



# Childhood literacy: Leading by reading

The simple act of reading with a child can have a profound impact on that child's development. As members of the business community, we should be proud to live in a place that not only understands the importance of childhood literacy but also supports programs that improve early literacy skills, especially for disadvantaged children.

Why is childhood literacy so important?

"We know that children who are not read to daily are twice as likely to have developmental delay," said Dr. Dipesh Navsaria, medical director of Reach Out and Read Wisconsin. "In extreme circumstances, children who are deprived of emotional nurturing (but their physical needs are all met) have significantly smaller brain sizes and extraordinary developmental delay."

According to Navsaria, "The literal wiring of the physical architecture of a child's brain is driven by the nature of their interaction with other people. Caring, consistent relationships is what makes the difference. One of the best ways to help facilitate this is by encouraging families to read together with their young children from the earliest days. Reading aloud offers visual and aural stimulation, interaction, language and love, all rolled into one."

There are many groups in the Chippewa Valley that are dedicated to improving childhood literacy in our community. Here are a few:

**ECLIPSE** – Early Childhood Literacy Intervention Program, Services & Evaluation.

In ECLIPSE, UW-Eau Claire students, who are AmeriCorps members, work with children from low-income families in Head Start preschool classrooms for approximately 10 hours per week. Donna

Lehmkuhl, the ECLIPSE program director, notes that college students work with children who need extra help with language, literacy, social and numeracy skills. The college students assist classroom teachers by reading books and helping with projects and activities. In addition to classroom activities, college students volunteer for three youth events: Dr. Seuss' Birthday Party, Global Youth Service Day, and a Literacy Festival.

**Reading Partners** – Title I Reading Partnership Program.

In Reading Partners, UW-Eau Claire college students visit children in their homes to help them read in a relaxed atmosphere.

This is an Eau Claire School District program that began about 25 years ago as a way to provide English-speaking opportunities to Hmong families in the school district. The program has now expanded to all elementary and middle schools in the district.

The focus of the program is to improve literacy by helping children develop a joy for reading, according to Jane Rockwell, the Reading Partners director. The children are referred to the program for many reasons including: English is a second language at home; the child is behind a grade level in reading; the child may be 'at risk' because of delinquency, homelessness or family unrest; or because a parent wants a child to increase his or her interest in reading, noted Rockwell.

This year 200 school children are participating in the program along with 191 college student volunteers. Each year the children's families are invited to group events at Chippewa Valley Museum and at Carson Park.

**1,000 Books Before Kindergarten** – L.E. Phillips Public Library.

This program prepares kids for

kindergarten but at a pace that is comfortable for each family. According to children's librarian Shelly Collins-Fuerbringer, the most effective way to get children ready to learn is to read to them. In the six months since the program began, 325 kids have signed up. With a nod to the program mascot, a fox, the child decorates a paw print for each book that is read to him or her and then collects prizes for certain levels reached, such as 100, 500 and 1,000.

Collins-Fuerbringer relayed a conversation she had with a mother, whose daughter recently reached 900 books. According to Collins-Fuerbringer, the mother said that this program has really increased her daughter's interest in reading because she likes to color the paw prints. The mother also said she feels that her daughter is bringing her books to read more than she ever did – usually it was one of the parents who suggested reading and now it is often the daughter.

"I can't imagine a better story because one of our goals is to instill a love of reading into the children we serve, so the fact that this program is helping accomplish our goals is wonderful," said Collins-Fuerbringer.

**Reach Out and Read Wisconsin**

This statewide program seeks to improve childhood literacy by providing books to children during their regular check-ups with their pediatricians.

"Reach Out and Read prepares our youngest children to succeed in school by training clinicians to leverage their special relationship with families to prescribe books and encourage them to spend time reading together," explained Karin Mahony, Reach Out and Read Wisconsin project director.

There are 119 clinics participating statewide, including two clinics in Eau Claire and two in Chippewa Falls, with another four clinics in our area going through the application process. Eight other clinics in our area are waiting to join until Reach Out and Read Wisconsin has secured additional funding.

