



SUMMER COUNTS!

**A Guide to Support Summer
Learning Through Book Giving**



CONTENTS

- 1 Section One • Introduction
- 2 Section Two • Why is Summer Learning Important?
- 4 Section Three • What Supports Do Parents Want?
- 7 Section Four • Research-Supported Best Practices in Book Giving to Support Summer Learning
- 12 Section Five • *Books on Break* in Action
- 16 Section Six • Summer Learning Resources
- 18 Section Seven • Sources

1



INTRODUCTION

Summer learning matters.

Summer slide—as it’s often called—is a significant contributor to the income-based achievement gap.

Although children typically progress at the same rate during the school year, they can lose two to three months of what they learn over the summer.

These losses are cumulative and therefore add up! By the time children from lower-income families reach fifth grade, they may be up to three grade levels behind their peers from higher income families.



Giving children books to own is an effective evidence-based strategy to support children’s continued learning—one that can reduce and even eliminate summer learning loss.

For the past three years, with funding from United Way of the Greater Triangle, the North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation (NCECF) and Book Harvest have partnered to create tools and strategies to support young children’s learning during the summer months.

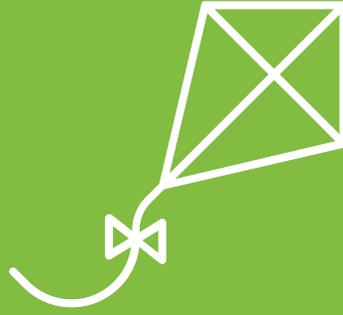
Our work has been driven by parents. No one is more passionate about children than their parents, and no one knows them better. We have had the privilege of hearing from parents about their dreams for their children and the challenges they face. Parents led the way—crafting messages with us, determining how their peers would want to access resources, and shaping the strategies we undertook.

This guide is a culmination of that partnership. It focuses on book-giving—an easy-to-implement activity that can support children’s summer learning and long-term educational success. We share best practices, lessons learned and resources that address the following questions:

- Why is Summer Learning Important?
- What Supports Do Parents Want?
- How Does Book Ownership Support Summer Learning?
- What are the Research-Based Best Practices for Book Giving?
- What does Book Giving Look Like in Action?

The guide also includes links to the tools that were created throughout the three-year partnership and a list of online summer learning resources.

2



WHY IS SUMMER LEARNING IMPORTANT?

Children learn best and retain information more when learning is uninterrupted.¹

Children from low-income families are less likely to have access to the books and summer learning experiences that many of their higher-income peers do, and are therefore more likely to fall behind during the summer months.

Low-income children lose as much as two months of reading and math achievement each summer, while their middle-income peers tend to make slight gains in reading.² These year-over-year losses are cumulative, leaving lower-income children up to three grade levels behind their higher-income peers by fifth grade.³ Place matters, too: children and youth who live in low-resourced neighborhoods are more likely to lose ground in reading over the summer than those in higher-resourced neighborhoods.⁴

Summer learning loss in the early grades is a predictor of high school course placement, dropout rates, and college attendance rates.⁵ Some research suggests that summer learning loss may account for as much as 80 percent of the income-based achievement gap.⁶ On average, children experience greater summer learning loss in math than in reading.⁷ Math skills affect third-grade reading proficiency.⁸

Children from low-income households stand to gain the most from high-quality summer learning programs, and they are the least likely to have access to them.⁹ Having books at home where children are reading with their parents and caregivers in the early years is an important strategy to reverse summer learning loss.

3



WHAT SUPPORTS DO PARENTS WANT?

Parents have an important role to play in supporting children's summer learning.

Understanding what resonates with parents and what they need to support their children's summer reading is critical to addressing summer learning loss.

The North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation (NCECF) has gathered and analyzed parents' perspectives to create messages and tools that are accessible and responsive to parents.

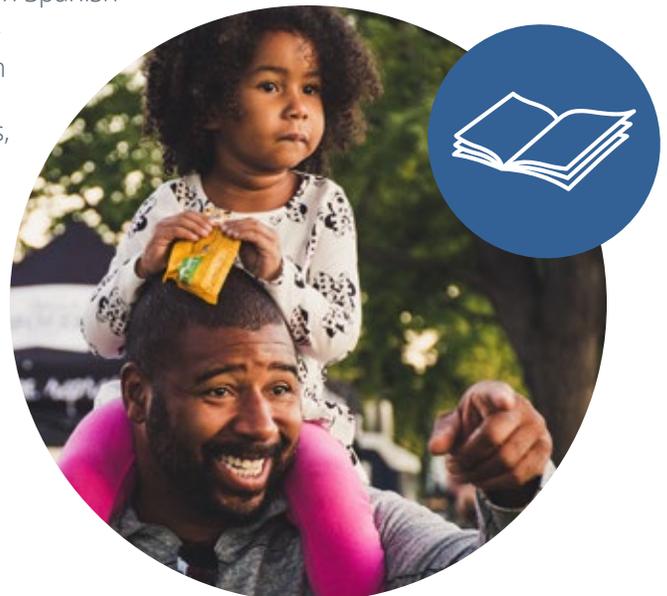
Over the past two years, NCECF has engaged parents in the following ways:

