Eleven-year-old Maftuna Ismoilva and her six-year-old brother Shukrullo Ismoilov live in the remote village of Dustov, in Khatlon province, Tajikistan. Like most children in Dustov, Maftuna and Shukrullo had no access to books for young children, not even at the school library, until the arrival of 433 books provided and distributed by Reading for children, a literacy project in 2013. The project fosters young children’s love and enthusiasm for books and enjoyable reading, and increases awareness and capacity of the government, families and communities about the importance of reading for preprimary children.

Recognizing this deficit of children’s books and the importance of reading to a child’s cognitive development and school success several years in the future, the project commissioned local Tajik authors and artists to write and illustrate 25 age-appropriate and culturally relevant stories for pre-school children. The project then published the books and distributed them to 246 schools in Khatlon and Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Provinces.

Shukrullo has been paralyzed since birth and suffers from speech and language disorders as well. His, Tohir Ismoilov, is a taxi driver who works long hours and his mother, Jumagul Rahmatova, is a home-maker. But young Shukrullo needs constant support, so his sister spends a lot of time helping to care for him. Until recently, even with Maftuna’s presence, the young boy still felt alone and removed from the world around him.

A few months ago, Maftuna discovered her school’s new mini-library and she became a member. She thought that reading to her brother might help relieve his solitude. Although he is unable to produce speech sounds correctly, reading with his older sister has become Shukrullo’s favorite activity.

Maftuna attended seminars conducted by the Reading for children project where she learned how to use interactive reading techniques to better engage with her brother and improve his comprehension. Now Maftuna visits the mini-library regularly to borrow books for Shukrullo. When she reads to him, he is captivated by the illustrations and listens attentively to his sister’s descriptions. The two even use the stories as a basis for role-playing activities.

Shukrullo hopes to be able to visit the mini-library in his wheelchair one day to choose books himself.

The Reading for children project runs from August 2012 to August 2014.