Vision screenings for preschoolers

By Paige Parker
The Oregonian

Preschool-age children can get their vision checked for free at the Beaverton Family Resource Fair on Oct. 17 by volunteers trained by the Elk's Children's Eye Clinic at Oregon Health & Science University.

Kids should be screened for vision problems by age 5 to detect serious conditions that become irreversible if left untreated, but only about a third of preschoolers have their eyes checked, says Joanna Vaughan, preschool vision screening director for the eye clinic.

Oregon doesn't require eye exams for kids until they reach school age, a point at which it is often too late to treat amblyopia, a common eye disease where the brain shuts off the blurry image from a weak eye and depends entirely on the stronger eye.

Concerned that too many low-income children were going unscreened, the Oregon State Elks in 2003 began backing a program that trains Head Start teachers and Elk's Club volunteers to conduct basic eye checkups. If a problem is detected, children are referred to eye doctors for a comprehensive exam. So far, about 12 percent of children screened have been referred to an eye doctor.

"I've personally screened kids who at age 4 were identified as having behavior problems, and what was really going on was they couldn't see," Vaughan said.

Most children helped by the program qualify for the Oregon Health Plan, but if they don't, and their family can't afford an eye exam or glasses, the Elk's program will pay.

In addition to the Head Start screenings, the Elk's Children's Eye Clinic also conducts public screenings at health fairs. Two are coming up. The screening is open only to children ages 3 to 5.

Oct. 17, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m.
Beaverton City Library
12375 S.W. Fifth St., Beaverton
For more information: 503-350-3623

Dec. 5, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Southwest Community Health Center
7754 S.W. Capital Highway, Portland
For more information: 503-432-6756

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Staff Reports