

## **“My Book!”**

**By**

**William A. Palmer, Jr.**

Our two-year-old grandson has become enamored with the possessive pronoun. He lays claim to the world around him by announcing, “*My house!*” “*My car!*” “*My tractor!*” Recently I was happy to hear him add to this repertoire of ownership, “*My book!*” Although he may not actually own his parents’ house, their car, or his Grandfather Steve’s tractor, the books in his little library unquestionably are his, and even more gratifying to me is the fact that both his parents read to him daily.

My gratification is magnified by the fact that I came relatively late to reading. In the front rank of the post-World War II baby boom, I grew up in an overwhelmed school district that admitted children to kindergarten by lottery. At the time, I certainly didn’t consider myself a loser when my parents informed me that I would get to play at home for another year instead of going to school. Only the following September, when my family had moved to a different town and I was entering first grade, did my deficiencies become clear. Shortly after school had begun, my classmates and I were sitting with the teacher in a little circle of chairs. In our hands were fresh new copies of books about Dick, Jane, Sally, and their pets Spot and Puff. When it was my turn to read I broke into embarrassed tears. The black marks on the page meant nothing to me.

Mrs. Carbone, God bless her, was a loving, patient, and gifted teacher who before long brought me up to speed. During that year in her class I moved from the third reading group to the first. Yet I have little doubt that this early experience has contributed to my passion as an advocate for early learning and family literacy.

The Parent–Child Development Corporation (PCDC) emerged from a grass-roots concern for the children of our community and their families. Over its nearly forty years of existence, it has developed Smart Start, a preschool and childcare program; become the grantee for Bridges Head Start, now readying 217 children for kindergarten; and adopted several other initiatives to support early learning and family literacy.

One of those initiatives is called Begin Educating Early (BEE). Supported by a grant from the King and Queen County Department of Social Services, a PCDC family advocate visits WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) clinics in King William and King and Queen counties. There, mothers and children are given a bag containing information about community resources, a form for enrollment in Head Start, and a story book for the child (we have materials in both English and Spanish). As available, toys or other items may be included in the bright yellow BEE bag. For many families, the contacts made at the WIC clinics are a first step to experiences that promote a love for learning. When a child can claim ownership to “my book,” a process is set in motion. It has less to do with possession than it has to do with the nascent understanding that knowledge is power. The fundamental ability to read, comprehend, and express oneself is critical to success in the modern world. The links between family literacy and school achievement, well-paying employment, and psychological wholeness can begin to be forged long before a child ever enters the schoolroom.

Children’s author Emilie Buchwald has written that “Children are made readers on the laps of their parents.” At PCDC we agree that parents are a child’s first and most effective teachers. Our goal is to do more than teach children; we seek to empower families. Families that read together, share a curiosity about the world around them, and regularly visit their local public library build strengths that will

provide advantages in an increasingly competitive society. Yet no future advantage outweighs the simple pleasure of having a small child crawl up into your lap so that you can read him “my book.”

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