



# Students 'Get SMART'



*Reading program gives children confidence and skills for a lifetime*

**By Lori Russell**

Can 30 minutes make a difference in the life of a child? Sherry Munro knows it can.

As a volunteer for Start Making a Reader Today (SMART), Sherry has seen many children gain competence and confidence by reading with an adult for half an hour a week.

Oregon's schoolchildren are expected to read independently by third grade. Research shows those who do not learn to read by then are more likely to struggle with reading as adults, drop out of school and be less successfully employed.

Every year, SMART trains thousands of volunteer readers across Oregon. They meet with students in kindergarten through third grade once a week for seven months. Teachers identify students for the

program who may have limited books at home, need a relationship with a caring adult, have been in the SMART program before or who are not receiving other services at school.

Students who have limited time to read with an adult at home or do not have an English-speaking family member also benefit from the program.

In the time many adults spend watching a television sitcom or washing a load of laundry, Sherry helps a child develop sight reading and reading comprehension skills that will continue to serve him throughout his life.

The program provides books for students to read on a variety of interests and reading levels.

"I begin (each visit) by giving the child a choice: 'Would you like me to read with you or you to read to me?'" Sherry says. "Kindergartners want you to read to them, but by first or second grade, they want to read themselves."

Sherry frequently pauses during the reading time to ask the child a question about the book they are

reading together or to discuss an interesting or challenging word in the story.

Sherry learned about the SMART program through her involvement with Kiwanis.

“The focus of Kiwanis is helping children in our community, so it was a good fit,” she says.

Sherry has worked with beginning readers in each of three elementary schools in The Dalles.

“I’m a senior citizen,” says Sherry, once the owner of a bed and breakfast, but now retired. “Many kids don’t have a grandparent nearby. This gives them the opportunity to be with someone of a different generation and develop a rapport. It builds their confidence.”

In addition to reading aloud with volunteers, students are given a book once a month to build their home library.

“The kids are always excited to go back to class and show off their new books,” says Sherry.

She admits to quite an extensive collection herself.

“I keep telling my husband we need to put another room on the house to hold all of my books,” Sherry says.



**Michon Silaphath is president of the local SMART chapter.**

Since 1992, SMART has served 130,000 Oregon children, giving away 1.8 million books and enlisting the help of 90,000 volunteers contributing more than 2.8 million hours. Volunteers read with about 75 students in The Dalles last year.

SMART volunteers range in age and include the retired as well as working people who come on their lunch hour, says Michon Silaphath, president of the local SMART chapter. She helps coordinate the program at Colonel Wright Elementary School.

“If we had more volunteers, we could serve more kids,” Michon notes.

Although the program began in mid-October, volunteers still are needed. Students can join throughout the school year as more adults become available.

An independent study by the Eugene Research Institute reveals that fifth-graders who participated in SMART are 60 percent more likely to reach state reading benchmarks than similar students who did not participate.

The program’s impact extends beyond improving reading scores, says Michon.

Sherry agrees.

“Every time I go to a SMART graduation, I see children who can read better and are more self confident than when they began the program,” Sherry says. “It is a beautiful experience.” ■

## Volunteers Needed to Help Even More Children

The reader volunteer position is the backbone of the SMART program, providing the one-on-one reading attention that allows young children to gain confidence in their reading ability.

Although SMART is not a learn-to-read program, volunteers are asked to share their love and enthusiasm of reading, along with genuine caring. As a result, children receive the two key components basic to early reading success: exposure to language and human interaction.

SMART volunteers build a caring relationship and fulfill the commitment to read the same time each week, one-on-one, with two K-3 children during the school year and help kids choose take-home books provided by SMART every month.

Helpful qualities and skills of volunteers are:

- ▶ Advocate of children’s literacy and dedication to community service.
- ▶ Enjoyment and familiarity of children’s literature.
- ▶ Ability to enthusiastically read books aloud.
- ▶ Ability to relate positively to young children.
- ▶ Understanding of children’s developmental stages.
- ▶ Reliable.

Readers are trained in SMART program basics and read aloud strategies prior to starting their volunteer experience. Information is given regarding age-appropriate developmental stages and behavioral strategies. A site coordinator is there to help.

*To find out more about becoming a SMART volunteer, call (877) 598-4633 or visit [www.getsmartoregon.org](http://www.getsmartoregon.org).*