IN THE WAITING ROOM: VOLUNTEERS AND LITERACY-RICH SPACES

Reach Out and Read has tried from the beginning to take advantage of the long periods of time that many families spend in the waiting room. The initial idea of the volunteer reader was a realistic accommodation to what is for many of our sites an uncomfortable reality: long waiting times, cranky children, bored parents. Many families, as we all know, bring all the children to the health center when one has an appointment, and the waiting room can be a frenetic and tense place. Over the years, since the founding of the program, dedicated volunteer readers have logged thousands of hours in clinics all around the country, and dedicated coordinators have coped with the complexities of recruiting, training, supporting, and retaining their volunteers.

Some sites, however, have had problems maintaining a consistent volunteer component of their Reach Out and Read programs. There are many reasons for this: some waiting rooms are not suitable, because the average waiting times are so short, or because the waiting room serves a family medicine population and there are not necessarily many children present. Some clinics, hospitals, and health centers, are friendly to volunteers, and indeed, already have well-established protocols and volunteer offices, but others do not regularly use volunteers for any purpose and are not set up to easily accommodate them. And some coordinators, even after Herculean efforts and consistent struggle, do not have the complete volunteer coverage they would like.

Even as we have watched our sites and our coordinators accomplish great things with volunteers in the waiting room, we have also been aware that resourceful coordinators have found many ways to supplement their volunteers with other waiting room activities. It is our hope that sites will incorporate some of these ideas, making every Reach Out and Read waiting room a print-rich, literacy-rich and book-promoting environment. While we continue to believe strongly that the most effective waiting room literacy-promotion strategy involves volunteer readers, we want to offer alternatives to those programs whose waiting rooms aren’t suitable for readers, to those who periodically experience patchy coverage, and to those for whom the logistics of managing volunteer readers can sometimes prove prohibitive. If we can strengthen the literacy environment in all our waiting rooms, we will give the volunteers a stronger background against which to work, and we will be offering some support, information, and assistance to every family that visits the clinic.
Making Your Waiting Room a Literacy-Rich Environment

Keep in mind that you may be able to get volunteer help with any of the projects described in this section. Some volunteers may prefer to help with waiting room decoration or displays, rather than signing up to read. Redecorating a waiting room and establishing a reading corner might work well as a service project for a volunteer organization or a school or sorority/fraternity looking to do community service. Child life specialists—or child life interns—may be full of good ideas about waiting room activities.

Decorate your waiting room with a literacy theme:

• Display posters about books and reading—there are good ones available from the National Center, and others may be found through bookstores, publishers, and libraries—or created as school or volunteer projects.

• Consider wall murals with characters from children’s books, or with messages about books and reading.

• If you have the funding, there are book-themed wallpapers and even carpets!

Create a reading corner:

• Child-sized furniture.

• An adult-sized rocking chair for reading aloud.

• Gently used books that children can take away with them.

Work with your local library, and your local children’s librarian:

• Put up a bulletin board about library resources in your community.

• Give out handouts listing library locations, hours, children’s programs.

• Invite local children’s librarians to come into the clinic to read aloud or to hand out library cards.

Make good use of all those gently used books that come your way:

• Keep a shelf—or a bookcase—of gently used books with a sign inviting children to choose one and take it home.

• This is a great place to use those books for older children—and even adults!

• Make sure you look them over carefully before you put them out, screen out damaged, potentially controversial or inappropriate books.

Offer information on reading aloud and related subjects:

• Put out pamphlets for parents about reading aloud.

• Offer information—by poster, by display, by pamphlet—about adult and family literacy programs.

• Offer ESL resources.
Volunteers and Volunteer Readers

Volunteer readers come from all walks of life but have in common two important traits: a love of books and stories, and a genuine interest in helping children. Volunteers play an important role in the Reach Out and Read program, both as readers and as supporters. This section will help you in find volunteers, train and retain volunteers, and make the most of their time and enthusiasm.

The Reach Out and Read National Center has no guidelines or recommendations for volunteers or for volunteer activities that override the guidelines for volunteers set by the host organization of a Reach Out and Read (ROR) program. Before implementing the volunteer component of a ROR program, coordinators should consult with the Human Resources Department of their organizations for their guidelines and procedures.

The Value of a Volunteer Reader

Volunteer readers in pediatric literacy programs:

- Transform waiting areas into positive environments for children and parents.
- Model book-sharing techniques for parents.
- Show by example that reading aloud is fun for adults and children.
- Demonstrate appropriate responses to children's reactions to stories.
- Bring an enthusiasm for books and reading that will be contagious.

What Do Volunteers Do?

By reading to children in a pediatric clinic waiting room, volunteers transform the time waiting for medical appointments, which could otherwise be stressful or boring, into a pleasant experience.

By watching volunteers read aloud to the children in a waiting area, parents have an opportunity to see the reader using different voices or asking questions, or pointing out pictures on the page. Thus, the volunteer is able to model reading techniques. Parents also see that children listening to a story can participate and interact with the reader, rather than sitting in silence. Many times this is the first time a parent realizes that children, of all ages, enjoy being read to, and that storytime is an enjoyable experience for both the child and the adult.

