

# Report: Indiana families reading to young children regularly

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Vast numbers of Indiana parents are reading to their children.

At least, that appears to be the case according to a new report showing that 85 percent of Hoosier children younger than age 6 have family members reading to them three or more times a week — tying Indiana with Connecticut, Iowa, Michigan, North Dakota and Utah for the 23rd highest percentage in the country.

The findings are included in the latest Kids Count policy report released today by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The report, called “The First Eight Years: Giving Kids a Foundation for Lifetime Success,” says the decades of brain and child development research show that kids who enter kindergarten with below-average language and cognitive skills can catch up — but only if they are physically healthy and have strong social and emotional skills.

“I’m very pleased to hear about this statistic,” said Josh Wolf, manager of children’s services at the Monroe County Public Library. “Parents are their kids’ first teacher. If they read to their children just 20 minutes a day, the results are phenomenal. It helps kids develop a love for reading, and that is a huge building block for their future success in school.”

But some are skeptical of the report.

“That’s a high number,” said Meri Reinhold, executive director of Monroe County United Ministries. “It would be wonderful if it were true, but I’d like to see it backed up by more studies. Personally, I don’t believe it.”

Rogers Elementary School principal Mark Conrad admitted the 85 percent figure sounded a bit high, particularly in a culture in which many homes have two working parents and hectic schedules.

“But if it’s accurate I think it’s wonderful,” he said. “When we welcome our new kindergarten students it’s obvious which ones have been read to at home and which ones have not.”

But whether the study is accurate or not, there are many local efforts designed to encourage parents to read to their kids. Wolf said 10 years ago the library launched “Every Child Ready to Read,” a program for newborns through 5-year-olds that stresses to parents the importance of reading to their children.

“We use workshops to show parents how reading to their young children helps them develop pre-literacy skills,” he said. “They are instilling in them a sense of language play and narrative, building

their vocabulary and giving them a positive association between reading and a sense of closeness and warmth.”

Wolf added that reading to young children is especially crucial in light of research showing that 85 percent of a child’s brain development occurs during the first three years.

“The Monroe County Library is a huge resource when it comes to encouraging parents to read to their children,” Reinhold said. “When parents ask me, ‘What can I do to help my kids do well in school?’ I say, ‘Just sit down and read to them. If you can turn your kid into a reader that kid will be a good student.’ ”

There are a myriad of other local programs promoting adults reading to children, as well as children reading on their own, such as the “Monroe Smart Start Birth-to-Five Coalition,” led by the United Way of Monroe County and Community Foundation, that organizes such things as literacy parties in which parents and children explore books together and a “Let’s Read” outreach that encourages pediatricians to talk about the importance of books and give away books at the child’s wellness visits through age 5.

Another program, First Book of Monroe County, has given grade schools and agencies such as Head Start and the Boys and Girls Clubs of Bloomington more than \$10,000 since its inception two years ago for them to buy low-cost books through a national marketplace.

“The school or agency then gives those books to children which they can then take home with them,” said Joanne Weddle, a member of the agency’s board. “The program is geared toward children in low-income homes, so we give grants to schools and agencies in which at least 70 percent of the children they serve are in poverty.”

### **Bad news**

The report also contains some sobering news.

Based on 2012 data, 50 percent of Hoosier children from birth to 8 years old are living in low-income households — tying it with Maine, Michigan, Missouri and Ohio for the 20th-highest percentage in the country.

And in 2011-12, only 24 percent of low-income Hoosier children under age 6 received a developmental screening — tying Indiana with Michigan, Nebraska, and Nevada for the 37th highest percentage in the country.

“That blows my mind,” Reinhold said. “We do developmental screenings twice a year for kids age 2 through 6 because it’s a significant tool that has statistical validity and empirical research to back it up.”

Reinhold said the earlier teachers can determine if a child is lagging behind in some area of

development, the sooner the child can be given resources to help remediate those developmental deficits.

“It’s more cost-effective, and more effective in general, to begin working with a preschool child rather than waiting till the child is in third or fourth grade,” Reinhold said.

Reinhold said the reason MCUM gives children developmental screenings on an ongoing basis is that children learn at different rates and often go through an ebb and flow in their development.

“The fact that we see one child lagging behind the others in a certain area — such a fine motor skill development — does not mean that child is in a deficit state,” she said. “But we do take it seriously and our educators would implement some fine motor exercises to help remediate the problem.”

She said if the child continued to show a fine motor deficit in three consecutive screenings over an 18-month period, then MCUM would call the child’s school and ask that it evaluate the child for a learning deficit and provide therapy if the school determines the child does indeed have a deficit.”

The report, which can be seen at [www.aecf.org.KIDSCOUNT](http://www.aecf.org/KIDSCOUNT), includes data on early childhood development for every state, the District of Columbia and the nation.