

The Good Habit of Reading (*El Buen Habito de la Lectura*): Parental Reactions to an Enhanced Reach Out and Read Program in a Clinic for the Underserved

Carrie L. Byington, MD

Wendy L. Hobson, MD

Lenora Olson, PhD

Gloria Torres-Nielsen

Kimberly Winter

Karen A. Ortiz, MD

Karen F. Buchi, MD

Summary: This report describes parental reactions to a Reach Out and Read (ROR) program enhanced with a children's library in an urban clinic serving low-income immigrant families.

Key words: Literacy, cross-cultural health, Reach Out and Read.

Reach Out and Read (ROR) supports the promotion of early childhood literacy by health care providers.¹ In the U.S., there are more than 3,000 practices that follow the ROR model.¹ The program improves literacy orientation, book-sharing, and receptive and expressive language development.²⁻⁷

Children from immigrant families, especially those who identify as Hispanic or Latino, are at high-risk for poor reading skills and subsequent school failure.⁸ The ROR model of providing books and advice to Hispanic families has been associated with more frequent book-sharing and daily reading, as measured by physician-created surveys.^{4,6} However, information about cross-cultural issues, specifically how minority parents perceive the ROR program and how they incorporate the advice and books into their lives is limited.

We recognized an opportunity to study parental reactions to a ROR program in Utah when parents began to write spontaneous notes thanking our staff for the program. These notes convey, in the parents' own words, what they value about the ROR intervention. Qualitative methodology is suited to describing how social experiences

CARRIE BYINGTON is Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, UT and can be reached at Department of Pediatrics, 30 North 1900 East, Salt Lake City, UT 84132; (801) 585-2372; Carrie.Byington@hsc.utah.edu. *KAREN A. ORTIZ* is with the Arroyo Chamiso Pediatric Center, Santa Fe, New Mexico. All other authors are affiliated with the Department of Pediatrics, University of Utah.

are given meaning, particularly for individuals who are marginalized or oppressed,^{9,10} so we used qualitative methods to study 133 notes submitted between 2003–2004. The major question we asked was: What is of value to families participating in a ROR intervention in an urban pediatric clinic serving low-income, Spanish-speaking immigrants? The work was reviewed and classified as exempt by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Utah.

Location and identification of participants. The work described here took place in a primary care clinic for underserved women and children in Salt Lake County. The pediatric clinic is staffed by four academic generalists and is a continuity clinic site for the University of Utah pediatric residents. The majority of attending and resident physicians are bilingual in English and Spanish, but all are native speakers of English.

Over 80% of the children served at the clinic are from families whose origin is Mexico and who primarily speak Spanish. A previous study established that 57% of our Hispanic/Latino parents had less than a high school education and average annual household incomes of about \$14,000.¹¹ Approximately 75% of the children are enrolled in Medicaid and 25% are uninsured.

The clinic has been a ROR practice since 1998, and documented 3,598 ROR visits in 2004. Our program incorporates several cultural adaptations. For Spanish-speaking families, all literacy interventions are initially offered in Spanish, with bilingual books introduced subsequently. This supports parents' desire to maintain ties with their native language; a strong foundation in the native language also helps with the acquisition of English as a second language.¹² The physicians instruct parents to look at books rather than to read books with their children. This subtle difference allows parents with low literacy to feel comfortable with the intervention. The physician instructs parents on how to use the pictures in the book pointing out objects, colors, and actions (*dialogic reading*).¹³ Finally, in 1998, we opened a children's library, staffed by a bilingual librarian, to address the barriers to public library use that we noticed in practice, including the assumptions that: 1) libraries are not for children, 2) public libraries are not free, and 3) U.S. citizenship is required to use the library.¹¹ Our library is open every day and contains 3,000–5,000 children's books. A child may take a book to keep each time he or she visits. The library is the focal point for literacy activities such as monthly story-time and is a source of public library cards and literacy resources. Each month 400–500 books are taken from the library.

Themes contained in the thank you notes. *Theme 1.* Almost all letters thanked the program for giving children books. Comments such as, "Thank you for these books, each one means so much to me and to my family" and "Thank you for the books you have here. The best thing is that my children can read them at home," were found in the notes.

Parents recognized the opportunities the ROR program provided for their children and families. They were grateful for the opportunity to own books. One parent wrote, "Every book you give our children is a treasure for them," while another parent wrote "Thank you for the opportunity for our children to own their own books."

Several parents commented that they appreciated the bilingual books available in the clinic. A Spanish-speaking mother wrote, "Thank you for having books that help us to learn English." Participants emphasized the importance of bilingual materials for

learning English. One person described her feelings this way: “. . . Thank you for the opportunity you give Latinos to learn to read and speak English. Thank you for the books that are simple to understand. I can assure that these books are of vital importance for us as Latinos and they form a fundamental base for the growth of our children.” Another parent wrote, “Thank you for the opportunity to come together, learn, and enjoy reading in English and Spanish.”

