



Media Contact

Kimberly Kemp
kkemp@unitedway-ny.org
(315) 706-6924

Largest-Ever Shared Book Reading Study Finds Dolly Parton's Imagination Library Dramatically Improves Early Literacy for Children in Onondaga County, New York

SYRACUSE, NEW YORK 2/17/2026 New [groundbreaking research](#)¹ - **the largest dataset ever conducted on shared book reading** - reaffirms that [Dolly Parton's Imagination Library](#) significantly strengthens early literacy skills for children in Onondaga County alongside children across the five other countries, reinforcing the power of shared reading in the earliest years of life. This data aligns to results in local DPIL studies conducted by Le Moyne College staff.

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library program was brought to Syracuse, NY by the founding Executive Director of the Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County, Virginia B. Carmody, in May of 2010. It began as a small pilot program on the city's northside and is currently countywide, available to all children under the age of five in Onondaga County with over 16,000 children receiving books monthly to their homes. We thank Onondaga County for their generous support as lead funder of our DPIL program.

¹ *Galea, Claire Melanie Anita (2025). The Impact of shared book reading on children and their Families: insights from Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. Macquarie University.

Thesis. <https://doi.org/10.25949/30123745.v1>

Onondaga County Executive Ryan McMahon said, "The historic funding my administration has made in our children, and their kindergarten readiness is amongst our proudest accomplishments. Thanks to our partners at Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, we have delivered a book every month to every child, from birth to age 5 free of charge. Now, thanks to this groundbreaking international research study, the science proves what we've known all along: providing books as early as possible closes literacy gaps and improves learning outcomes." McMahon continued, "We remain steadfast in our commitment to supporting our children and investing in their future. I want to thank our partners at Dolly Parton's Imagination Library and look forward to celebrating many more milestones to come!"

The study, authored by Dr. Claire Galea, Head of Research at United Way Australia, analyzed data from more than 86,000 caregivers in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the Republic of Ireland. Results were compared with responses from 18,112 caregivers who were on the program compared to 37,776 whose children were not in the program.

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, the flagship program of The Dollywood Foundation, was created over 30 years ago in honor of her father, who could not read or write. The program is dedicated to **inspiring a love of reading** by gifting free, high-quality, age-appropriate books to children from birth to age five. Today, the international program mails more than **3 million books each month** directly to children's homes. Every enrolled child receives **one book per month** from birth to age five—**at no cost to families**.

In **Onondaga County**, Imagination Library is delivered locally through the **Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County**, with major funding support from Onondaga County and the Central New York Community Foundation, helping ensure children have access to books during the most critical years of brain development.

Melanie Littlejohn, president & CEO, Central New York Community Foundation said, "For the past fifteen years, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library has met local families right where they are, placing books into homes and creating shared moments that shape lifelong learning. This study affirms what our community has long known: when we invest early and read together, we change outcomes for children and strengthen our entire region."

Global Findings

The study found that across all countries evaluated, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library is linked to **stronger early literacy outcomes and richer reading experiences at home**—helping **close early literacy gaps** by

strengthening foundational skills, **increasing the frequency of children being read to**, and boosting children's **interest and engagement** during shared book reading. It also shows the program **builds positive family reading habits and traditions**, with caregivers more likely to interact in meaningful ways (like talking about pictures and encouraging children to hold the book), reinforcing a warm, consistent home literacy environment that supports children's learning and long-term success.

United States & Canada Highlights

United States

- Children were **11 times more likely** to be interested in books and **15 times more likely** to join in during shared reading compared to children not in the program.
- Children were **nine times more likely** to initiate shared reading and **nearly three times more likely** to demonstrate concepts about print compared to children not in the program.

LOCAL IMPACT OF IMAGINATION LIBRARY:

Imagination Library in Onondaga County

- Children currently enrolled locally: **16,321**
- Books gifted locally to date: **1.9 million books**
- Local program launch year: **2010**
- Local funding partners: **Onondaga County and the Central New York Community Foundation.**

A 2016 study on our Onondaga County Imagination Library program, led by Le Moyne College faculty members, found that children who consistently took part in DPIL were better prepared to enter kindergarten than their non-participating peers by a factor of nearly 30%.

Founded by Dolly Parton in 1995 to honor her father, the Imagination Library continues to deliver measurable, international impact by putting books directly into children's homes.

About Dolly Parton's Imagination Library

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library is the world's leading early childhood book-gifting program, having gifted more than 300 million books across the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the Republic of Ireland. The program is funded through a partnership between The Dollywood Foundation and hundreds of local community partners. Visit imaginationlibrary.com for more information.

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