

Reading for health

Doctors can promote patients' language skills, development through early literacy programs

by Greg McConnell
Correspondent

When a parent reads to a young child, the interaction and affection fosters the child's curiosity of learning and development of language skills. This can be critical to laying a foundation that enables the child to begin reading on his own, paving the way to a lifetime of learning.

There are certain aspects of reading development that can be thought of as the literacy equivalent of vaccinations, said Catherine Snow, Ph.D., Henry Lee Shattuck professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. "Those would be: loving parents, physical health, no organic problems like hearing loss or learning disabilities that would interfere, exposure to literacy in the home, seeing parents read, being read to and very importantly, conversation that would help support language development."

Pediatricians can play a pivotal role in promoting early literacy in a child's life because many parents do not realize the benefits of reading to their children in the years leading up to preschool.



Dr. Snow

Never too early to start

Barry Zuckerman, M.D., FAAP, and Robert Needlman, M.D., FAAP, co-founded the AAP-endorsed Reach Out and Read (ROR) program, which is one of several intervention programs designed to promote early literacy. In the pro-

Dr. Zuckerman

gram, parents receive developmentally appropriate advice and children get a book at each well-child visit from age 6 months to 5 years. A special emphasis is placed on helping low-income children. The books are new, carefully chosen and developmentally appropriate.

The program is not about teaching young children to read early, said Perri Klass, M.D., FAAP, ROR president and medical director. "This is about helping them to grow really motivated, loving books, associating books strongly with the pleasure of spending time with their parents."



Dr. Needlman

This year, the program will distribute more than 3.2 million free books to children, many who have no books in their homes.

The program has a positive effect on children's language development and parents' attitudes toward reading aloud. One study showed that parents in a ROR-based program were 4.7 times more likely to list reading aloud among their favorite activities or to read to their children three or more times a week (High P, et al. *Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med.* 1998; 152:459-465). Another study compared two similar urban clinics, one with a ROR program and one without. Children at the ROR clinic had higher scores on standardized vocabulary tests — 8.6 points higher for receptive language and 4.3 points higher for expressive lan-



Early literacy programs can stimulate children's love of books, according to Perri Klass, M.D., FAAP, pictured here with a young reader.

guage (Mendelsohn A, et al. *Pediatrics.* 2001;107:130-134). Parents should be encouraged to start reading to their children in the first few weeks of life, said Pamela C. High, M.D., M.S., FAAP, professor of pediatrics at Brown Medical School, and director of developmental behavioral pediatrics at Hasbro Children's Hospital, Providence, R.I.

"I think when (reading) becomes part of the routine that the parent and the child do together early on, it just becomes a smooth, enjoyable routine for both," she said.

Helping low-income and illiterate families

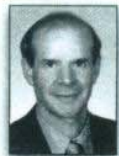
Low-income families are the least likely to have children's books. A child who is in the ROR program will receive 10 new books (one every six months).

"We've done studies in some low-income homes, in particular in immigrant families where there might not be 10 books in the whole house — if you can imagine that," said Dr. High.

Pediatricians should emphasize to illiterate parents that it is important to encourage their children to love reading, even if they cannot read to their children.

An illiterate parent can still look at a book with a child, discussing the pictures, making up the story, and pretending to read. At early enough ages, the child won't realize that the parent cannot read and will still get the benefits of improved language skills and love of books.

"There's no documentation or proof that parental illiteracy contributes to child illiteracy," said Peter A. Gorski, M.D., M.P.A., FAAP, professor of public health and pediatric psychiatry at the University of South Florida, and member of the AAP Bright Futures Early Childhood Expert Panel.



Dr. Gorski

Multiple languages

Being raised by parents for whom English is a second language poses its own issues.

"For bilingual families, I would suggest (pediatricians) talk to the families about what they want their kids to end up as," said Dr. Snow. If they want them to be bilingual, they need to invest in maintaining the home language.

