



Books bring benefits

Gillian Johnston profiles a charity that advocates family literacy and spreads the joy of reading to children across Hong Kong.

As a *Playtimes* reader, you probably read for pleasure and understand that books and magazines bring real benefits. However, many people don't have ready access to books – particularly children. It's a relief, therefore, to learn about Bring Me A Book™ Hong Kong (BMABHK), a non-profit organisation (founded in 2006) that serves children without access to quality books and who aren't read aloud to regularly. The charity reaches out to these local kids and families to provide libraries, bookcases and reading support services. It also runs training programmes in nurseries, kindergartens, community centres, shelters, health clinics and in the workplace.

BMABHK is an affiliate of Bring Me A Book™ Foundation, the award-winning literacy non-profit headquartered in California. The Hong Kong affiliate was established by James and Su Chen from the Chen Yet-Sen Family Foundation. After their first child was born, James and Su Chen witnessed the pressures children face and the lack of a local reading culture. They recognised that too often the focus was on test scores, rather than nurturing an independent, self-motivated and empathetic thinker – just a few of the benefits to be gained from reading for pleasure.

The need to read

According to a global research study, Hong Kong has the lowest rate of family literacy in the world. Shockingly, only 12% of parents engage with their child in pre-school literacy activities (reading books, telling stories, singing songs), less than one-third of the international average. While local students scored well

academically for reading achievement, they scored lowest (out of 43 countries surveyed) for motivation, interest and confidence in reading. Thankfully BMABHK leads the way in advocating for family literacy.

"We remind parents to find time in their busy lives to read for pleasure with their children – to have conversations with them, some 'screen-free' time and a few giggles over the books they read. Not only does reading together help significantly expand a child's vocabulary, imagination and knowledge about the world, it also fosters empathy, curiosity and a close bond between parents and their children," says Pia Wong, BMABHK's Executive Director.

Impact

Over the past 10 years, BMABHK has installed 350 libraries, serving over 140,000 children in low-income communities. Qualified trainers run regular monthly sessions, and have so far provided 20,000 parents and teachers with the confidence and skills to read aloud effectively.

"When I came across BMABHK, I was thrilled to find so many resources available for free on their website! Every parent should know where the treasure is. Since joining their training, my read aloud skills have improved significantly and reading has become fun again for both my daughter and I!" enthused parent Mrs Lai. Indeed, she was sufficiently inspired to help start a Facebook book club, "Reading Makes You Shine", for parents keen to encourage every child to be read to in every family.

To guide parents and educators on the best kids' books, BMABHK compiles a collection of recommended books for



reading aloud, from birth to teenage years. The lists (available in English and Chinese and updated every two years) are a valuable resource, with over 200,000 downloads from the charity's website.

Bring on the benefits

The volunteer programme comprises two main services: book wrapping for libraries and reading to underprivileged children. Programme Director, Angela Leung, said: "We install three-four libraries each month so we are always in need of volunteers to wrap books, which helps protect and extend the book's shelf life. We have also trained thousands of volunteers to become skillful storytellers. We do encourage donors, especially our corporate donors who are able to fund a library, to join our volunteer programme. Usually we will arrange 10-15 volunteers to read to around 30 children for each session, held at our library beneficiary site. It's a great way for volunteers to directly impact the local community while acquiring new skills and the children love being read to!" 📖

Read more about bringing the benefits of books to others at www.bringmeabook.org.hk