

### ***Library starts literacy program this spring***

*Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA)*

*February 8, 2007*

*Author: K.G. Wilkins*

The other day here at the library, Alice in circulation told me a story about her mother, who used to read the newspaper to Alice's daughter every day.

Since Alice's daughter was very young, everyone in the family thought it was quite peculiar. But the old woman persisted for years. When Alice's daughter reached the sixth grade, she read at a 10th grade level.

Recent research shows that Alice's mother was giving her granddaughter the gift of reading well.

In the spring of 2007, the library system will begin a literacy program aimed at our youngest citizens. "A City of Readers: Infants and Parents" is a program financed by a \$3,000 Target Community Giving Grant. Through this program, the library will provide literacy kits to 400 sets of new parents at New Orleans maternity wards.

The kits will consist of a canvas bookbag, a board book, an all-cotton infant toy, and literacy tips. Families will be encouraged to get library cards and use the library regularly. A company called Under the Nile is donating 100 of their delightful organic cotton toys to the program.

Modern research is a reason for the program.

Time was when no one knew the age when a child benefited from hearing stories read to them. Many people waited to read to their children until they were old enough to ask for books at bedtime. Other children were read to when they were starting to attend school. A few parents read to toddlers for "fun."

No one really knew all the reasons why some children learned to read well early in life and others didn't. It became obvious that children who didn't read well often were destined to receive less education and wind up in jobs offering poor wages.

In the 1990s, Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) technology allowed scientists to study all stages of human brain development. It was possible to see areas of the brain "light up" when stimulated.

Scientists began to study how our brains could become more active and even build synapses, the neural connections that hold our knowledge, experience and associations. Small children, it turned out, were building the basis for their later achievements by making millions of new connections.

Reading to small children made a huge difference in making those connections. It made a difference in how well they learned to read and how well they did in school. It has also turned out that parents who had a close bond with their children also read more to their children. Children who had been given positive associations with books learned to read better than children who did not.

Parents talking to children, even if they did not hold enthralling discussions, added to their children's reading readiness. The differences from family to family could be striking.

A child who had heard 45 million words and understood a vocabulary of 1,116 words might enroll in preschool next to a child who had heard only 13 million words and possessed a vocabulary of 525 words. Which one do you think learned to read more easily?

The same researchers also discovered that parents who frequently encouraged their children raised better readers.

The New Orleans Public Library has always served parents who needed books for their children, providing a wide array of copies for borrowing and storytimes.

Storytimes are scheduled three times a week: Mondays at 10 a.m. at the Hubbell Branch, 725 Pelican Ave.; Tuesdays at 10:30 a.m. at Latter Library, 5120 St. Charles Ave.; and Wednesdays at 10:30 a.m. at the Children's Resource Center, 913 Napoleon Ave.

The future of this city is in our hands. Will we become a city of readers? We can make it happen.

Bring a child to the library. Read to children. Give them books. It can make all the difference in their lives.

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K.G. Wilkins can be reached at [kwildins@gno.lib.la.us](mailto:kwildins@gno.lib.la.us).

Memo: SCCOUT

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Record Number: 422157728