

# Literacy in Northern Ontario

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Dr. Marie Albert  
Dr. Anne-Sophie Gervais

## Background

In 2021, the CPS released a position statement on the importance of early literacy levels, which highlighted the impact of early literacy on future health outcomes and described three ways to promote early literacy. One of the ways to promote early literacy is through reading; reading to and with a child has tremendous benefits on language development and future interest in reading.

In our review of the literature, we have found important statistics that highlight the status of literacy levels in Canada:

- More than one million children in Canada are estimated to have below grade-level reading skills.
- 27% of kids in Canada start Grade 1 without some of the early developmental skills they need to be able to learn to read.
- Approximately 25% of Grade 3 children in Canada are not reading at grade level.
- Pandemic disruptions in children's learning are forecast to cause a 30% increase in socioeconomic skills gaps
- 13.8% of Canadian Grade 10 students do not have the baseline level of reading skills needed to navigate in our society, according to a recent international study from the OECD.
- Children in low socioeconomic communities are almost 2× as likely to be behind in early development skills as high-socioeconomic status peers
- Parents' reading habits play a large role in determining how often kids read: 57% of kids who are frequent readers have parents who read books 5–7 days per week, compared to only 15% of kids who are infrequent readers.

Northern Ontario has a particular geographic location and is quite vast. There is a paucity of physical bookstores and libraries in Northern Ontario, especially north of Thunder Bay amongst the Northern First Nations reserves. Therefore, these concerns with lower literacy levels are likely exacerbated. Other barriers in vulnerable populations of low SES include lower financial security and decreased awareness of the importance of early literacy.

Based off of all this background information, we developed this project in order to promote early literacy and access to books in the populations that we serve as pediatric residents working in remote northern Ontario.

## Target Population

All children of Northern Ontario but more specifically children of indigenous background and of lower socioeconomic status that are disproportionately affected in terms of early literacy.

## Objectives

1. Improve access to books for the communities of Northern Ontario, in English and other languages

2. Provide information to parents on the importance of early literacy

## Project Implementation

In order to improve access to books in the communities of Northern Ontario, we set off on the goal of setting up “book nooks” in several different locations where we would be able to reach the most children in need. We accumulated books both from large amounts of donations as well as purchased with the support of grants. Books given by donation were triaged to ensure they were culturally appropriate. Books purchased were selected to have a variety of themes that foster inclusion and diversity, as well as selected in several different languages including Ojibway-Cree. The books were selected for ages ranging from 0-8 years.

The book nooks were placed both in larger medical centres where a large number of children travel to for medical care, as well as smaller communities. Some of these book nook locations were set up in the style of “take a book, leave a book” in order to make this sustainable long term. However, some of the book nooks in small communities were instead set up with a goal for children to simply take a book without expecting them to give something in return as we understand not everyone has a book to give.

The current book nook locations that we have set up so far include:

- Thunder Bay Pediatrics Clinic
- Sioux Lookout Meno Ya Win Health Centre
- Cochrane Temiskaming Children’s Treatment Centre (Timmins)
- Neskantaga Rachael Bessie Sakanee Memorial Health Centre
- Mishkeegogamang Early Childhood Development Centre and Nursing Station
- Kingfisher Lake Education Centre

Alongside the books in our book nooks, we have included some resources for parents to read up on the importance of early childhood literacy and tips on how to support their language development. We have also organized book readings in locations in Thunder Bay, including a library and many community centres part of the Thunder Bay Playgrounds Program, a free drop-in service for children of Thunder Bay.

## Next Steps

We have been lucky to have ongoing support from community members with book donations and grants to continue to purchase more books therefore we will continue to replenish the existing book nooks and hopefully continue to create new ones in other Northern Ontario communities. We also would like to continue to organize further educational sessions to continue to empower parents to read to their children and to learn more about the importance of early literacy.

## Acknowledgements

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## Pictures



Book Nook at the Mishkeegogamang Early Childhood Development Centre



Book Nook in Thunder Bay



Giving books out at the Sioux Lookout Meno Ya Win Health Centre





Book reading at a Thunder Bay library