

WHITEWATER — Curling up Thursday in a tiny chair at the Irvin L. Young Memorial Library, 2-year-old Thia Benhart twisted her blonde pigtail while listening to a woman read a story.

Thia has attended several story hours at the library, but this tale about a young boy determined to grow a big carrot was different: The children's book, "La Semilla de Zanahoria," was being read in Spanish.

The story hour is one of several bilingual programs promoted by Walworth County's UW Extension office to reach Latinos. The hope is to bridge gaps between Spanish-speaking and English-speaking residents.

The bilingual story hour is 2 p.m. Thursdays at the library until July 31.

"The idea is to build community," said Cristina Parente, program coordinator. "We're offering something in both English and Spanish, so we can learn a little bit."

Several bilingual offerings—including nutrition, school and family programs—are done in both languages, she said.

They're designed to be culturally relevant and to give Latino families access to the same educational information offered to others, Parente said.

"One of our goals is to open those doors," she said. "Working through the schools, a lot of people are Latino, and it's a good way to work with their families."

The programs are a work in progress, Parente said, and not all attract large crowds.

But with the growing Latino population in Walworth County, the extension office plans to continue its bilingual outreach, she said.

Cathy Bloom, the library's director of children's programs, said the bilingual story hour complements other methods of reaching Latinos.

The library offers adult classes in Spanish to teach people about library cards and computers, Bloom said. It also has Spanish educational programs on one computer.

"I think the Latino population is comfortable coming to the library, and they take advantage of the various programs the library has to offer," she said.

During the story hour, Lesley Shreves with the extension office read English and Spanish versions of children's books. She said it's important for children to get exposed to both languages at a young age.

"I think we can reach people," she said. "I really think these bilingual programs help."

After finishing "La Semilla de Zanahoria," Shreves asked Thia, "Did you like that story?"

"Yes," Thia responded.



Intern Lesley Shreves reads to Thia Benhart during the bilingual story hour at the Whitewater Irvin L Young Memorial Library.