

Libraries and Pediatricians Team Up to Improve Literacy *and* Health for Delaware’s Children

Jennifer Noonan, MLIS¹ and Stacey Garfield Fox, MD, FAAP

1. Children’s Librarian, Lewes Public Library; Board Member, Cape Henlopen Educational Foundation

There are millions of children in the United States who have no books of their own at home. In fact, in some low-income neighborhoods, access to books is astoundingly meager, with just one book available for every 300 children.¹ Pediatricians and librarians know that early literacy and healthy brain development are closely connected, and see the lack of access to books for young children as the crisis it is. That’s why in Delaware, libraries and pediatricians are working with policy makers and hospitals to get more books into the hands of every child in the state – and as early as possible.

Book Distribution Programs in Delaware

Over the last several decades, several book distribution programs have sprung up at the national and international level with the aim to improve book access and positively impact early literacy. Two of the most recognizable are in Delaware: Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library and Reach Out and Read.

Dolly Parton launched the Imagination Library in her home county of Sevier County, TN in 1995, and it has since grown to be an international effort, mailing more than 1 million books a month out to children in the U.S., U.K., Canada, Australia, and Ireland.² Children, if enrolled in the Imagination Library at birth, amass a 60 book library by the time they “graduate” from the program at the age of five – at no cost to their families. In 2003, after expanding the original program from Sevier County to the full State of Tennessee, the Dollywood Foundation created a model that allowed local organizations to replicate the program in their own communities by becoming Local Champions. That’s just what Marie Cunningham, of Delaware Division of Libraries, and Friends of Harrington Library did in 2012, to bring the program to the Harrington School District, in Kent County, DE. In 2018, the Lewes Public Library followed suit, and became the Local Champion for the Cape Henlopen School District in Sussex County, DE. The success and popularity of those programs caught the attention of state policy makers, and in January 2020, the State of DE began supporting a pilot that included five school districts, which consequently expanded statewide in August of 2020. “It’s a great privilege for me to serve as the honorary chair of Delaware’s Dolly Parton Imagination Library program,” said First Lady Tracey Quillen Carney. “The quantity and quality of early language experience, starting at birth, correlates to children’s academic success at ages nine and 10—the target of our state’s grade-level reading campaign—which then correlates to the likelihood of high-school graduation, which correlates to virtually every positive life outcome from then on. Expanding the Imagination Library program in Delaware is a great investment in our families and in our future.”

Reach Out and Read was founded by pediatricians at Boston City Hospital (now Boston Medical Center) in 1989, with a mission to help make routine reading a part of families’ lives.³ Since then, it’s grown to 6400 program sites, spread over all 50 states, and provides 7.4 million books a year to children all over the country. Pediatric and family practices that provide pediatric care

can become Reach Out and Read sites. As such, they receive training in anticipatory literacy guidance, and distribute books to children at well-child visits starting at six months. By the time a child reaches five years old, they will have built a collection of 8 – 10 quality books. Each Reach Out and Read site also creates a literacy-rich environment, which can include books, early literacy hand-outs, and even volunteer readers in the waiting room. Medical providers give caregivers guidance on age-appropriate ways to share books with children at each visit. Dr. Shirley Klein was the first to bring Reach Out and Read to Delaware at Christiana Care in 1998. In 2008, Pediatrician Dr. Aguida Atkinson founded the program at Delaware Nemours DuPont Pediatrics, where it has since expanded to 11 out of 12 Delaware practices. Those practices distributed 19,232 books to children and their families in 2019 alone. “The importance of reading aloud to children from a very young age is that it promotes and develops language, which is crucial for overall child development. It also strengthens the bond between parent and child,” says Dr. Atkinson. “Caregivers trust pediatricians - they really listen to us. Pediatricians have a great opportunity to relate the importance of early literacy during periodic well visits, so parents can incorporate reading into their children’s daily routine starting as early as birth.” In 2016, Dr. Stacey Garfield Fox established Beacon Pediatrics, in Rehoboth Beach, as a Reach Out and Read site, which has since distributed more than 11,300 books to children in its practice. Beacon Pediatrics is the exclusive provider of pediatric care for newborns at Beebe Hospital, which serves Sussex County, and is working toward an early literacy partnership with Delaware Libraries that will get books into the hands of families as soon as their children are born.

Delaware Libraries and Pediatricians Come Together

Both Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library and Reach Out and Read are time-tested programs, each with a significant base of research supporting their efficacy. So, one might rightly ask, “Do we really need both?” With book access for so many children in critical condition, the answer is a resounding, “yes.” And that’s because each of these programs approaches the complex early literacy puzzle from a different angle. Both provide brand new, high quality books to children – an important piece of that puzzle they both share. Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library focuses on volume and early reach, while Reach Out and Read targets one-on-one caregiver education and support.

