

Young minds avoid 'summer slide'

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King of Prussia - "Summer slide" may sound like a playground attraction. But it is actually an educational "pitfall" most children would do best to avoid.

American Reading Company, 421 Feheley Drive, King of Prussia, spent the warm-weather months helping children steer clear of the otherwise predictable lapse.

Specifically, "summer slide" is the term education experts use to refer

to the decline in children's reading and math skills if they do not engage in educational activities over a summer break.

American Reading Company CEO Jane Hileman proposed a challenge to employees at the start of summer-find a young person to read with and log the time he or she spends reading.

Hileman is a former teacher who provides schools nationwide with 100 Book Challenge, a program that encourages children to read independently every day at school and at home by allowing them to select books from leveled collections.

Schools that participate in 100 Book Challenge typically complete 100 steps in a marking period, according to American Reading Company Marketing Assistant Megan O'Grady. A step is equal to 15 minutes and children and their reading partners keep a log sheet that records how much reading they accomplish in each step. "This way, children read 'leveled' books so they don't become frustrated," says O'Grady.

Director of Product Development Marilyn Pitt helped Kim Vu, who works in the company's finance department, assess her children's reading skills this summer. Vu says her 7-year-old daughter, Leone has improved since the reading department helped her pick out proper level books to bring home. "She used to become frustrated, but now she's doing so well and enjoying reading," says Vu.

Vu says she started 100 Book Challenge to prepare Leone for second grade this fall at East Lansdown School. "It helps me stay on top of our reading when we have to log the hours," says Vu.

Leone reads to her 3-year-old sister, Jessica and the girls' big brother, Quoc, 8, has taken advantage of recent summer reading time to explore his interest in science. Quoc doesn't seem to be "sliding" this summer as he spouts off facts he comes across in a book of world records. He begins most sentences with "Did you know..." and talks about liquids, solids and gases. "It's amazing the difference reading makes," says their grandma, Anne Hart.

O'Grady says Hileman believes that the more you read the better

reader you will become. With a 'practice makes perfect' mentality, the American Reading Company set a summer goal for employees to get each child to log at least 25 hours of reading time. For every 25 hours, Hileman offered employees a half-day of paid time off.

What may have began as a quest for a paid vacation for many employees turned into a company-wide effort to overcome the odds kids face when starting a new school year-research has shown students typically score lower on standardized tests at the end of summer than the beginning.

Several employees are participating, but Sylvester Ricks of Southwest Philadelphia, who has worked in American Reading Company's receiving department since May, has taken on the greatest responsibility. Ricks has been coaching eight neighborhood children as well as his son, 12-year-old Nyier, who he says has inherited his love for reading.

"Reading has been a passion of mine since childhood," says Ricks, who also has a desire to help disadvantaged youth. For him, paid time off is just a summer perk-he considers 100 Book Challenge a year round undertaking, not just a summer project.

"Without reading, nothing is possible," says Ricks. "I tell my son, 'just imagine if we lost the remote control, had no volume on the TV and we couldn't read captions-we would be in trouble!'" he laughs.

Ricks is like a bookworm's Santa Claus, and his living room is his workshop. When the company donates slightly damaged books they can't sell to customers, he passes them onto the kids. "About once a week my son and I drop books off around the neighborhood," he says.

Ricks keeps a chart on his living room wall that color codes reading levels. He arranges piles of books, according to age appropriateness and their degree of difficulty, and the children, who range from Kindergarten to eighth grade, choose their reading material.

The children have plenty to choose from, because according to O'Grady, the amount of books the company carries from varying publishers-including both powerhouses and smaller vendors-is unique to American Reading Company.

Each child who reaches the 25-hour reading milestone by the end of summer will receive a medal from American Reading Company and an invitation to tour their book warehouse in King of Prussia, where they can choose from a vast collection of children's titles.

"I'm about to take on 5 new kids who are interested," says Ricks. "There's not a lot to do in the city so I believe in reading. I guarantee their report cards will reflect this come first term."

