

Library, physicians team up to get books to kids



Jen Zettel, Post-Crescent Media 11:04 a.m. CDT August 3, 2015



APPLETON – Thanks to a grant from the United Way Fox Cities, 80 percent of children in the Fox Valley will receive a book when they visit their doctor.

The Appleton Public Library received the \$50,000 grant to expand the Reach Out and Read program, which helps participating medical providers give books to children at well-child visits, free of charge.

Dr. Sarah Campbell, a pediatrician, helped bring Reach Out and Read to Children’s Health Clinic at St. Elizabeth Hospital. For the past two years the clinic’s 10 pediatric providers have distributed books to patients.

Now the program is expanding in a big way.

Well-child visits focus on a child’s sleep habits, nutrition and development. The routine checkups happen 10 times between the ages of 6 months and 5 years old, which allows physicians to put a bug in parents’ ears about the importance of literacy before their children get to school.

“As pediatricians ... we get a lot of face time with families, so it (literacy) seems like a natural thing to work on,” Campbell said.

A time to observe

When Campbell hands books to children, she watches how they handle them — an indication of their gross and fine motor skill development.

She also observes whether they have “print recognition,” or the awareness that letters are components of words and words tell a story.

How a child and parent interact with a book is also telling, Campbell said.

“I love seeing that 2-and-a-half-year-old who gets the book, climbs into mom’s lap and doesn’t want me to talk,” Campbell said.

Parents usually trust their child’s physician, and many take what a physician says about the importance of reading to heart, Campbell added.

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Reach Out and Read will expand in the Fox Valley courtesy of a \$50,000 grant from United Way Fox Cities.
- Through the program, physicians give free books to children at well-child visits.
- It helps doctors talk with parents about early childhood literacy and gauge a child’s development.
- With the clinics involved, 80 percent of Fox Valley children will get books at well-child visits.

A partnership

Campbell helped write the grant, and said organizers want to reach every child in the Fox Cities in three years.

They're already off to a strong start — the clinics committed so far serve 80 percent of children in the Fox Valley, said Abbey Unruh, the program's library physician liaison.

Unruh works part-time to connect with clinics interested in joining the program. If they decide to participate, she helps them navigate the required administrative hoops, including applying, acquiring funding and purchasing books.

Since the movement received the grant in January, Unruh has focused on reaching large pediatric clinics in the Fox Valley. Affinity Health System, ThedaCare, Mosaic Family Health and Partnerships for Community Health have all committed to the program, Unruh said.

She also connects clinics to their local libraries so they can work together.

Some of the grant money will help library staff design literacy-focused spaces in pediatric waiting rooms — corners with bookshelves and books for kids to read while they wait to see their physician.

Physicians also have that direct connection to the library, so they can refer families to their local library depending on what they need, said Tanya Misselt, children's services supervisor at the Appleton Public Library.

The ultimate goal is to have more parents reading to their children, and their children prepared for school.

"When they're getting these books in the physicians' rooms, they're getting a big step in the right direction," Misselt said.

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HOW TO HELP

- Donate children's books at any local library branch, any YMCA of the Fox Cities branch, local medical clinics, Half-Price Books or The Building for Kids until Saturday. The books will be distributed to local physicians who participate in the Reach Out and Read program.
- Donate money to purchase children's books for the program. Cash or checks will be accepted at any Appleton Public Library service desk. Checks should be made payable to Friends of the Appleton Public Library.