

GREENVILLE NEWS

Journey of a Thousand Words Begins with a Single Page

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By Jeanne Brooks

They didn't know the names of the animals.

The volunteer had opened a book about a farm, a simple book with pictures.

The children looked at the pictures of the farm animals with typical preschool interest. Family income makes no difference in a child's lively curiosity.

But income can matter when it comes to buying books.

These children didn't live on farms and didn't have books to tell them about farms. So they couldn't say the names of farm animals. They didn't know them.

Sara Mansbach was the volunteer at the child development center that day, some years ago. She has never forgotten it.

Prior to the center, Mansbach was involved with the library of a prosperous church.

There, she says, "I could open a book about dinosaurs and the children would come up with 24 names of different dinosaurs."

The immense gap between the two groups of children shocked her.

Research has shown that, as a child's brain grows and develops, the first three years are critical. This is when the groundwork for reading, for knowing and understanding words, is laid.

Studies say that in homes where parents hold professional jobs, a child typically hears 2,150 different words in a day, Mansbach notes.

But in homes where parents may not have finished high school: only 600 words.

The difference matters enormously for the child.

"At 48 months of age, the size of a child's vocabulary predicts how well he'll be reading in the first and 11th grades," Mansbach says.

A child who struggles to read will struggle with written directions and explanations in every subject at school.

So if he or she doesn't begin "with the desire to read and the vocabulary base, then you're just setting the child up for failure in school," she says.

The solution: Read to them. "Reading together 20 minutes a day is the most important gift you can give your child," Mansbach says.

Too many parents don't realize that. Some, she says, weren't read to when they were children. Some feel too tired at the end of a day.

It doesn't have to be 20 minutes in a row -- a near impossibility with, say, a 2-year-old -- just 20 total, she points out.

Mansbach came to see that reaching parents early with this message, well before a child turns three, is vital. She set out to accomplish that.

Lapsits for Early Literacy is the nonprofit Mansbach began in 2003. It's located at the Sterling Hope Center in Greenville.

Already she's making videos for parents to watch in places like doctors' waiting rooms. She has a stockpile of books to give away free for starters.

She hopes to raise money for posters, billboards and such.

Mansbach wants to blaze the message everywhere so people understand what early reading can do: Change children's lives.