

State's reading program reaches out to Lawrence youth

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A state reading program has grown like the young minds it serves.

The Kansas Pediatric Foundation's program "Turn a Page. Touch a Mind" provides new books to children through clinics and doctors' offices. It began in 2004 by offering books at one location in Chanute. It now provides books at 30 locations, including Lawrence.

The goal is that at each well-child checkup between infancy and age 5, a child will receive a book and the doctor will spend a few minutes discussing with parents the importance of reading.

"Research shows that children who are read to for 30 minutes a day basically have better developmental skills and are very prepared for kindergarten," said Chris Steege, executive director of the pediatric foundation.

A 2004 study by the Kansas State Department of Education found that only 43 percent of kindergartners showed up for school with the literacy and communications skills they needed.

Within four years, the program reached 21 sites. In September, it received a \$4 million grant from the Kansas Health Foundation that allowed it to add nine sites — including two in Lawrence.

Haskell Health Center, 2415 Mass., became part of the program in January and expects to distribute about 300 books per year. Pediatric & Adolescent Medicine, 346 Maine, will join the program in April and expects to distribute 7,500 books annually.

Dr. Rachel Smith, of Haskell Health Center, said the program encourages a love of reading.

"Someone who is literate and who loves reading is a healthy person overall," Smith said.

Doctors also get the opportunity to give something besides dreadful shots.

"We condition children to not like seeing us, but this program is a chance to have something positive and painless and enjoyable that maybe they will remember instead of the shots," she said.

"Turn a Page. Touch a Mind" also offers annual training that includes information on the latest research and statistics. So far, the program has trained 137 physicians.

During its first three years, the foundation provided 46,571 books that were valued at \$174,641. Once a site is selected, it receives books for as long as it wants to be in the program. Doctors just order the books and send the foundation an invoice.

Steege said the program's endowment has grown to \$6 million, but has been affected by the stock market.

"We are still fundraising because we have many sites that want to come on," she said.

For more information about the program, visit the foundation's Web site at www.kansaspediatricfoundation.org or call Chris Steege at (913) 780-5649.
