

OUR BABIES CAN'T WAIT

Program helps kids, families, community

Goal is for children born in Mid-Columbia to be successful in school or work by age 20

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More than 100 parents have benefited from services provided by the Our Babies Can't Wait initiative since it launched in January, officials said.

Our Babies Can't Wait is the first initiative to spring from Community Solutions, an effort led by United Way to tackle the Tri-Cities' most pressing health and human services problems.

The ultimate community vision is divided into three categories — kids, families and community — and its ideals include seeing children well fed, healthy and educated; families self-sufficient and having basic needs met; and a community that is unified, embraces diversity and is a safe place to live.

Our Babies Can't Wait aims ultimately to have local newborns grow up to graduate from high school and succeed in college or the workplace by the time they turn 20.

The initiative starts with family education to prevent physical, sexual and emotional abuse and neglect and the adverse affects of living with someone who is mentally ill, an alcoholic or drug-addicted.

Children in those situations are more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, start smoking, commit crimes and become teen parents. They're also less likely to stay in school or succeed in school.

The short-term goal for Our Babies Can't Wait is to make sure the nearly 3,900 babies born yearly in Benton and Franklin counties are ready for kindergarten by teaching parents and caregivers about a child's development and physical, nurturing and bonding needs.

The Mid-Columbia Reading Foundation provides weekly workshops for new parents to answer questions like when to start reading to a child or whether a baby will become spoiled if a parent always responds to a cry.

"Babies cry to communicate what they need," said Carla Prock, a Benton-Franklin Health District nurse who speaks at the workshops. "It is important to always check to see if the baby needs a diaper change, or if he is hungry, too hot, too cold or in pain. A baby builds a sense of self and trust early in life when you respond immediately."

Workshop topics cover nutrition, sleep/wake cycles, developmental stages and how to choose caregivers, among others.

Other services offered through Our Babies Can't Wait include community resource information from Lutheran Community Services Northwest, Community Cafes — a series of conversations about how to build leadership and partnerships among parents so they can raise thriving children — and screenings by health district nurses.

To sign up for Mid-Columbia Reading Foundation workshops, call 987-2229. For Community Cafes, call the Substance Abuse Coalition at 783-3180.

For more information about Our Babies Can't Wait, go to www.communitysolutions-bfco.com.

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