



South African Children Face Bleak Future Without Books *SA Collaborative Initiative Fights to Give Every Child a Chance*

[Sixty percent](#) of children start Grade 1 without ever holding a book. This “[inequality at the starting gate](#)” is part of the reason for South Africa’s highly unequal education outcomes in later grades. This is a concern for Deb Zelezniak, CEO at the [Santa Shoebox Project](#), who, speaking in light of World Book Day, says that early literacy development is critical for children’s later academic, social, emotional and career [success](#).

Despite government acknowledging the crisis around literacy, and several initiatives from DBE, provincial departments and the NGO sector, there is a great need for more support to initiate, strengthen and fast track programmes that drive book ownership and reading promotion.

“Last year’s [National Reading Barometer](#) showed us that only 35% of homes with children under 10 have any picture books” she points out. The [Reading Panel 2030](#) shows that we’re far off-track to reach state plans to get all children reading by 2030, and recent [PIRLS results](#) show over 80% of children not achieving the relevant benchmark. “Globally, the link between owning books and [academic success](#) is widely documented. Because of the unrepeated rate of brain development in the first 5 years, the earlier we get books to children, the greater the impact and so the better the use of funds. As these children are our country’s future decisionmakers and contributors to the economy, we need to get books into their hands and homes as soon and as widely as we can.”

The [Santa Shoebox Project](#) is working with [Book Dash](#), a fellow non-profit that publishes proudly South Africa children’s books. Book Dash works to get every child owning a hundred books by the age of five, by producing and distributing local, engaging picturebooks for young children and their families. “This is crucial for early childhood development, as access to children’s books at home is associated with [higher odds](#) for being on track with cognitive, communication and language, social and emotional, and motor development milestones. Owning books is thus directly linked to higher academic results,” notes Zelezniak.

“We’re purchasing 70,000 books from Book Dash for inclusion in the shoeboxes which will be collected for and distributed to children-in-need throughout South Africa and Namibia at the end of the year. This is in addition to the 10,000 books which Book Dash have already donated to our Project, ensuring that every single shoebox contains at least one book this year. The idea is to make books available to all beneficiary children in the home and - as literacy is a cornerstone for future success - to foster a love of reading,” she explains.

To amplify this impact, Zelezniak calls upon members of the public to pledge funds to include more Book Dash books in Shoeboxes at the reduced cost of only R10 per book. “We need to empower our children with books today so that they are guaranteed a better tomorrow,” she concludes.

About the Santa Shoebox Project

Traditional Santa Shoebox: Over the last 18 years, 1 226 756 Santa Shoeboxes, each containing eight specified items of treats and essentials, have been given to underprivileged and socially vulnerable children throughout South Africa and Namibia. From 01 September each year, Santa Shoebox donors choose their beneficiary child/ren by name, age and gender and are given the child's clothing size. Each personalised shoebox reaches the very child for whom it was pledged.

Virtual Santa Shoebox: These shoeboxes are purchased online by donors and are available year-round, meeting the needs of donors who live too far from drop-off points, are too busy to shop or have health issues. Components are chosen by the donor on the Santa Shoebox website, the shoeboxes are packed by the Santa Shoebox Team and delivered to children attending far-flung rural facilities. A Virtual Santa Shoebox contains the eight specified items, as well as additional items, such as a lunchbox and books. A Virtual Santa Shoebox costs R450 plus an optional delivery fee of R30.

SSP Legacy: All Santa Shoebox Project operating costs are covered by corporate sponsors. Privately donated funds accrue to the SSP Legacy and are used to bring permanent change to the lives of Santa Shoebox beneficiary children and the impoverished communities in which they live.

Fiduciary information: As a Level One Contributor to B-BBEE, the Santa Shoebox Project earns 100 points on the generic scorecard, and with Section 18A status, is able to provide a tax-deductible receipt in recognition of donations. The Project is an initiative of the JOG Trust (IT2671/2009). The Trust is registered as a Public Benefit Organisation (PBO-930031301), a Non-Profit Organisation (NPO 102-098) and holds a current ICPR in support of 100% SED compliance.

Social media:

TikTok: @santa.shoebox

Facebook: /SantaShoebox

X: @SantaShoebox

Instagram: /santashoebox

YouTube: The Santa Shoebox Project

Pinterest: /santashoebox

About Book Dash

Book Dash is a local social impact publisher with the vision that "Every child should own a hundred books by the age of five". Owning books from birth has proven developmental benefits that last into later life, but access to children's books is extremely limited. A lack of books in children's homes is a cause of low literacy rates. To drive early book ownership, Book Dash developed new ways to create and distribute beautiful, locally-made picture books to the children and families who most need them. The Book Dash model addresses key limitations in conventional publishing systems. As a result, Book Dash gets an abundance of books into the hands and homes of very young children. Since 2014, Book Dash has distributed close to 4 million books into the hands and homes of children across the country. This work tackles inequality early on, supporting children and families to achieve their full potential. Read all Book Dash books for free, or find out how to get involved at www.bookdash.org

Social media:

Facebook: [/bookdash](#)

X: [@bookdash](#)

Instagram: [@bookdash](#)

YouTube: [@bookdashorg](#)

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/company/book-dash/>