

Learning Tree Program Is a Great Partnership Both In-Person and Virtually

By Rachel Enrich, Portsmouth Public Library, Portsmouth, Virginia

Several years ago, the Portsmouth City Manager asked the Library to provide outdoor programs that promoted reading and early literacy. The result is Learning Tree, a collaboration with public preschool centers and city departments, offered each May at three preschool centers.



For the program, the library erects tents on school grounds for reading stations and a movement station. The first year we offered the program, the school library staff went old-school for the movement station, running an extension cord through a window for a record player to share their Ella Jenkins and Hap Palmer records with the children.

Groups of children rotate through the stations, listening to several volunteer readers and participating in the movement station. They change stations after all the readers finish their books. Readers share a rhyme and have a

conversation with the kids if they finish reading before everyone else. Without rushing anyone, we can complete the program within an hour and a half or less at each school.

Learning Tree was suspended in 2020, but we went virtual this year, offering 8 videos of community helpers reading books for the preschool teachers to share with their students during Children's Book Week. Some police officers who read were gracious enough to participate last-minute; we talked them into reading while they were waiting for their partners to share their books. The videos were shared only with the three schools and taken down after a week to prevent violation of copyright rules.

The success of the program stems from the amazing collaboration with the schools and other city departments. Volunteer readers come from the Fire Department, Police Department, Waste Management, Finance Department, Sheriff's Office, and the Children's Museum of Virginia. The kids love the idea of hearing a book from their favorite community helpers, and the adults enjoy sharing books and getting silly with their audience. Law enforcement officers and firefighters reading titles like **Chicken Little** by Rebecca Emberley and **Groovy Joe and Dinosaurs** by Eric Litwin are definitely crowd pleasers. A highlight at the live program is always our Waste Management supervisor reading **Trashy Town** by Andrea Zimmerman with the help of a recycling truck. The kids also see some of the readers at other school events, such as career days and Coloring with a Cop, so they get to interact with adults they already know.

And finally, the Learning Tree program has led to other partnerships with schools and city departments, including a drive-thru Operation Warm program last October where we gave coats and books to 150

children with the help of the Fire and Police Departments, who volunteered to provide traffic control and distribute coats to the families.