

The pamphlet you're holding in your hand or reading on your screen came to be thanks to lots of reading, searching and talking with all sorts of clever people. It's not a learned text but a manual, the result of an effort to bring together in concise and accessible form the ABCs of what is needed to promote literacy in Poland.


How well we do will affect our country's future. If we collaborate on this cause, we will succeed.

Our five organizations have come together to publish *The Superpower of Books: A handbook for promoting reading*. We very much hope that our efforts will begin to build a wide network of cooperating professionals, institutions, companies and people of good will!

The publishers:

Universal Reading Foundation
Krakow UNESCO City of Literature
Wrocław UNESCO City of Literature
Polish Chamber of Books
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THE SUPERPOWER OF BOOKS

A handbook
for promoting
reading

Maria Deskur

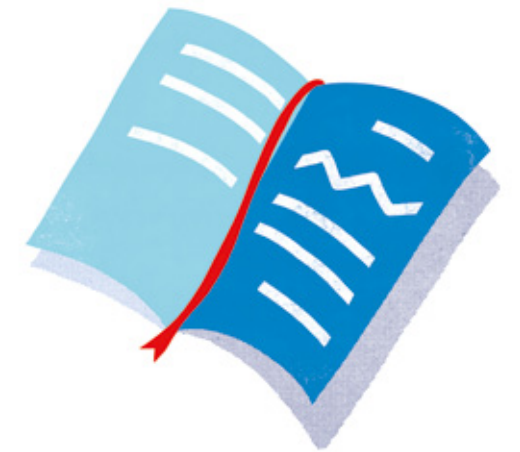




THE SUPERPOWER OF BOOKS



A handbook for promoting reading



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This guide is intended for those who are engaged in different ways, professionally or as volunteers, in helping to increase the numbers of Poles who read. We would like to assist them in their work, to start conversations, to launch cooperation between institutions and organizations and to promote further action.

It's all about reading books—novels, reportage, stories, poetry collections and longer academic or popular-science texts. We always use “reading” as shorthand for reading books.



REASONS: why promote reading?

Because Poland's future depends on making reading more popular. Our health, our academic success, the power of our social capital, entrepreneurship, not to mention equality and the future of democracy, all depend on how widespread reading is in different communities. Remember this! Reading is not a privilege, but an essential prerequisite for producing thoughtful and responsible citizens who will participate in democracy.

HEALTH

Books begin to play a role in a person's life at a very young age. Our brains develop most intensively in the first three years of life, at best in a relationship with someone we feel close to. It's also at this time that our brains develop affinities, and the stimulation they are exposed to determines how intensive these affinities become. Reading together - or, actually, going further with the book we read and look at together to discuss, play and interact - promotes a child's cognitive, emotional and social growth. This process is terrific at cementing the child-parent relationship and building a child's self-esteem!

The American pediatrician who was the first to recommend to parents that they read to their babies and talk to their slightly older children regularly found that those of his patients whose parents followed his advice got sick less often after they started school.

Let's read and talk to our children to make them healthier.



EDUCATION

Reading underpins education, definitely not only the humanities but all education. Is this a no-brainer? Well... do we really know just how important reading is to understand math? Studies show that reading books fosters critical thinking, curiosity and analytical skills, helps to understand cause-and-effect relationships and improves concentration. Thus, reading books boosts a schoolchild's chances of succeeding in all disciplines, including science. A child first learns to read, then reads to learn. We know that dyslexia is a major problem today. Reading out loud to a dyslexic child has many positive effects, as it builds relationships, starts conversations and develops semantics - all of which are crucial. All this, of course, requires the parent to understand this causality and to be willing to devote time to reading.

There is no education without reading.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Is reading private? Reading fiction develops social skills, builds empathy. Is this surprising? Many studies confirm it. When we read, we are invited into someone else's story, we learn to see another person's point of view, we begin to understand someone else's emotions, accept the fact that they may feel or perceive something differently. Our social skills mature. Thus, paradoxically, reading a book, which is a private and individual pastime, improves our ability to connect with others. Since social skills are the foundation of our functioning in a community, the person who reads becomes more confident; as we read, we learn to understand others, we feel better in others' company, work with others more smoothly, gain confidence. We are building social capital.