- Family representatives participated directly in our NC Pathways to Grade-Level Reading initiative, an effort that has engaged hundreds of diverse stakeholders to co-create whole-child, birth-through-eight metrics and strategies that support children reading on grade level by third grade.
- EducationNC conducted a digital survey of North Carolina parents to better understand the resources they rely on and obstacles they face as they support their young children's success. The survey received more than 2600 responses.
- Partnering with Book Harvest in Durham, NCECF worked to better understand parents' perspectives on summer reading—246 parents responded to a survey and 39 parents participated in six focus groups, conducted in English and in Spanish. These activities were conducted among parents whose children attended three elementary schools in Durham County.
- NCECF supported the creation of a Book Harvest Parent Advisory Team to inform how to help parents understand the importance of summer reading and support their children's learning.

From this work, in 2017 NCECF produced a meta-analysis, *Not About Me, Without Me—Raising Parent Voice to Guide Early Childhood Policy*. More than 2,000 parent and caregiver voices were represented in the report. Here are some of the key findings from parent feedback related to summer learning and parents supporting their children's learning over the summer.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Parents want to support their children's learning during the summer, but feel constrained by limited time and limited access to books. They say more time at home and more books at home are needed.
- Parents may be aware of summer learning loss, but they know less about the role of reading in stemming learning loss.
- Parents say more information about the benefits of summer reading, tips on how to read with children and access to more books would most help them support their children reading regularly during the summer.
- Spanish-speaking parents want greater access to books in Spanish and want specific help with supporting bilingual children.
- Parents make use of community supports when they can access them and have needs, such as information about resources, informal social supports, affordable programs, resources and services for families of color and immigrants.
- Parents also have barriers to accessing community supports, such as time, transportation, lack of trust, waitlists, eligibility, and cultural bias and stigma.
- The messenger matters. English-speaking parents said information coming from their peers would be more credible than information coming from program professionals.
- The method of communication matters too. Parents have preferred methods of communication, such as



word-of-mouth from friends, family, doctors, teachers, schools, and community organizations as well as flyers, brochures, Internet, and text messages.

- “Parents, you are your child’s first and most important teacher,” is not an effective message. Some of the English-speaking parents found it offensive and said that they did not relate to it. In addition, Spanish-speaking and English-speaking parents interpret the meaning of this phrase differently.
- Parents preferred positively framed messages about the importance of summer reading combined with information about summer learning loss.
- While English-speaking and Spanish-speaking parents have much in common, they also may interpret messages differently and have differing needs.
- You can read more about what parents want and need to support their children’s learning in the NCECF meta-analysis report [*Not About Me, Without Me*](#).



4



RESEARCH- SUPPORTED BEST PRACTICES IN BOOK GIVING TO SUPPORT SUMMER LEARNING

Reading is the only activity that is consistently shown to build learning over the summer.



Too many children do not read over the summer because they do not own books. Access to books is an equity issue.

Children living in low-income families, who are disproportionately children of color, are less likely than their middle-income and white peers to have books in the home, or access to books through well-stocked school libraries or public libraries nearby.

Book-giving programs have been shown to increase reading and improve reading proficiency over the summer. They can be less expensive and more effective than summer school or voluntary summer learning programs. Well-implemented summer book-giving programs result in reading gains for all children, and they show the largest impacts for children who face the most barriers to opportunity—children of color, struggling readers, and children who report owning fewer than 50 books.

In 2012, Book Harvest launched a book-giving program called Books on Break. In its first year, Books on Break provided books to two elementary schools in Durham County, inviting children to select books to take home to read over the summer and to keep forever.

In 2018, Books on Break reached every elementary school student in Durham Public Schools with between three and 10 books each: students in 30 schools selected and took home a total of 80,779 books. Book Harvest's lived experience with this program, and its journey from small demonstration pilot to a program with system-wide reach, was guided at every step not just by parent input but also by research findings on what works and what doesn't.

