

Fighting the Unseen Handicap: OSU Extension Brings Much-Needed Vision Screening to Preschoolers

“What you don’t see won’t hurt you.” So goes the popular saying.

But when it comes to vision disorders among preschoolers, nothing could be further away from the truth. Conditions such as amblyopia, strabismus, and refractive error are the leading handicapping conditions of childhood — yet fewer than 14 percent of preschool-age children have eye exams and fewer than 22 percent even have their vision screened.

Ohio State University Extension is doing something to solve this problem. Through a partnership with Ohio State University’s College of Optometry and the Columbus Foundation, Extension educators and 4-H teen leaders participated in a first-of-its-kind pilot program seeking to evaluate the effectiveness of training lay people to conduct vision screenings at the community level.

“Undetected vision disorders handicap Americans in many ways, from learning to participation in social activities to economic productivity,” said optometry professor Paulette Schmidt, a nationally recognized researcher in pediatric vision screening. “I wanted to take our award-winning research into the communities to help Ohioans, and OSU Extension was the perfect match because of its mission and its presence in every county.”

Funded by the National Eye Institute and OSU Cares, the program — titled “Through the Eyes of a Preschooler: Envisioning the Future” — was piloted in three counties representing urban, suburban, and rural populations: Summit, Shelby, and Henry.

OSU Extension educators recruited a community volunteer and five to six 4-H members in each county to be trained and certified by College of Optometry experts, after which the trainees held a one-day screening session for local preschoolers.

Pam Leong, an OSU Extension family and consumer sciences educator who assisted with the pilot in Shelby County, said she was impressed by the dedication and quality of the 4-H volunteers who participated in the training.

“They are giving so much of their limited spare time and are just thrilled to be a part of such a valuable community service,” she pointed out, adding that the teens are already committed to doing more screenings at a local manufacturer’s health fair, at a preschool, and for a home-schooling group.

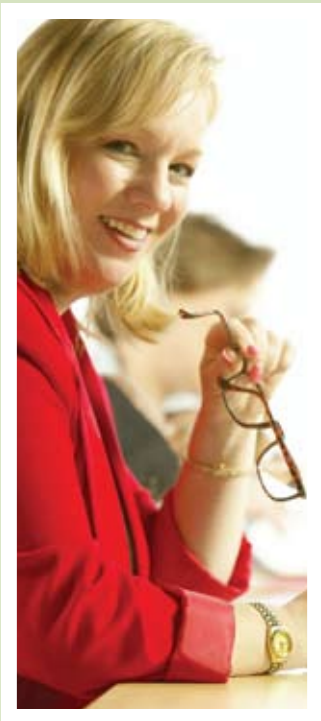
Jackie Krieger, a 4-H educator and director of the Summit County office of OSU Extension, said she has been receiving calls from more 4-H members

wishing to assist with screenings and from preschools requesting their services. “I have offered my colleague in Portage County the opportunity to join us in this important work. We never want the vision screening equipment we received to sit in our office unused,” she said.

Unused it won’t be. Schmidt is planning to refine the program and make this model available for wide distribution to train lay people and educate communities about the importance of effective vision screenings. And OSU Extension will be an integral part of this work.



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Strengthening Families and Communities

Ohio State University Extension teaches people how to apply science in their daily lives in order to make informed choices about everything from finances to healthy living to food safety.



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OSU Extension receives no funding through Ohio State University's state support or tuition. It is funded through a line item in the State of Ohio's budget, and receives support from counties and from the federal government.

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