

Wisconsin Bookworms™: Bringing the Joy of Reading to Young Children



“This is a wonderful program that gets kids interested in reading. We love getting new books and read them over and over.”

—Parent of child participating in the Wisconsin Bookworms™ program

Situation

Reading to young children helps them develop a love of books and an enthusiasm for learning. Many people can recall a special children’s book that sparked a lifelong interest in reading and learning. Yet children from families with limited incomes may not have the opportunity to own many books.

The Wisconsin Bookworms™ Program was developed in an effort to provide free books to children who may not otherwise be able to own them. The program gives preschool children the experience of having someone read to them and helps promote a lifelong love of reading. The families of the young children are also involved as they read and participate in family literacy activities at home.

Response

The Wisconsin Association for Home and Community Education (WAHCE), Cooperative Extension’s Family Living Programs, and Wisconsin Public Television cooperated to bring the Wisconsin Bookworms™ Program to more than 45 counties and nearly 6,000 state children in 2009 with the goal of encouraging literacy, introducing children to the joy of reading, and promoting reading in the home.

Teachers, readers and families agree that the three most important components of the Wisconsin Bookworms™ program are: 1) providing new books for children to take home (eight books per child); 2) having volunteers read to the children; and 3) encouraging parents to use the activity suggestions that come with the books at home. The suggested activities related to the books are written in both English and Spanish. Sixty-five percent of the families report using these activities with their children at home.

Role of WAHCE in Wisconsin Bookworms™

The Wisconsin Association for Home and Community Education, a non-profit educational organization with members in 54 Wisconsin counties, plays a unique and vital role in the success of the Bookworms program. WAHCE’s goals include providing education that strengthens families and communities and building coalitions with organizations and agencies that have similar concerns.



Local WAHCE groups raise funds to cover the cost of books (\$23 per set of eight books) for the Bookworms programs in their counties. In 2008-2009, the group raised nearly \$124,000 for 5,309 sets of books for Wisconsin children.

The work of WAHCE volunteers is supported statewide by staff from Family Living Programs and Wisconsin Public Television (WPT). Along with serving as advisors to both state and county WAHCE associations, Family Living faculty provide training to readers and coordinators in the areas of early childhood development, reading to children and cultural awareness. WPT staff oversees the selection and distribution of books and development of activity sheets designed to extend the books' educational value.

WAHCE volunteer readers have contributed thousands of hours of volunteer time to read to children, prepare activities, coordinate and distribute books, collate activity sheets, insert bookplates and assist at the programs. In 2008-2009, 491 WAHCE volunteers from 31 counties read to children.

Based on information compiled by Independent Sector Research, a non-partisan coalition of nearly 600 organizations, the estimated dollar value of such volunteer time would be slightly more than \$15 per hour in Wisconsin.

Outcomes

When the Bookworms early literacy program started in 1998, 16,500 books were distributed to Wisconsin children.

In 2009, a total of over 46,144 free books will be given to preschool children throughout Wisconsin. That number is expected to reach a cumulative total of half a million in 2010.

In its first year, more than 130 Bookworms volunteers read books to 1,375 children in 26 counties.

Currently, the program reaches 5,850 children in 45 counties. Overall, since the program first started in 1998, the Bookworms program has reached approximately 52,500 Wisconsin children.

Parents of children who participate have reported positive changes as a result of the Wisconsin Bookworms™ program. For example:

- 89% talk more often with their children about books.
- 81% read to their children more often.
- 50% visited the public library more often.

Parents say the Wisconsin Bookworms™ program provides resources that are not available anywhere else. It gives their children a variety of free books and activity sheets, as well as the experience of having someone read to them.

The collaborators on the Wisconsin Bookworms™ Program have twice been recognized with UW-Extension's highest awards—the Wisconsin Idea Award in 2000 and a UW-Extension Chancellor's Award in 2009—for "...outstanding collaboration, creativity and dedication in involving the citizens of Wisconsin in bringing the joy of reading to our state's younger generation."

As one volunteer reader explained, "Words cannot express the value of reading to children, but the children's eyes tell one the great value they are receiving. When the pattern is repeated month after month, the children unknowingly are receiving the gift of words."

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