Read books
and you will learn
to read people.



ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Why are leaders readers? Future-oriented skills, ones that employers will seek in employees in the coming decades are (evidently) not only entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity, but also social skills such as compassion and teamwork. Reading boosts these skills, fosters empathy (see p. 6), stimulates critical thinking (see p. 5) and motivates us to understand others (see p. 6). Reading also lies at the root of innovation and creativity. And it's indeed reading slowly that compiles a database in our brains, which at the right moment equips us with new associations, and thanks to which we make innovative and original connections. This is how innovation is born. Reading slowly promotes modernity. It turns out that reading is the foundation of inventive entrepreneurship and strong economies. Many successful people highlight how reading books has helped them: Oprah Winfrey, Elon Musk, Malala Yousafzai, Bill Gates, Warren Buffett are some of the most famous examples.

Innovators
are made
by reading.



EQUALITY

Is it possible to eliminate social inequality? It may seem impossible. Children from wealthier families have access to a better education, and that's that. But in 2011, OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) instigated a major discussion with its study "Reading for change," which demonstrated that a schoolchild's love of reading (and reading for fun) has a greater impact on her success in school than does her socio-economic background. In other words, reading books is the superpower that overcomes social inequalities. It's not necessary to have loads of money to help children from poorer families, but it's enough to encourage them to enjoy reading regularly. Over time, the socio-economic differences fade.



Reading
makes us
equal.

DEMOCRACY

We're not born with the skills to read, understand and analyze a text, so we need to work on them, which is somewhat like training our muscles to excel at sports. Both demand training, as our muscles will get flabby when we don't use them. Reading books keeps our analytical and critical thinking skills in good shape, since they are indispensable to citizens' proper functioning in a contemporary democracy. We must be able to understand and evaluate the omnipresent advertising, legal agreements, political debates, instruction manuals and so many other complex texts. When people use their reading skills to analyze such texts, they augment their sense of agency and are more likely to vote and engage in public and civic life.

When we abandon reading as an exercise in critical analysis, we become a collectivity that is governed by someone else who hones their analytical and persuasive skills, whether it's companies selling inferior goods or electronic applications that exploit our personal data. A society that does not read is abandoning its responsibility, weakening democracy and strengthening oligarchy.

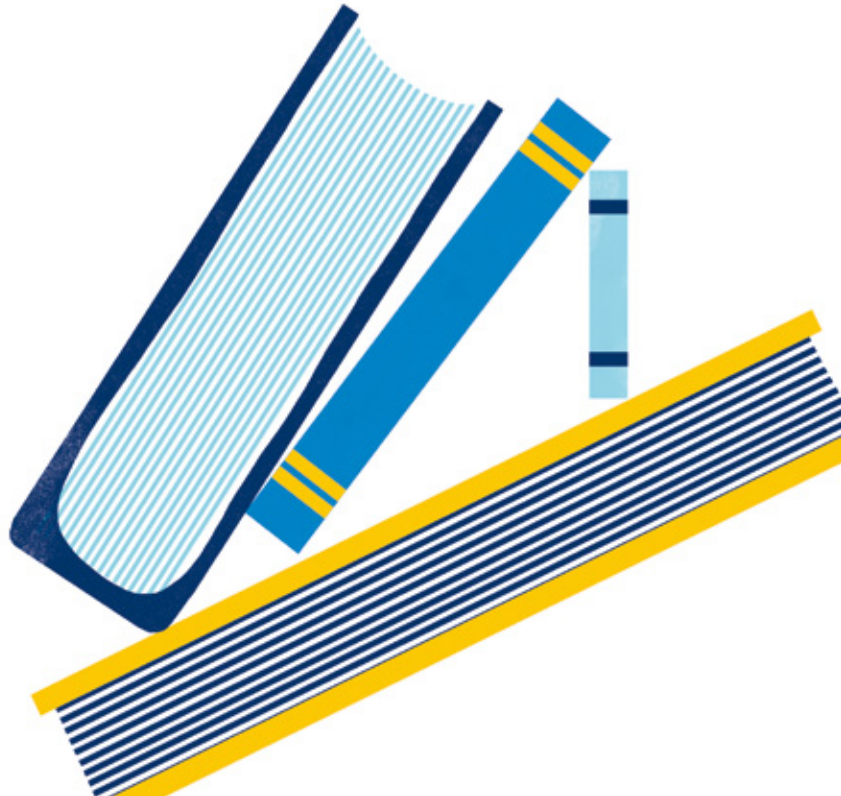
We have the right
to read. Let's take
advantage of it.





