

BRIGHT SPOTS

Ready for School, Prepared to Learn



Reach Out and Read, Boston, MA

In 1996, a pediatrician at Bellevue Hospital Center in Manhattan handed a bilingual board book to Claudia Aristy during her son's 6-month checkup. A recent immigrant from the Dominican Republic, Aristy already was a reader, but she didn't know English or American culture.

"I remember asking, 'How much is the book?'" says Aristy, now assistant director of the same Reach Out and Read program at Bellevue that was behind her first encounter. The pediatrician assured her that the book was free, and that her son Alejandro would receive a new book at every regular checkup.

Founded in 1989, Reach Out and Read partners with pediatricians and other medical care providers to "immunize" children against illiteracy by providing them with books and encouraging parents to read to their young children. Even for Aristy, the reader, the program was a revelation. "I didn't know there were baby books in Spanish," she says. "I discovered the world of children's books for the first time."

Aristy used Reach Out and Read books to gain clues about what other books were appropriate for her son. "I would bring the book to the librarian and say, 'Can you help me find books like this?'" Reading together before bed became a special time that would help Alejandro enter school ready to learn.

Books, tips and encouragement

Pediatricians Barry Zuckerman and Robert Needlman, along with early childhood educators Jean Nigro and Kathleen Fitzgerald-Rice, introduced the first Reach Out and Read program at Boston City Hospital (now Boston Medical Center). "Their vision was to make literacy a standing part of their pediatric practice," says Earl Martin Phalen, Reach Out and Read's CEO.

WHO THEY ARE

Reach Out and Read:

- Reaches 3.9 million children, age 6 months to 5 years, annually.
- Operates in 4,600 centers in 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and at 47 U.S. military bases.
- Engages 27,000 volunteer medical care providers.
- Distributes 7.1 million books annually.

\$100 cost per child for five-year participation in the program.

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The program spread, thanks to the founders' advocacy, and eventually became a part of pediatric residency programs throughout the United States. In 1998, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) endorsed the Reach Out and Read model. In 2004, AAP made it part of its Bright Futures guidelines for pediatric health care providers.

Through a network of 27,000 medical providers, the program now serves 3.9 million children, ages 6 months through 5 years old. In exam rooms, pediatricians and nurses in the program speak with parents about the importance of reading aloud to their children every day, and offer tips and encouragement. In waiting rooms, displays, information and books create a literacy-rich environment. In some cases, volunteer readers entertain the children, modeling for parents the pleasures — and techniques — of reading aloud.

Fourteen peer-reviewed studies confirm that children served by Reach Out and Read enter kindergarten with larger vocabularies, stronger language skills and a six-month developmental edge.

Looking to a strong future

In April 2011, Reach Out and Read, which was classified as a national program “earmark,” lost the federal funding that supported 50 percent of its budget. Prior to the federal cuts, philanthropy accounted for another quarter of the budget, and in-kind donations from Scholastic and 30 other book-publisher partners supplied the balance.

Reach Out and Read is now strengthening the fundraising and development capabilities of its regional offices, seeking more temporary support from book publishers to help bridge the gap for a year, and ramping up its national fundraising. “These three pieces will help us stay strong,” says Phalen.

Meantime, a new online training platform for health care providers is contributing to more consistent program quality and greater operational efficiency. In addition, pediatricians are now required to go through training for a hospital or health center to be an official Reach Out and Read site.

The program has set itself a goal of serving 10 million children, nearly all of them in the U.S., who live in poverty. Getting there will require a corps of 40,000 volunteer medical-care providers at 10,000 sites, up from the current 4,600 hospitals and health centers. Reach Out and Read's expansion to 100 U.S. military bases, as a part of First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden's Joining Forces initiative, will help advance that goal as well as reach other children.

Co-founder Needlman looks forward to the day when the distribution of picture books to support a child's development takes place in every well-child visit. “Eventually, I hope it becomes part of standard care.”

WHAT THEY ACHIEVE

Parents:

- **Read more frequently to their children.**
Source: [Mendelsohn, 2001](#)
- **Increase weekly bedtime reading with their children.***
- **More frequently report reading as their own or their child's favorite activity.***

**Source: [Silverstein, 2002](#)*

Children:

- **Score higher on receptive and expressive language tests.**
Source: [Mendelsohn, 2001](#)
- **Experience a “Dose Effect”:**
The more Reach Out and Read, the higher their language scores.

Source: [Theriot, 2003](#)

HIGHLIGHTS

Reach Out and Read pediatricians and nurses:

- **Give a new, developmentally appropriate book to every child at every well-baby visit.**
- **Speak with parents about the importance of reading aloud to children every day.**
- **Offer age-appropriate tips.**

Volunteer readers entertain children and model reading aloud for parents at some centers.

31 publishers provide books in 13 different languages at deeply discounted rates.

Leyendo Juntos (Reading Together) supports Spanish-speaking families.