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Libraries Provide – Countywide!: Take Off! early literacy program grows young readers

By ERIN MCCUSKER
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Early Literacy Program Manager Monica Hoffman delivers materials for the Take Off! early literacy program. Contributed Photo

Part of a library's purpose and desire is to build and support lifelong readers. The most important years for building literacy for a child are from the time they are born until they enter kindergarten. Giving children a strong start by reading to them every day is a proven indicator of success in school and in life.

The Take Off! Program of the Umatilla County Special Library District (UCSLD) focuses on early childhood literacy development, particularly for children and their families who cannot get to a public library easily because of transportation issues or work conflicts.

Early Literacy Program Manager Monica Hoffman serves over 60 Head Start, preschool and registered child care classes within Umatilla County. She also provides storytimes and storytime resources to our public libraries as they request. During typical years, she serves well over 70 classes, delivering over 16,000 items to children every month.

The Take Off! Program has a multi-pronged approach to building early literacy skills. The first is the provision of carefully selected, age-appropriate materials, including books and learning manipulatives delivered to the classrooms. The books and manipulatives are grouped in themed boxes, such as Friends, Farms, All about Me, Oregon History and more. Secondly, children in a class hear a wonderful story delivered by Monica, seamlessly integrating early literacy development techniques.

Children get to hear and participate in a fun story, not noticing that they are developing literacy skills. Additionally, she models these skills for parents and care providers who are attending.

There are also sites that ask the Take Off! Program to come to parent nights — at these events, Monica shares books and early literacy development tools with parents so they can continue their learning at home. Periodically, Take Off! delivers training to child care providers through modeling of and sharing the techniques for building early literacy in their students. There are also storytime kits in a bag for library staff, preschool teachers and care providers to use with a full, ready-to-go themed storytime complete with books, puppets and early literacy tips.

The final element of the program is a highlight; children get free books to take home to read with their parents. There are so many good things about reading with children — time for bonding, snuggles, the magic of a wonderful story — and the best thing is that all of this develops and sustains literacy.

As with everything else, the COVID pandemic has affected the Take Off! Program. Currently and during the last year, Monica delivers themed book boxes to program site classes, as well as distributing free books for children to take home and participating in virtual parent nights. She also has a social media presence sharing early literacy tips and techniques and, best of all, stories. After COVID restrictions ease, the Take Off! Program will resume storytimes in the classrooms and with our public libraries.

Get more information about the Take Off! Program and how to reach Monica Hoffman with questions at <https://www.ucslid.org/take-off-a-preschool-learning-outreach-program>.

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