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# Facts on Literacy

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Did you know that over 40 million adult Americans have trouble reading and writing even simple things? They cannot fill out a job application, read traffic signs, read election ballots, or read the prescription on a medicine bottle. People with very limited literacy skills also struggle with tasks involving basic math.

Another 63 million American adults have only basic literacy skills. They may have difficulty in reading comprehension or in interpreting what they have read.

Over 75 million Americans have basic or below basic literacy skills. This means they have difficulty following instructions for medications and understanding written directions from health care providers. For them, lack of literacy is dangerous to their health.

And the problem is getting worse. The United States ranks 49th among the 156 United Nations member countries in its literacy rate, a drop of 18 places since 1950. At the same time, the need for good literacy skills is increasing, especially in the workplace.

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## Literacy and Poverty

In a recent survey of adult literacy, nearly half of all adults at the lowest level of literacy were living in poverty, compared with less than 10% of those in the highest proficiency levels. Approximately one quarter of those people at the lowest level of literacy were newly arrived from other countries. Two-thirds of them had not completed high school, and many were above age 65.

- 43% of people with the lowest literacy skills live in poverty.
- 17% of people with the lowest literacy skills receive food stamps.
- 70% of people with the lowest literacy skills have no full or part time job.

## Literacy and Children

As the education level of adults improves, so does their children's success in school. Helping low-literate adults improve their basic skills has a direct and measurable impact on both the education and quality of life of their children. Children living in poverty are the most at risk for

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## How Can You Help?

*Be a parent role model.* Parents who emphasize the importance of reading to their children are more likely to have children with above-average literacy skills.

*Be a volunteer tutor.* Many literacy programs are small and depend on local community members. They are glad to provide training to potential volunteers.

*Support an education program.* Many literacy programs are happy to have volunteers to help answer phones and provide other office support.

*"Adopt a Learner."* Many literacy programs encourage community members to "adopt" a student. For a fixed donation per year, donors are matched up with students and can follow their progress.

*Donate.* All literacy programs together serve less than 10 percent of people with literacy needs. Your donations let more people get the help they need.

*Strengthen the relationships between literacy programs and other community groups.* If you volunteer at another program in your community – such as a food pantry – make sure the organizers are aware of literacy programs and how to refer potential learners to them.