



**A Program of Child Start Inc.
Napa, CA**

RAISING A READER PROGRAM INVOLVES ENTIRE FAMILY IN LEARNING LANGUAGE

A HEAD START TEACHER SHARES HER FAMILIES STRUGGLES TO LEARN ENGLISH

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The children at cluster around their Head Start teacher, Mireya Frias, eager to talk about the stories they have shared with their parents in the Raising A Reader program. “Who wants to tell us about their favorite story?” she calls out. Lots of little hands shoot up in the air, with shouts of “I do! I do!”

Frias is delighted to see the children’s enthusiasm, knowing they are learning fun stories from the books provided by Raising A Reader, a nationally recognized, award-winning early literacy program for preschool children and their families. “These children are developing a love for books and building a foundation for learning,” says Frias. “It’s so exciting to see that happen!”

Raising A Reader, operated in Napa and Solano Counties by Child Start Inc., is offered at all Head Start sites in the two-county service area and in state-subsidized and private preschools throughout Napa County. The purpose of the program is to engage parents in their child’s early language and literacy development, preparing them for kindergarten and school success.

“Active involvement of parents or primary caregivers in their child’s early education is vital to the development of a young child,” says Linda Cranor, manager of the Child Start Raising A Reader program. “Children don’t wake up one morning singing their favorite rhyme or counting to five. Learning language takes a lot of practice and repetition. Raising A Reader helps parents guide their child’s first explorations of language through regular sharing of books and stories, boosting a child’s ability to learn vocabulary and build connections between written and spoken language.”

Children who participate in Raising A Reader receive red book bags filled with age-appropriate books to take home and share with their parents. The red bags are exchanged weekly with a new set of carefully selected books – something the children look forward to eagerly on “Book Bag Day” every Thursday. While Raising A Reader is targeted to preschool children, the benefits are family-wide, especially for families who are from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

“Raising A Reader involves the entire family in reading and learning,” says Frias, who was introduced to the program as a parent. “When my son Oscar brought his first Raising A Reader book bag home, it was

like a treasure. The whole family read the books together, including my husband, Rosalio, even though he works full time and has a long commute. When we were busy, Oscar's older brother Sai read to him. These books helped all of us to learn English. My 3-year-old daughter, Rosalia, loves to share books with us, too."

When Frias first participated in Raising A Reader, she was surprised that teachers would trust families with the books. "Books are expensive in Mexico," she says. "Teachers would not send books home because they could get lost or damaged and were too expensive to replace." Frias says parents deeply appreciate the trust given to them to bring the book bags back each week. "Trust is an important part of Raising A Reader's success," says Frias. "For many of us, this has never happened before – being given something without asking for something in return."

Raising A Reader also introduced Frias to the public library system, which she hadn't known about while Sai was learning to read. She took Oscar to the library as often as possible. At the end of the school year, Raising A Reader families receive a blue library book bag to encourage them to continue going to the library to read and check out books to take home.

Frias knows from personal experience how important it is for children to begin building their language skills at an early age. As an elementary school teacher in Mexico, she saw children come to her 4th grade class still unable to read. She also remembers what it was like to try to speak English when she first came to the U.S. with her family in fall 2004. She had studied English for two years in Mexico, but found it was much easier to read English than to speak and comprehend it. Recalling those early days in this country brings tears to her eyes. "I didn't know anyone at first, and I felt really isolated, because my English was so limited," Frias recalls. "Not being able to communicate or understand even simple sentences was very humiliating and painful."

It was even harder for Frias to watch her son Sai struggle to learn English and keep up in school. When Sai started 3rd grade in the U.S., his test scores were very low. Frias was determined to help him. "We translated his books word by word, from English into Spanish" Frias says. "Then I had Sai read to me in Spanish and English so I could be sure he understood what he was reading. Sai is still working so hard. He has advanced well, but is still not up to where he needs to be for his grade level." Reading with his younger brother, Oscar, has helped Sai. "Bringing the Raising A Reader books home every week established a routine of reading for us," says Frias. "We still read every day, seven days a week. Sometimes we get up early and read first thing in the morning. It has helped Sai with his reading comprehension. He is reading more, and writing a lot."

Oscar was 3 years old when he came to the U.S. from Mexico. Unlike his brother Sai, Oscar had the benefit of participating in Head Start and Raising A Reader prior to attending kindergarten. Frias says that because Oscar had access to English and Spanish books from an early age, he was able to develop dual language skills more quickly and easily than Sai. "Oscar started to read books on his own within the first two months of kindergarten," she says. "I didn't need to help him as much with his English," she says.

Frias was inspired to teach at Head Start and offer the Raising A Reader program to families because she wanted to make sure every child would "have a book bag" and stories to share. "I feel very happy to be helping other moms," she says. "People have helped me – now I can do something good for others."

Raising A Reader is funded through local donors, including Auction Napa Valley, First 5 Children & Families Commission of Napa County, and United Way of the Bay Area.