an innovative and holistic STEM-based program that inspires children to see and explore even the most abstract concepts. Some of the activities this program includes are: classifying rocks and gems, preserving leaves and racing marbles. She has also had students design and engineer creations like Rob the recycling robot. Additionally, Rehman ensures American Sign Language (ASL) is incorporated from an early age, to help provide children with developmental delays with a vital bridge for communication. She also encourages the children to be proactive in the community. Each year, the children choose a charity and then create works of art that are auctioned off to raise funds. At one of the centres, she had them install and tend vegetable

and herb mini boxed gardens in the playground, so that families may enjoy harvesting some of their own food.

Rehman has worked with Little Scholars Montessori since 2003. She is currently the area manager for Bright-Path Early Learning, overseeing four Little Scholars Montessori locations as well as Manotick Montessori. She also works with a number of other childcare programs across Ontario to share resources and ideas. Rehman follows in the footsteps of Mona Khan, founder of Little Scholars Montessori. Khan was recognized with a Prime Minister's Award for Excellence in Early Childhood Education in 2014.

Childcare Today caught up with Khan and Rehman recently to congratulate them and learn more about their outstanding achievements.

Q *Sabrina, perhaps you could share with our readers a bit about your background and career path and what prompted you to make the transition from engineering to early childhood education?*

A I always knew I wanted to be involved in a career that would have a lasting impact on my community and world. Engineering came as a natural choice because the way I see it, engineers and their practices have been encouraged for one paramount reason: benefiting humankind. As an engineer, I became involved in a research and development project related to improving children's access to early education in developing countries. Through this experience I saw first-hand the impact early years have on the whole lives of children. I knew then that I had met my passion and certainly wanted to be a part of something this extraordinary.

Q *Did you work at other licensed centres prior to joining Little Scholars Montessori?*

A During my internship years as I worked on my Diploma in Early Childhood Education at Loyalist College in Belleville, I had the opportunity to work at a number of different childcare centres. What I found interesting was observing how each centre was different in terms of approaches and philosophies, yet similar in terms of goals and challenges.

Q *Why do you feel STEM-based programming is important?*

A In today's world, we as parents and educators often worry that our children are being raised as consumers as opposed to creative thinkers or developers. Whereas the future citizens of our global society require skills to contribute to creative solutions, sustainable development and a peaceful world. It is in the early years that children develop their basic values, attitudes, skills, behaviours and habits, which are long lasting. STEM-based experiences in these years empower children with problem solving, creative thinking and more importantly an attitude that is beneficial for their lifetime: respect for self, respect for each other and respect for their environment.



Valuable science lessons are taught through play-based activities.

Q *How did the two of you develop your centre's strengths in the delivery of STEM-based programming and how long did it take you?*

A It was important to evaluate our team's understanding of child development, including both the biological and cultural aspects. Observation has been a critical component of our program, the deeper our understanding of the children's needs and interests, the more relevant we can make the STEM experiences. We worked on ensuring that our approach to planning ensures a wide range of relevant, motivating, flexible and interesting opportunities. Setting up our environment to facilitate and encourage successful learning by all children (e.g. boys and girls, children with additional needs, children for whom English is not their home language or children who learn best when out of doors) was another critical step. Our team has come a long way over the past years, but we believe quality early education is always a work in progress. We think of it as an ongoing journey to adapt and improve the approaches and environments we offer to our children and families.

Q *Did you encounter any barriers along the way and how did you overcome them?*

A There are many incorrect notions about STEM-based programming. For example, a common one is that STEM is too "advanced" for early childhood. Research supports that young children right from birth are not empty vessels, but rather natural born "experts" eager to explore and modify the world around them. This is exactly why early childhood is the most opportune time to capitalize on their innate desire to investigate. The best way to overcome notions has been to discuss and demonstrate what true STEM programming should be: a wide array of child-led experiences and investigations that expand children's knowledge of the world around them.

Q *What advice would you have for centre owner/operators and educators who want to enhance their capacity to deliver STEM-based programming?*

A It helps to keep in mind that STEM-based programming is naturally a part of most childcare programs. It meshes well with different approaches including Emergent, Montessori, Reggio, High/Scope, Project Based, etc. Adding STEM components can be as simple as taking advantage of activities that commonly occur in your early childhood centre (such as building with unit blocks) and simply expanding and offering more complex activities (such as Ramps and Pathways for children to connect those unit blocks and build bridges!). Getting your team of educators and families on board through STEM-based workshops can go a long way at ensuring quality programming.

Q *Sabrina, how did you feel when you first learned that your work was being recognized by the Prime Minister's Awards of Excellence program? What was the best part of the event?*

A It felt surreal! I was deeply grateful to the families, colleagues and community members who nominated me. With countless dedicated educators across our country, being named among the top five has been a monumental honor. It is an honor I share equally with my team because it is our combined efforts that have led to this recognition. Meeting the other recipients and participating in a best practice sharing session was the highlight of the weeklong event— a truly inspiring and humbling experience to learn about their outstanding work.

Q *Mona, you have also been awarded the Prime Minister's Certificate of Excellence in Early Childhood Education. What did that honour mean to you?*

A As Canada's highest honor in early childhood education, the PMA nomination and selection process is rigorous and takes a lot of combined effort from families, educators and members of the community to nominate an educator. Being awarded the PMA meant a lot because the nomination came directly from families and educators that have experienced the program and deemed my contributions worthy. It has further inspired me to continue efforts to evolve our program into the best it can be!



As an engineer, Rehman understands the importance of numeracy as a basis for higher learning

Q *What actions have the two of you taken to foster an environment that facilitates excellence in teaching?*

A Excellence in teaching requires that educators learn alongside the children and empower children to be leaders of their own learning. At Little Scholars Montessori, we strongly believe that educators have the power to change the status quo of children's role in early development. Our initiatives are centred around ensuring that children can break away from being in a receptive role to a more interactive role. As they participate at their own pace and ability, our students become the "experts" and gain a sense of confidence and independence that naturally inspires lifelong learning.

Q *Is there anything else you'd like our readers to know?*

A Growing research supports that STEM-based experiences are a developmental best practice. We would encourage educators and parents that it is never too early to immerse children with STEM as long as learning is well rounded, age-appropriate and relevant to the child's interest. Experiences that encourage discovery through play, asking questions, exploration and using creativity to solve simple problems can turn into unforgettable learning experiences that can inspire and motivate children.