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Soldiers read to children via video

Emily Seftel

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When Caleb Pipes wants his father, Gregory, to read a story to him, the 2 1/2-year-old asks his mom to put on the video.

Pipes, an army captain, is stationed in Bagram, Afghanistan, thousands of miles from his family in Germany. Pipes didn't want the distance to stand between him and his children, so he started Read to Me, Daddy (or Mommy), a program in which soldiers taped themselves reading a children's book. They would then send the video and the book home so their children could watch and follow along.

"This idea, while new to me, has been around the military for a while," Pipes e-mailed from Afghanistan. "There is a program set up already here at Bagram, but it is difficult to utilize."

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need would be filled by Theresa Killingsworth, a fourth-grade teacher at Catalina Ventura School in Phoenix.

Killingsworth and Pipes connected by chance. She asked students to donate items for soldiers overseas as part of the school's Character Counts program. Their donations filled 71 boxes.

Killingsworth visited anysoldier.com, where soldiers post messages and requests, to find those in need of the items. There she found Pipes.

"I looked at his post and read about how he was trying to set up a read-to-your-kids program," Killingsworth said. "I included a note in his care package that I would look through kids' books in the classroom and send him whatever I could find."

Pipes received the package and began to trade e-mails with Killingsworth, the two developing ideas to promote and expand the Read to Me Daddy (or Mommy) program. He was looking for more children's books so additional soldiers could participate.

"My dream is to have my office overflowing with children's books - and then to see them disappear and get sent to soldiers' children," Pipes wrote.

Killingsworth contacted Sandra Carpenter, district marketing manager at Borders Books and Music, and they developed a book drive.

Customers at eight Valley Borders stores can choose a flag with a soldier's name and the ages of his or her children. The customer buys the appropriate

conversation with the soldier who runs the program, Pipes decided to try to set up one just for the 150 soldiers in his company.

He set up a room where soldiers were guaranteed privacy. A camera and monitor were installed. All Pipes needed was the children's books. That

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book or books and Borders will ship the items to the soldier. The drive runs through Aug. 15.

"It's too cool," Carpenter said. "(Pipes) is so wonderful to have even dreamed this up. To be able to read to your kids when you're so far away is just amazing."

The program has two goals, Killingsworth said. First, organizers want to collect at least 600 books, which Pipes feels would be sufficient for his company. Second, the program will promote reading to children, showing how important it is even under seemingly impossible circumstances.

"Here you have a situation where it's very hard for people over there to be able to read to their kids, and they're going above and beyond," Killingsworth said. "It's a good reminder not to take it for granted."

As for Pipes, the videos strengthen his bond with his children.

"(The children) have overwhelmingly responded to my videos," he wrote. "We recently obtained the use of some Webcams and I got to see my kids for the first time in four months. My wife said that after that day, my son, Caleb, has wanted to watch the Daddy videos over and over again. That proved to me that these videos are truly a link between me and my small children."

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