

Vail Daily

Vail Valley's colorful pre-school on wheels

The Magic Bus takes reading and learning to children who can't go to pre-school

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AVON, Colorado — From a distance, the Magic Bus looks like a relic from a 1960s road trip — a psychedelic roadster splashed with bright green, blue and even an orange flower.

Look closer, and you'll realize the bus is painted with a mural: A bespectacled worm reading a book, a dinosaur, a ladybug and a rocket-ship blasting into space — images which bring to mind the escapism and imagination of reading.

Magic Bus coordinator Rosa Cordovz helps Jocelynn Valles, 2, with a painting project in the bus in Avon on Wednesday. The Magic Bus program provides books and weekly educational activities to kids who aren't in preschool.
Theo Stroemer/Vail Daily



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Step inside, and you'll see the bus, funded by the Vail Valley Foundation, is a portable pre-school. There are benches, tables, an easel and shelves of children's books in the back, full of tales of princesses and race cars.

Bring the bus

Interested in having the Magic Bus make a stop where you live? Call the Youth Foundation at 763-7000.

Deb Dutmer and Rosa Cordova drive the Magic Bus for the Youth Foundation. They travel from one end of the valley to the other, visiting families who, for whatever reason, aren't able to send their young kids to preschool.

The idea is to give them some of that preschool experience, read with them, give them books, engage their minds and send them home with educational activities to do throughout the week — important alternatives to sitting in front of a television, Dutmer says.

Story time

Their first stop on Wednesday is the Riverview Apartments in Avon. Later, they'll be visiting a few homes in Minturn. They're meeting Dana Valles, two of her children, Christina and Jocelynn, and two children she's baby-sitting, Dhazali Sandoval and Beckham Wood.

This month, the Magic Bus theme is music, so they start today's fun with a song. The kids giggle and clap, not knowing all the words, but at least remembering there are 12 months in a year — the main point of the tune.

Next comes the reading — Dutmer gives a lively performance of a book called "Zin, Zin, Zin, a Violin," which, through colorful pictures of symphony musicians, helps kids with their counting, and teaches them what instruments like a French Horn look like.

Next is an art project — they dip tiny jingle-bells into different colors of paint, drop the bells in a box with a sheet of paper in the bottom and roll the bells around, creating a beautiful mess of swirled paint.

Keeping in the fine arts tradition, the kids start dancing to a joyful tune called "Shake Your Sillies Out." And before leaving, the kids pick out a book from the back to take home and read during the week.

It's a fun outing for a group of 3- and 4-year-olds. It's obvious they're enjoying themselves, and it's something

they look forward to during the week, Valles said.

“When I say the book bus is coming, they get all happy,” Valles said.

Rubber-band guitar

Many of the kids visited by the Magic Bus stay with baby-sitters or grandparents during the day, which is a good thing, but they don't have the kind of structured lessons and activities you find in a preschool, where a child grow can really grow.

Dutmer says that there are probably hundreds of children in Eagle County who aren't going to preschool, but probably need to go.

That's why the Youth Foundation gives every family who visits the Magic Bus a bag full of activities to work on during the week, to give the kids a chance to keep learning when the bus isn't around.

Since the kids are reading “Zin Zin Zin, a Violin,” in the bus, they're working on music-themed projects, like making shakers out of cardboard paper-towel rolls and a guitar out of boxes and rubber bands.

Next month, they'll be reading a book called “In Arctic Waters,” in the bus and they'll study Eskimos, polar bears and snow.

“When kids are exposed to these experiences we're exposing them to, they're way more prepared for kindergarten,” Dutmer said.

The bus has been running since January, and its drivers hope more families will take advantage of the bus. They're only making four stops now, but have time for about 25 stops.

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