



Lorena Sanchez, 33, reads a book to her 6-month-old, Maximiliano Garcia, under the Raising A Reader initiative, which uses free literacy training to help children become readers.

NICK OZA/THE REPUBLIC

Very early education

Literacy program at apartments aims to develop skills of those 5, younger

Southwest Human Development is offering a literacy program to families with young children at Phoenix apartments. "These are very diverse populations," said Ginger Ward, CEO of the agency. "The assumption was that there are a lot of little kids and that parents are interested in programs like this." **Page 3**



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Parents bring their young children to the Raising a Reader Initiative at the Willow Springs apartment complex in Phoenix. The multiyear program aims to develop the literacy skills of children from birth to 5 years old.

Reading initiative is for kids

Literacy program targets children in apartment communities

By Sadie Jo Smosky
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In an effort to reach families with young children, Southwest Human Development is offering a proven literacy program at apartment communities in central and north Phoenix.

Ginger Ward, CEO of the non-profit organization, said the collaboration with the Arizona Multihousing Agency ensures that more families will benefit.

"These are very diverse populations," Ward said. "The assumption was that there are a lot of little kids and that parents are interested in programs like this."

The Raising A Reader Initiative, a multiyear project, is linking free literacy training with outreach activities in apartment communities to help children between birth and 5 years

old develop the skills they need to be successful readers.

Willow Springs, near 35th Avenue and Indian School Road, is one of 20 apartment communities and 16 child-care centers taking part in the project.

Training specialists provide a series of eight workshops, reading materials and an introduction to the public library. At the end of the program, Southwest Human Development, which provides comprehensive services for young children and their families, will provide new books to participating families.

Marlene Moreno, a training specialist, said encouraging parents to read, sing songs and play with their children is essential to learning. Through this program, Southwest Human Development is bridging the early-childhood literacy gap between

birth and preschool.

"This is a crucial time to develop routines," Moreno said. "We're creating peaceful, joyful moments around books to encourage reading and learning."

Participating families are given a red book bag containing four books each week. At the end of the week, they bring the bag back and pick up another one, Moreno said.

The biggest and most-unexpected challenge so far has been finding age-appropriate bilingual books in multiple languages.

Moreno leads two sessions at Willow Springs, one for Spanish speakers, and another for Bhutanese and Nepali speakers.

The effort is being funded with grant funding of \$82,000 from First Things First and \$35,000 from JPMorgan Chase.