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Having fun with FRED

By Pauline Schreiber

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FARIBAULT - Filiberto Vargas stood before the crowd of fathers and youngsters assembled in the Faribault Senior Center dining hall Tuesday afternoon.

He then turned to the microphone and began reading the children's book, "Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?" in English and Spanish.

Fathers reading to their children makes a difference in their lives, said Kathryn Fonfara from Head Start, a federally-funded preschool program for low-income families. Mothers reading to children, too, is important, but too often fathers rarely pick up a book to read to their young children, she said.

Vargas, who has three small children, reads to them often and volunteered to help with Tuesday's FRED night for Head Start families. He and Buckham Memorial Library's children's librarian Delane James held a session just for the fathers of Head Start students on the importance of reading to their children as part of Tuesday's FRED night.

FRED stands for Fathers Reading Every Day. It started in Texas and encourages fathers to spend time with their children, reading a book to them, Fonfara said.

"The program came about because of research that shows children, whose fathers are involved in their lives, including reading to them, do better in school and are more successful throughout their lives," Fonfara said.

Head Start received a grant from the Minnesota Humanities Center to put on the FRED night, that included giving youngsters attending two books to take home. Local businesses and civic groups provided the funding for a meal for the families.

"We had a nice turn out," said Sharon Wolf, director of the local Head Start program. "Several dozen dads came."

Before Vargas read "Brown Bear," Faribault First English Lutheran Church Pastor Richard Jorgensen read the children's book he wrote, "Reading With Dad," to the crowd. It was based on his times reading books with his daughter.

"What's important is that fathers enjoy the time they spend reading to their children," Fonfara said. "Dads should find books they like reading to their kids. It can develop into a great bonding time between youngsters and their dads."

Fonfara previously introduced the FRED program in Red Wing, Zumbrota and Wabasha. The program is four weeks in length with an introductory night, like Tuesday's event, and then a concluding night.

"What fathers are asked to do is log the time they read to their kids over the four weeks of the program," Fonfara said. "They fill out a survey on the final night. I've only had one father who didn't read at all to their kids. All the others did some reading, whether once a week, several times or almost everyday."

The idea behind FRED is to involve dads in their children's literacy development and at the same time improve the quality of father-child relationships, she said.

"Dads can be great role models like moms in showing youngsters that reading is an important skill," Fonfara said. "And also, show them that reading is fun."



Jesus Reyes, left, reads to his daughter Evelyn Reyes, 5, while Angelica Camarillo looks on at the Senior Center during an event called Fathers Reading Every Day (FRED) sponsored by Head Start in collaboration with the Minnesota Humanities Center. (Jackson Forderer/Daily News)

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