GOLDEN RULES, or the key elements of success to remember.

Successful projects have developed rules that assure their success. Adhering to established rules is crucial for achieving results. Let's take advantage of others' experience and test our ideas through the prism of their knowledge. Target groups, access to books, fun, authority figures, constancy, habit and direct contact are elements to perfect.



THE TARGET GROUP

Whom should we address?

a. the non-reader

Making reading more popular literally means increasing the number of people who read, producing more readers. We know that in the average family of readers, the habit of reading is transferred from one generation to the next. For this reason, experienced literacy activists emphasize that children from educated families are not their most important target group. Instead, to minimize differences and promote fundamental social justice they focus on children from the poorest social and economic milieux.

b. the earlier the better

A child's brain develops most rapidly during the first three years, and so we will be most successful if we recommend that adults start to read and talk to the six-month old. This way, at the age of three, he will know about twice as many words as if he had been raised with no books and no conversation. We should also, of course, support older children, but given a choice, let's remember that early intervention is dramatically more successful at preempting problems. It's also much easier to instill a habit at a younger age. In Poland, 60 percent of adults do not read a single book in a year. Since many of them must have children, our target group is enormous.



CONTACT

The goal is not the message itself, but to transform mindsets. “As we looked at the effectiveness of our work, we stopped allowing ourselves to send out book parcels. We made no difference to the families who received the gifts if we didn't also send a volunteer to meet them.” This is what the program manager of BookTrust said. Evaluations revealed to the program staff that parents who don't read can only be convinced to read with their children by someone they know, by a person who can explain to them the reasons to do it and show them how to do it, someone who will familiarize the whole family with books. BookTrust volunteers are trained prior to meeting with the families. This is because a non-reader simply ignores the book parcel that arrives by mail. Personal contact with someone who shows that they care about the family and does not allow it to remain a passive recipient has the enormous power to change their habits.



ACCESS

You can't read if you have no books. The absence of books in a home has been shown to be the greatest barrier to literacy. Many countries have organizations that deliver books to places that don't have them, the poorest neighborhoods and most modest families. Years of British experience tell us that giving people free books doesn't cut into the sales of books. This is very important to remember, as publishers may worry that giving away books will kill their sales. But the opposite is true: World Book Day has spent the past 25 years handing out more and more books, most recently a million books in the four weeks of events that accompanied World Book Day - and at the same time sales went up. The event not only stirred up interest in reading but also the demand for books, since most of the children who got a book as a gift immediately asked for another one: reading really is fun! Let's support projects in which books are given away or swapped. In Poland, 20 percent of families do not own a single book, and another 10 percent own only schoolbooks. This means that 30 percent of our fellow citizens are bookless.