Research-Informed Best Practices for Book Giving:

Below are best practices, linked to research, that are an essential part of the book-giving strategy used by the *Books on Break* program. These are important for any school or organization to consider as they build their own book-giving strategy for combating summer learning loss.

BEST PRACTICE: Ensure that children in the early grades have books in their homes.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND RESOURCES:

- Historically and currently, and across countries and cultures, children with more books in their homes are exposed to more learning than children without books in their homes.¹⁰
- Access to books has been shown to promote reading achievement outside of school.¹¹
- Children who report easy access to books read more books.¹²
- Students living in concentrated poverty tend to live in neighborhood “book deserts,” which impacts their learning.¹³

BEST PRACTICE: Target summer time to stem the learning loss that often occurs when children are out of school for extended periods of time.

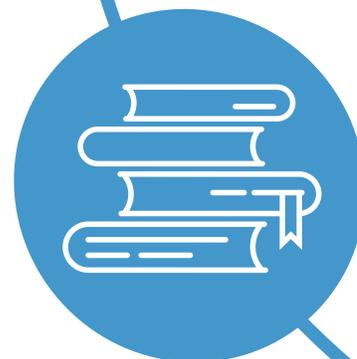
RESEARCH FINDINGS AND RESOURCES:

- Learning gains made during the school year are fairly similar for students from different social and economic backgrounds. Reading loss happens not during the school year, but over the summer months when school is out of session.¹⁴
- Reading is the only activity that is consistently shown to build learning over the summer.¹⁵
- With school libraries closed and classroom books not available, children have less access to books during the summer.¹⁶

BEST PRACTICE: Give children lots of books to read over the summer.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND RESOURCES:

- Four to 20 books have been shown to have an effect on children’s reading and learning over the summer.²⁸



BEST PRACTICE:

Focus book-giving efforts on children from low-income families, who are most affected by summer learning slide.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND RESOURCES:

- All children gain reading skills during the school year, but while middle-income children tend to have reading gains over the summer months when school is not in session, low-income children have losses.¹⁷
- Summer break creates, on average, an annual reading achievement gap of about three months between students from middle- and lower-income families. That annual loss accumulates over the elementary grade summers, and by middle school, there is a cumulative lag of two or more years in reading achievement.¹⁸
- Children from high-income families have more access to books, both through home libraries and through higher-quality, accessible public libraries, than their peers from low-income families. As a result, children from higher income families read more over the summer.¹⁹
- Book-giving programs improve all children's reading over the summer, and they show the greatest impact in reading improvement among populations that face the most barriers to opportunity: students of color, less fluent readers, and students who report owning fewer than 50 books.²⁰

BEST PRACTICE:

Give children books to own.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND RESOURCES:

- Giving children books, as opposed to lending them over the summer, results in larger effects on reading achievement.²¹

BEST PRACTICE:

Allow children the opportunity to select their own books from a variety of topics, genres, and authors.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND RESOURCES:

- Voluntary reading—rather than assigned book lists—has been shown to improve motivation and reading achievement.²²
- Incentive programs (earning prizes for reading, for example) can encourage children to read only easy books and/or to read books quickly without comprehension. Increasing access to a variety of interesting reading materials is more likely to encourage children to read outside of school.²³
- Self-selection of books on topics of personal interest, written by favorite authors, or within a particular genre, are important features of voluntary reading.²⁴

BEST PRACTICE:

Provide a range of books at slightly below and slightly above students' grade levels and help children find books that are a good fit for them.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND RESOURCES:

- Successful reading experiences—reading books that are on an appropriate reading level—are more likely to result in reading progress than when students try to read books that are too difficult for them.²⁵
- When students try to read books that are too hard, their energy is used to understand each difficult word, rather than engaging with the story.²⁶
- Overly frustrating reading experiences make children feel unsuccessful and provide little incentive to continue trying.²⁷

BEST PRACTICE:

Provide books for consecutive summers.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND RESOURCES:

- Giving books over an extended period (three consecutive summers) resulted in more reading improvement than one-time book giving.²⁹
- Book giving is a cost-effective strategy for increasing summer reading and reading achievement.³⁰
- Book giving is less costly and potentially more effective than voluntary summer learning programs or summer school.³¹

BEST PRACTICE:

Encourage parents to read with their children every day and to ask their children questions about the books they are reading.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND RESOURCES:

- Students read more over the summer when parents monitor their reading.³²
- Reading gains are largest when family members are involved and make sure that children understand what they are reading.
- Active reading, a shared reading practice where the child learns to become the storyteller with the adult acting as an active listener and questioner, improves children's oral language, which is important for literacy.
- Listening to an adult model fluent reading increases children's fluency and comprehension skills, and expands their vocabulary, background knowledge, sense of story, and awareness of genre and text structure.

