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OUR BABIES CAN'T WAIT

Program helps kids become successful

For the 35 years I practiced as a pediatrician, what inspired me every day was the genuine desire of parents to have the best for their children.

They often asked questions such as: "Is my baby gaining enough weight?" "When should my baby be talking?" "Is my baby developing OK?"

But there also were important questions that were asked less frequently: "How do I keep my baby safe?" "How do I promote health and fitness in my child?" "What can I do every day that will help my child succeed in school and in life?"

While I readily gave parents answers to their questions, I have always lamented the fact that the answers could not be fully addressed in a brief office visit.

When babies don't come with a manual, when grandparents are hun-

dreds of miles away, or when other life priorities get in the way, both parent and child miss out on time-sensitive opportunities that could have helped launch them on a healthy and successful path.

To me, three things are essential in order to raise happy and healthy kids: Parents need awareness of what matters, the motivation to do what is best for their child and the skills and abilities to make a difference. I am convinced that most parents have the motivation, but the awareness and the skills

sometimes need a boost.

The communitywide initiative Our Babies Can't Wait is designed to help. Championed by Sandy Owen, director of Preventive Health at the Benton and Franklin Health District, the initiative was launched in January.

The goal of Our Babies Can't Wait is to help parents and caregivers in Benton and Franklin counties create a caring and nurturing environment for kids so they grow up to be healthy and successful adults.

Our Babies Can't Wait offers myriad services:

► Workshops for parents are offered through the Mid-Columbia Reading Foundation. A wide range of informational topics, including nutrition, sleep/wake cycles, developmental stages, child safety and how to choose a caregiver, is discussed. The work-

shops usually start with a meal and social time for the parents.

► Family engagement services are offered through Lutheran Community Services Northwest. Here, parents have a chance to learn about services available in the community that may help meet their special needs.

► Benton Franklin Substance Abuse Coalition and Catholic Family and Child Service offer Community Cafes, a series of conversations among parents about how to raise thriving children.

► For eligible families, the Benton and Franklin Health District provides public health nurses, registered dietitians and behavioral health specialists to assist families through the First Steps Program as well as through the



Dr. Sara Zirkle

In Focus

See **KIDS** | Page E3

KIDS | Parents can learn the skills needed to teach their children

FROM PAGE E1

Women, Infant and Children (WIC) Program.

► Our Babies Can't Wait has close to 200 informational articles and other resources available on the internet. The link is www.communitysolutionsbfco.com/obcw/about.htm

► Educational materials can be obtained by contacting United Way of Benton and Franklin Counties. A popular comment about Our Babies Can't Wait educational materials is that they are informa-

tive and user-friendly. Most are available in English and Spanish.

Although it only has been seven months since its launch, more than 100 parents have directly benefited from Our Babies Can't Wait. An average of 300 visitors log on to the website for information every month. Approximately 40 organizations and 100 volunteers are involved with the communitywide initiative. Individuals interested in Our Babies Can't Wait services can simply call 211.

The famous pediatrician Dr.

Benjamin Spock once said, "In automobile terms, the child supplies the power, the parents have to do the steering." Our Babies Can't Wait is making it easier for parents to steer.

The various services offered by Our Babies Can't Wait give parents the opportunity to learn the skills they need to help their children grow up to be successful adults.

We can all do a part by getting engaged. Parents can sign up and use these different services. Others can tell rela-

tives and friends about Our Babies Can't Wait. Businesses can host and invite a parent educator to speak at a brown bag lunch. Everyone can praise a parent when he or she does something helpful for a child's growth.

Let's help our next generation of children grow up to be healthy, happy and successful adults. We must do all that we can now, because our babies can't wait.

► Dr. Sara Zirkle is a pediatrician and a member of the Our Babies Can't Wait planning group.