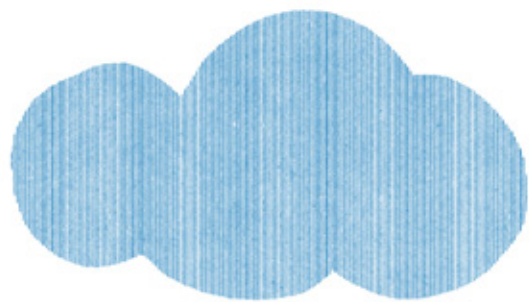
HABIT

Reading regularly is the only way to go. We're not trying to persuade humanity to read all day long a few times a year. Instead, our goal is to forge the habit of reading every day, even for a very short time. The necessary steps to reach this goal will likely be **1.** breaking the barrier of fear of the new (hence the need for connection, see p. 21), **2.** demonstrating the major rewards (better education for their children) of a minor effort (a few minutes a day) and **3.** stressing the need to practice reading every day (it's just like brushing your teeth!). It pays to talk to the same family multiple times, first to tell them about reading, show them and "give them an assignment" and then ask: how can I help? do you own any books? do you know what you would like to read? Once we overcome the initial resistance and set up regular short reading sessions, the book becomes a homey, familiar item - and we are on the way to planting a habit.

ROLE MODELS

Everybody knows: setting an example works magic.

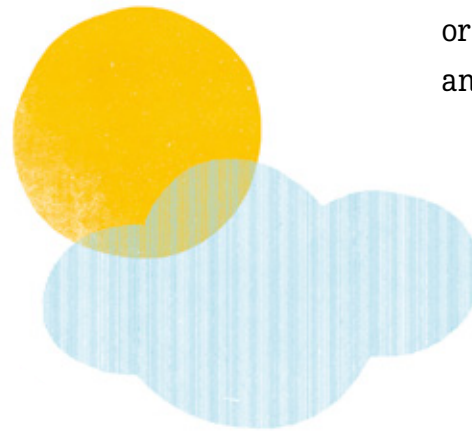
This is part of the reason why reading families pass on the reading habit. But a role model can also be a powerful tool. Doctors, nurses, midwives, social workers, teachers and librarians are all role models. It is rewarding to use one's authority to seek out groups who are role models for non-reading families. For example, asking football players to take part in large-scale programs that encourage reading among children, for whom athletes are demigods. The Polish football star Robert Lewandowski is convincing when he promotes reading. It's good to try something new! In the States, there is a program in which barbers, who, according to research, are role models for African-American boys, promote reading to their customers as they cut their hair. The Olga Tokarczuk Foundation's involvement is an example of how a fabulous role model, a Nobel Prize winner, can help. But let's not shy away from looking for local heroes. In one town, the best role model may be a well-known businesswoman, or a popular teacher, or a female lawyer, or a barber, or perhaps someone altogether different. Whoever they may be, ask them for support. Ask them to do a reading in public, to let themselves be photographed holding a book, to speak in public about the importance of reading. It will take many role models to promote our cause.



FUN

Pleasure is not something we need to be forced to pursue.

We repeat things that give us pleasure by ourselves. Activities we like become our needs. For this reason, if we want to develop a habit in others, we should base it on enjoyment and excite a need for it. Our mission will progress faster, more smoothly and more naturally. According to PISA research (see p. 8), reading for fun has a significant impact on success in learning, as it is based on the simple natural drive to keep going back to what we enjoy. Children who read for fun, i.e., by choice, simply read more and more often. They are acquiring the skills and knowledge required to do well in school. Programs that focus on teaching children to enjoy reading by no means replace the classics or other more challenging texts. They simply start by focusing their efforts on infecting children with fun and craving, since reading Flaubert, Gogol or Norwid in a class that likes to read will make life much easier for the teacher and be much more accessible to the pupils.



MODELS: EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL PROJECTS

BookTrust – Bookstart Baby

Britain's BookTrust started over 25 years ago by donating books to families with children. Every child born in Britain receives a parcel of three books by the time he or she turns 1, and then again after they turn 3. Every year new developmentally appropriate books are selected. The packages also include instructions for parents and a poem for the child.

■ So how does this relate to the golden rules?

