

Award-winning Family Storyteller

program helps children and parents succeed

BOOSTING LITERACY IN YOUTH

The joy of hearing a storybook glows on the faces of small children as their mothers read to them at Smithridge Elementary School in Reno. It's a crisp autumn morning in the cafeteria, as the doors open and close for morning snack deliveries to classrooms. But nothing chills the children's excitement or the parents' enthusiasm as they sing the familiar "The Wheels on the Bus" song and point to the pictures in the book.

It's all part of Family Storyteller, a national award-winning program of University of Nevada Cooperative Extension that addresses childhood literacy. Held in Washoe County libraries, elementary schools, family resource centers, pre-kindergarten programs and Head Start, Family Storyteller is making an impact on helping parents learn ways to improve their children's success in school.

"I did not know how to read books together," said Maria Plascencia at the Veterans' Memorial Elementary School workshop. "Now when my daughter gets home, she wants to read the book together."

This mother's experience is not unusual. "What we found is that many Spanish-speaking immigrant families, who have an education level of 6th grade or below, have no experience being read to or reading to their children," said Dan Weigel, Cooperative Extension's area youth development specialist. Weigel co-founded Family Storyteller 10 years ago with Sally Martin, Cooperative Extension's state family life specialist, to address a critical need in Nevada and beyond.

Cooperative Extension has directly taught 11,550 Nevada families, of which more than 80 percent are Hispanic, and trained 325 volunteer facilitators. The materials are reaching beyond Nevada, with 235 curricula purchased for use in 29 other states.

ASSESSING THE NEED

Up to 42 percent of adults have basic or lower reading skills than they need to be competitive in the workforce. Also, 38 percent of all third-grade students do not meet the national standards in reading. The number of Spanish-speaking children entering schools continues to increase.

"Further investigation indicates that we can predict which children are likely to have trouble learning to read before they get to school," explained Martin. Studies show that children who start school without a literacy foundation have difficulty learning to read and are more likely to fall behind in other subjects, drop out of school, end up in low-



Photo by Theresa Dams-Douglas

Carmen Cognian of Cooperative Extension teaches family storytelling to parents and their children.

paying jobs, and engage in juvenile and adult crime.

Family Storyteller is designed for families of 2- to 7-year-olds in which parents have low literacy skills, few children's books at home and limited experience in sharing books with young children. The six-week program is unique in that parents and children attend together.

DESIGNING THE PROGRAM

"I had never attended a workshop before, and I would like to have more so I can learn and I can teach my son, said Rosa Corona at the Veteran's Elementary School workshop. "Today, I learned it is a valuable time to share with my son and to do activities and pay attention to him when I read. My son likes it very much."

Bedtime stories are something many families take for granted, and many parents have learned special techniques that help children learn to read—repetition, using different voices for different characters, singing, talking about the pictures and the characters. Counting, drawing, using puppets, pointing out colors, places and every-day experiences also help make learning fun.

The hour-long, six-week workshop includes practice time for parents to read with their children, while the teacher supports and coaches parents. Parents also learn about games and activities to extend their children's literacy learning at home—they practice doing one of the activities during the workshop. The book of the week and the packet of materials go home with the parents and children so they can continue their reading and activities together.

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Cooperative Extension has taught 11,550 Nevada families how to read to their children



Ely Guzman has fun at a Family Storyteller workshop at Smithridge Elementary School Oct. 31.



Photo by Theresa Danna-Douglas

Jacqueline Aragon points out colors and pictures to her son Acxel at Veteran's Elementary School.

There are four different Family Storyteller programs:

- the original for lower-literacy English speaking families,
- a second curricula for English Language Learners,
- a third curricula being developed for Spanish-speaking families who do not yet speak English, and
- a fourth curriculum is being designed and pilot-tested for Native American families.

RESULTS

Results show that Family Storyteller makes a difference on factors that predict school success. After participating in the program:

- parents and children read together more often,
- parents used skills taught in the program more often—for example, encouraging


their children to guess what happens next and to learn new vocabulary words,

- parent-child literacy and language activities increased,
- children increased their understanding of book basics—for example, knowing the front of the book and realizing that you read from left to right and from the top of the page to the bottom,
- children increased their enjoyment of reading.

Spanish-speaking families:

- parents increased their ability to use English,
- children *and* parents increased their English vocabulary,
- Parents increased their knowledge of book basics,
- Parents increased their shared reading skills and their enjoyment of reading with their children.

Ultimately, Family Storyteller benefits Nevada by increasing the number of at-risk children who will:

- enter school with language assets,
- be introduced to English before they start Kindergarten,
- have enhanced capacity to learn to read and succeed,
- have parents who are able to help their children build language, while improving their own literacy and English-language skills. 

The program proves helpful to both parents and their children by increasing:

- Children's early literacy development,
- Children's opportunities for school success,
- Parents' abilities to boost children's literacy development and
- Parents' ability to use English.

AWARDS

Family Storyteller is recognized as one of the outstanding childhood literacy education programs in the nation:

- Western Extension Director's Award of Excellence, The Family Storyteller (2007)
- National Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences Regional Award, The Family Storyteller (2000)
- Nevada Library Association Outstanding Community Initiative Award, The Family Storyteller Collaborative, (1999)

COLLABORATORS

- Public Television
- School Districts
- Literacy Coalitions
- Head Start
- Even Start
- Libraries
- Preschools
- Private & Public Agencies
- Agriculture Experiment Station research and evaluation grants