



Wisconsin Bookworms:TM Building children's literacy for 17 years

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

—Parent of a Wisconsin BookwormsTM participant

For America's poorest children, the biggest obstacle to literacy is the scarcity of books and appropriate reading material, according to experts at the US Department of Education.

The Wisconsin BookwormsTM program was developed in an effort to provide free books to children who may not otherwise be able to own them.

Wisconsin BookwormsTM promotes reading by giving preschool children the experience of having someone read to them. Families are involved through participating in literacy activities that promote additional reading at home.

When Wisconsin BookwormsTM started in 1998, 16,500 books were distributed to Wisconsin children through the partnership efforts of UW-Extension Family Living Programs, Wisconsin Public Television and the Wisconsin Association for Home and Community Education (WAHCE).

Since its beginning in 1998, the program has reached a total of 84,445 Wisconsin preschool-age children and 750,000 books have been purchased through the 2015-16 reading year.

Role of WAHCE in Wisconsin BookwormsTM

The Wisconsin Association for Home and Community Education, a non-profit educational organization with members in 50 Wisconsin counties, plays a unique and vital role in the success of the Wisconsin BookwormsTM program.

WAHCE's goals include providing education that strengthens families and communities and building coalitions with organizations and agencies that have similar aims. Local WAHCE groups raise funds to cover the cost of books (\$24 per set of eight books) for the Wisconsin BookwormsTM programs in their counties.

UW-Extension Family Living Programs and Wisconsin Public Television (WPT) support WAHCE's efforts across the state. Family Living provides guidance and support to Wisconsin BookwormsTM county coordinators including Spanish translations of parent activity sheets. WPT oversees the selection and distribution of books, and development of activity sheets that extend the books' educational value.

Family Living Programs Impact Report

Survey identifies key outcomes

An evaluation of the program completed in 2013 included surveys for three groups (Wisconsin Bookworms™ volunteer readers, classroom teachers, and families of the preschool students) and focus group interviews with families.

- **Teachers, readers and families all agreed that the top two most important components of the Wisconsin Bookworms™ were being able to provide free new books in the home and having reading volunteers in the classroom.**
- **Teachers reported that having volunteers to share their love of reading with children and the opportunity for children to experience intergenerational relationships were key outcomes of the program.**

Volunteer readers

From the 2013 survey, volunteer readers gave approximately 3,270 hours of volunteer time to the program—reading to children, preparing literacy activities, and coordinating programs. At \$18.50 an hour, this equals more than \$60,000 of volunteer time for the Wisconsin Bookworms™ program.

Comments from nearly 300 volunteer readers conveyed their enjoyment of participating as a volunteer in a program that meets its goals of helping children discover good books and the benefits of reading.



To build on the program's achievements, in 2015 a volunteer reader training was designed to better equip the volunteer reader base. The volunteer reader training was centered on three themes: 1) research about early childhood literacy development and reading techniques; 2) diversity of the learning environment; and 3) value of the role of volunteers.

The dialogic reading method was the technique used for the training, as this method of reading has positive effects on children's language acquisition as noted by research.

"I wish everyone could experience the look on the youngster's face after hearing the story, and then receiving the book to take home."

Positive changes

Nine hundred and seventy-two families shared their feedback through the 2013 Wisconsin Bookworms™ survey. They overwhelmingly reported positive changes as a result of the Wisconsin Bookworms™ program:

- 97% reported having read at least one of the Wisconsin Bookworms™ books to their children during the school year.
- 69% used the literacy activities provided as part of the program.

Parents commented that Wisconsin Bookworms™ provides resources not available anywhere else; gives their children a variety of free books and activity sheets; and encourages them to read at home.

"My child absolutely loves her books and spends hours reading/looking at them."

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."

"Words cannot express the value of reading to children, but the children's eyes tell one the great value they are receiving..."

A volunteer reader



To learn more, contact:

Michelle Tidemann

State WAHCE Liaison
Family Living educator and
department head
Fond du Lac County UW-Extension
920-929-3174
michelle.tidemann@ces.uwex.edu