BookTrust works with all (!) local government units in Britain, in each one employing a coordinator who assembles a team of “gifters,” who go door to door to visit and hand over the parcels, and to create a connection. The gifters are volunteers (local government employees, librarians, social workers) who use their position to help families when they realize that books are foreign objects to them. The volunteers focus their efforts on the most modest families to whom the simple instructions are addressed. During the first visit, the local BookTrust volunteers meet the family and help it develop the habit of reading; the second package gives them another opportunity to call on the family and to offer support. All the books are developmentally appropriate and intended to be enjoyable. The golden rules are applied.

■ What does this have to do with us?

In Poland, the “Tiny Book, Great Human Being” program of The Polish Book Institute is founded on similar principles. It donates books to 95% of newborns! Some Polish city governments, including Wrocław's, Krakow's and Warsaw's, add a book to a free layette. These programs are worth supporting by reminding young parents about the book they received and urging them to read it and talk about it with their child! The present can be backed up with direct contact and a chat about reading. Further backing can be offered by a midwife who takes time on home visits to talk about reading, by library events for the parents of babies which include practicing reading and interacting with their child, by neonatologists showing the book the parents just received and explaining the importance of reading and inventing games relating to it with their child.



Reach Out & Read: the doctor's clout convinces the unconvinced

Reach Out & Read (ROR) was founded more than 30 years ago in Boston by pediatricians taking a broad view of their patients' development. Professor Barry Zuckerman talks about the first time he realized that some children get sick when they start school. He noticed a correlation between psycho-physical problems and the fact that no one read to these children at home. He decided to include among the recommendations he gave parents one about reading regularly and talking to their children even when they are babies. A few years later, he was able to use his research to demonstrate that it worked: the children were developing better. ROR has grown into a powerful organization, which operates in every state and is considered one of the best programs promoting literacy and childhood development in the world.



How does this relate to the golden rules?

Reach Out and Read is continuously making lists of books to donate to children, making sure they are age-appropriate and fun. Reach Out and Read doctors focus on the underprivileged and work directly with the parents of young children. They give the parents books during their children's checkups, get them to practice reading and interacting with their children; they are taking advantage of their professional status to encourage the parents to make an effort and at the same time demonstrating the pleasure of reading for both the child and the parent, stressing the value of beginning to read for literally a few minutes at a time. During the next visit, they bring it all up again, asking how the reading is going, help to build a routine. They operate 100 percent according to the golden rules.

What does this have to do with us?

The Lost in Reading Foundation (Fundacja Zeczytani) collects books for hospital patients. The Universal Reading Foundation's Prescription for a Book, Prescription for Success project ("Książka na receptę. Recepta na sukces") is built on the model of Reach Out and Read. You can become involved by asking pediatricians, neonatologists, midwives and nurses to add reading to their recommendations, alongside vitamins. Some ideas for what you can do: organize a book drive to bring books to doctors' offices, encourage pediatricians to make gifts of books to their patients, start a partnership between a library and a doctor's office by displaying posters at the doctor's office inviting the families to visit the library.



NEXT STAGE: SCHOOL

Reading Partners and World Book Day are examples of excellent programs for schoolchildren. The Reading Partners extensive network of volunteers matches a child with a reading partner who works with the child for a few months to bring his reading level up to that of the rest of his class. World Book Day gives every schoolchild a voucher for a free book. A class visits a bookstore with its teacher and every child can either choose one of ten free books from the current list or buy a different one at a discount. The two programs are components of a system of regular reading in school.

■ How does this relate to the golden rules?

