

THE OKLAHOMAN

Nonprofit's toy library teaches kids, helps parents

**NEEDS
& DEEDS**

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A toy library isn't just something in a child's imagination. There's one in Oklahoma City's Paseo Arts District, and it's being freshly stocked with \$11,000 worth of new toys.

The library is run through the nonprofit Rainbow Fleet, which was founded in 1972 to help parents and child care providers receive resources and learning materials, such as toys, to help the community's children. The most recent batch of toys was bought using grant money, said Carrie Bullard, Rainbow Fleet's executive director.

For \$40, child care providers and parents can come to Rainbow Fleet's headquarters and choose up to 10 toys from the group's lending library, which includes toys that promote physical activity or are educational, Bullard said.

"You don't know you're learning anything. You think you're just playing, and I think that's kind of the beauty of a lot of the toys that we have," Bullard said.

The shelves of toys are categorized into themes, such as farm or motion, so parents or child care providers can plan activities around the toys they check out. Lenders can keep the toys for a month before returning them and getting more, Bullard said.

"Kids get bored with toys, too," Bullard said. "So this is a way to keep them refreshed."

The toys do more than help bored children, though. Foster parents use the library to check out age-appropriate toys for their foster children, said Charlie Price, of Price Lang Consulting, who works with Rainbow Fleet.

In addition to the lending library, Rainbow Fleet offers free, statewide child care referral services, a nutritious meals program and a quality enhancement initiatives program that helps child care



Lindsay Brooks organizes a shipment of educational toys in the learning materials storeroom at Rainbow Fleet. The nonprofit has resources to help families find child care and also assists child care providers. PHOTO BY PAUL HELLSTERN, THE OKLAHOMAN

providers raise their star rating, a quality rating system for child care facilities.

Through the referral service, parents can call the group and get a list of child care providers based on various criteria, such as star rating or proximity to the parents' work or home, Bullard said.

From there, the parents can choose which child care provider is best for them.

“When I had my son, I didn't know about Rainbow Fleet, and I didn't know where to find child care, and so you end up using word-of-mouth,” Bullard said. “We streamline that stuff for parents.”

To incorporate Oklahoma City's growing Hispanic population, Rainbow Fleet carries educational toys printed with both English and Spanish words, Bullard said.

As well, the group has a Hispanic resource and referral employee, Florencia Briglie, to help Spanish-speaking parents find child care or take child care training classes.

“If you're doing (classes) in your mother language, there's some things that you can get better,” Briglie said.