

gift of literacy

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Abstract:

"Here at Menasha Public Library Children's Department, our goal is to get every parent to realize the importance of books in a baby's life and the continuing importance of reading and of literacy in a preschooler's life and in the life of a school-age child," Beson said.

Full text:

"I'm an educator myself, and knowing the importance and seeing it firsthand in children, you can tell they had exposure to books. There is so much power in a book."

Julie Bradley

Menasha

Tammy Pedersen's daughter gets excited when she receives a special birthday card from the Menasha Public Library that allows her to get a free book.

"As soon as I give her her card she wants to go right away," said Pedersen of Larsen about daughter Gabelle, 4, who is signed up in the Happy Birthday, Baby Club offered at the library. "Plus it means another trip to the library, which means even more books."

Children's supervisor Kathy Beson had the idea to start the program when she took the role in 2008.

"Here at Menasha Public Library Children's Department, our goal is to get every parent to realize the importance of books in a baby's life and the continuing importance of reading and of literacy in a preschooler's life and in the life of a school-age child," Beson said. "One of the most important gifts you will ever give your child is a library card."

Initially, Beson wanted to do a long-term study of the babies enrolled in the club, following them from birth through fifth grade to see "if babies enrolled in early literacy programs here at the library did better in school." However, she couldn't because of privacy issues.

"Nevertheless, all current research supports my hypothesis that babies and preschoolers who are consistently read to at home, who attend story time at the library, who are enrolled in preschool literacy activities and who are frequent visitors to the library with their parents are more ready for school, do better in school, have higher test scores, better school experiences and enriched early life experiences," Beson said.

There are 152 families in the Happy Birthday, Baby Club. Parents of new babies can sign up their baby and get a special pink and blue plastic bag full of literacy information, a Read to Me bib, a Read to Me plastic keychain and rattle, and a board book.

The baby receives a birthday card from the library each birthday for the first five years. Families can come in, take a survey and get a free book for their baby for the first five years of the baby's life.

Families also are asked if they want to get the baby a library card and join the 1,000 Books Before Kindergarten program and programs like the Book Sprouts literacy program for preschoolers. Children ages 3 and up also can sign up for summer reading programs. Families of toddlers can sign them up for special literacy programs.

"The parents taking the surveys consistently tell us that they love the library, they love being in the club, and they love the programming at the library," Beson said. "The great majority of the parents say that they were read to as a child and also taken to the library when they were a child and that they intend to take their child to the library and read with them at home."

Pedersen wants to share the love of reading with her daughter.

"We signed up just because I grew up pretty much in a library," she said, noting she signed her daughter up when she was 2. "I wanted her to have that experience of me reading to her."

Her family has a collection of books at home, but they frequent the library several times a week to get more books.

"We do the different programs at the library and the other things going on like the reading clubs and summer program," she said.

Julie Bradley of Menasha said the club is much needed. The participants may be babies, but they do take in the stories, words, changes in voice, pictures and other aspects of reading, said Bradley, who registered her 7-month-old son, Gavin.

"Gavin has already been going to the programs already," Bradley said. "It's funny how he seems to know what's going on."

Early exposure to literacy through programs like the Happy Birthday, Baby Club, will go a long way in the future, Bradley said.

"I'm an educator myself, and knowing the importance and seeing it firsthand in children, you can tell they had exposure to books," she said. "There is so much power in a book."

-- Linda Dums: pcffeatures@postcrescent.com

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More info

For more information about the Happy Birthday, Baby Club, call the Menasha Public Library at 920-967-3670.

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