

## Never too young

*Infants, toddlers get priceless lessons from story time*

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Jennifer Reyes of Greenville isn't a gardener, but she's planting seeds nonetheless — one book at a time. She and her husband, Abraham, share their love of reading with their 2-year-old son, Joshua, and his 3-month-old brother, Caleb. Mrs. Reyes reads to them at least twice a day. And traveling to the public library for story time is often a family field trip.

"The earlier they are exposed to reading, the more likely they are to develop a love for reading," Mrs. Reyes said. Her planting has already taken root in her older son. "He can easily sit through six books without getting distracted. He just loves books that much," she said.

Parents should never underestimate the importance of reading to their infants and toddlers. However, many do just that, said Dr. Sara Mansbach, program director for Lapsits for Early Literacy, an organization that promotes early childhood literacy.

A child's brain development and language skills are most intense in the first three years of life, Mansbach said. "And unfortunately, many people are not aware of that," she said. "And they think I don't need to interact with my child much. I don't need to talk with them much. I don't need to read bedtime stories," she said.

"But those are the very things that build a child's pre-reading skills. ... If a child is not prepared with pre-reading skills before he goes to K-5 and first grade, then becoming a reader is extremely difficult."

Basic pre-reading skills include knowing how to follow words on a page, recognizing letter sounds and having the ability to describe things. "



Jennifer Reyes holds her 3-month-old son, Caleb, as she reads to 2-year-old Joshua at their Greenville home. Joshua loves books so much he can sit through half a dozen, she says.  
GEORGE GARDNER/Staff

“We’re talking pretty basic recognition here of what a book is,” Mansbach said.

“Reading time should be fun. It should be playing with books and playing with language.”

Lapsits is part of a collaborative effort for the first Launch a Future Reader Campaign, which goes on Wednesday through Nov. 17. The purpose is to highlight the importance of reading aloud to infants and preschoolers. United Way of Greenville County’s Success by Six will donate books at local health clinics countywide, and volunteers will read books aloud to children at the clinics.

The campaign will gather information about the number of books read, the number of children read to and the number of times books were read to children during the campaign, Mansbach said. “The purpose is to start to make people aware of how often they read — providers and parents especially — and encourage more reading,” she said.

The campaign begins on National Family Literacy Day and runs through the end of Children’s Book Week. It is a combined effort of various local agencies and businesses that include the Greenville County Library, Greenville County First Steps, United Way of Greenville County Success by 6, the Greenville County Child Care Association, the Open Book, Barnes & Noble, The Greenville News, Kiwanis International, Latino newspaper and the Greenville Journal.

Twenty-five percent of the population in Greenville County is functionally illiterate, which means that segment of the population lacks the proper skills to read a bus schedule or a restaurant menu, Mansbach said.

“That’s pretty large. Many of those people are parents, of course, of young children, which is where we come in. Our organization is just totally focused on literacy. We are focused on low-income, undereducated parents. \*\*\*But many middle-class parents don’t know that the size of a child’s vocabulary at 4 months predicts his language performance in first grade. \*\*\*

“We know that bedtime stories are even in danger,” Mansbach said. “Some parents are no longer saying good night with bedtime stories. The parents themselves are too involved with the computer, too involved with television or their iPod or whatever. It’s only through ongoing, joyful, pleasant interaction that children learn.”

Reading aloud allows parents to bond with their children, promotes language development and problem-solving skills, said Jane Leo, parent educator at the Overbrook Child Development & Family Learning Center on Laurens Road. “Reading is the foundation for everything they will do in school.”

And it’s never too early to start that learning process, Mansbach said. “There’s so much to say about this.” Reading to your children while they’re in the womb is highly

recommended, she said. In fact, “some research studies, show that if the mother reads the same book, over and over, that when the baby is born, you can soothe a baby with that book. I mean, when a baby is born, they can identify their mother’s voice.”

And as children get older, parents need to make sure they make reading fun, Leo said. “It’s has to be something that’s not a chore.” For instance, act out a book. “Get them involved. You can make simple puppets even if it’s a paper bag or a sock.”

Mrs. Reyes said when she reads animal books, she and her son make noises. They’ll moo with the cows or bark like a dog. “He loves to read about farm animals,” she said. Repetition is also beneficial for young children, said Jim Cappio, a volunteer reader for Lapsits. The father of four and grandfather of two visits Pleasant Valley Head Start Center once a week to read to 3-years-olds. If you’re reading a number-related storybook for instance, you might hold up two fingers and then have them repeat the number two. “You ask them questions. You want them to get the gist of the story,” said Cappio. “You want them to verbalize.”

Cappio said reading aloud to young children can be fun and rewarding. “You see growth and that’s important.”