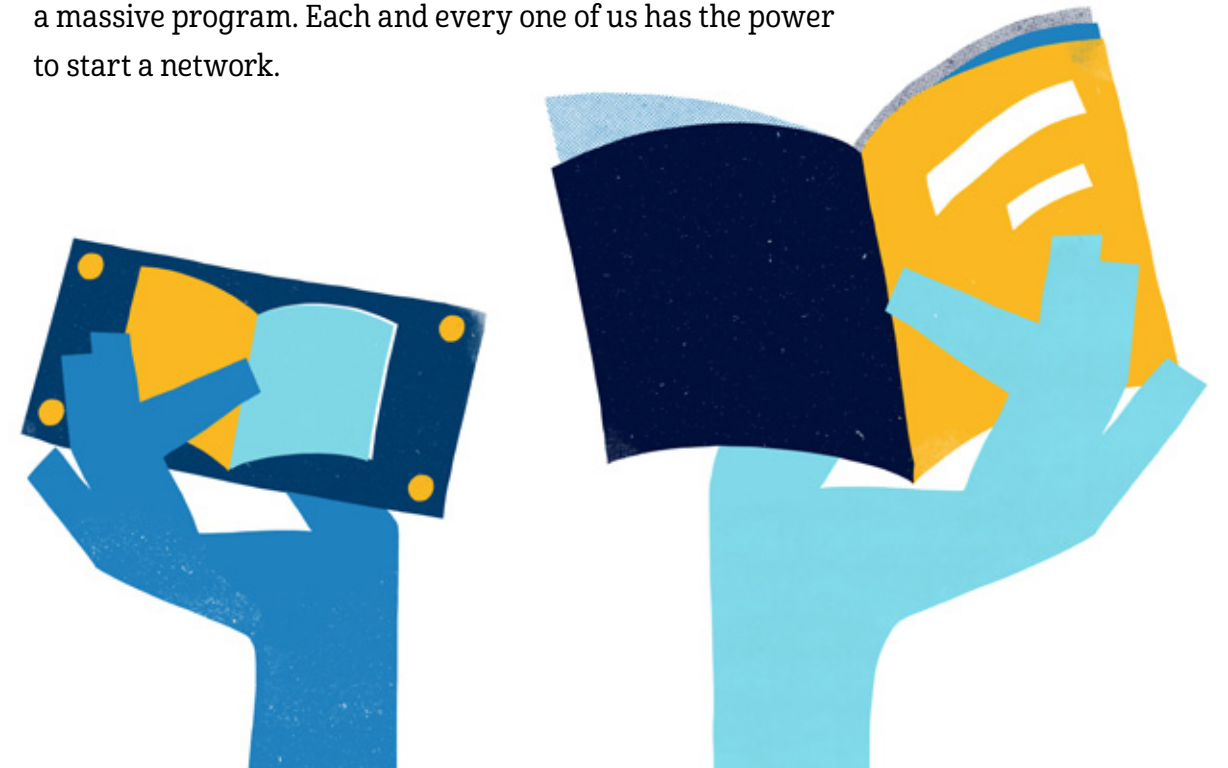
Both programs guarantee a personal connection between the child and someone who helps her read or select a book. For Reading Partners, it's personal contact. Both establish a regular schedule, Reading Partners with regular meetings with a reading partner, and World Book Day by working with teachers to include regular class reading by the children. Both encourage reading by demonstrating the gratification one gets from it, both guarantee access to books, both are addressed to children. World Book Day staff study how many of their gifts are the first book a child has ever read (in the program's 20th year, 25 percent of children got their first book ever thanks to it!), while Reading Partners works exclusively with children who have problems. They both adhere to the golden rules.

■ What does this have to do with us?

The National Program of Promoting Literacy (Narodowy Program Rozwoju Czytelnictwa) has been operating for many years. It donates millions of zlotys to public and school libraries for book purchases; this year it also started funding preschool libraries. We must absolutely keep track of what this program offers and take advantage of it.

For 20 years now, the All Poland Reads to Children program (Cała Polska Czyta Dzieciom) has been promoting daily reading.

It would be splendid if every Polish school made 20 minutes of daily reading a part of its curriculum. For example, in the early grades the teacher could start the day by reading to the children, and in the upper grades every child would read by himself. In preschools, a teacher or an invited parent would read out loud to the class. It would cost absolutely nothing, and what positive outcomes! You can find lists of recommended books on the websites of Fundacja Edico, Czasdzieci.pl and the International Board of Books for Young People. We can emulate World Book Day's program of giving children vouchers with which to buy books, which brings huge numbers of children into bookstores. For starters, try to set up a partnership between one bookstore and one school; it could explode into a massive program. Each and every one of us has the power to start a network.





