

# Children's literacy: the great equalizer

**“By the time children reach grade 3, they transition from learning to read, to reading to learn. If they can't read, it's going to impact their ability to learn and communicate. When this happens, a lot of children withdraw from the learning process and it opens the door to even more concerns, such as disengagement from school, low self-esteem and lack of confidence.” – Machele, ED, Strong Start**

**Learning to read is one of the essential building blocks of life. Strong Start's programs aim to help children reach their potential and strengthen our community through literacy.**

'Healthy Children and Youth' is one of Wellbeing Waterloo Region's key priority areas. For Strong Start's Executive Director, Machele Denison, recognizing the connection between literacy and healthy brain development in children is vital.

Two high-impact programs offered by Strong Start are Letters, Sounds and Words™ and Get Ready for School™.

Letters, Sounds and Words is a 10-week program that targets children in Senior Kindergarten and Grade 1 who need a literacy boost. They are paired with trained community volunteers who go into schools to work one-on-one with children, playing carefully designed games and activities. The program is organized in four strands that help children recognize letters, a sound each one represents, how to learn words by sight and how to learn a word by using the sounds of its letters.

Get Ready for School is a program for pre-schoolers during the six-month period before entering Junior Kindergarten. Through the 44 classes, children build vocabulary, learn letter sounds and practise classroom behaviours. The program is particularly beneficial for children who are learning English as a Second Language or for those who are from a low to middle socio-economic background.

According to Machele, one of the key features of these programs is that they are completely free of charge. “It really is the great equalizer. No matter what your background is, if you are given the resources and help you need to learn to read, you have an equal chance at success.”



Strong Start's programs also support many of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals, including: 'No Poverty', 'Quality Education', 'Decent Work and Economic Growth', 'Reduced Inequalities'.

“When you consider the immediate and long-term impact that being able to read has on a human being and their life trajectory, there are many linkages to these goals,” says Machele.

In many cases, the programs not only have an impact on the children, but their parents as well. “I was concerned prior to this program that my son wouldn't be ready for Junior Kindergarten in the fall due to a speech delay,” says Michelle Delahunty, whose son was in the Get Ready for School program. “This program has not only given me the confidence that he is more than ready for school, but my son is now talking and has taken more from this program than I could have ever imagined.”

Grants from Kitchener Waterloo Community Foundation have allowed Strong Start to add an additional Get Ready for School program in a designated high-needs neighbourhood, and another program servicing rural areas of Waterloo Region. The funding has also assisted the Letters, Sounds and Words program by replenishing the learning materials needed to operate the program as well as train new volunteers.

Since its inception in 2001, Strong Start has helped nearly 39,000 children learn to read with the help of over 28,000 volunteers.

**“This really is a great example of a community rallying around its children, with its time and its money, to help them learn to read. It really does take a village to raise a child.” – Machele**

If you are interested in learning more about Strong Start, visit [www.strongstart.ca](http://www.strongstart.ca).

