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# VOICES

## Literacy fight still vital

THE PUSH HAS been on for several years to improve Canadian literacy rates, and it would be nice on International Literacy Day to be able to boast that all that work had really paid off.

But in fact, we're making little headway. Almost half of all Canadians were found in 1989 to have a literacy level below what was needed for daily function, and a follow-up study four years ago found that the rate hadn't budged. The complex problem can't be tackled with anything as simple as hiring more aides for youngsters with learning disabilities or teaching illiterate adults to read books. The hurdles range from disability and dysfunction to cultural issues, shame and "a whole ton of factors," says Victoria READ Society executive director Melanie Austin.

"You know how the VCR used to just have an on/off button and now it's a lot more complicated? Well, that's how the world has become, too," says Austin. "People who could manage 15 or 20 years ago can't any more, because the world is more complex."

What can you do to help? Read to your children. Teach them to value lifelong learning. Support funding for literacy programs, including aid for children with learning disabilities.

At work, encourage your employer to offer a variety of upgrading for staff. Austin says literacy skills can quickly drop away if people are in work that doesn't routinely require reading.

And most importantly, keep talking about literacy. We all need to be reminded that this is a resilient problem that continues to cause economic and emotional hardship for millions of Canadians.