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Viewpoint: Read to your child every day

Brad Schultz and Shannon White Bond

Here's a scene familiar to many of you. It is the end of the day and your child is choosing one of her favorite books. You hold her in your arms as you settle in your easy-chair, and together, you share a book.

But as wonderful as this activity is, it's so much more than that. The single most significant activity that influences a child's educational success is being read to at home prior to beginning school.

Far too many of our children never know the simple pleasure of reading with a parent. Nationally, 35 percent of children (one out of every three) enter kindergarten without the basic pre-reading skills that are critical for success in school. In neighborhoods where children did poorly in school, 60 percent of kindergartners never owned a single book.

In San Luis Obispo County, 14.8 percent of our students are designated as English learners and a majority of them reside with families where Spanish is the primary language. Thirty-four percent of our students are socio-economically disadvantaged and many live with families that cannot afford to purchase age-appropriate books for the home.

Now, imagine every child having access to a variety of beautiful, high-quality children's books. Imagine every child spending hours each week in a parent's lap, sharing favorite stories. Imagine every child arriving to kindergarten with a love of books and ready to read. This is the world that the national award-winning early literacy program Raising a Reader is creating in our county.

Raising a Reader was initially launched in San Luis Obispo County in 2003 and funded in partnership by First 5 School Readiness and the San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation. With a recent grant award from the San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation, in partnership with the Orfaea Foundation, the project has expanded to a total of 12 sites including locations in Paso Robles, Los Osos, Cambria, San Miguel, Oceano, Shandon and San Luis Obispo.

Raising a Reader's mission is to foster healthy brain development, support parent-child bonding and early literacy skills and instill a love of reading.

Through a variety of early childhood programs like Head Start, California State Preschool, First 5 School Readiness sites and the San Luis Obispo Child Development Center, Raising a Reader rotates a set of bright red bags filled with award-winning children's books into the homes of low-income families on a weekly basis.

Key to the success of the Raising a Reader program is the partnership with local libraries for families with children ranging in age from infancy to preschool and beyond.

When a child reaches kindergarten, they are given a blue book bag to keep along with their own library card to provide families with access to high-quality books for a lifetime.

Raising a Reader encourages a love of books and the magic of storytelling in the warmth of a caregiver's arms. By addressing the specific barriers that prevent parents from engaging in the shared book experience, we give them the opportunity to succeed in what may be their most important role — their child's first teacher.

For more information, contact the San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation at 543-2323.

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