

1-Year-Olds learning how to read? **Believe It Baby™**



Steve VanDeWalle, a former teacher, has founded a literacy program called 'Believe It Baby' to teach children as young as a year old how to read within 12 months. Here the VanDeWalle family participates in the program; from left Kari Oliva VanDeWalle, Mateo, Kiera and Amaris, and Steve VanDeWalle. Photo: John Greenwood.

By John Marx
jmarx@qconline.com

The father of three young children nervously tapped his feet on the floor of the art museum.

His years of thinking about and months of planning a system that would teach toddlers as young as age 1 how to read were about to be tested.

Steve Van De Walle's "Believe It Baby" literacy program was going public.

"I'd call the first seminar a success," said the 32-year-old Silvis man, who resigned his teaching post in the Davenport School District last June to devote himself full time to promoting literacy in the lives of others.

"Twenty-six percent of the people we reached (with the first one-hour seminar) have signed on to use 'Believe It Baby.' Things went so well, we're doing it again Nov. 10."

Though he's confident and dedicated to his program, there remains some apprehension for the amateur boxing star turned educator. The new dream isn't guaranteed, and he gave up a full-time job to chase it.

"My wife is nervous and I'm ner-

vous, because it's my job to provide for my family," he said. "I'm not nervous about the program I've established and its merits, because it works. I'm like anyone who's started their own company after years of working for someone else. Those are the nerves I have."

The seed for Believe It Baby was planted while the Silvis man was attending college.

"At Black Hawk College, I was required to take a class in clinical observation," Mr. Van De Walle said. "I did double the class observations I was supposed to do because I was bothered (that) so many children struggled to read, specifically in the elementary grades. I could see defeat in their faces.

"Then and there, I made a commitment to myself that I'd learn everything I could about reading and learning to read. I vowed my children would be successful readers."

Mr. Van De Walle and his wife, Kari, did not have children then. They have three today. One of them, Amaris, 6, was born nine weeks premature. She is the model who proves that Believe It Baby works.

"I did countless hours of research

about premature babies and learned there could be cognitive delays, and they could be behind a couple years in certain areas," Mr. Van De Walle said. "I wanted to prove some of those theories wrong."

He pored over the works of educator Mari Montessori, who was teaching children to read at the ages of 2 and 3 more than 100 years ago. He studied the works of educator/author Glenn Doman, an expert of whole-language.

"Phonemic awareness I took as learning to recognize rhyming sounds and word patterns," he said. "And so I began to implement these theories, the teachings of these people, with what I felt would bear strong results. I tried them on my daughter."

Amaris was recognizing letters and small words at age 1 and reading sentences at age 2. A home video shows her reading word cards and sentences days after turning 3.

The data Mr. Van De Walle compiled, mixed with his own theories and tests on his own daughter, helped him produce Believe It Baby.

"I began reading rhyming books -- Dr. Seuss, for example -- to all of my kids in the womb," Mr. Van De Walle said of Amaris, 6, Kiera, 3, and Mateo, 1. "When they would fuss as infants, I would read rhyming books that would soothe them. The rhyming patterns enhance awareness, I believe.

"In addition to regular reading sessions, I've taught my two girls to identify pictures and read words through various games, which taught them how to read independently by age 2. I'm working the same methods on my son, who turned age 1 in September."

Mr. Van De Walle said he knows some will have doubts about his program, but he has no fear about sharing his knowledge. The goal, he said, is to benefit the child.

"The ability to read is the great decider in the world," he said. "You have so much of a chance to make a difference if you embrace it. Just watch the face of the child who loves to read and the face of the child who struggles. One of them lights up."