"It's really important for parents who are primarily fluent in a language other than English to read to their children in the language that they're fluent

States get involved in early childhood literacy programs

More children will be touched by the early literacy program Reach Out and Read (ROR) thanks to a recent \$10 million federal grant, up from the \$4 million it had received annually for the past few years.

By the end of FY 2006, ROR hopes to add another 1,200 sites to the 2,400 that currently participate, said Marsha Gershun, ROR's director of national expansion.

Although ROR is in all 50 states, Guam and Puerto Rico, the Academy's supporting role for the program varies from state to state. In some states, the Academy is the fiscal agent for ROR. This means that as the ROR program's 501 (c)(3) in that state, the AAP chapter acts as the housing organization (e.g., providing office space, underwriting salaries, helping raise money).

Goldsboro Pediatrics in North Carolina has used ROR since June 2003. With 11,000 well-child visits in the 0 to 5 age group, it gives out \$40,000 worth of books per year, said Valerie Bailey, nurse practitioner and ROR development program coordinator for Goldsboro Pediatrics. Less than 10% of their ROR budget is funded by the federal government, so much of their fundraising is from corporations, foundations and in-kind gifts.



In states and cities that have formed ROR coalitions, the fundraising, book ordering and quality control have been centralized. There are 20 such coalitions as well as individual sites. For contact information by coalition or state, visit www.reachoutandread.org/about_find.html.

Other programs have used Reach Out and Read (ROR) as a model for their own literacy programs. One example, "Turn a Page. Touch a Mind." in Kansas, was started in 2003 with the goal to reach every child in the state.

In order to accomplish its goal, the AAP Kansas Chapter has to reach private practitioners, many of whom would not be eligible to receive federal funding for ROR because they do not see enough low-income children to qualify. So a major component of "Turn a Page. Touch a Mind." is its statewide advertising campaign aimed at raising funds for pediatricians to operate the program throughout Kansas.

The chapter is promoting a campaign to establish an endowment "that will run this program forever," said Chris Steege, executive director of the AAP Kansas Chapter.

For details, visit www.aapkans.org/EarlyLiteracy.htm.

—Greg McConnell



Dr. High



in because the main benefit for young children of reading aloud, besides the loving and the hugging and all that, is language stimulation," said Dr. Needleman. "And language stimulation is really only effective if the person who's doing the stimulating is fluent in the language."

Increased availability of ethnically diverse books given to patients can help raise children's self-esteem by having role models with whom they can identify.

A 2003 AAP Community Pediatrics Training Initiative resident project "Increasing Ethnic Diversity in Books Given to Patients" by Malaka B. Jackson, M.D., found that many of the books given out in various literacy programs did not represent the ethnic diversity of the patient population that received them.



Dr. Jackson

"I thought it would be advantageous if we would increase the diversity of the types of books that we would provide," said Dr. Jackson. "And it was actually very challenging trying to find those books because we wanted to make sure that there were no stereotypic portrayals of any of the characters."

Along with a growing demand for culturally diverse reading materials, there's a demand for more languages in early literacy programs.

"We have a very good selection of books available in both Spanish and also Spanish and English on the same page," said Dr. Needleman. Books also are available in other languages, including Arabic, Russian, Korean, Cambodian and French.

The ROR program also serves children with special needs by providing Braille books for blind children and board books with age-appropriate content for older children with motor delays who have

trouble turning paper pages.

To sign up for Reach Out and Read, visit www.reachoutandread.org. Start-up funding is available so that the costs of the program are covered for the first six months. Beyond that, funding for the program can be found through nearby Reach Out and Read coalitions.

Books for hurricane evacuees

Reach Out and Read (ROR) established a Disaster Relief Book Account to provide books for families with young children who were displaced by the hurricanes. ROR also will replace books destroyed in the storm.

Medical providers who need books for patients can e-mail: growth@reachoutandread.org. New materials related to the hurricane are available online at www.reachoutandread.org/hurricane/hurricane.pdf.