Above all, parents and children both enjoy the experience of hearing a volunteer read aloud, and are more likely to repeat it at home—perhaps with the book that the child
Volunteer Guidelines

Below are listed some basic guidelines that we recommend in order to make your ROR program a success.

- Volunteers should commit to a minimum of one hour per week.
- Volunteers may find themselves reading to one child or to a group of children, depending on who is in the waiting room at any given time.
- Volunteers read at the children’s level of interest.
- Volunteers are not responsible for supervising children or for keeping order in the waiting room. Parents need to continue to be responsible for their children.
- Volunteers may talk with parents about reading, encourage them to join their children in looking at books, or recommend age-appropriate books but they should respect patient privacy and, of course, should not offer medical advice.

Recruiting Volunteers

Volunteers in ROR programs come from all walks of life. Volunteers are hospital employees, retired teachers, librarians, social workers, college and high school students, and parents: anyone with an interest in helping children.

If possible, take advantage of the expertise in your own institution’s volunteer office or link up with a community volunteer placement community organization, where the recruitment, training, and supervising of volunteers can take place as part of a larger hospital volunteer program.

- Contact your volunteer office and tell them about your pediatric literacy program.
- Send this volunteer section of the ROR manual to your volunteer office for their review.
- Meet with the director and staff of the volunteer office to discuss the processing of ROR volunteers.
- Invite the volunteer office to plan meetings for your ROR program, and have them participate in ROR training sessions.

Service organizations like the Junior League or Kiwanis may be able to take on the responsibilities of recruiting, training, scheduling, and supervising volunteers.

Places to seek volunteers for your ROR program:

- America Reads volunteers and VISTA volunteers receive stipends for the time they spend reading at ROR programs.
- Faith-based groups: local churches, synagogues, mosques, Combined Jewish
Philanthropies, Knights of Columbus.

- Civic groups: Rotary, Kiwanis, Lions, Elks, Masons, Moose, Jaycees, the Junior League, etc.
- Senior citizens groups: RSVP, AARP, Foster Grandparents.
- Local high schools, colleges, and universities, sororities and fraternities.
- Corporate outreach programs can serve as sources of support, both in terms of volunteers and fundraising.

Getting the Word Out

In addition to contacting local organizations, there are other ways to let the members of your community know about your ROR program and its volunteer opportunities.

- Newspapers have sections for free listing of volunteer opportunities.
- Local radio and TV stations often have on-air community events bulletin boards.
- Post volunteer notices at your local library and area stores.
- Many communities now have websites listing area activities.

Create Volunteer Handouts

A well-presented compilation of information about ROR will make your request stand out from the other demands made upon community organizations.

The ROR Resource Materials section of the ROR Catalog, a very comprehensive volunteer recruitment handout, Volunteering for Reach Out and Read, that describes the volunteer opportunities within ROR and suggestions on how to make the most of being a volunteer reader in a clinic’s waiting area. Volunteers can also find a brief online volunteer orientation in the Get Involved section of the ROR website www.reachoutandread.org/involved_volunteer.html.

If you decide to make a larger packet that includes the volunteering opportunities and requirements of your own hospital, the ROR logo, handouts and information about the program can also be downloaded from the Reach Out and Read website. ROR handouts especially useful for volunteer packets are:

- What Children Like in Books
- Developmental Milestones of Early Literacy
- Talking with Parents About Books (available in the training section or downloadable
Training and Supervising Volunteers

If your ROR program is in an institution with its own volunteer office, contact your human resources department to find out the guidelines and procedures for accepting and training volunteers.

The majority of large health institutions require the following of all volunteers working with patients in the clinic (although the requirements may vary by institution):

- Initial interview
- Letters of reference
- Records of current immunizations
- Recent TB skin test
- Health screening
- Photo identification
- References check
- CORI criminal checks

Orientation and Training Session

Volunteers need to be oriented to the sometimes-overwhelming clinic environment and they need to understand the nuts and bolts of reading in a clinic environment in order to be effective. In addition to any orientation or trainings that your health facility may require, ROR volunteers should be provided with a training specifically designed for the waiting area reader or any of the other responsibilities assigned to the ROR volunteers at your site.

ROR volunteers can be offered the online training for volunteers, available on our website at www.reachoutandread.org/involved_volunteer.html.

This training provides a comprehensive orientation for new members of a ROR program and, upon completion of the course, a certificate of completion is available.

Please check with your human resources or volunteer department on the volunteer training required within your facility. As a general rule, volunteers should not be left alone to supervise children without other clinic staff in the waiting room areas.

Essentials of Creating a Strong Volunteer Group

1. Create and maintain a clear volunteer schedule: Copies of the schedule should be posted for both the volunteers and the clinical staff.

2. Name tags/IDs for volunteers and a sign-in sheet: Volunteers should wear photo
identification or name tags and should sign in when they come to read. (Any identification worn by volunteers should comply with the requirements of the host clinic.) The sign-in system can be written or computerized, and is essential for those volunteers who receive payment for their services (i.e., participants in VISTA, AmeriCorps, Foster Grandparents programs). Accurate records are also helpful when preparing for volunteer recognition events.

