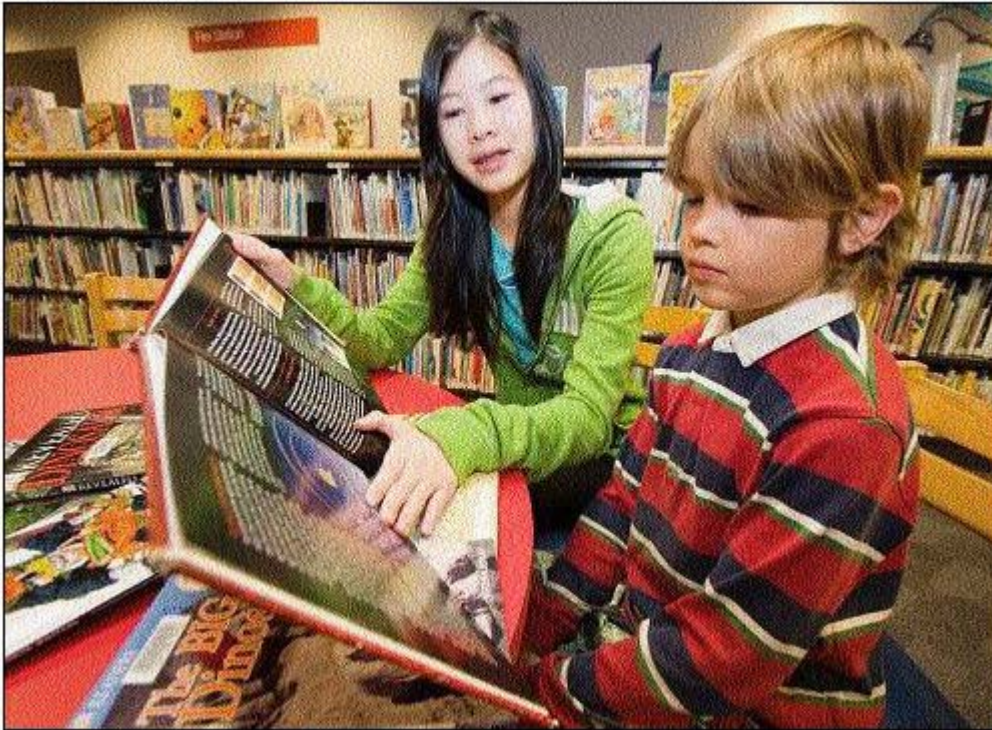


Summertime fun in the pages of a book

Library programs help kids keep up literacy skills during vacation

By Katherine Dedyne, Times Colonist July 10, 2010



Kelsey Hong, 16, reads to Tom Kerr, 8, at the Victoria Public Library. The library presents a Reading Buddies program this summer, matching teen volunteers with kids in Grades 2, 3 or 4 who need extra practice.

Photograph by: Debra Brash, Times Colonist, Times Colonist

Lots of children love to read and take advantage of unstructured summer days to hang out with their latest find -- be it a comic book or children's classic.

Other kids consider reading to be schoolwork and take a "no more teachers; no more books" stance to their two months off -- something parents know is bad news for keeping up their literacy skills until September.

Claire Rettie, executive director of Victoria READ Society, stresses that reluctant readers can be motivated by a variety of strategies.

"We always look at summer as an opportunity to read for pleasure," she says.

"Going to the libraries and allowing your children to choose their own books is a really important step. Making it fun. And the public libraries have put in place some wonderful opportunities."

Kids who think they aren't really into reading might want to check out the library's Summer Reading Club for kids 12 and under, Reading Rocks! It was designed as a way to help children maintain or even improve their reading and comprehension levels over the summer, says Tracy Kendrick, co-ordinator of children's and teen services at the Greater Victoria Public Library.

The club is self-paced, so it doesn't matter whether kids are super, slow or average readers. They can choose to read anything from foreign language to cookbooks, as long as they write it down in their logs.

"It used to be that we'd ask kids to keep track of how many books they'd read," Kendrick explains. "And then we found that some kids were reading books way below their reading comprehension level in order to read up their reading record more quickly. So we changed it so they would read 20 to 30 minutes a day for seven days to get a prize." That way, they can read one long novel that might take all summer and still get all seven prizes from bookmarks to free swim passes.

The idea of kids reading fast for some kind of reward is encouraged by modern culture, says English professor Thomas Newkirk, but as a slow reader himself, he suggests it's shortchanging young readers.

"[It's] as though reading has become a form of fast food to consume as quickly as possible, just one more cultural celebration of speed," the University of New Hampshire expert writes in *The Case for Slow Reading* in a recent issue of the journal *Educational Leadership*.

Newkirk says reading slowly is the only way to absorb some of the pleasures of the printed word that have fascinated and inspired people for centuries.

Moreover, reading aloud, which animates the words on the page for children, stops too soon for a lot of them. Silent reading takes over because of the pace of 21st-century life and the abundance of reading material.

"Yet our attraction to sounds, to the rhythms of speech and to a human voice in the text is primal," he writes. "Children know something that adults often forget -- the deep pleasure of repetition, of rereading, or of having parents reread, until the words seem to be part of them."

To that end, the library also hosts the Reading Buddies program, matching teen volunteers with kids in Grades 2, 3 or 4 who need extra practice.

"That program works really well because the children generally really enjoy having the attention of a teenager, and they'll sit together and slowly read through a book at the child's pace," Kendrick says. In English or French.

For the Summer Reading Club, the library hires five assistants to discuss the children's logs one-on-one. The assistants visit all the branches except Goudy on Goldstream Avenue.

"That brief personal connection is really key to the program," Kendrick says.

"Talking to another person just makes it so much more meaningful, and I think that's what [Newkirk] is saying. And I see that happening every day, all day at the library. People want to talk about what they're reading."

Reading is a source of ideas, emotional reactions and assessment of personal values, she says.

"That's what he would call slow reading. You digest it. You talk about it with other people and it's meaningful."

Last year, about 4,500 local kids joined the club, 400 more than the previous years and she expects the children's section of the library to be extremely busy this summer.

If parents can't get to the library, they can still find books with the kids in the community, Rettie suggests. Apartment buildings are ideal for a book swap, combining connections between people, words and a good time.

And don't disparage comic books, she stresses. "I know some people will question that but they're still reading, and it's engaging them."

If kids read comic books while you're at work, ask them to draw the characters and tell the story to you when you get home.

Summer is an ideal time to help kids realize that reading can make their lives more interesting and exciting, and open them up to different worlds.

"Finding a way to engage whatever child this is and support them in that journey is really what our responsibility is," Rettie says.