

Puls: Invest in children by reading to them

By Petra Puls

In today's fast paced, digital driven world, time is more precious than ever. So I pose this question to your readers, what does 5 minutes mean to you?

In five minutes, you can grab a cup of coffee, scroll through your phone... or make a world of difference to a young child. All you need to do is "Talk! Read! Sing!" to spark a lifelong love of learning.

At First 5 Ventura County we know that investing in children is key to their future and our overall economic future. Economic research shows that early investment in children can produce lifelong dividends to those children and to the taxpayers supporting those investments. In fact, Nobel Prize winning economist James J. Heckman finds 13 percent return on investment for comprehensive, high-quality, birth-to-five early education. Early investment is far more effective than remediation to help teenagers and young adults catch up.

By age five, 90 percent of a child's brain development is complete, laying the foundation for school, work and life. Words build that foundation — even before a child can talk, words help their brain grow.

When communities devote time and energy to children by talking, reading and singing, they provide them with the best opportunity to reach their full learning and emotional potential:

- A one percent increase in overall literacy would boost productivity by 2.5 percent and per capita GDP by 1.5 percent. With a similar increase, the United States stands to increase national income by nearly \$200 billion.
- Being introduced to books in the home and reading to a child before they enter school has been shown to be the strongest predictor of school success, especially for students at the greatest risk of falling behind.
- By age four, a low-income child is exposed to 30 million fewer words than his high-income counterpart. This gap is linked to smaller vocabularies and lower reading scores.

Reading at grade level by the third grade is a leading indicator of school success and high school graduation. This pivotal year is when children must make the shift from learning to read to reading to learn. If they don't, the consequences are dire. Eighty eight percent of children who never graduate from high school were poorly performing third-grade readers, and high school dropouts earn less than half of college graduates.

The first five years impact a lifetime. As your child's first and best teacher you can help them succeed in school and in life by reading with them every day, and talking to them throughout the day. Point out letters on signs while shopping, talk about colors while folding laundry, and sing songs in the car.

Children who engage in meaningful interactions in a loving and nurturing environment not only learn more words, but also develop better social, emotional and cognitive skills, which are critical to long-term health and well-being.

So we encourage you to invest in a child, invest your time, your laughter and your voice to help build a solid foundation of learning for a child in your life.

Local leaders, including Pacific Coast Business Times publisher Linda LeBrock, did just that on May 3. In Celebration of First 5 Ventura County's 20th anniversary and the 4th annual Take 5 and Read to Kids event, more than 55 local leaders read to kids throughout Ventura County. We ask each of your readers to become a champion for early literacy every day by talking, reading and singing to a child.

What does five minutes mean to you?

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