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## Literacy program helps children read at grade level

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DANIEL BOCK / FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

Olivier Lamothe and his daughter Olivia Lamothe, 2, pick out free books available through the Read to Learn Books for Free program at the Northpark at Scott Carver Community Center in Liberty City. The program gives out free books to help children read at their grade level. It's a partnership between The Children's Trust and The Center for Literature and Theatre at Miami Dade College.

Two plastic crates filled with children's books were wheeled into the community center of a housing development in Liberty City. A dozen children chattered as they waited for a cardboard bookshelf to be stocked with the books about colors and numbers, sharks, fairy tales and the adventures of cartoon characters.

The books and bookshelves are courtesy of Read to Learn Books for Free, a literacy program funded by The Children's Trust in partnership with the Center for Literature and Theater at Miami Dade College. So far, the bookshelves can be found at 32 clinics, community centers, parks and housing developments in Miami-Dade County, from Florida City to the Broward County line.

The goal: to help children read at their grade level so they can succeed in school.

"A child's ability to read is linked to the successes they experience in life," said Emily Cardenas, senior communications manager of The Children's Trust.

Studies show that students are much more likely to drop out of high school if they cannot read at grade level by the time they reach the third grade, according to research conducted by The Children's Trust. Students who attend low-achieving schools and who live in poorer neighborhoods are

especially at risk.

"Children living in low-income communities have little access to reading materials," said Cardenas. "The more access you have to reading and the more you are encouraged to read, the greater the likelihood that you will become a strong reader."

A Florida Department of Education report from 2013 showed that just 53 percent of third-graders in Miami-Dade County achieved level 3 or above in the FCAT 2.0 reading assessment. Level 3 is considered reading at grade level. However, newer standards require third-graders to achieve only a level 2 or higher on the reading assessment to be promoted to the fourth grade.

The Children's Trust and the Center for Literature at Miami Dade College work to bridge the gap between lack of access to reading materials and academic success.

Lanette Johnson, a paraprofessional with Miami-Dade County Schools, recently took her two children, Anthony and Dajahnique, to get books at the community center at Northpark at the Scott Carver housing complex in Liberty City.

Anthony, 8, a third-grader at Lillie C. Evans K-8 Center, struggled with reading last school year. He was afraid to read, and would stare at the pages before his eyes started to wander, his mother said. But with the help of Read to Learn Books for Free, he showed an impressive transformation during his last nine weeks of second grade.

"He went from an F to an A since we started coming here," said Johnson. He loves books now, she said.

While the program helps children ages 8 and younger, others have requested help for adolescents.

Evancia Francois takes her six children to Northpark every weekday so they can read and be tutored. Her oldest daughter, Jessica, is an eighth-grader at Lillie C. Evans K-8 Center. She struggles with a learning disability, and doesn't do well in math or reading.

"I try to comfort her and tell her not to feel bad," Francois said. "It happened to me, too."

Francois has had trouble with reading and spelling since she was a young girl. Indeed, when she applies for jobs, someone has to accompany her to help her read the application. Francois has seen an improvement in her daughter's reading since she started the program in June.

"I just want to read and learn and study," said Jessica.

For Bess Perry, administrative coordinator for Read to Learn Books for Free, seeing children develop a love for books is one of the most satisfying parts of her job.

"You see the kids' reading improve, you see them wanting to read. I feel like that's half the battle — to get them to want to read and have books," Perry said.

The kids are given one book a month to take home, but some will ask to take more. They can keep the books.

"Libraries are a fantastic way to expose children to books . . . but we also want to be able to give children books because we believe there's a sense of pride in ownership," said Cardenas. "Kids who get to take a book home are really proud because they've never had a book to call their own."

Perry remembered a call she received at her office from a mother.

“She had told me how she had always wanted to get books for her children, but she wasn’t able to afford them,” Perry said. “This program made it possible for her to not have to choose [between daily necessities and books]. She knew that books were important for her children, but she never had the resources to purchase them.”

The Center for Literature collects books from 30 donation bins from Coral Gables to Miami Beach. The Center also purchases new books. Over the span of a year, as many as 144,000 kids go home with free books.

For the Children’s Trust, the biggest challenge is finding partners that can set up book-donation sites.

“You would think that this program would be something a lot of people embrace, but they don’t,” Cardenas said. “It seems that from an aesthetic standpoint, having our bin in their location might not fit with the business’ marketing.”

The center has partnered with First Book National Book Bank, an organization that distributes books to programs serving low-income families. It purchases books through the Book Bank at reduced prices.

The center has also launched an online book drive through which people can donate money or buy a book from a list provided on the center’s website. (See box.)

“We want books get to live on and live another life in the hands of other children,” Cardenas said.

### **Read to Learn bookshelf locations**

**Miami Gardens Community Service Center:** 16495 NW 25th Ave., Miami Gardens

**Joseph Caleb Community Service Center:** 5400 NW 22nd Ave., third floor, Miami

**Children’s Courthouse and Juvenile Justice Center:** 3300 NW 27th Ave., Suite 1000, Miami

**Family Court Services:** 175 NW First Ave., 15th Floor, Miami

**Florida Department of Children & Families South:** 12195 Quail Roost Dr., South Miami-Dade

To donate money for the online book drive or to buy a book, go to [www.flcenterlitarts.com/readtolearn/bookstore.html](http://www.flcenterlitarts.com/readtolearn/bookstore.html).