



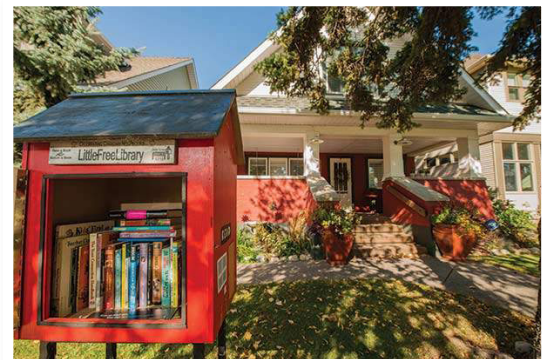
Four strategies one nonprofit uses to boost literacy citywide

At Calgary Reads, a nonprofit based in Alberta, Canada, our mission is to create positive change in literacy outcomes for children by mobilizing education, community, and business to care and act together with ingenuity. The organization was founded in 2000 to fill a need in helping Grade 1 and 2 students boost their reading skills through weekly practice with trained volunteers. As new research on reading and early brain development emerged, we began looking to the early years and community to build language and literacy skills. We now focus on the 0-8 years continuum, from babies to Grade 3.

Our strategies to create positive change are to increase book ownership, change values and engagement regarding literacy and reading, and increase capacity in adults and children. To do this, we work with the adults who surround the child, namely parents, community members, teachers and school leadership, and businesses owners. It's exciting work because these adults are going to spread the joy of reading to not only the children they now serve, but also those they will serve in the future. The ripple effect may be enormous. Once that switch is flipped, once they know how to embed reading into their routine or conversational turns into their day, they don't go back. They fuel the Reading Revolution!

I'd like to share with you some of the ways that we're inspiring parents, educators, and community members to help children become lifelong readers:

Children's Reading Place – We had a vision to create a beautiful space that families could visit to be inspired, immersed in books, and get back to the basics of reading with children. We wanted to create a place for families to spend quality time centered around literacy, accessible to all families regardless of income, language, or culture. Two years ago, that vision became a reality when we opened the Children's Reading Place. This heritage home was built in 1912 in the historic Inglewood neighborhood of Calgary. We invited designers, design students, and artists to transform the



Every time a family visits the Children's Reading Place, each child selects a book of their own to take home. Children who own books are more likely to be readers and see themselves as readers.

house into a magic wonderland of children’s literature, where families can see how amazing a reading place can be and get inspired to create one of their own at home. Every time a family visits, each child selects a book of their own to take home. This is one of our literacy strategies for book ownership, because we know that children who own books are more likely to be readers and see themselves as readers. This is not a lending house, we want kids to own the books and start building their own home libraries and reading places.

The house itself is full of cozy reading spaces for children — under the stairs, a tipi, a tent, and even in the attic. Each reading place has books, a book light, and book storage — the “three Bs,” as we call them. In our Indigenous room, reflecting the language and culture of Treaty 7 people, we painted the ceiling under the stairs to create the effect of looking up through forest trees to the night sky when the child lays down.

Along with families, we invite local schools and preschools to book field trips to the Children’s Reading Place to promote literacy and book ownership. We offer professional learning for educators that emphasizes how the environment is the third teacher in promoting literacy and language development in the classroom.

There are two “Readers in Residence” who live at the house and help with special events like Baby Book Club and Dads’ Night. In the basement of the house, we have our Book Bank in which volunteers clean, sort, and deliver books to agencies we work with, including the Food Bank, to distribute to children. A family in crisis might not be able to come to the Children’s Reading Place, but they may have a trusting relationship with a community agency, so we supply other local organizations with books, key literacy messages, and reading places so that we can meet families where they are. In two years, we’ve received more than 10,000 visitors to the Children’s Reading Place and given out more than 72,000 books through our Book Bank.



Reading spaces in the house are supplied with the “three Bs” — books, book lights, and book storage.



The Children’s Reading Place is a place for families to spend quality time centered around literacy, regardless of their income, language, or culture.

LENA Start – We launched LENA Start in the spring of 2019 with YW Calgary (formerly YWCA Calgary). For our first cycle, we had 20 families register! This was above our expectations. We are just wrapping up this group and are excited for graduation. The parents have been engaged, diligent, and excited about what they are learning and how it is impacting their relationship with their child as well as their child's language skills.

LENA Start also complements Calgary Reads' other initiatives very well. There's an amazing symbiotic relationship between the Children's Reading Place and LENA Start, because it provides a place for parents to practice the strategies they are learning in LENA Start. They can visit the house and practice talking, reading, singing, and playing with their child. They get used to using reading as a tool to increase conversation. Both build home libraries, because parents get a book at each LENA Start session and on each visit to the Children's Reading Place. We had two families who came into the LENA Start program without any books at home, and now they have a library of their own.

Big Book Sale – For the past 17 years, we have hosted a fundraiser called the CBC Calgary Reads Big Book Sale, on Mother's Day weekend. We receive more than 100,000 donated books, then over the course of a few weeks more than 1,000 volunteers sort them to be sold during the three-day book sale. We have volunteers who come back every year to work at the Big Book Sale and many of our customers have it scheduled in their calendars to attend. This year, over 10,000 people came through the doors in three days. Our promotions through radio and social media get the Calgary community talking about literacy, sharing favourite books, and promoting the important work of Calgary Reads. When the sale closes, we invite schools and community agencies to our Unsold Event to take boxes of free books for their organizations. Our book sale also has a positive environmental impact through reducing waste by reusing books, recycling books that are too damaged to be included, and by selling the remaining unsold books to a company that will put them back into circulation in another part of the world.



Families who attend LENA Start can enjoy complementary visits to the Children's Reading Place.



Volunteers help to run the Children's Reading Place and the annual Big Book Sale.

Alberta Reads Network – Calgary Reads continues to recruit and train over 1,000 volunteers to work in schools through programs in over 11 school jurisdictions within the province of Alberta. We offer many options for schools to promote literacy including training older students how to be good reading buddies with younger students, supplying Literacy-In-A-Box for family literacy nights, and hosting weekly read-alouds for children in kindergarten and Grade 1.

We host professional learning for educators and administrators on literacy and family engagement and often speak to parent school councils about the importance and impact of literacy.

Through these four strategies, we're increasing literacy across the city of Calgary. Reading is a fundamental skill that has a profound impact on our lives, and it begins at an early age. By supporting early literacy and helping children learn to read, we're opening doors to new worlds, new perspectives, and new opportunities to grow. For more information about Calgary Reads please visit our website at **CalgaryReads.com** and follow us @CalgaryReads on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.



By Sharon Walker, PhD

Dr. Sharon Walker is Director of Research & Early Years at Calgary Reads. She has worked within the education, health, and non-profit sectors focusing primarily on speech, language, and literacy development with early learners and school-aged children.

Learn more about LENA Start!



LENA Start is a program for parents that uses regular feedback from LENA technology to help increase interactive talk in order to close the early-talk gap, support kindergarten readiness, and build stronger families.

Visit www.LENA.org/LENA-Start for more information.