

Program provides free books at wellness checks

BY ELAINE Walker

News editor

Through Reach Out and Read, physicians in all 50 states are putting 6.4 million books a year into the hands of 3.9 million children.

Soon, some of those hands will belong to Anacortes children, who will receive a developmentally appropriate book during every wellness check-up at Fidalgo Medical Associates. The program will be implemented thanks to a group of champions from the clinic, the Anacortes Public Library, the Anacortes School District, Island Hospital and the Anacortes Noon Kiwanis Club.

Dr. Jill Sells, state director of Reach Out and Read, gathered a roomful of those who have been involved at Island Hospital June 23 for an informational meeting about the program. The premise is simple.

“It supports parents as children’s first teachers,” she said.

Kids who develop solid language and literacy skills by third grade do better in school and in life — saving society the costs of special education as well as law enforcement and other negatives, she said.

A unique aspect of this program is that physicians distribute books at the beginning of routine wellness checks starting at 6 months and continuing until 5 years. Anacortes Children’s Librarian Doug Woods said that even families without a car, who can’t get to the library or afford preschool, get their kids to their doctor visits.

“That’s where the kids are — 97 percent of kids have had a checkup in the last year,” Sells said.

Anacortes Children’s Librarian Doug Woods said it’s not particularly remarkable when he hands a child a book, but it is a powerful teaching moment when a physician does it.

“It is an enriching experience. It gets the parents thinking about what they should read to the child,” he said.

When Anacortes needed a physician mentor for the program, Dr. Jeanne Olmsted, a pediatrician with Fidalgo Medical Associates, stepped up. She said she’s excited about getting started.

“I think it’s going to be great for us,” she said.

Olmsted said the goal is not simply to read words out loud, but to make the experience a dialog between parent and child.

“It’s not just sit down and read a story, but let your child be interactive,” she said.

When distributing a book, the doctor teaches parents about what is developmentally appropriate for the child. Olmsted said a good example is shown in a training video featuring a 6-month-old boy. Thrilled with a new book of photos of children’s faces, he looks at it then sticks it in his mouth — a perfectly normal response.

“It’s fine for baby to chew on books. That’s what they do,” Olmsted said.

Sells said families are extremely receptive to both the books and the information.

“Parents want that, and it’s really exciting,” she said.

She said all parents want what’s best for their children.

“It is a rare parent that doesn’t want to be a good parent,” she said.

Woods got Reach Out and Read off the ground in Anacortes by writing the grant and coordinating with MaryJo Christenson, Anacortes School District’s early childhood education coordinator, to begin getting physicians on board. Noon Kiwanis provided \$3,000 for the program.

“There’s a lot of interest from the other doctors, the family practice doctors. They’re anxious to come on board,” Woods said.

Anacortes Superintendent of Schools Chris Borgen said early learning is a key to success in school. He said programs like Reach Out and Read can give kids a strong foundation and prevent them from needing special education services when they are older.

He estimates that providing enough books for every child in Anacortes would cost about \$6,000 a year.

Sells said communities that have participation of 100 percent of the medical providers are designated as “Bookend City.” She said Washington does not have one yet.

“I’d sure like to make Anacortes the first ‘bookend’ program in the state,” Woods said.



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Gavin Guttormson, 3, talks with Dr. Jeanne Olmsted about shapes and characters in the new book she just gave him. Olmsted gave Gavin the book as a trial run of the new Reach Out and Read program, which will officially start at the Fidalgo Medical Associates clinic as soon as books and paperwork arrive.

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