

By Barbara Holden
Special to My Life

Developing your child's brain, vocabulary, school readiness, and a love of learning during his first five year's will benefit him, your family, and this community for the rest of his life.

Unfortunately, all too many families await pre-Kindergarten or Kindergarten to teach reading skills and other learning essentials. Since 80 percent of the human brain develops before age three, that's three prime years wasted.

The good news: some the most important things you can do to boost your child's brain development are easy, fun and in many cases free!

What is this magic potion? Hug, touch, cuddle up and read to your child every day.

When a Kindergartener loves books, his teacher can hit the ground running, helping ensure that his reading abilities progress at the intended rate for his grade level.

Children who start school unprepared to learn are behind the game and often never catch up. And children who do not read at grade level by the end of third grade have difficulty completing high school.

Being comfortable with words and learning to read sets the foundation for the rest of your child's life. It's a fact, and it's one of the many reasons why the Imagination Library book program, known here as Shelby County Books from Birth, is so close to my heart.

The Imagination Library began as Dolly Parton's gift to the children of Sevier County, and today mails a free, age-appropriate, hardback book to enrolled children in all 95 Tennessee counties, every single month from birth until age five. Titles include "The Little Engine That Could," "Goodnight Gorilla," "Max's Ride," "Frog on his Own," and many more.

A few years ago, Governor Phil Bredesen created the Governor's Books from Birth Foundation to expand the program statewide and to split the monthly book order costs with each county program.

Currently, 199,588 Tennessee children are enrolled to receive their very own free library of 60 books. It's free! It's fun! But it's so much more.

In Shelby County, more than 28,200 children are enrolled in the Imagination Library. Although the program is offered at no cost to the family, it is supported entirely with private contributions from our community.

A gift of \$70 will bring 12 books a year to one child from his birth until his fifth birthday. But no matter what amount you give, your money goes a long, long way.

A skilled workforce starts with early childhood education. Early exposure to books in the home increases his vocabulary, self-confidence and preparedness to learn, which means he's more likely to stay in school and securing a better job when he's ready for the workplace.

According to the Governor's Books from Birth Foundation newsletter, there is an expanding nationwide gap between children who have access to books and those who do not, as well as significant disparities among children from different social classes in book ownership and home reading experiences.

The Imagination Library is having a significant impact on eliminating these disparities, and provides a monthly reminder to families that reading to children from birth to age five is essential. Plus, it's just too much fun to watch your toddler scurry out to the mailbox, squealing with delight over a book. A book!

This simple program is changing lives, but it won't continue without your support. More than that, you will have made a sound investment in our future. And there's no better time to make that investment than today, during Imagination Library Week in Tennessee.

"Imagination Library Week is particularly exciting this year, as we celebrate the fact that just over one out of every two Tennessee children under age five is now enrolled," said Lady A. Bird, president of the Governor's Books from Birth Foundation. "We hope that businesses and individuals will continue to support county Imagination Library programs with financial support – no gift is too small."

Don't forget: Sept. 14 – 20 is Imagination Library Week! All little literary lovers are invited to meet *Llama Llama Red Pajama* author Anna Dewdney on Saturday September 20, at 11 a.m. at Davis-Kidd Booksellers.

For more information about Imagination Library Week in Tennessee and other Shelby County Books from Birth activities, or to make a donation, please visit www.booksfrombirth.org or call (901) 820-4501.

Barbara Holden is a director at the Urban Child Institute, a Greater Memphis organization dedicated to promoting early childhood development. The Commercial Appeal is a partner with the Urban Child Institute in this effort to help parents and other care givers learn skills that nurture and educate the minds of infants and children. For more information, go to www.theurbanchildinstitute.org or dial 211 for the Public Library and Information Center.