

baby RALLY! targets Jacksonville's youngest



Ask the Mayor

by Mayor John Peyton

Educating young people is the best way to address the root causes of crime. That's what the experts say, and a recent poll conducted by the University of North Florida shows that Jacksonville citizens strongly agree.

A vast body of research shows that a child's educational foundation is laid between birth and age 5. A healthy start results in higher individual education and earning potential and, ultimately, a lower crime rate and a stronger economy for the entire community. That's why my wife and I read to our 1-year-old son every night — and why I kicked off 2007 by launching *baby RALLY!*

This new program targets infants and toddlers, expanding on *RALLY Jacksonville!* efforts to enhance early literacy and better prepare children for school. As a result of *baby RALLY!*, each

child born in Jacksonville in 2007 will receive a free literacy kit filled with two age-appropriate board books, a bib, a burp cloth, a sippy cup, a "key to the city" toy, a Jacksonville Public Library card application, helpful information for parents and a compact disc featuring educational songs sung by the Paxon High School Honors Chorale.

Infancy and childhood are vital times to develop an appreciation for reading and learning. The *baby RALLY!* literacy kit will give all parents in Jacksonville the tools necessary to begin this process with their new baby.

Now in its third year, *RALLY Jacksonville!* has garnered remarkable community support. Nearly 24,000 pre-kindergartners have joined the Mayor's Book Club, more than 785,000 books have been collected and distributed to Jacksonville children, 200-plus volunteers read to pre-kindergartners on a regular basis, individuals are working to improve the quality of hundreds of childcare centers, and a rating system is being

piloted to help parents make smart choices about their child's care.

There are a number of ways to be a part of *RALLY*, and the program is always in need of volunteers. To learn more about organizing a book drive or adopting a childcare center through the *RALLY* Readers! or *RALLY* Childcare Champion! programs, visit www.jaxkids.net or call 630-4754.

Increasing early literacy is just part of our ongoing efforts to reduce crime in Jacksonville. In the short-term, we are increasing funding for officer overtime in high-risk areas and investing resources to strengthen neighborhoods. But we must also take a long-term approach, and education is one of the most important things we can do to ensure a safe and productive future for our community.



J.R. Jones
President

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