

As has been the case for the past four years, I am away on an end of the year vacation as I write my last column in 2016. This year, I am in the area north of Chicago with my son's family.

Like any proud grandmother, I am quite amazed by the progress made by my kindergarten aged granddaughter, who has been in school only since September of 2016. She never went to preschool or play groups before going to public school, but has had the great advantage of having adults around her who read to her and talk to her consistently. Her room is full of art supplies and shelves full of books. My son reads to her from chapter books about horses (her favorite) every night. Whenever she hears one of us say a word she doesn't know, she will ask, "What does that mean?"

Research in early childhood education for decades has confirmed that children benefit immensely from their parents or other caretakers who read to them and speak to them regularly.

According to Reading is Fundamental, an organization that is now 50 years old, "children learn to love the sound of language before they even notice the existence of printed words on a page. Reading books aloud to children stimulates their imagination and expands their understanding of the world. It helps them develop language and listening skills and prepares them to understand the written word. When the rhythm and melody of language become a part of a child's life, learning to read will be as natural as learning to walk and talk."

When I first came to Hershey in 2003, I invited Jim Trelease to speak at HPL on the topic of his most famous work, The Read-aloud Handbook. Jim focused on this message that we prepare children for success in life by reading to them, talking to them and having them see us read. He asks how can a child learn to read, write, or use a word, if he or she has never heard that word?

So my challenge to all of our library members, visitors and friends is that in 2017 we do all we can to contribute to the literacy level of our community. The Hershey Library will continue to provide well developed and interactive classes for as many young children as possible. We will make materials available that are new and relevant for you and the children whose lives you share. Let's make 2017 a Year of Literacy to remember!

Happy New Year!

Barbara Ellis