Quality books matter, but so does quantity. The more high quality books in the home, the better.⁴ In fact, literacy increases with the number of books children have access to in their homes.⁵ Children are eligible to register for Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library the day they are born, and will start receiving books immediately. If they remain in the program, 60 brand new, industry curated, high quality books will be theirs forever. Getting books to them early also matters. Reading to babies – even the very youngest - helps to improve language development, as well as social and observation skills. Since 2014, The American Academy of Pediatrics has recommended caregivers read to their children from birth, because the more words babies hear, the better their literacy, vocabulary, and reading comprehension will be in the future.⁶

Reach Out and Read begins giving books to children at their six month well-child visit, and while it distributes fewer books to them overall than Imagination Library, it packs a formidable punch in its efforts to educate caregivers on the importance of reading to their children daily; demonstrating to them how they can share books in age appropriate ways, no matter what their child’s age. It’s the combination of books and information given together that makes the program so effective. There’s a strong correlation between this intervention combination practiced by

Reach Out and Read and improvement in oral early language skills.⁷ When a pediatrician gives caregivers early literacy information and direction at a well visit, while also giving them a book to read with their child, it positively impacts early language development.

By inspiring read-aloud time together, both Imagination Library and Reach Out and Read help capitalize on the way books can help children and caregivers to bond, and to form loving, healthy relationships. According to Reach Out and Read,³ “Spending time together while reading aloud helps to create strong parent-child bonds and promotes healthy brain development. Children that are read to more often have improved language and listening skills, experience stronger emotional connections to their loved ones, and gain a lifelong love of reading.”

The Future for Delaware’s Children

Delaware Libraries and pediatricians came together in late 2019/early 2020 and began work toward a partnership that would ensure all of Delaware’s children and their families get early access to books and quality early literacy information from these two book distribution programs. Their ultimate goal is to increase the number of pediatric practices that are Reach Out and Read sites, and to work with birthing hospitals to register children in the Imagination Library before they even leave the hospital. “We know that early intervention makes a difference. That’s why it’s so important to Delaware Libraries to get every child in the State of Delaware free access to books, at home, and early. As soon as they are born.” says Delaware State Librarian, Annie Norman. It’s a mission inspired partly by Tennessee’s Governor’s Early Literacy Foundation, which has been successful in getting children registered with Imagination Library early, through its partnerships with birthing hospitals in that state.

The connection between early brain development and literacy is well documented. But there are strong and predictive ties between literacy and general health in adults, as well. “Studies have shown that patients with inadequate literacy have less health-related knowledge, receive less preventive care, have poorer control of their chronic illnesses, and are hospitalized more frequently than other patients.”⁸ And with nearly 21% of American adults (about 43 million) falling into the illiterate or functionally illiterate category,⁹ the need for intervention is more important than ever. Book distribution programs like DPIL and ROR have been proven to advance kindergarten readiness. According to a longitudinal study by Applied Survey Research (ASR) in Alameda County, CA, children who are ready for kindergarten are more likely to be reading on grade level by the 3rd grade, and that success improves their chances of future academic success.¹⁰

It’s difficult to succeed in life if you can’t read well. And it’s very difficult to get good at reading if you don’t have books to practice with at home. There may be no better way to impact children’s overall futures than by making sure they have a steady supply of quality books to read in their homes. And in the long run, it’s cheap. It costs less than \$160 to provide a child with 60 books from Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library *and* 8 – 10 books from Reach Out and Read. That’s less than the MMR/Varicella vaccine.¹¹ More than 90% of U.S. children are inoculated against those two diseases.¹² If we could inoculate children against illiteracy, would we? Because we can.

References

1. Neuman, S. B., & Celano, D. (2001). Access to print in low-income and middle-income communities: An ecological study of four neighborhoods. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36(1), 8–26. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.36.1.1>
2. Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. (n.d.). About. Retrieved from <https://dollyparton.com/imagination-library>
3. Reach out and Read. (2020, March 04). About. Retrieved July 31, 2020, from <https://www.reachoutandread.org/about/>
4. Elley, W. B. (2000). The potential of book floods for raising literacy levels. *International Review of Education*, 46(3/4), 233–255. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1004086618679>
5. Jacobs, T. (2018, October 8). Home libraries confer long-term benefits. *Pacific Standard*. Retrieved from <https://psmag.com/education/home-libraries-confer-long-term-benefits>
6. Robb, A. (2014, June 24). Does it matter what you read to your baby? *The New Republic*. Retrieved from <https://newrepublic.com/article/118361/what-should-you-read-your-baby-does-it-matter>
7. Theriot, J. A., Franco, S. M., Sisson, B. A., Metcalf, S. C., Kennedy, M. A., & Bada, H. S. (2003, March). The impact of early literacy guidance on language skills of 3-year-olds. *Clinical Pediatrics*, 42(2), 165–172. [PubMed https://doi.org/10.1177/000992280304200211](https://doi.org/10.1177/000992280304200211)
8. Dewalt, D., & Pignone, M. (2005, August 01). The role of literacy in health and health care. Retrieved from <https://www.aafp.org/afp/2005/0801/p387.html>
9. Rea, A. (2020, April 29). How Serious Is America's Literacy Problem? *Library Journal*. Retrieved from: <https://www.libraryjournal.com/?detailStory=How-Serious-Is-Americas-Literacy-Problem>
10. Kindergarten readiness and later achievement: a longitudinal study in Alameda County [Scholarly project]. (2018). In *ASR*. Retrieved from <https://www.appliedsurveyresearch.org/>
11. FastStats - Immunization. (2017, March 17). Retrieved July 31, 2020, from <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/immunize.htm>
12. Vaccine Price List, C. D. C. (2020, July 01). Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/programs/vfc/awardees/vaccine-management/price-list/index.html>

Copyright (c) 2020 Delaware Academy of Medicine / Delaware Public Health Association.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>) which permits unrestricted non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.