

# Kansas City Star

## GIVING KIDS A BOOST WITH BOOKS

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Anthony Meyer walked into the lobby of a Children's Mercy pediatric clinic toting a little black bag. While waiting to see a doctor at the Children's Mercy Clinics on Broadway, 5-year-old Evelyen Edmunds was captivated by the book "Ferdinand," being read to her by Anthony Meyer, a volunteer reader for Reach Out and Read Kansas City.

He was there to help kids, give them what physicians and child experts know they desperately need. On a recent Wednesday, he wasted no time. Within a few seconds, he'd walked up to a little girl sitting with her mom.

"How are you today?" he said. "Want to listen to a story?"

Meyer pulled out "The Cat in the Hat," his go-to book. His eyes widened and his voice came alive as he began to tell 5-year-old Evelyen Edmunds the story of a brother and sister whose mom went out for the day.

Meyer's goal, as with other volunteers for Reach Out and Read Kansas City, is to introduce young children to reading. Reach them early, as early as their wellness checkups when they're babies, so by the time they reach kindergarten, they're more ready to learn. They'll know their colors, letters and numbers. They'll know the importance of books.

Reach Out and Read is one of many Kansas City area agencies aiming to provide better opportunities and services for children — and providing ways for people to take Sister Berta's Challenge.

After the Newtown, Conn., school shootings, Sister Berta Sailer, co-founder of the Operation Breakthrough early childhood center, threw down a challenge to Kansas City families: Do something for children here.

This year, The Star is writing about people stepping up to help kids.

With the help of volunteers and physicians trained in the reading program, Reach Out and Read tries to reach families whose young children may not be exposed to books.

Not only do volunteers read in the lobby, but physicians and pediatricians prescribe reading at the end of checkups and give kids a new book for their home library.

William Pankey, a physician who recently saw 9-month-old Briana at Turner House Children's Clinic in Kansas City, Kan., handed the girl a book of baby faces as he suggested to her parents that each of them spend time reading to her. As he talked, Briana grabbed the book and tried to turn the pages.

"As you can see, she's automatically interested," Pankey told the parents. "We want to encourage that interest."

A survey by The Star last year found that area school districts estimate on average that more than a third of their incoming kindergartners lacked the skills expected for a beginning student. That number rose to more than 50 percent in districts where most students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

Meyer reads once a week, on his lunch break from his job as a designer for a civil engineering firm. In years past, when he read in a clinic closer to his work, he'd volunteer up to three times a week.

On this day, Meyer made Evelyen laugh and feel suspense in a Dr. Seuss book she's probably heard a time or two. He prodded her to answer the big question at the end, "What would you do?"

Then, as he closed that favorite, he went for his bag again.

"Want to listen to another one?"



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Krista Nelson-Cox remembers the day when she realized how far behind some kids are falling. The pediatrician at Baby and Child Associates in Kansas City was giving a checkup to a young boy about to start school. She asked a few questions.

What color is this? Can you count to five? How about this color?

He couldn't come up with the answers.

"It breaks my heart. ... They literally didn't know any colors, their letters," Nelson-Cox said. "And their parents didn't have any recognition that there was a problem."

A pediatrician who strongly believes in Reach Out and Read, Nelson-Cox said she knows full well the importance of the books she hands out. "If you start in kindergarten behind, you're never going to catch up," she said.

As Nelson-Cox talked, volunteer Mollie Caldwell — known to the kids as Miss Mollie — sat with toddler John Dorsey.

Caldwell, a longtime Reach Out and Read volunteer and a retired librarian and teacher, loves to read to children. "Just ask my grandchildren."

Miss Mollie lured 1-year-old John with books, fanning out "Chicka, Chicka Boom, Boom," "Goodnight Moon" and "Where the Wild Things Are." His eyes and tiny hands went toward the first one.

"It's got some letters," Miss Mollie, of Prairie Village, told him as she picked up the book. "A, B, C ... Chicka, Chicka, Boom, Boom."

John's mom, Latisha Price, sat nearby watching her son, still in his Cookie Monster slippers. At home, she said, he sings the ABC song and constantly "reads" books with his older siblings.

"When you're reading to him, he tends to repeat what you're saying," Price said. "He'll read it to you."

According to Reach Out and Read, 84 percent of local parents surveyed last year reported reading to their children three or more times per week after receiving a book and advice from their medical providers.

Nationally, children served by the literacy program during their preschool years score three to six months ahead of their non-Reach Out and Read peers on vocabulary tests.

Medical staffers are seeing more parents buy into the program.

"We know that children's books are treats in their homes," said M. Elena Leal, a nurse and clinic manager at Turner House. "They set up special places in their homes for them."

Children who begin with the program as infants and stay through their wellness checkup before kindergarten get as many as 13 new books to start their own library.

"Many of their families are struggling to make ends meet, and they don't get many new things," said Megan Sturges, executive director of Reach Out and Read Kansas City. "They go to thrift stores, many garage sales. And now they get something that's new, something that's just for them."

After years of seeing families through the literacy program, Nelson-Cox now gets different answers to some of her questions. Not just from the kids.

"I used to hear parents say, 'No, we don't read. We don't have books at home,'" Nelson-Cox said. "Now kids are coming in expecting a book."

Meyer wanted a chance to help. Once his three kids reached a certain age, and were involved with school and other activities, he thought back to all the adults who'd helped him when he was a kid. "I wanted to do the same thing," he said. "I thought, 'I got to go out and try to do something for somebody.'"

He looked into volunteer opportunities. Married to an educator, and being a dad who always loved that time reading to his kids, he latched onto Reach Out and Read a decade ago.

He tries to show kids that reading is fun. He also tries to show parents that the more animated and interactive the adult reader, the more a child stays interested. So he raises his voice, whispers, makes a face or two.

He always reaches out and shakes a child's hand at the point in "The Cat in the Hat" when Thing One and Thing Two shake hands with the brother and sister. He doesn't hesitate to throw a question the child's way, as he did when Thing One and Thing Two fly a kite inside.

"Would you ever fly a kite in the house?" Meyer asked Evelyen, who giggled and shook her head.

As they neared the end of a second book, a nurse's voice rang out.

"Edmunds?"

"Is that you?" Meyer asked.

"Yep," Evelyen said, looking at the book as if sorry to have to miss the rest.

Meyer loaded up his black bag and moved on to the other side of the lobby. There, a little boy waited for the doctor.

Though the boy was a little shy, Meyer knew how to break through that. He smiled wider and leaned down closer to the boy's height.

"Want to listen to a story?"