3. Invite experienced volunteers to share their observations: One very easy way to inspire new volunteers, improve your ROR volunteer program, and recognize the valuable members of your organization is to ask seasoned volunteers to tell others about their own experiences. These volunteers can become the best recruiters as they convey their enthusiasm to others. Asking experienced volunteers to make suggestions on how to improve aspects of the volunteer program offers a coordinator the opportunity to gain a new perspective on an established program and also serves as a means to recognize a volunteer’s value and knowledge.

4. Set up a system for on-going communication: Volunteers need someone to speak with when they have questions, suggestions, or concerns about their volunteer activities or matters related to the staff or patients. Identify a staff person to maintain regular contact with volunteers and the ROR program coordinator. A list of names and contact information should be kept in the volunteer handbook and be available to volunteers at all times.

5. Recognize and appreciate the volunteers and their activities: Even a simple thank you goes a long way towards creating a strong volunteer group. Other ways to show appreciation include posting photos (with the written consent of the people in the photo) and thank-you letters. Volunteer appreciation days and other events recognizing the volunteers and their contributions are worthwhile efforts with long-term benefits to the ROR program.
Practical Suggestions for ROR Programs

• Have a secure place where volunteers can store their belongings while they are reading.

• Check with your institution about any benefits for volunteers, such as free or discounted meals, parking, or security escorts to cars.

Have Books Available

Colorful hardcover and paperback books are ideal for reading aloud. Some publishers sell “Big Books” (18"x24"), which are great interactive tools that make it easy and fun to read to a group.

• Replenish the supply of books regularly.

• Add especially good donated books to the collection of read-aloud books.

• Create a volunteer readers’ book bag with selected titles and store it in a safe but accessible place.

• Encourage volunteers to bring in their own favorite books (as long as they meet the criteria for ROR books).

Create a Reading Area

While not every ROR program has the space, funds, or need for a designated reading area in a waiting room, here are suggestions for creating a comfortable area in which to read to children.

Make it easier for volunteers and children to enjoy reading together:

• Provide comfortable chairs for both the children and the adult reader.

• Have a child-size table and perhaps a colorful rug.

• Walls can be decorated with ROR posters or with images from children’s books.

• When the reader is present, turn off the TV set in the waiting area.

Ask for Feedback

• Have volunteers, staff, and parents complete an evaluation form periodically or contact them for feedback.
A Volunteer Handbook

A handbook for the volunteers at your site can serve many uses and can help your ROR program run smoothly. Many of the handouts mentioned on the website can be added to a handbook that you have specifically designed for volunteers at your site. A handbook should include:

- Information about Reach Out and Read’s literacy model.
- Information about the Reach Out and Read National Center.
- Any volunteer material required by your clinic.
- Descriptions of responsibilities and schedules.
- Contact information for the coordinator or other key people at the site.
- Suggested booklists, book guidelines, and read-aloud hints.
- Guidelines on HIPPA, patient privacy and waiting room conduct.

By reading aloud in the waiting room, you are showing parents how much children of all ages enjoy hearing a story read aloud, and how to do it in an engaging, exciting way—how to use different voices or gestures to enliven the stories, how to ask and answer questions or respond to children’s comments, and still keep the story going. But the most important reason you are reading aloud is so that the children can hear you read and discover how much fun it is to listen to a story. Here are some tips to help volunteer readers enjoy their time in the waiting room:

- Make a general announcement that you are about to start reading—or else start reading a story and see who comes to listen.
- Ask a child to choose the book to be read aloud.
- Invite parents with babies or shy children to look at books themselves or just listen to story from their seats rather than joining the group.
- Use different voices, make the sounds in the book (i.e., train sounds, moo like a cow, etc.)
- Use body language (i.e., pretend to play a musical instrument, wave goodbye, pretend to cry, etc.)
- Ask the children questions about the pictures (what is this, where are the red balloons, what do you think that monkey is trying to do, etc.)
- Make it clear that it’s fine with you if young children don’t listen to the entire story, if they leave the group to check back with a parent, or look at other books.
- Older children may want to help read the story.
- Volunteers are NOT teaching reading, but making books and reading fun.
- Be flexible and do what is most comfortable for you—enjoy yourself.
Frequently volunteer reading opportunities involve working with families who have a first language which is not English. Try to find volunteers who speak other languages by seeking volunteers from the community or among the parents.

- Ask children to name pictures in their own language and teach you the words and offer them the English equivalents.
- Offer a parent a book to look at with the child—they can talk about it in their own language.
- Children and their parents may enjoy the story even if their English is limited.

Try to keep the set of read-aloud books in the clinic: You can say “these books need to stay for other children to enjoy” and direct children to books they can take on the donated-book shelves.

Volunteers are very important because through them, in the print-rich and literacy-rich waiting room, children and parents get their first exposure to the ROR program, setting the stage for what will go on in the exam room and then at home.