

## VIEWPOINT

## Creating Practical Primary Care Supports for Parent-Child Relationships—Language, Literacy, and Love

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**Young children** learn and develop primarily through contingent interactions and strong foundational relationships; this is true of language and, more generally, cognitive and socioemotional development. Separate domains have great utility for screening, assessment, and referral, since isolated delays can point to specific diagnoses and therapies. In other respects it is difficult (and sometimes artificial) to separate cognitive from socioemotional, given the complex overlays of cause and effect and the essential role that interactions and language play throughout. Healthy mental, emotional, and behavioral development in young children reflects—and requires—secure attachment and stable foundational relationships with adult caregivers, including the emotional responsiveness and positive parenting behaviors that also result in the kinds of positive language-rich interactions that stimulate language and cognitive development. Now, with the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic stressing families, strategies to strengthen and support those relationships and behaviors on a population scale are critical.

Boat and Kelleher<sup>1</sup> argue eloquently for the unique advantages of pediatric primary care for promoting healthy mental, emotional, and behavioral development by providing anticipatory guidance, screening for social determinants, and coordinating care across 2 generations, given the vital importance of family and parental well-being. They cite Reach Out and Read (ROR) for successful promotion of school readiness and widespread successful implementation, with fidelity to an evidence base as “an example of population-based efforts.” We are honored and write to expand on the existing and future potential of this already-established network of pediatric primary care clinicians and on shared reading as an intervention to promote positive parenting and healthy mental, emotional, and behavioral development.

In the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic, families are facing extraordinarily high levels of economic and emotional stress, bringing even more urgency to work already the focus of much thought and attention, including the report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.<sup>2</sup> The Pediatrics Supporting Parents initiative is a “big bet” initiative aimed at realizing the extraordinary promise of children’s primary care as a near-universal, nonstigmatized, highly skilled, and well-respected point of contact for parents to receive reassurance, modeling, coaching, and guidance, specifically around supporting socioemotional development, incorporated into health supervision visits. The Center for the Study of Social Policy surveyed parenting support programs and deeply analyzed 13 exemplar programs (including ROR), identifying 3 categories

of actions: nurturing parents’ competence and confidence, connecting families to additional supports to promote healthy development and address stressors, and enhancing the care team and the clinic.<sup>3</sup> While primary care operates in these domains, more can be done, so via a multipronged approach, Pediatrics Supporting Parents aims to articulate what drives evidence-based, successful, scalable programs while—critically—also considering what can be done through health care financing to allow these initiatives to be well implemented. The Center for the Study of Social Policy has developed a strategy for funding change through Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program, while the National Institute for Children’s Health Quality has developed strategies for practice improvement<sup>4</sup>—with further work to come from Pediatrics Supporting Parents.

Moving forward when so many families are vulnerable, interventions supporting parental involvement to promote cognitive development are by definition also supporting parent efficacy and healthy mental, behavioral, and social development. The ROR network serves 4.5 million children annually, through 33 000 trained pediatric primary care clinicians. As an early literacy intervention for children from birth, our primary strategy is promoting strong positive relationships between young children and their parents and caregivers and encouraging shared reading and language-rich interactions as expressions of parental love that nurture children’s development. Through offering anticipatory guidance, modeling dialogic reading in the examination room, and providing developmentally and culturally appropriate books to families, early literacy promotion in primary care, as recommended by American Academy of Pediatrics policy,<sup>5</sup> supports language-rich routines. In addition to the clear benefits to the child, parents benefit from shared reading as an in-the-moment stress reducer, making this a 2-generation, bidirectional intervention. Such reading-based routines can serve as positive childhood experiences, as buffers against adverse childhood experiences, and as sources of resiliency.<sup>6</sup> In addition, they provide the enriched vocabulary and syntax exposure, alphabetic and phonemic awareness, introduction to the mechanics of books and stories, and language practice linked to school readiness. This happens through adult-child interactions, which foster attachment and security and have been linked to improved behavioral outcomes in young children.

We suggest that literacy promotion is both an example of a scaled intervention and also a practical platform for fostering, supporting, and enhancing those relationships in primary care settings, with potential for enhanced collaborations and extensions that can build on this already established network of clinicians, with an

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infrastructure to train and support them and promote community collaborations.<sup>7</sup> Reading aloud and playing have been shown to reduce behavior problems in children growing up in families with social risks,<sup>8</sup> and shared reading can play a critical role in cognitive and socioemotional development. We should learn how best to use it to enhance parent self-efficacy and mental health as well, as a vital 2-generation approach. The incorporation of books into primary care also offers opportunities for strengthening bonds between parents and primary care sites (the clinic as a whole and the clinician) and for enhancing and structuring the skilled, intentional, and direct observation of parent-child interactions and child development in the examination room.<sup>9,10</sup> Boat and Kelleher<sup>1</sup> point to potential within primary care to identify and refer parents who need additional support around parenting skills and to provide mental health services and counseling to parents by colocating these services in clinics delivering primary care to children. Strategic partnerships among the programs delivering services to families identified as at additional risk could create a more unified approach and build on the network and training strategies developed by

ROR—which have proved practical, inexpensive, and appealing to pediatric primary care clinicians, to the point that even busy clinics have willingly taken on the task of application, training, and implementation.

To promote reading aloud to young children, clinicians should model strategies in the examination room for dialogue building on the words and pictures in a book, encourage regular routines with language and stories, and support the relationships essential for early childhood brain development, from language and early literacy skills to socioemotional development and behavior. Framing reading aloud and book sharing as a way parents show love to their children speaks to the science of reading aloud to children and to the emotional and relational benefits that scaffold parent identity and self-efficacy. Through literacy promotion, primary care reinforces the value of expansive positive language, lap time, and contingent interactions. Through strategic partnerships, screening and referral, and direct services for parents and children at increased risk, pediatric primary care can build on the already welcome presence of books and stories in the clinic to enhance the life stories of children and families.

#### ARTICLE INFORMATION

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