



Reach Out and Read

July is national literacy month and Cortez families have reason to celebrate. Thanks to Reach Out and Read Colorado and the Imagination Library/Cortez Rotary Foundation our youngest residents have the opportunity to build their own home library for free. Both of these early literacy book programs are now available in our community.

Reach Out and Read is an evidence-based nonprofit early literacy program that partners with health care providers to prescribe books and encourage families to read together. The program serves children ages six months to five years, and provides new, age-appropriate books at well child exams at the doctor's office. Doctors and health care providers begin by giving the child a book to start their own library at home. Two health care facilities in Cortez have joined the program: Cortez Integrated Health and Southwest Health System, which has four clinics participating. The children who visit these medical clinics will have a library of 10 new books by the time they reach their fifth birthday. Additionally, the Montezuma County Health Department has been participating in the Reach Out and Read program since 2008.

The Imagination Library, a book-giving program that also encourages families to read together, is the brainchild of Dolly Parton. But it took the determination and investment of time and money from Shane Hale, Cortez City Manager, to get the program started in Cortez. As a member of the local Rotary Club, Hale was instrumental in securing its financial commitment to the Imagination Library program. It takes a village . . . And indeed, many banks, individuals and organizations in the community have joined together to make this possible. Families with young children who sign up for the Imagination Library will receive one book a month in the mail for each child up to the age of five.

Through these programs our community is making a commitment to early literacy by providing books to families at no cost. Advances in scientific research on the developing brain have determined that early literacy begins at birth. The first five years of a child's life lay the foundation for the literacy skills they will need as adults. Parents are their children's first teachers. It's never too early to introduce babies to spoken language, sounds, books, and other emergent literacy skills that will provide them with the building blocks for later reading and writing.

Studies show that money invested in early literacy skills for our youngest children have a far-reaching benefit. Having printed materials in the home and access to books from the beginning of life helps provide children with the best possible start. Parents have the power to make this difference in their child's life -- it doesn't take money, an expensive electronic gadget, or even a college education. When parents read to their children daily they create a pathway to success in school with the fundamentals of reading and writing. Most significantly, they give the gift of their undivided attention.

I hope that you will join me in celebrating literacy during the entire month of July. Sign your child up for the summer reading program at the library or attend one of the family entertainment programs they offer. Make a commitment to read to your child at least once a day. You will be giving them the gift of literacy and even more importantly, sharing one-on-one time together. Create lasting summer memories for your family and open up new worlds for your child with one simple activity: read a book together.

If you would like to sign up for the Imagination Library Program, stop by your local library for a registration form. The only requirement is that you live in Montezuma County.

Mary Vozar is a MECC member and the Southwest Coordinator for Reach Out and Read