

A Roaring Success

Lions offer free vision testing for young children

By AMANDA GRAY
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Lakeville Lions Club member Tammi Hohulin holds the wand that greets children receiving eye screenings through the Operation KidSight program. (South Bend Tribune photo by Greg Swiercz)

Ten seconds isn't a very long time. Yet, 10 seconds is all the Lakeville Lions' Operation KidSight needs to tell if a young child has eye problems that require correction, according to KidSight chairman Paul Russell.

Using PediaVision screening equipment, the Lakeville Lions Club travels around St. Joseph County providing free vision screenings for children ages 1 to 6.

"We're more than happy to provide this program for the community," Russell said. "We're trying to reach out to every kindergarten, Head Start program and preschool in the area."

The testing can make a difference -- just ask Tammi Hohulin, whose granddaughter's vision problem was detected by the screening.

So grateful for the program, Hohulin joined the Lions Club and now helps with the screening herself.

This local KidSight program is one of many across the state, Russell said, and other clubs within the county are assisting the Lakeville Lions. Michigan, along with several other states, has a similar program.

"Generally speaking, a child's eyes are fully formed by the age of 6," he said. "If there is a problem, it needs to be detected. Some of these problems can be corrected."

Lions member and past president Don Milzarek said that the program fits with the Lions' commitment to vision, stemming from a request by Helen Keller in 1925 for the club to be "Knights of the Blind in the crusade against darkness."

"If we catch just one vision problem, that is fabulous," Milzarek said. "It's great just to know that if this child has a problem, it will be corrected. That's the best part of the whole program."

After a child is screened, the results are sent to the pediatric ophthalmology unit at Indiana University medical center in Indianapolis, Russell said. Feedback, including a referral for a follow-up appointment with a local ophthalmologist, is sent to the parents and the school, as well as the program.

The Lakeville Lions recently visited the St. Bavo campus of Mishawaka Catholic School to screen the vision of students. Russell said they screened 34 children over two days.

Principal Vikki Wojcik said the Lions have provided a great service.

"Anything that is preventative we welcome to our school," she said.

The opportunity to catch problems early on is the best part of the screening, she said.

"As long as they're offering such a service, we'll welcome them," she said. "We are grateful for organizations such as Lions for providing such a service to the community."

Local ophthalmologist Dr. Steve Gerber said the program is essential for children's eye health.

"I do a lot of pediatric eye care," Gerber said. "I know you have to screen them early."

Gerber was very involved with the beginnings of the KidSight program in Lakeville, where he talked to members about eye health.

"When I found out the Lakeville Lions were doing it, I went to some of their meetings," he said. "To watch it in action -- it's amazing. It's so accurate."

The screenings are most impressive when they detect problems in just one eye, as opposed to problems that exist in both eyes, Gerber said. The machine also checks vision strength and pupil alignment, among other things.

However, the biggest problem lies not with the children or eye problems, Gerber said. It lies with parents.

"One of the main obstacles is having parents sign consent forms," he said. "They won't sign one because they don't know what it is or forget to. But this program is here -- no cost, no risk -- it's a wonderful thing."

The other problem is getting parents to follow up with an ophthalmologist if problems are detected with the screening, Russell said.

"We do try to emphasize the follow-up appointment," he said. "The follow-up is extremely important."

Follow-up appointments are where children receive prescriptions and eyeglasses, Russell said. The readings from the KidSight test are confirmed, and children walk out of the doctor's office with corrected vision.



Tammi Hohulin holds the camera while Rose Russell checks the computer screen for a suitable image of a Mishawaka Catholic School pre-kindergarten student's eyes during an Operation KidSight screening session. (South Bend Tribune photo by Greg Swiercz)

"We're very serious about this program," Russell said. "Thousands of kids start kindergarten every year in St. Joseph County. We would hope that we could screen them all."



Lakeville Lions Club members screen the eyes of Mishawaka Catholic School pre-kindergarten student Emilia Corpe during an Operation Kid-Sight eye screening session. (South Bend Tribune photo by Greg Swiercz)

Tammi Hohulin certainly recommends the screening, which caught a vision problem with her granddaughter Kaylin's eyes.

"She had been stumbling a lot, but we never thought it was because of her eyes," she said. "We never tied it to that."

Hohulin was at kindergarten registration for Kaylin when she noticed the program.

"They flagged me down and told me it was free," she said. "They tested her, and by golly if she didn't have a problem after all."

Doctors told Hohulin that Kaylin was caught early enough that her vision will be corrected enough that she will only have to wear one contact lens when she gets older.

"We joined the Lakeville Lions after because of this program," she said. "Now I go out and help with vision screenings."

Hohulin called it her way of "paying back."

"To find just one kid is just great," she said. "Parents need to keep in mind that if they're told their child has a recommendation for the doctor, they definitely need to follow up. Don't wait until they're older, because you can correct it now."

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To learn more

For more information on Operation KidSight, visit the Lakeville Lions' website at www.lakevillelions.org or e-mail kid-sight@lakevillelions.org.
