

# YAKIMA HERALD REPUBLIC

*A Daily Part of Your Life*

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## Ready to Read at Age 2

By RHINA GUIDOS



Laura Mendez helps her 2-year-old daughter, Paola, read "The Lion King." The West Valley School District Parent-Child Home Program encourages parents to help their youngsters develop learning habits.

Alma Rodriguez, left, visits Laura Mendez, center, and her daughter, Paola, in their home twice a week as part of the West Valley School District's Parent-Child Home Program. Paola is learning colors by using farm-themed toys.

Photos by GORDON KING/Yakima Herald-Republic

Two-year-old Paola Mendez hasn't learned to read yet, but she knows a good story when she hears one. "Sometimes I end up reading the Lion King almost 15 times in one day," said her mother, Laura Mendez.

She has stepped into her West Valley home during her lunch hour to play and read with little Paola. It's those reading habits between parents and their children that West Valley School District is trying to cultivate with its new Parent-Child Home Program.

"At age 2, she is learning what my son learned in kindergarten," Mendez said.

The 23-week program is aimed at families with children, ages 2 and 3, who face difficulties when entering kindergarten because of a learning delay. Home visitors teach parents how to read to their children or play with them in a way that can be both fun and educational.



After Mendez reads a book to Paola or plays with her, she asks her questions about the activity they just finished.

"She knows how to count from one to seven, she also knows seven colors and a lot of animals," Mendez said. "When we're driving around, she'll see a color on the street, point to it and say 'Mami, yellow.'"

Her 5-year-old, Ramon, faced a tough time in kindergarten because he hadn't had the same preparation as her sister.

It's families whose children have faced difficulties before that the district wants to help.

On the 13th week of the program, 2-year-old LeRoy Peters is learning about farm animals. Like other home visitors, Nancy Darigol, coordinator of the parent-child program, pays the family a 30-minute visit twice a week.

"He's more apt to listen and more willing to sit down," Darigol said.

The structure of the program will help him become a better student before he enters the classroom, she said.

LeRoy likes to read. His favorite book is "Pat the Bunny," and he can name a lot of the farm animals that Darigol and his mother, Kristy Peters, have been teaching him for the past 13 weeks.

Like the Mendez family, the Peterses have an older child who had problems learning in kindergarten.

"He's going to have an advantage that my daughter didn't have," Peters said. "She struggled in school."

Peters digs inside a small white box for "Pat the Bunny," one of the many books and toys the family has received through the program. The families are allowed to keep the materials so they can continue teaching after the home visitors leave.

The district spends \$2,000 per family on these materials, salaries and mileage for home visits and other expenses. Twenty families participate in the program, and the district hopes to expand the program next year.

Dave Levad, principal of Cottonwood Elementary, said the school expects to see results when the children start arriving at West Valley schools within the next three years. Levad and program coordinator Darigol spent time looking at how the program works on the East Coast, where it has produced success stories for almost 30 years.

"When you don't intervene early, you're playing catch up," he said. "We looked at various programs and this one appeared to hold promise."