

## Building Literacy Skills for At-Risk Children in Poverty

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Professionals worldwide grapple with the challenge of serving students who present with cognitive, linguistic, and executive functioning deficits related to being from low-socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2013). Among the many challenges they experience, a major one for low-SES children is the limited oral language input they receive compared to middle- and upper-SES children (Turnbull & Justice, 2012). The research of Hart and Risley (2003) involving low- and middle-SES families showed that in a 365-day year, young children from professional families would have heard 4 million utterances; children from welfare families would have heard 250,000 utterances.

In addition to hearing much less oral language input than middle-SES children, low-SES children also have a great deal less exposure to written language. A great deal of research supports the fact that when compared with middle-SES children, low-SES children have striking deficits in literacy-related skills, such as phonological awareness, print awareness, vocabulary, and others. For this and other reasons, such as a lack of access to books, they frequently grow up to be poor readers, with resulting negative consequences for job-related and educational opportunities. As Neuman and Celano state (2012, p. 5) state, "...children's earliest experiences with print will establish a trajectory of learning that is cumulative over time—spiraling either upward or downward, carrying profound implications..."

Statistics indicate that lack of access to literacy materials is a major cause of literacy deficits and academic failure, which have been linked to delinquency, crime, and violence. In the U.S., in states such as California and West Virginia, prison cells are built based in part upon the number of 3rd graders who are reading below grade level (Children of the Code, 2012). Over 70% of America's prisoners cannot read above a 4th grade level. By some estimates, in middle-income homes, the average child has 13+ books; in some high poverty areas, there is one book for every 300 children. Three fourths of children who finish 4th grade reading below grade level are at risk for prison, welfare, or both. All these numbers were published before Covid 19 closed our schools.

During Covid 19, we want to make a difference for those who are truly suffering and at risk. One specific way to do that is to collect and donate books to at-risk children in poverty to keep! Here is how you can do this in a safe, pandemic-friendly way:

1. Clean out your own home. If you have children's books, great! Start there!
2. Call around your community and find if there are schools, preschool programs, food banks, and other outreach programs that you can safely donate the books to. Many schools, especially elementary schools, have pandemic outreach programs where families can come to the school and

receive food and other items which are handed to them through their car windows by masked volunteers. Food banks are also actively engaged in contributing to at-risk families. Call them!

3. Tell your friends, colleagues, and family that you are collecting children's books.

4. Organize a book drive in your neighbourhood, school, place of worship (e.g. church, temple, mosque) or community. Start by telling your colleagues, friends, and family that you are collecting new and gently used children's books for at-risk children experiencing poverty and limited access to literacy materials.

5. Advertise on social media. Explain that you are collecting new and gently used books to give to at-risk children in poverty. I myself use Facebook and Instagram.

6. Use the Next-Door app on your phone. I've had a number of university students successfully collect books this way.

7. Offer contactless pickup. I and some of my innovative university students have had great success asking people to leave bags of books in their driveway for pickup. Arrange a date and time for the pickup. One of my undergraduate students just delivered 230 books that she obtained through social media and the Next-Door app. She arranged for contactless pickup and was highly successful! My husband and I recently got 400-500 books from a third-grade teacher who is retiring. She left the boxes of books in her driveway. We came and got the books and never even met her.

We all long to make a difference for the good of others, but during the pandemic, it can be very discouraging to try to help. Everything is shut down as Covid 19 cases continue to rise. There is a concrete, easy, safe way to make a difference. Start collecting and donating books to at-risk children in poverty for a brighter future—today! For more ideas, go to [www.lovetalkread.com](http://www.lovetalkread.com). Follow me on Instagram @lovetalkread and Facebook at Love Talk Read. Together we can help our at-risk children in poverty continue to increase their literacy skills.