

Vivacious Vocabulary

How 1,000 books before kindergarten turn little ones into strong readers

Lately, I have become obsessed with numbers—and with good reason. Across the country, educators are looking to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) to increase the level of students' knowledge by high school graduation. Marilyn Jager Adams, professor of cognitive and linguistic sciences at Brown University (whose research helped shape the CCSS), argues that students need to know close to 100,000 words in order to be critical thinkers and strong readers. It's a daunting number, one that's virtually impossible to reach by studying vocabulary lists alone. Rather, Adams says students need to read more often; that by doing so, they will then be able to tackle increasingly challenging texts as they gain comprehension skills.

It starts with a story

What does this have to do with early learning? Plenty. If our nation is challenging its students to be more rigorous readers, it stands to reason that our littlest learners need to enter school ready to learn to read, which includes an early introduction to a host of varied vocabulary. The best way to teach those skills is by instilling a love for stories at the youngest age possible, via programs for parents and caregivers that model best reading practices.

Children's author and reading advocate Mem Fox (memfox.com) encourages parents to "read at least three stories a day; it may be the same story three times. Children need to hear a thousand stories before they can begin to learn to read. Or the same story a thousand times!"

Early literacy research shows that this benchmark has merit—but how is a short-staffed, bustling library to achieve this? Through "1,000 Books before Kindergarten" programs. The concept, which libraries across the country are embracing, is brilliantly simple: Patrons register and receive a journal in which they track books that they read to their children. Most libraries group books into sets of 100 titles, and patrons collect a small incentive from the library for reaching their goals. After reading 1,000 books with their parents, children are often awarded a certificate and gift book to mark their achievement.

Sandy Krost, head of children's services at the Bremen (IN) Public Library, says children's librarians in North Central Indiana host quarterly roundtable meetings to

share ideas, and it was during brainstorming there that she was first inspired. She adapted the idea into one of the first "1,000 Books before Kindergarten" programs that debuted in a public library, back in 2006.

"I was looking for a way to keep that enthusiastic spark going with parents that would be measurable," Krost says. "While 1,000 might not have been the perfect number, it has a 'wow' factor attached to it...parents can look back and see how much they read to their child." The initiative (<http://ow.ly/rGvos>) has a long-term goal as well, to create lifelong library users in the community that Bremen Public Library serves. Out of about 100 students per grade at the local school, roughly a quarter of them complete the program before entering kindergarten, Krost estimates. Students who finish reading all the books get their picture taken and sent to the local weekly newspaper. The project is also open to Spanish speakers.

More ways to get inspired

Google or Pinterest results show dozens of library sites that offer similar programs, not all of which start at birth. For example, Baby Book Bees (<http://ow.ly/rGugy>) at La Crosse (WI) Public Library was created by early literacy librarian Brooke Rasche. Parents in this program are challenged to read 100 books before their baby turns one. The journal sheets that she uses track 25 titles at a time and use colors and shapes to help visualize a families' reading journey. Rasche says the program "creates the opportunity for families to visit the library at least four times during their babies' first year of life." She also partners with two local hospitals to promote the ideas to new moms.

So, let's go back to that original, daunting number. A five-year-old entering kindergarten will have heard 1,826 stories if he/she listens to just one story a day. Suddenly, 1,000 books before kindergarten sounds doable, doesn't it? And parents that take the Mem Fox challenge? Their 1,826 stories just multiplied into a cool 5,478 early learning opportunities, putting their children far along the path to learning how to read while introducing them to thousands of new words and experiences along the way.

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