



## Learning to love books

Program lends materials to kids before they read

BY: Karen Pierce Gonzalez, Special to The Chronical

Rebecca Randall rides the bus to work at United Way's Bay Area headquarters in San Francisco every day. One morning not too long ago, she noticed a young Latina mother with two children in nearby seats poring over books provided by the Raising A Reader program, a volunteer book-lending program designed to encourage literacy in the home.

Randall, who is a United Way Bay Office representative assisting with this statewide project in Napa, San Francisco, and Contra Costa counties, was thrilled with what the mother and her children were doing.

"This was the RAR program in action. I leaned forward and asked the children if they liked the books," Randall said. Unsure of who she was or why she was interested in what they were doing, the children clung tightly to their red book bags. The bags, like the books they were reading, were also part of the reading program this family and thousands of others enjoy while improving literacy skills.

The take-home book bag program, designed to be a collaborative effort between community agencies, child care centers, and caregivers, has reached more than 36,000 homes in six Bay Area counties (Napa, Sonoma, Alameda, San Mateo, Santa Clara and San Francisco). The program is also being run in Placer,

Riverside and San Diego counties and in Florida, Hawaii, Virginia and Mexico.

Melinda Su of Menlo Park is program director of the project, which was initiated by the Peninsula Community Foundation through the Center for Venture Philanthropy.

The Raising A Reader program began in 1999 as a collaborative project of the San Mateo County Library, Peninsula Partnership for Children, Youth and Families and the Peninsula Community Foundation in Menlo Park.

The program provides bilingual books in Vietnamese, Cantonese, Mandarin, Spanish, Tagalog, Bengali, Korean and English. Book content must be age appropriate and reflect healthy social values for children through age 5.

Child care center directors distribute the book bags, with four books in each, and children take them home -- where it is hoped they will invite their caregivers to read to them.

The goal is to level the playing field for children who might otherwise not have had an opportunity to develop important literacy skills prior to attending kindergarten.

In researching kindergarten readiness, the Peninsula Community Foundation found that the use of books early on in the home assisted with development of "preliteracy skills," according to Su. "Children learn how to hold books, and they know that the printed word means something."

PCF statistics show that one in three children in the U.S. enter kindergarten without basic pre-reading abilities and never develop strong reading skills. For children with limited English proficiency, the need is perhaps even more acute.

"Children who do not have sufficient preliteracy abilities by the time they begin kindergarten often struggle with reading for the remainder of their school years and lives," Su said.

According to Professor Deborah Stipek, Dean of Stanford's School of Education, "Raising A Reader is based on the best research on early reading. The program reaches into the home to help parents create the literacy-rich environment that has been shown in research to foster high levels of literacy skills."

Created to be a ready-to-use classroom kit at home, this volunteer program is a hit with many parents.

Leo Gonzalez of San Jose, parent council head of a San Jose Head Start program, said his 4-year-old daughter Cassandra -- in her second year with the RAR program -- is now very interested in books.

"At bedtime, I read to her and then she pretends to read to me. I think it's very important that she first have books in Spanish. She is very interested in learning, and knowing how to read books will make a difference later in school."

At the Davis Street Family Resource Center in San Leandro, coordinator Eowyn Gorman found that the program's success has much to do with its being "family friendly."

"Parents often work two or more jobs and don't have time to browse the library, let alone return books when they are due. This way, if a child really enjoys a book, he or she can have it read again and again. Then, when they are ready, they bring the books back and get some new ones."

By the way, she added, parents look forward to getting the books, too. In some cases, the home reading improves their literacy skills as well.

Davis Street currently oversees the program in three of their subsidized child care centers, two for preschoolers and one for infants and toddlers. A majority of the children are of Latino, African American and Caucasian working poor and impoverished homes.

RAR is funded through Peninsula Community Foundation's Center for Venture Philanthropy's Social Venture Fund. By collaborating with community partners, such as

United Way and Head Start, as well as investors, they raise the necessary money for each book bag that goes home -- about \$35 per child.

The money is well spent, said Carol Welsh Gray, executive director of the Center for Venture Philanthropy.

"More than 90 percent of human brain development takes place in the first five years of life, and yet this is the point at which our society spends the least amount of resources on developmental stimulation."

San Francisco coordinator Janell Flores of the Bella Vista Foundation agreed. "Our statistics show that more than 10,000 San Francisco children and their families could use this program. Today in San Francisco we have applications from 60 different child care sites who are interested in the program."

All of the sites qualified, she said, but there aren't yet enough resources.

"So we have some child care centers on a waiting list."

Bella Vista, like the other agencies who work with PCF, provides funding for program training to child care center directors. "We talk about book cuddling and how to deliver this program to limited English speakers."

Video tapes are also provided in a variety of languages and each center receives one kit. "That's 104 books per center and we distribute them to each district in San Francisco. I personally have delivered over 4,000 books," Flores said

Catherine Held, who works with the Sonoma County chapter, says the program is expanding there as well. "We are now in about 1,200 homes a week and have 30 child care center sites." That also includes the Migrant Education Home Visiting Program and St. Joseph's Health Care, which provides information and referrals to families.

"We have very committed families who really did not know how they were going to help their children learn to read," Held said.

The reading benefits everyone in the family. The child who is read to enjoys the storytelling as well as the time they get listening to someone familiar read to them. The books selected reflect life for the children who, due to language constraints, may live in two worlds at once. And, lastly, the parents or caregivers also gain from the process.

One Sonoma mother was so excited by the reading program, she sought out an English as a second language class. Another in Santa Clara went on to earn her G.E.D.

Six independent evaluations, including the Print Concepts/FACES test designed by the federal government and administered in Head Start programs nationwide showed that in 2001, Head Start children in the RAR program for eight months tested at least twice as high as the national norms for Head Start students in kindergarten readiness skills of book knowledge, reading comprehension and print knowledge.

Results also suggested that Spanish-speaking children showed dramatic improvement and compared favorably to English speakers in gaining book knowledge and triple (or more) their scores in reading comprehension and print knowledge.

RAR has expanded its reach to include a baby preliteracy program. The first program of its kind in the nation, it works to train nurses who visit at-risk families at home to help new parents and other infant caregivers get an early start on healthy reading practices while fostering crucial brain development.

"Early reading helps to stimulate language centers and illustrations can activate the brain's creative centers," said Gorman, whose East Bay program is funded by the Junior League of the East Bay.

For Gray, this new venture "extends the dramatic success that RAR has had in California Head Starts and other state preschool programs to babies at home in those vital first 24 months of life."

Four-year-old Belia Dejesus of Santa Clara County thinks the RAR program is great at any age. According to mother Erika, who is 21, Belia enjoys the responsibility she has taking care of her "red book bag" and she also likes the fact that reading has become a favorite weekend activity for her family.

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