ATTITUDES, or how to be effective?

Learning about the methods used by organizations in different countries is instructive. By taking advantage of research findings, strongly stressing collaboration, planning precisely for the long term and keeping an eye on the ball to attain goals have proven to be the right way to reach the scale and develop narratives necessary to implement lasting social change.

SUBSTANTIVENESS

What's all the research about? Citing research findings is not about promotion. We need to learn from the many existing studies of literacy to know whether what we're doing is right as it simply increases our chances of success. Good studies show us the way to reach our goals. After the PISA research findings were published (see p. 8), many countries' education ministries redirected their approaches to reading instruction to encourage reading for pleasure. The decision-makers believed the researchers that this would give them better outcomes (and they themselves would receive higher ratings). When substantive foundations are being built, it is also important to include self-evaluation to gauge the effects of our actions. This phase is usually very difficult, both organizationally and intellectually. But do not give up. Self-evaluation leads to progress, which helps us draw the right conclusions for the future.

Our outcomes will improve when we build on solid foundations.



COOPERATION

It's easier said than done. Reading promotion in Poland, where fewer than 10 percent of adults read regularly, is difficult and complex. But how we do in promoting literacy will decide our future. And so, to put it plainly, we cannot afford to compete among ourselves. Everyone who works on literacy promotion should be willing to share their knowledge, experiences and successes. It pays to publicize not only our own but others' endeavors and achievements, to work together, to support each other, to share opportunities, to lower costs by linking our projects and to talk among ourselves. This is fundamental.

Let's work together and we will go further.



THE LONG TERM

Ours is not a seasonal sport.

Building a reading habit is a long, slow process, a bit like toothbrushing or physical exercise. You can't brush your teeth once a year and you can't acquire the brushing habit without brushing every day. It's that simple. Fostering the tradition of reading in a family that doesn't read is similar. Small, but very regular and well-chosen exercises (regular, very short texts on attractive subjects) will be more effective than abrupt leaps. Since we are thinking about the long term, we must not get irritated that five minutes of reading is too little. If the five-minute sessions happen regularly, they will extend into more minutes.

Let's be consistent
and we'll change
the world.

DIMENSIONS

An immense desert is made up of tiny grains of sand.

Of course, producing change that shapes a whole nation or country requires action on a large scale. But it need not be one big action organized by someone with a lot of money. When we work with people we know, on our own stomping ground, with precise planning, clarity and consistency, joining forces with others, we become a link in a network that may suddenly turn out to be much larger than we could ever imagine. And then, the change we started will take on totally new dimensions. Each and every one of us has the power to amplify the dimensions. Each and every one of us can work where they are substantively, with a long perspective in mind and in cooperation with others. This way we will change the world together.

Let's become
strong links
in a huge network.

WRAPPING THINGS UP: THE NARRATIVE

Choosing the right words is an art. Should we promise young parents that if they invest in reading to their child as a baby, he will do well in school? Or should we make them worry that their child will have mental and physical problems if she spends too much time on her smartphone? Or perhaps we should emphasize our “right to read,” the right to be taught to read properly so that we can make it in today’s information jungle? Or should we stress that reading levels social differences? All these arguments are true, and each one is very powerful in its own way. And yet the urgency of improving literacy never finds its way to the front pages of newspapers. It’s definitely worth discussing, in an attempt to build a narrative that will move people. It should be emotional enough, personal, perhaps shocking, so that it will catch people’s attention and unleash the almighty viral clicks. To break through with our message is another part of our mission.

Let’s appraise
and perfect
our message.



If you’ve come this far, you clearly care about the cause of literacy. Like us.

Let’s stay in touch, let’s build up a mutual support network.

Please write to us:

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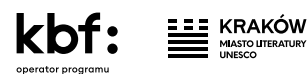
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