

## Program helps poor families learn how to treat sick kids



September 8, 2009 - Enrique, left, and Andrea Castaneda of St. Charles, participate in a pilot program by the Youth In Need Head Start and Early Head Start in which parents learn how to use the book, "What To Do When Your Child Gets Sick" at St. Charles Community College. The aim is to reduce unnecessary trips to hospital emergency rooms and lost time at work by teaching parents to treat minor ailments at home. (Christian Gooden/P-D)

**By Michele Munz**

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**COTTLEVILLE** — Instructor Jane Bennett tries to get the crowd, nearly all of whom are on Medicaid, to spend two hours learning about their children's health.

"Who's been to the ER?" Bennett asked the 60 parents sitting around tables in the gym at St. Charles Community College. Nearly everyone raised their hands.

Bennett explained how the training could keep them from missing work. Their children could have fewer absences and do better in school. And, she said, "You and your child

will not be sitting in the ER for hours, worrying." The room boomed with applause.

Bennett was teaching Head Start families from St. Charles and Lincoln counties how to treat the most common illnesses and injuries at home and what symptoms warrant a trip to the doctor. Head Start is a national program that provides education, health and social services to low-income families with children up to age 5.

A \$1.1 million federal grant is funding the training for 8,000 Head Start families over the next three years, beginning this year with 1,500 families in Missouri. Trainings are starting in the St. Louis area this month.

The training, called "I Can Help My Child Stay Healthy," was created eight years ago through a partnership between UCLA and Johnson & Johnson and has reached nearly 27,000 Head Start families nationwide, affecting 50,000 children. The success has won the program an "innovation and improvement" grant from the U.S. Office of Head Start.

"To have the federal government get on board in such a big way is a wonderful thing," said Conrad Person, the contributions and community relations director at Johnson & Johnson.

The cost of low health literacy is significant. A 2007 report from the University of Connecticut states that savings achieved by improving health literacy translates into enough money to insure the 47 million people lacking health insurance.

Health literacy is defined as the ability to obtain and understand health information. A federal survey done six years ago showed 36 percent of U.S. adults have basic or below basic health literacy levels, meaning they either struggle or are unable to decipher when symptoms require a medical test.

## **BOOK FOR ILL KIDS**

The program for Head Start families centers around the book "What to Do When Your Child Gets Sick." The book describes treatment and prevention of 50 illnesses and injuries, such as bloody noses, burns, diarrhea and coughs. It is written at an elementary level and easily searched by body part or symptom.

"Pretend your child has an ear ache," Bennett told parents. They quickly flipped through their books to the correct page and discussed their options.

"We give them a tool, but we teach them how to use it and show them the importance of using it. That's what makes a really strong impact," said Ariella Herman, the research director of the UCLA/Johnson & Johnson Health Care Institute, the partnership behind the program. Head Start counselors continue the education and collect research in three follow-up home visits.

The Health Care Institute grew from Johnson & Johnson's work with UCLA in establishing a management training program for Head Start directors. A 2000 survey of graduates revealed a concern about the health literacy among families they served. Most parents had no resource materials or thermometer at home and couldn't interpret temperatures. The Health Care Institute launched a small pilot education program to test its success.

Excitement among fellows in Missouri won the state's involvement in the launch. Pictures from an early training still line the hall at YWCA Head Start, which serves St. Louis County and the western half of St. Louis. Most of the faces are high school drop-outs who want a better life for their children, said director Betty Robinson. She keeps the pictures as reminders of how empowered parents felt.

"Their attitude, their confidence — it all changes," Robinson said. "The idea of having finished something and graduated from something ... suddenly you change the entire dynamics of a family just by looking at one area."

About 125 parents will attend the Oct. 30 training at the agency's Pagedale Center, she said.

## **MISSOURI CONTRIBUTES**

Missouri remains a key partner with the Health Care Institute. The Central Missouri Community Action Head Start, which serves eight counties, applied for the federal innovation grant. "We saw an opportunity to provide the training to agencies who haven't gone through the program," said director Mernell King.

Tiffany Moore, 27, of Moscow Mills, left last week's training with a new thermometer

and hope that her new book will prevent her second-guessing when it comes to caring for her children, ages 6 and 3. She once took her daughter to the emergency room in a panic after the girl stuck her fingers in a fan.

Moore said, "It does make you feel more confident knowing you can do it on your own."