"Walking into a well-child exam without a book for that child is like walking in without my stethoscope," said Dr. Navsaria.

**Literacy Volunteers' Family Literacy Program**

The Family Literacy program serves 65 families including 124 children, 98 percent of whom are living in poverty.

According to Barb Nelson, Family Literacy director, "The mission of Literacy Volunteers Chippewa Valley is to provide flexible literacy programs to help adults and their families reach their education, employment and life goals. In Family Literacy, we teach parents how to become their child's first and most important teacher."

Nelson recounted a story about a mother and her refugee family that tells you everything you need to know about the power of literacy to change lives.

When her older children started school, the mother didn't know English, couldn't read or write, and didn't know anything about the schools they attended. As a result, her older children required special instruction in school, explained Nelson. But, the mother began attending Family Literacy with her two younger children. In addition, these younger children also participated in a YMCA early education program and then Head Start.

As a result of this literacy instruction, the younger children

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didn't need any extra help in school and were ready to begin learning when they entered kindergarten. The mom eventually got a driver's license, began working and the family recently purchased their own home.

### Family Resource Center

"In just about all of our programs, childhood literacy is a topic," said Kari Stroede, executive director of the Family Resource Center. "Providing a great start to literacy is part of the core of all we do."

The Family Resource Center provides support and programs for parents including: a home visiting program; parent education including programs at Eau Claire and Dunn County jails; and play n'learn play groups, among other programs. Recently, the Family Resource Center was asked by a Head Start program to provide a one-hour training session for parents on childhood literacy.

### United Way – Successful Children's Network

The United Way has

identified early literacy as a critical component to a child's long-term success, according to United Way executive director Jan Porath.

According to Porath, the United Way is in the process of implementing its Successful Children's Network, which serves as a community action plan for school readiness. The United Way recognizes that children who live in poverty are less likely to have the skills they need to succeed in school. Accordingly, the target population United Way is focusing on are children birth – five years old, below 200 percent of the federal poverty guidelines. In the United Way service area, 4,890 children between the ages of 0-5 live below 200 percent of the federal poverty guidelines.

The goal of the Successful Children's Network is to "ensure that the most vulnerable children will have the same opportunities as their affluent peers," said Porath.

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## PEOPLE

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**RESULTS:** As a result of the growth and the long hours, current managers are feeling overworked. While they are excited about all the positive growth of the company, it has not come without some struggles and challenges. At this point, their patience level and expectations are much shorter than they were when the growth started to ramp up.

For these reasons, the new managers may not have a 'refreshing' experience coming onboard. This is not because the current managers are not dedicated, hard-working employees – it is simply because they have so much on their plate it is difficult to begin to 'dig out'.

### POTENTIAL ACTION:

In order to support the managers with the hiring process, there are a variety of things that could be done to

**Leadership is not a skill that you learn and 'let it ride.' Leadership must be nurtured, practiced and include thoughtful reflection on different scenarios.**

make the process more streamlined and efficient for them and for the new hire. Examples include:

Develop a list of items that the current manager will transition to the new manager. Determine which are A, B, and C priorities. How can training be aligned to support making a quick and efficient transition?

Determine the 'must-have' list for interviewing candidates. Know that there will likely be a need to re-evaluate that 'must-have' list and be prepared to rank which areas you are willing to negotiate on (i.e. leadership experience with Candidate A is more formal and with Candidate B it is more informal, but candidate B dealt with a similar growth curve at a previous employer).

As organizational leaders, formal or

informal, we must be prepared to evaluate our own leadership skills and constantly improve. Leadership is not a skill that you learn and 'let it ride.' Leadership must be nurtured, practiced and include thoughtful reflection on different scenarios.

Think about the last time you had an opportunity to influence someone with your leadership. What was the situation and the result? How could you have handled it differently for a stronger or better impact than what you achieved?

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