

Let's make Delaware the First State in reading

By Tracey Quillen Carney and Dr. Annie Norman
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We are proud to partner, through the First Chance Delaware initiative and the Delaware Library Card Campaign, to promote early language skills for all of our children in Delaware. Research shows just how vital early language exposure is to future benchmarks for lifetime success, including reading at grade level and graduating from high school. It all starts early.

Experts, including our dedicated Delaware librarians who follow national and international research, tell us that adults should read to children starting at birth — many suggest reading out loud during pregnancy — for at least 20-30 minutes per day. That's about four picture books a day for our youngest Delawareans, during the years when their brains are developing the fastest.

It's also the time when reading can be easiest for adults, including struggling readers and English language learners, because the books are more accessible. Getting a reading "buddy" is also an option, and our librarians can help. Adults who model the reading habit are another important component for children, and together, we can find a way for every family.

Speech sounds stimulate brain activity. The more reading young children hear, especially in an interactive setting where they can react (as with facial expressions and, as they get older, questions) and we can respond, the more the language-related regions of their brains will be activated and strengthened. It also strengthens the bond between the reader and the child.

If we follow the half-hour-a-day advice until a child reaches age 5, it adds up to something like 7,000 children's books before kindergarten. Every parent and caregiver knows that it doesn't take long for kids to identify "favorite" books, which will be read over and over again. That's great, and it's good for the adults in a child's life to note and track evolving interests and curiosities in order to encourage further learning. But variety also matters to expand the number of words a child hears, along with different sentence patterns and subject matters.

Even if we build at-home libraries, through both donations and purchases, none of us is likely to accumulate thousands



of children's books on our own. Our public libraries are essential to the goal of raising readers—again, knowing that so many of the other goals we have for Delaware's children depend on early language skills.

Through Delaware's libraries, each family has access to more than 700,000 children's books, shared statewide through the unified Delaware Library Catalog. All it takes is a library card. Plus, our libraries regularly host events for young children and caregivers that combine language skills with project-based learning, socialization and physical activity. Librarians can also work with families on transportation issues and mobile library access; again, together, we can find a way for every Delaware family.

This summer, as part of the Delaware Library Card Campaign, we introduced two new cards just for children. "My First Delaware Library Card," featuring a baby blue hen, is for birth through age 5. The "Super Library Card," because all kids can be superheroes, is for ages 6 to 12. The campaign also includes a tracker card; children get a stamp each time they visit the library, and earn prizes after every 10 visits.

Check out the new Delaware library cards for kids, and while you're at it, get a card for the adults in your household, too. Libraries are now interactive centers of community life, with access to technology and expanding services to support families and children. By developing and modeling the "library habit," we can make Delaware the First State in reading and help to give every child in our state a first chance to succeed. Find out more at delawarelibraries.org.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Tracey Quillen Carney is Delaware's first lady. Dr. Annie Norman is Delaware's State Librarian and director of the Division of Libraries.