5



BOOKS ON BREAK IN ACTION

**Forest View Elementary School,
Durham Public Schools, NC**

Summary

What do these best practices look like in action? Seven years of book giving at Forest View Elementary is contributing to strong academic results—reducing summer learning loss and improving literacy. The school's partnership with Book Harvest has also created a sense of community, creating enthusiasm for learning and contributing to family literacy.



About Forest View Elementary

Forest View Elementary School, part of Durham Public Schools, has been participating in Book Harvest's Books on Break book-giving program since 2012. More than 750 students—kindergarten through fifth grade—attend Forest View. The school is multicultural, representing over 25 countries, with inclusive classrooms where students with and without disabilities learn together. The student body is four percent Asian, 24 percent Black, 36 percent Hispanic, 32 percent white and four percent of two or more races. For the 2017-2018 school year, 48 percent of Forest View third graders scored at or above proficient in reading, and 62 percent scored at or above proficient in math as measured by North Carolina's End-of-Grade tests.

The school is a "positive space for literacy and learning holistically with a strong teacher culture and an active PTA," says Catriona Moore, English Language Resource Teacher at Forest View Elementary. Moore believes this all adds up to a school where parents want their children to attend and stay for their elementary years.

Partnering with Book Harvest

The road to partnering with Book Harvest began with a Girl Scout troop that needed a volunteer project. Moore proposed a community book drive, which brought in 300 books for Forest View Elementary. From there, the school connected with Book Harvest to discuss how the organization could partner with the school through its Books on Break program.

The Books on Break program aims to combat summer learning loss by equipping elementary school students with books to read over the summer and keep forever.

Books on Break embodies three core values:

- 1 • Choice—students can choose books that interest them
- 2 • Quantity—students select 10 books, one for each week of summer
- 3 • Ownership—students keep the books they select

There are two Books on Break strategies for book giving through elementary schools—one in which Book Harvest runs the program from book collection to book selection, and a second in which a school contributes books through community donations supplemented by Book Harvest and manages the book selection at the school. For both strategies, book donations are collected, sorted, and then displayed in a central place such as the school media center. Just before summer break, students select up to 10 books to take home and keep. Both approaches engage school staff, school families and community volunteers to support various aspects of the program. There is also collaboration with summer reading programs and the public library to ensure the message about reading over the summer permeates the community.

Forest View Elementary operates on the shared model with Book Harvest. The agreement began with Forest View collecting as many books as it could, working with churches, civic groups and even a store going out of business, which donated all of its books. Book Harvest then supplemented with more books.

At first, the book-giving effort focused on children who needed books at home as identified by teachers in each classroom. The school started at about 30 to 44 percent of the students receiving books, then 50 to 60 percent. Since 2016, Books on Break has been school-wide, and often it takes place twice a year—before winter breaks, when children each select five books, and before summer breaks, when children each select 10 books.

Book Harvest's Books on Break program is now "part of the fabric of our school," says Moore. Each year the school's family engagement events, including the annual and very popular multicultural festival, help create enthusiasm for Books on Break. There are also events specifically for Spanish-speaking and Arabic-speaking families that highlight the importance of literacy and how parents can support their children's reading skills. Books are made available to parents during these evenings as well.

Outcomes

Moore notes that there are both strong qualitative and quantitative positive outcomes at Forest View Elementary that can be attributed to children owning books as part of what she calls "a healthy literacy environment" in the school.

Quantitatively, the Forest View data manager has compared students' end-of-school-year literacy skills as measured by mClass and TRC assessments with their skills at the start of the next school year. She does this with the same cohorts. The analysis has shown zero summer learning loss, with one cohort showing a gain.

Qualitatively, Moore says the "enthusiasm is greater than the sum of its parts" at Forest View when it comes to books. She believes much of it is about the social part of learning, such as how the book-giving initiative strengthens relationships and creates a sense of community. In turn, the school has seen more activity at the library, in Moore's book-borrowing box in her classroom, and in community donations. The book box outside the media center now needs to be emptied once or twice a week—hundreds of books are coming in from the community.

Best Practices

In addition to operationalizing all the best practices in the academic literature about book giving as described in Section 5, Forest View Elementary shares some strategies that bolster the Books on Break program in their school.

