

Unique community program inspires a love of books

By LAURIE DAVIS, Register Correspondent
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Young children come into the Napa Park Homes Community Room every Thursday evening looking like they can barely contain their excitement. Clutched in their tiny hands is a red canvas tote bag full of books their parents have been reading with them during the week.

Each Thursday is a big day for these children because they get to exchange their red bags for new ones full of new books that they take home and share with their parents. The book bag exchange, an integral part of an award-winning pre-literacy program called Raising a Reader, inspires preschool children to learn to love books and prepares them for a successful learning experience in kindergarten, which studies have shown will benefit them throughout their lives.

Raising a Reader was conceived in 1999 by the Peninsula Community Foundation in San Mateo, in response to national studies showing that one in three children enter kindergarten lacking basic early literacy skills. The program is designed to engage parents as partners in helping their children learn early literacy skills by sharing books together in the home, while helping parents gain confidence in their ability to read aloud with their children. Raising a Reader has grown rapidly in the last five years and is now offered in 72 communities in 24 states and four countries.

Raising A Reader came to Napa County in 2002 thanks to the support of the Community Foundation of the Napa Valley, Auction Napa Valley, First 5 Napa County, United Way of the Bay Area Success by 6 Initiative and other local funders. With input from community agencies focused on early literacy development, Child Start Inc. was selected to administer the Raising a Reader program.

Raising a Reader is now being offered at no cost to families throughout the county, primarily through early childhood preschool programs, family child care homes and neighborhood centers.

According to Linda Cranor, CSI's manager for Raising a Reader, there are 60 Raising a Reader sites in Napa County serving about 1,400 preschool children each year. CSI's goal is to more than double that figure by increasing the number of participating sites.

Raising A Reader has been successful in Napa County. Cranor says parents who participate in the program have established a regular routine for book-sharing, reading with their children a minimum of three times a week. When surveyed after participating in the program, more parents have rated "reading to their child" as "very important."

Sue Nahass, resident services program manager for Napa Valley Community Housing, introduced Raising a Reader to residents of Napa Park Homes two years ago. She invited Cranor to speak to a group of parents at the apartment complex, where more than 75 children are under 5 years old, to encourage interest in the program.

While Raising a Reader is typically implemented by professional staff (such as preschool teachers), the program at Napa Park Homes is unique in that participating parents volunteer to help with the weekly book bag exchanges.

Maria Estela Hernandez, the first parent to begin volunteering at Napa Park Homes two years ago, can be credited with having made Raising a Reader possible there. Staffing was not available for the evening hours the working families needed to participate in the program. Hernandez stepped forward and offered to help with book bag exchanges for a few hours each Thursday evening.

"Parents really want to help their children be ready for school," said Hernandez, "and they know books are important for their children."

Hernandez has seen the benefits of Raising a Reader for herself and her children. She was inspired to help other parents when she saw what the program was doing for her own family and encouraged other families to participate.

"Since my two youngest children started with Raising a Reader, they have become more interested in books in general," said Hernandez. "I want all the other children here to benefit from the program, too."

Even though Hernandez and her husband are busy working and raising five children (ages 2 to 15), Hernandez has shown steady commitment to and passion for the program working to ensure its success at Napa Park Homes. She is currently working with 42 families, and because the apartment complex is like a small community, she knows most of the parents and children personally. She contacts parents regularly to remind them to read to their children as often as possible. She continually reaches out to encourage new families to participate in the program and maintains a thorough tracking system so that she knows exactly where each book bag is. If parents haven't come in to exchange book bags, she calls to remind them to stop by.

Because Hernandez knows the ages of participating children, she can make sure the bags include books that are appropriate for each child and written in a language with which the family is most comfortable (English, Spanish, or bilingual). Customizing the book selection and making the books conveniently available for busy families has had a significant impact on the children's school-readiness and eagerness to learn.

"I've seen a lot of changes in these children over the last two years," said Hernandez. "They learn to love reading so much that when they have completed all the book bags, many just start over again!"

According to Cranor, one of the values of Raising a Reader is that the positive experience children have with the book bags transfers to a life-time love of books.

"That's the whole idea," she said. "Once they've had this really positive experience of sharing books regularly with their parents, they keep exploring what books have to offer whenever they can get their hands on one. When they get to kindergarten, they will be better prepared and more eager to learn how to read."

Cranor says Raising a Reader also partners with local libraries to encourage a lifelong family habit of reading. When children have read all the books available in their red bags, they receive their own blue bag they can use to take home books from their public library.

Hernandez has been working with another parent volunteer, Alma Correa, to help with the weekly book bag rotation. The goal is to continue "peer-training" parents so that they understand how the program works and can ensure its continuity. The parent volunteer approach has worked so well that staff from the Stonebridge Housing Complex in St. Helena have been visiting Hernandez and Nahass to learn how to establish a Raising a Reader program for their families, too.

Raising a Reader is provided primarily through early childhood programs, so families already participating in one of these programs can also participate in Raising a Reader. However, parents may directly enroll their children in Raising a Reader at the Family Centers in Calistoga and St. Helena. Community Resources for Children also accepts enrollments from both parents and family child care providers.

Expansion funding is currently available from CSI for preschools wishing to provide Raising a Reader for their families.

For more information about becoming a Raising a Reader site or enrollment opportunities, call 252-8931, ext. 2847, or e-mail rar@childstartinc.org.