Families appreciated the books and activities offered in the library. Many parents noted that they had used the clinic library for years and that they would visit the library without a medical appointment. Some comments specific to the library include: “Thank you for this marvelous island where our children are inspired to become readers” and “Thank you for letting us share these moments in the library. Our girls like to come and choose a book and share with us what it contains on each page.” One mother wrote: “My girls benefit very much from this program and they love to read. They do not miss an opportunity, we visit the library every time we come to the clinic.”

Families appreciated the literacy advice given by physicians and staff. For many, the advice was new. For example, one immigrant father wrote: “When we came to this country we experienced many radical changes, but one of the biggest changes was the advice to constantly work to read with our children . . .” Several fathers commented that the advice they received from the ROR program was important to them as heads of households and helped them understand the importance of supporting reading. One father wrote of his wife, “My wife is now dedicated to always taking time to read with the children.” Another father stated: “Your actions have motivated me as father of the family to learn new methods to teach my children.”

Theme 2: Benefits to children and the family. Parents believed the ROR program promoted the good habit of reading, or “*el buen habito de la lectura*.” One mother noted, “This program helps so many children and encourages them to read and write.” Parents attributed developmental gains by their children to the ROR program. One father commented, “It is incredible the development of imagination that has resulted from the good habit of reading.” One mother stated, “Every time my daughter comes to the library, I can see she is more interested in looking at the books.”

Another benefit parents reported was that the ROR program was motivation for children to come to the clinic. One mother commented, “The reading program motivates my child to come to the clinic because she knows that we will pass by the library, she will get a book, and we will pass a good moment there.” Another mother wrote, “My son loves the library. It is a good incentive to come to the clinic.”

Theme 3: Positive perceptions of the clinic staff. Parents reported that the presence of the ROR program in the clinic demonstrated “special attention to children” and “respect for the family.” Parents described the program as “marvelous,” “fabulous,” “stupendous,” and “incredible.” One parent wrote of the ROR physicians: “Thank you for your dedication to our children and your professionalism.” In addition to thanks, the notes frequently included comments requesting God’s blessing for the physicians and the staff. One note contained the following blessing: “God bless you for helping children who need to learn to read and write.” Other comments recognized the work involved in keeping a ROR program going, and gave encouragement to continue. One father wrote: “I was a teacher in my country; that is why I understand the importance

of these programs and how much effort and investment are required to succeed. Keep on doing such a great effort. Congratulations.”

Discussion

This report describes the spontaneous reactions of low-income immigrant families to a ROR program. The availability of thank you notes in our setting allowed us to examine what parents valued about the program.

Literacy promotion may improve physician-family relationships in cross-cultural settings. Parents perceived the physicians and staff of the clinic as particularly interested in and dedicated to the welfare of their children because of the ROR program. Parents stated the ROR program demonstrated respect for the family. These are important qualities in establishing a trusting relationship between physician and family, and suggest an area for research as physicians are asked to develop skills in cultural competence and to partner with families in a medical home setting.¹⁴

Decreased educational attainment places children at risk for poverty and poor health. Hispanic/Latino children have the lowest high school graduation rates in the U.S.,¹⁵ have parents with lower literacy levels than average White or Black Americans,¹⁶ and are less likely to be read to by family members.¹⁷ Innovative strategies are urgently needed to address these disparities, but must be conducted in a way that respects cultural values. The notes provided by our families indicate that the enhanced ROR program offered in our clinic was valuable and culturally acceptable.

In Salt Lake City, a survey of teachers from low-income schools found that the most common deficits in children entering kindergarten related to literacy.¹⁸ Teachers stressed that children needed more exposure to books and that the families needed more direction in how to prepare children for school.¹⁸ The ROR program directly addresses both issues and the positive perceptions families reported suggest the program has the potential to improve school readiness.

Respeto, or respect, is considered a normative cultural value for Latinos and is critical for establishing effective physician-patient relationships.¹⁹ Our report suggests that Spanish-speaking families receiving pediatric care from native English-speaking physicians perceived the presence of the ROR program in the clinic as a sign of respect for the family. The availability of Spanish-language and bilingual reading materials and bilingual storytime may have contributed to the families' perception that physicians respected their culture. We believe that the positive feelings engendered by the ROR program may influence families' willingness to accept advice on other subjects, strengthening the patient-clinician interaction. As one mother commented, "*Gracias por este programa y por su dedicación hacia cada uno de nuestros hijos. De estos niños depende el futuro de nuestros países y del mundo.*" [Thank you for this program and your dedication to all of our children. On these children depends the future for both of our countries and the world.]

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Notes

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