

Family Living Programs

Wisconsin Bookworms™:

Bringing the Joy of Reading to Young Children

Situation

Reading to young children helps them develop a love of reading, along with an enthusiasm for learning. Yet, children from families with limited incomes may not have the opportunity to own many books. The Wisconsin Bookworms™ Program is an effort designed to provide free books to children who may not otherwise own books; giving them an opportunity to be read to and helping preschool children gain a lifelong love of reading. The families of the young children become involved in reading to their children and doing family literacy activities with their children.

Response

Working in partnership, University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension Family Living Programs, Wisconsin Public Television, and the Wisconsin Association for Home and Community Education (WAHCE), are bringing the Wisconsin Bookworms™ Program to more than 50 counties and over 6,000 children annually. This early literacy program had been operating under the former name of Wisconsin First Book. The 10-year milestone presented the partnership with the opportunity to rename the program, aimed at serving young children in families around the state with limited resources.

Outcomes

A total of over 50,000 free books will be given to preschool children throughout Wisconsin this year. The number of books distributed has grown each year of the program, from 16,500 in 1998 to 50,000 in 2004-05.

Teachers, readers and families agree that the three most important components of Wisconsin Bookworms™ Program are providing new books for children to take home, reading volunteers for classrooms, and classroom and parent activity suggestions. Activity sheets are written for each of the books in both English and Spanish. Each family receives a copy of the activity sheet with their free book. Sixty-five percent of the families have used these activities with their child at home.

Parents have reported positive changes as a result of Wisconsin Bookworms™ Program:

- 89 percent talk more often with their children about books
- 81 percent read to their children more often, and
- 50 percent visited the public library more often

Parents say the Wisconsin Bookworms™ Program provides resources that are not available from anyone else, giving their children a variety of free books and activity sheets and the experience of having someone read to them.

The 772 WAHCE volunteer readers gave approximately 7800 hours of volunteer time in 2004-2005. This includes reading to the children, preparing book activities, coordinating and distributing the books, collating activity sheets, inserting bookplates in the books, and attending Wisconsin Bookworms™

Reader trainings. Valued at a modest \$10/hour, this is equivalent to at least \$78,000 of volunteer time contributed to the Wisconsin Bookworms™ Program.

Local WAHCE organizations also raise funds to cover the cost of the books for children in their county; each set of eight books costs \$23.25 per child. Statewide, \$140,197 was raised for books in 2005.

Comments from parents, readers and teachers have been overwhelmingly positive:

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

“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. As a volunteer I am humbled by the experience!” (Reader)

“The Wisconsin Bookworms™ Program puts books into the hands of children. It shows the importance of literacy and reading to children.” (Teacher)

“The program is a way to provide intergenerational relationships in the classroom; many of my children do not have grandparents or great grandparents nearby.” (Teacher)

Contact

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