



Books as friends: Growing Happy and Confident Kids

*“Books are the very best friends we know
for they remain when others go
They take us on a trip across the sea
To find a doodle bird in a peppermint
tree.”*

OK, the lyrics above are not exact, but they are close to the words of a song my brother, Russell, was taught as a second-grader and passed down to me, his 13-month younger brother. Obviously, the song was written by someone who was “pro book.” As simple as the words are, there is something intriguing about them. They equate books with relationships, permanence and adventure. They convey that books can open up the world and take us to places we have never been before.

As a child, I was fascinated by what I heard in the words of my brother’s song, for they offered another avenue to having an adventure. As a poor and slow reader back then (and I do mean poor and slow), I realized that books could help me as well as transport me. During the summers of my elementary school years, my parents insisted I read books before and after playing. Those thin, enlarged word tomes complete with colorful illustrations took me off the bottom of the class rolls and transformed me into a lover of learning.

Maybe that is why I eventually married a middle school librarian — and why I believe so strongly in one of the American Counseling Association Foundation’s signature projects that puts books into the hands of counselors in elementary schools. Growing Happy and Confident Kids is not a project that is esoteric, elitist or merely academic. I have witnessed the power of books

to make a difference in a child’s life — because I was that child.

Thus, I have a bias for books, especially in the early years of a child’s life. There is nothing virtual about books. They are something you can get your hands on (and your teeth into if you so desire). Books have words that move us beyond the narrow confines of our daily existence and give us hope. These are the page turners. Books, at least children’s books, have illustrations that illuminate and capture imaginations. They get children thinking about and exploring worlds they might never know otherwise. Books make it possible to dream differently and frequently of what can be as well as what is. They inspire. They provoke. They enlighten. They free the oppressed from the distress that might otherwise engulf them.

So what does all of this have to do with you? Think of your own life and the books that have made a difference. Some books made you happy. Some made you cry. There were some that gave you warm feelings and a few that made you sigh and think, “I wish I could do that.” What all of these books did, however, was increase in you an understanding of the breadth and depth of the world. Books brought forth your feelings and enriched your cognitive understanding. They were demanding and entertaining in the process. Thus reading, which is something you do now, became an active pastime if not a full-time behavior. Books took! They took you to where you are now.

Therefore, if you would like to help someone else on the journey of life, the ACA Foundation is a place where you can put your financial resources and

(unlike some banks) see a dividend. The payoff and payout is not automatic, and every penny does not yield a profit. However, more can come from your contribution to this project than would happen otherwise.

Children are hungry for knowledge. Children’s books entertain while explaining the mysteries of life. By having counselors in schools read to children and discuss classic literature with them, the boundaries of children’s minds grow. The why, what, when, where and how questions from children increase as their minds expand. The care and comfort from hearing, seeing and being engaged in materials beyond what is otherwise tangible fosters curiosity and creativity. Lessons about friendship and inventiveness surface into daily existence. Children’s books provide models for ways of being and growing that no other medium can match.

Whether books are the very best friends to know may be debated, but the declaration that they can change children’s lives is a given. As you examine your life and think of the lives of children you know, I hope you will contribute to this exciting ACA Foundation project. It is unique in its both subtle and blatant emphasis on promoting wellness, mental health and creativity in fledgling life. The lives we influence today in this way contribute to the good of the world tomorrow. ♦

Samuel T. Gladding is chair-elect of the ACA Foundation.