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Brightly colored toy drive barrels and festive holiday giving trees are popping up all across Marion County now that we enter the holiday season.

As the needs of those less fortunate have risen, toy drives have expanded to include donations of clothing and food. This year more than ever, low-income families will rely on the generosity of Marion County citizens to ensure there are gifts under the tree, warm clothes for the cold winter months ahead, and food on the table so children can have a joyful Christmas.

In conjunction with toy drives and giving trees, the Marion County Children and Families Commission is conducting their Holiday 2009 *Reading For All* Book Drive. Their goal is to collect twelve thousand books in twelve days. Donated books will accompany gifts of clothing and toys that community members provide for giving trees.

Books are easy to choose. There are books to appeal to all interests and all ages. There are books to fit any budget, especially with all the book sales, discount stores and outlet stores. By the way, the Children and Families Commission gladly accepts gently used books. You probably have some in your own home, or look at the local Goodwill Store, second-hand book store and garage sales; all of which are great places to pick up old classics. Local libraries have annual book sales; a good time to pick up bargains! And don't forget flashcards, comic books and puzzles, which are nice alternatives to books.

Books introduce new worlds and adventure. Books can bring laughter, and tears. Books can open minds to new ideas, be thought provoking, and expand a child's horizons. Books often spark interest in a new hobby or a potential career goal. Books help individuals define, set and reach personal goals. Books can encourage understanding of human nature and human challenges.

Moreover, according to the Marion County Children and Families Department, books promote literacy. When we support literacy, we help students succeed in school and in life. Success in school and in life helps to break generational cycles of poverty.

The best way to encourage children to read is for parents to be readers themselves. Teach children what a special gift a book makes. Let them help you pick out a special book for grandma, grandpa, siblings or friends.

Designate one night a week for a family outing to the local library. Check out books together as a family. Spend the Christmas holidays reading and sharing your books with each other over family dinners. Create lasting memories!

So, as you consider your Christmas giving for both your own family and for charity, please consider giving the gift of books and the joy of reading. Have a very Merry Christmas!

For more information on the Children and Families *Reading for All* program go to www.Reading4All.com or call 503.588.7975.

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