- The school reading media specialist has created a reading log for students to keep track of books they read—it's a visual reminder for them over winter and summer breaks. An example of a reading log from Forest View Elementary can be found in the Resources section.
- Students are told they are not paying money for books they select, and instead they are asked to sign a pledge, promising to read every day all summer long.
- After students select their books, they take them back to their classrooms and write their names on the inside covers so it is clear these books are theirs to keep.
- All school staff, including teachers, staff, bus drivers and custodians, can shop for books for their children.

Lessons Learned

We asked Moore to share lessons her school has learned over the past seven years in implementing its book-giving program. With no dedicated staff for Books on Break at Forest View—Moore and the English as a Second Language (ESL) team lead the effort—these lessons are vital to the program’s success. She noted that her school collects books year-round and planning for Books on Break starts several months ahead of time. Her suggestions include:

- Collect 10-15 percent more books than each child will choose, since during book sorting some will be eliminated due to condition and/or appropriateness of genre, reading level, etc.
- Conduct training for all volunteers participating in Books on Break. Volunteers help collect and sort books and work in the media center on days that students are selecting books.
- Create and divide books into genre and interest sections in the media center that are clearly marked for ease of selection, as students have 20 to 30 minutes to choose their books.
- Promote family literacy. This means accepting that children often select a few books their brothers and sisters would like and also ask for books for their parents who are learning how to read.
- The storage of books can be complicated. Check with the fire marshal, sort the books and label genres and numbers of books in each box, and use the same size boxes for ease of stacking.

The Final Word

After seven years of book giving at Forest View, Moore is continually amazed at the consistent enthusiasm created by children selecting books to own and the progress made in combating summer learning loss.



6



SUMMER LEARNING RESOURCES

Schools, libraries, summer camps and other organizations working with and caring for children can access the following resources to learn more about how to help stop and even reverse summer learning loss.

These easy-to-use tools can engage parents and caregivers in strategies for reading with their children. The messages also support parents and caregivers in gaining a better understanding of summer learning loss.

NC SUMMER LEARNING TOOLKIT • [Link](#)

The NC Early Childhood Foundation (NCECF) created a toolkit for summer program providers to become Summer Learning Ambassadors.

BOOKS ON BREAK • [Link](#)

A Step-By-Step Guide—Book Harvest’s toolkit guides elementary schools through starting book-giving programs.

HOME READING HELPER • [Link](#)

Read Charlotte developed this online resource to empower parents of preschoolers through third graders to support their children’s language and literacy development at home. The Helper includes videos, games, activities and printable materials for reading, language and writing. The site integrates Google Translate so that information and video subtitles can be translated on the fly into 100 languages.

ACTIVE READING • [Link](#)

Active Reading is an evidence-based approach to improve children’s language skills, vocabulary and oral comprehension skills. Read Charlotte has great examples of how to put this strategy into action—to read a book with rather than to a child. Information is available in English and Spanish. For even more details, check out the book authored by Read Charlotte staff, [*Read With Me: Engaging Your Young Child in Active Reading*](#).

SAMPLE FLYERS • [Link](#)

NCECF created spring, winter and summer break flyers that can be sent home with children or given out at school events. The flyers in both English and Spanish provide tips for parents to keep children learning over breaks. The messages were informed by parent surveys, focus groups and working with parents to understand how to best communicate the information.

SAMPLE TEXT MESSAGES • [Link](#)

NCECF and Book Harvest worked with parents and a parent educator to create text messaging for summer break. Parents can receive three texts per week for 12 weeks in the summer with fun tips to keep children learning.

NATIONAL SUMMER LEARNING ASSOCIATION (NSLA) • [Link](#)

NSLA has a variety of resources to support their vision that all children and youth have access to high-quality summer learning experiences to help them succeed in college, career and life.

FIRST BOOK • [Link](#)

First Book offers a wide selection of brand-new, high-quality books at affordable prices.

SAMPLE READING LOG • [Link](#)

Thanks to Forest View Elementary for sharing their reading log template so students can keep track of the books they read.

7



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The North Carolina Early Childhood Foundation
and Book Harvest are proud to be United Way of the
Greater Triangle Community Impact Partners.

We thank the United Way of the Greater Triangle for
supporting our collaborative work on summer learning.



book harvest

Book Harvest provides an abundance of books and ongoing literacy support to families and their children from birth and serves as a model for communities committed to ensuring that children are lifelong readers and learners.

bookharvestnc.org



The NC Early Childhood Foundation promotes understanding, spearheads collaboration, and advances policies to ensure each North Carolina child is on track for lifelong success by the end of third grade.

buildthefoundation.org

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