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NEW *PEDIATRICS* ARTICLE EXPLORES HOW REACH OUT AND READ IS CHANGING PEDIATRIC CARE

Journal article examines how a simple intervention has evolved to support child development, family relationships, and more responsive pediatric care

BOSTON (Nov. 9, 2026) – What began as a simple idea — putting children's books into pediatric well-child care — has helped reshape how clinicians support young children and their families. A new article in Pediatrics, the peer-reviewed journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics, traces the 37-year evolution of Reach Out and Read, examining how research has expanded our understanding of the role books and shared reading can play in children's development, caregiver-child relationships, and pediatric care.

The article, "Literacy Promotion and Child Health: The Role of Reach Out and Read," brings together perspectives from pediatric researchers, clinicians, parent leaders, and Reach Out and Read co-founder Dr. Robert Needlman. Drawing on decades of research and clinical experience, the authors examine how an intervention originally designed to address disparities in early literacy has evolved into a nationally recognized approach to supporting child development, strengthening family relationships, and enriching pediatric care.

The research highlights an important distinction: The greatest benefits come not simply from putting books into children's hands, but from helping families understand how to use them to support early development. Studies examining the Reach Out and Read model found that combining books with guidance from pediatricians and hands-on demonstrations of shared reading was associated with the strongest improvements in families' reading environments at home. The findings underscore that Reach Out and Read is more than a book giveaway: The interaction between the clinician, caregiver, and child is central to the model.

"When we started Reach Out and Read, we believed pediatricians could help break the cycle of educational disadvantage by encouraging families to read aloud together. What we didn't fully appreciate was how much more a book could do," said Dr. Needlman, Professor Emeritus of Pediatrics at Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine. "We saw the pride and hope parents felt when their children responded to books, and clinicians began having conversations with families they'd never had before. We've learned that books do more than build literacy. They strengthen relationships between parents and children and build the trust between families and clinicians that makes this work possible."

As Dr. Needlman writes in the article, "Relationships, in turn, power the intervention: parents who feel uncomfortable with reading aloud may still be willing to give it a try, because the

books arrive, not in the mail, but wrapped in a trusted relationship along with encouragement and personal hands-on guidance."

First developed at Boston City Hospital in 1989, Reach Out and Read was built on the understanding that learning begins long before a child enters a classroom and that pediatricians have a unique opportunity to reach families during the earliest years of development. Today, the program reaches 4.8 million children and families annually through nearly 6,800 clinical sites nationwide, with more than 41,000 pediatricians and other clinicians incorporating developmentally appropriate books, guidance for caregivers and demonstrations of shared reading into routine well-child visits beginning at birth.

The article also examines how Reach Out and Read has evolved alongside growing scientific understanding of early brain development, toxic stress, and the protective role of nurturing relationships.

"One of our responsibilities in pediatric care is helping parents and caregivers understand just how much is happening during those incredibly important early years of life, and the essential role they play in their child's development," said Perri Klass, MD, FAAP, National Medical Director at Reach Out and Read and co-author of the article. "When you give a young child a book, you're investing in that child's developing brain. When you model reading and talk with families about the power of their voices, you're reinforcing the vital role parents and caregivers play in their child's development and the strength of the bond they share."

The article also highlights emerging research to measure how families experience relationships with clinicians, creating opportunities for more meaningful conversations and responsive, family-centered care. This growing focus on the importance of trust and communication has led to new efforts to better understand how families experience pediatric visits, including research developed in partnership with parents and caregivers. The findings could help shape a broader understanding of quality pediatric care, recognizing that how families feel heard, supported, and engaged can be just as important as the medical guidance they receive.

"For too long, we've treated children's health, early learning, and family relationships as separate priorities, when we know they're deeply connected," said Lynette M. Fraga, Ph.D., CEO of Reach Out and Read. "Reach Out and Read gives clinicians a practical way to bring them together during a routine visit. This article shows both how far we've come and why we need to make this kind of care available to every child and family."

With approximately 70 implementation and outcome studies documented in its Early Literacy Research Library and recognition in the American Academy of Pediatrics' 2024 literacy promotion policy statement, Reach Out and Read has a substantial evidence base. The article also identifies the work ahead: strengthening clinician training, ensuring consistent implementation, developing better ways to measure relationships, and securing sustainable funding to make the model available to more families.

The full article, including a video abstract, is available in Pediatrics at https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/doi/10.1542/peds.2026-077966/211247/Literacy-Promotion-and-Child-Health-The-Role-of.

To learn more about Reach Out and Read visit ReachOutandRead.org.

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About Reach Out and Read: As a 501(c)3 nonprofit, Reach Out and Read leverages the near-universal reach of the pediatric well-child visit to support caregivers in fostering healthy relationships with their young children through shared reading. In FY25, Reach Out and Read served more than 4.8 million children and provided 9 million free books across 11.2 million well-child visits. Around 70 percent of the children Reach Out and Read serves are from low-income families. The only national pediatric literacy model endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics, Reach Out and Read serves children in every state across the U.S.