

VIEWS & VOICES

ISLAND VOICES

Literacy programs help disadvantaged children thrive

By Joanne Laird

Child and family homelessness is at an escalating crisis. What happens in early childhood can impact for a lifetime. According to the National Center on Homeless Education, the impact of homelessness on children often leads to chronic stress and trauma from frequent moves; inconsistent relationships; lack of places to play; and witnessing domestic violence and substance abuse.

This stress and trauma are emotionally and cognitively damaging to them. In young children, stress resulting from major trauma such as extreme poverty and homelessness, can weaken the developing brain and can lead to lifelong problems. The sit-

nation is dire.

By providing a well-established, positive family-centered literacy program, the consequences of early trauma can be prevented, and society can ensure that all children are prepared for school and life success.

According to the research conducted by Horizons for Homeless Children Organization children who are read to from the time they are very young become better readers, do better in school, stay in school longer, and are more likely to avoid the cycle of poverty due to the lack of work-related skills. Prevention is the key.



Joanne Laird is program director of Read Aloud America.

Read Aloud

America promotes the involvement of the whole family in making reading an integral part of a child's life. In 1995 the organization designed an early evening family literacy program that operates in

public schools, offering a series of high-energy, motivational sessions over the course of one school semester. Some (perhaps many) parents and caregivers who attend Read Aloud America's program do not read themselves. The program motivates families to work, learn and enjoy reading together. These program components lessen any feelings

of anxiety that may hinder the family learning environment.

We are determined to change attitudes and values within the family. A child is in school 900 hours a year and in the home community 7,800 hours. Until we change the home environment and bring character back, we will never change our schools, communities or our nation.

Read Aloud America tracks its success by monitoring attendance and by analyzing written evaluations and end-of-program surveys. We work in partnership with other community organizations and agencies. An example is the "Visit the Library" program, created in 2006, during which participants have made over

35,000 visits to Hawaii state libraries and obtained 4,803 library cards. Our collaboration with the national Reading Is Fundamental program since 2007 has put more than 21,000 books in the hands of low-income families in Hawaii.

Schools have been trying to engage parents and families for generations. Read Aloud America has a program that does just that. Attendance figures have been gathered since 1999 and we have served over 336,000 adults and children at 90 Hawaii public schools. It has become the largest and most effective family literacy program in America—and it provides a proactive way to combat the many causes that can lead to family homelessness.