Library Pilots Program Designed for Autism Spectrum Kids

In Centralia, a pilot "sensory friendly" Story Time hopes to reach a special audience.

Last year, Behavior and Education Consultant Susan Ray spoke to Timberland Regional Library’s youth services staff as part of an annual training day. Ray is on staff at the University of Washington Tacoma and serves on the Lewis County Autism Coalition. She came with a message: public libraries can help autistic children and their families by designing programs for kids who are hyper-sensitive to sights, sounds and touch.

Centralia Youth Services Librarian Alexis Hardy was inspired to do just that:

“We don’t have a lot of kids attending Story Times who are on the autism spectrum, or have other special needs. We’ve learned that parents hesitate to bring them because these children can be disruptive or extremely withdrawn. After learning more about autism, and about programs that are working in other libraries, we decided to pilot a sensory-friendly Story Time in Centralia.”

The program will give kids more freedom to move around and make noise. To minimize distractions, the area will be uncluttered, without books, posters or displays. Activities will engage all the senses and there will be “fidget toys” available to help with focus. Dim lights and soft sounds will add comfort. Any child who becomes anxious or overwhelmed will be able to retreat to an area away from the classroom space, with blankets, pillows and stuffed animals.

“Although we designed this story time with autistic children in mind, we think the program model will be excellent for children with all types of special needs,” Hardy said.

The pilot program is scheduled for two Fridays, February 5 and March 4, from 10:30 to 11:30 a.m. If successful, they will continue on a regular basis. Hardy encourages parents and caregivers of special needs children to contact the library to share program ideas based on their children’s individual learning preferences and experiences.

“We want to understand the needs of each child,” Hardy said, “and determine the best schedule for parents and caregivers.”

All Timberland Regional Library programs are free and open to the public.

The Centralia Timberland Library is located at 110 South Silver Street. For information, contact the library at 360-736-0183, www.TRL.org.