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Toy drive to help Lighthouse for the Blind's baby program

By MICHELLE HAMMONTREE-GARCIA

Alonso de la Cerda, 3, was born deaf and partially blind.

He communicates through photos, gestures and sign language – and with the help of therapists that come to his house once a week.

The free service is provided by the Miami Lighthouse for Blind's Little Lighthouse Blind Babies program. Alonso's mother, Gema Lepe, thinks this already difficult situation would be tougher without the program's help.

"It's more than the service, it is the humanity they offer that makes the program special," said Lepe, 40, a downtown Miami resident. "They care about his wants, his needs - and usually go beyond what is required."

To help the program be able to help other Miami-Dade county children the Pinecrest Learning Express Toy Store, 9529 S. Dixie Highway, will donate 10 percent of all purchases from 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Sunday to the Miami Lighthouse for Blind's blind babies program. It will also give customers a 10 percent discount on all purchase during the event.

Alonso contracted cytomegalovirus in utero. The virus rarely causes complications but when it does children can develop blindness, hearing and coordination problems.

But there are other causes of blindness in children and the number of blind babies is on the rise, said the program's spokesperson Cameron Sisser.

"Various things can cause babies to be blind or visually impaired – premature births, tumors, cancer and diabetes," said Sisser. "The program is open to everyone and helps fund programs for about 100 babies per year."

The program is five-pronged. It provides in-home services for children birth to five by assessing the child and proving an individual service plan. The program provides counseling services, playgroups for skill and social development and monthly family support groups. Donations will also be put toward community outreach and education programs.

Research has shown the 80 percent of learning is visual which is why shoppers are encouraged to donate "noisy" toys. These toys and toys with "different shapes and feels" help visually impaired children learn through touch and sound.

There will be a bin with select toys that are appropriate for visually impaired children at the store that can be bought and donated to the Miami Lighthouse.

The Miami Lighthouse helps Lepe learn how to communicate with Alonso. Something she thinks other may take for granted.

"Can you imagine not knowing how to ask your child if he is cold, hungry or if he is happy or sad? I do," said Lepe.

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