

# Encourage kids to discover poetry



**Jim Hawkins**  
Willamette Connections  
Academy

“I think that I shall never see, a poem as lovely as a tree!” Renowned poet Joyce Kilmer’s words are so inspiring for budding young poets across Oregon this spring.

This is a perfect time of year for parents to nurture a love of poetry in their children. Nicer weather offers opportunities for kids to write outdoors and take inspiration from the world around them.

I started writing poetry as a kid and continued through high school. My passion for the subject led me to eventually earn a Master’s Degree in English Literature. Dr. Seuss and other rhyming books under his umbrella were my inspiration.

While I don’t write poems anymore, I still adore Dr. Seuss and we read many of his children’s books in our classes. My second graders and I have a great time with poetry. I think it’s contagious. Having fun with language is a wonderful motivator for kids to read and write.

The benefits of reading are many. I believe that when reading poetry is enjoyable for children, their reading skills improve. It also supports brain development and assists in building a child’s vocabulary.

If your child is hesitant to read poetry, remind them of the lullabies and fairytales they liked when they were little. Here are a few more ideas to foster an appreciation of poetry in your child.

## Read aloud

Share your love of poetry by reading aloud with your child before bedtime, emphasizing the sounds and rhymes. Afterward, try discussing the selection with your student.

Instead of jumping into Shakespeare, try humorous poetry, or works

matching your kid’s interests such as superheroes. Leave poetry books around the house and download special apps to make reading more accessible.

Your student will write and recite poetry with your encouragement, especially if they see you writing poetry as well. Certain formats and prompts work better for novice poets to get their creativity flowing.

## Explore different types

Try cultivating your child’s love of this literary art form by exposing them to the many different types of poetry. Free verse could be a great starting point because it is what we call open form, meaning it doesn’t need to abide by a certain set of rules.

Haiku is another great type of poetry to explore. Haiku has three lines and a strict number of syllables in each — five, then seven, then five. Haikus rarely rhyme, frequently use metaphors, and children may appreciate the emphasis on nature.

Acrostic is a particularly fun form of poetry because of its structure, taking the first letter of each line to spell out a word. For example, S-P-R-I-N-G, Smells, Play, Running, Invigorating, New, Garden. Suggest your child attempt acrostic poems using names of family members or pets.

## Wordsmith

Offer your child different ways to change words into poetry and watch the magic happen! Make it a game using refrigerator word magnets so your child can write impromptu poetry, or cut out phrases from old magazines for them to arrange in new poetic narratives.

With blackout poetry, select the text from an old book or newspaper, scan and circle words for a possible poem, then redact out all the remaining words with a pencil or Sharpie. Transforming the remaining words into poetry will be an exciting challenge for your student.

## Teen tales

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I have a teenager and know that expressing yourself can be tough at that age. Poetry is a great way for them to process their emotions.

High schoolers today turn to technology instead of poetry books on library shelves. If this sounds like your kiddo, encourage them to explore age-appropriate podcasts and YouTube videos that explore this literary world. Other avenues for teens to learn about and share poetry include TikTok, Twitter, Snapchat and Pinterest.

If your teen isn’t usually interested in poetry, try Instapoetry, where users combine short free-verse poems with symbolic images.

## Blast the music

Kids might not realize that musical lyrics are a form of poetry. Your child could write funny new words for a current song, or turn a poem they wrote into

a rap.

Whether it’s National Poetry Month or throughout the year, anytime kids are getting creative with their reading and writing is a good thing. If your child embraces some of my suggestions, I bet that pretty soon they’ll be a poet and not even know it!

## Resources for families

- poets.org/poems-kids
- poets.org/poetry-teens
- rhymezone.com
- teenink.com/poetry
- poetryfoundation.org/learn/children
- poetryfoundation.org/learn/teens

*Jim Hawkins is an elementary school teacher at Willamette Connections Academy. To learn more about Willamette Connections Academy visit [www.WillametteConnectionsAcademy.com](http://www.WillametteConnectionsAcademy.com) or call (800) 382-6010.*

# Yellow Napkins encouraging conversation

## Yellow napkins campaign encouraging conversations on disabilities

### Em Chan

Salem Statesman Journal  
USA TODAY NETWORK

If you’re at some restaurants across Salem, your food or drink might be accompanied by a unique yellow napkin. Before you toss it, take a second look: the napkins are a part of an effort to educate folks for Developmental Disabilities Awareness Month.

