

Chandler students become 'Heimlich Heroes'

Elementary students learn lifesaving skills through new program

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by Garrett Cook



Chandler Elementary students are getting well acquainted with Hank and Heidi Heimlich.

They're not real people; rather, they're the life-sized dolls that used to teach second-through sixth-graders the Heimlich maneuver.

Chandler Elementary nurse Michelle Patterson is a passionate advocate for teaching younger students lifesaving skills like CPR and the Heimlich maneuver. In the past, however, it's been a costly endeavor for the school to undertake because of purchasing books and other materials necessary for the curriculum for hundreds of students.



But Patterson found Heimlich Heroes, a free program, through doing research earlier in the year. Everything a school needs for training, like the lessons, videos and mannequins, is donated. The schools simply have to return the dolls.

Chandler is the first Allen ISD campus to turn students into Heimlich Heroes. From Wednesday through Friday, physical education teacher Jamee Little, along with parent volunteers, will teach 510 Chandler students how to recognize the signs of choking, how to respond if a person is actually choking and how to prevent choking.

Students will see a demonstration performed on a boy doll, Hank, and a girl doll, Heidi, before attempting the Heimlich on their own. The kids are taught to put one fist under the ribs, cover the fist with their other hand and then pull upwards to create an air bubble.

They do this continuously to create more air bubbles and enough pressure to dislodge the item from the victim's throat through his or her mouth. A piece of Styrofoam will be placed in the dolls' throats so that if the maneuver is administered correctly, the kids will see it fly out of the doll's mouth.

They teach students that if the person choking can cough, speak or breathe, the Heimlich is not necessary. Instead, they encourage them to cough it up. The student should never hit victims on the back as it may cause the item to lodge further into their throat.

“At the end of the training, everybody should have the skills to save a life,” Patterson said.

Hank and Heidi stand 42-inches tall and are outfitted with an internal diaphragm, lungs and a windpipe, so Little said children respond to them much better than some of the mannequins used in the past.

“The ones we teach at elementary school, they can seem a little cold or a little scary, not life-like,” she said. “If you’re wanting to put these kids in a real-life situation, this is something they can relate to a little bit better. They feel more comfortable with these dolls.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s most recent report, choking is the fifth-leading cause of accidental death in the U.S., accounting for about 5,000 deaths per year. Since its inception in 1974 by Dr. Henry Heimlich, the Heimlich maneuver has saved more than 100,000 lives.

Little said the program provides students with such statistics, along with the names of several famous people saved by the Heimlich maneuver, to make it more relatable to them. Celebrities like former President Ronald Reagan, Jack Lemmon, Goldie Hawn, Elizabeth Taylor and Cher are just some of the famous people whose lives would have been cut short had someone not taken action while they were choking.

“It’s a way to show the kids that people really are saved by it,” Little said.

Patterson said they’re encouraging students to extend the discussions beyond school into their homes so their family members will also know how to save a life. Many parents have expressed an interest in the program and are volunteering to help with training.

One particular parent, Wendy Semper, who substitutes at Chandler and has three of her own children there, came out Wednesday morning to help out with the Heimlich action.

“They just asked me and I was happy to help because it’s a good thing to learn. I’ve never learned how to do the Heimlich so I’m learning with my kids as they go through school all over again,” she said.

Patterson said she hopes other schools in the district will see what they're doing at Chandler and implement the program on campus as well.

"It's a pretty significant thing that you can do without a lot of extensive training to be able to help save a life," she said.