The Yellow Napkins Project, a campaign orchestrated by non-profit Shangri-La in partnership with Columbia Bank, seeks to encourage folks to strike up a conversation about disabilities in the comfortable space of food and drinks.

“We’ve been dreaming of this project for several years,” said Ashley Erb, director of community engagement for Shangri-La. “We wanted to do something a little outside of the norm in terms of how people receive education ... I think people are most receptive when they’re doing something they love — so, eating! — so we thought what if we could have folks have this conversation over wine, and be more open to getting into that way.”

Shangri-La is a nonprofit dedicated to helping folks with disabilities “achieve their potential,” according to their website. The organization has offices in Salem and Eugene.

## Conversation piece

These napkins are a bright yellow and have one of five possible awareness points outlined on them.

The five topics are drawn from the most common topics folks have around disabilities, including: assumptions of the capabilities of the disabled, boundaries with people’s mobility devices, outdated lan-



**Ankeny Vineyards’ wines shown with yellow napkins.**  
SHANGRI-LA OREGON

guage, invisible disabilities and eye contact during communication.

“We picked the info this year because the topic on them are ones we most commonly see when out in the community,” Erb said. “In our work, so often, we see community members unsure about how to interact with people with disabilities or even how to refer to a person in the disability community.”

“We want the Yellow Napkin Project to give people bite-sized bits of information they can use to interact more positively with people with disabilities and ultimately build more inclusive and accessible communities,” Erb continued.

The first point is “don’t assume people with disabilities are incapable,” which stems from folks having preconceived ideas of how to help. Erb said it’s always best to just ask the person how to help.

The second point is “a person’s mobility device like a wheelchair, walker or cane is part of their personal space.” How moving, touching or interacting with these devices should be avoided since they are essential items.

The third point, and one of the biggest in the campaign, is around the language to refer to people with disabilities, specifically in avoiding outdated language like crippled, challenged and handicapped, among others.

“When we’re out in the community while tabling and talking about people’s experiences with folks with disabilities, they’ll pause and hesitate — almost physically see them grappling with that terminology to use,” Erb said. “That’s why we thought to give people the terminology that’s preferred and remove that hesitation.”

Point four, which is how some folks may have “invisible” disabilities, and not to assume or look down on those individuals’ requests for accommodations.

“We should be open to providing those accommodations when asked for them,” Erb said.

**“We want the Yellow Napkin Project to give people bite-sized bits of information they can use to interact more positively with people with disabilities and ultimately build more inclusive and accessible communities.”**

### Ashley Erb

Director of community engagement for Shangri-La

For folks with visible disabilities, point five is most relevant as it outlines that people chatting with folks with disabilities should give eye contact to the person and not their companion or aid. Even with disabilities, these folks are capable and should be addressed directly, with their support person stepping in only if necessary.

“Folks serviced by Shangri-La are typically supported with another person, so we commonly see a cashier at the store or a doctor talk to the support rather than the person themselves,” Erb said. “They should be talking to the person first and the support can jump in if necessary. When people have traits that are uncomfortable, they’ll talk and look to the support instead, assuming the person with disabilities is incapable, but that’s not it.”

With all the information printed on these small square napkins, Erb acknowledges that they do not completely encompass nor get close to fully explaining the topic.

“We’re aware you can only fit so much on a napkin,” Erb said.

“The topic is big and complex so one person will see it one way while others will see it another. We try to present a global look, but recognize we can’t represent every outlook but having that conversation in general is better than getting it all on a napkin.”

## Bringing the community together

About 2,500 napkins, with 500 of each topic point, were distributed to small businesses across Salem for the pilot launch.

“We wanted to start small in our mind, since 2,500 seems like a lot,” Erb said. “But we had more interest from businesses than napkins and hope to grow (in the following years). We are so glad to have so many small businesses want to be included.”

Small businesses who are partnering in passing out yellow napkins include On Any Sundae, Peace Love Pretzels, Rolling Bagels, Ratchet Brewery, Cozzie’s NY Deli, The Easy Otter, Ankeny Vineyards, Joe Mocha and Redgate Winery.

Napkins will be distributed at these businesses periodically throughout the month while napkin supplies last, Erb said.

For more information about the efforts of Shangri-La, check out their website, [shangri-laoregon.org](http://shangri-laoregon.org), or their Facebook page.

*Em Chan covers food and dining at the Statesman Journal. You can reach her at [echan@statesmanjournal.com](mailto:echan@statesmanjournal.com), follow her on Twitter @catchuptoemily or see what she’s eating on Instagram @sikfanmei.ah.*

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