

Books for Children... Connections for Families



UT Family Physicians Embrace Reach Out and Read Program

THE LITERACY FACTS AREN'T VERY PRETTY.

In the U.S., 42% of Americans cannot extract basic information from a newspaper article or comprehend directions for taking medication. About one in four is unable to understand information on a physician's appointment slip.

In Tennessee, adults have lower literacy rates than across the U.S., and we see high school and college graduation rates below the national average. The rates often are even lower in our rural counties, including those surrounding Knox County.

It's simple: We must improve the literacy rates of citizens, and the University of Tennessee Graduate School of Medicine is working toward that goal every day.

TAKING ACTION IN OUR CORNER OF THE WORLD

Family Medicine physicians and residents at UT Graduate School of Medicine give more than checkups and immunizations. They also give the gift of imagination to children and promote stronger literacy skills in parents.



Fifteen-month-old Spencer Strunk is mesmerized by a book he reads with the help of his mother, Angela Strunk. Steven Roskos, MD participates in the Reach Out and Read program by giving a book to Spencer and other patients at the UT Graduate School of Medicine Department of Family Medicine at every well visit. "We love the program," said Angela. "Spencer really enjoys the books." And from the look on little Spencer's face, we believe it.

As part of the national non-profit program, Reach Out and Read, these everyday heroes give age-appropriate books to every child in their practice at every “well” visit from the time each child is six months old until he or she is five years old. That’s ten books by the time the child reaches kindergarten.

Along with books for children comes information for parents about the importance of reading aloud to their children as well as promotion of adult literacy.

“The program allows us to help the whole family in a lasting and meaningful way by encouraging parents to read to their children, which not only promotes the child’s reading skills but also strengthens the relationship between parent and child and encourages improved adult literacy,” says Steven Roskos, MD, family physician and medical director for the Reach Out and Read program at UT. “And importantly, reading is a wholesome activity that can simply bring families together.”

APPROACHING LITERACY IN CHILDREN AND ADULTS

Encouraging literacy in children translates to their success as adults, and it starts early. In the first three years of life, literacy is vital to successful brain development. Early literacy helps children develop memory and curiosity, experience enjoyment and realize mastery—even if it’s just learning to turn a page or identifying rhyme and repetition.



Children receive high-quality, classic children’s books through the Reach Out and Read program at the UT Graduate School of Medicine Department of Family Medicine.

Children who are familiar with books are ready to learn once they enter school. And children who are engaged in learning are less likely to drop out of school and more likely to become successful adults.

“If we can get books into the hands of children and their parents and encourage their parents to read aloud to them, we are making small steps toward improving literacy for both and promoting closer parent-child relationships,” says Lorraine Wallace, PhD, UT Graduate School of Medicine’s Reach Out and Read program coordinator. “This is especially important here in East Tennessee, where literacy rates are low and high school dropout rates are high.”

The most recent information from United Health Foundation shows that in Tennessee, only 57% of children entering high school will graduate in four years. “Low graduation rates tell us that our literacy rates are just as low, or lower, and students likely to drop out of high school have the lowest literacy skills,” says Wallace.

And who better to make these strides toward literacy than physicians? Physicians are trusted advisors to families. Parents look to them for advice on health and

well-being, and information shared by physicians is viewed as reliable and important.

Our Numbers and Our Legacy

Since August 2005, when Reach Out and Read was implemented at UT Graduate School of Medicine's Department of Family Medicine, 36 physicians and residents have given 400 books to children—and an immeasurable amount of support to parents.

“Our program is one of the very few in Tennessee,” says Wallace, “and we hope to expand it through our residency program.” UT Family Medicine faculty physicians urge their residents to get involved in Reach Out and Read, with the hope that when the residents move into private practice, they will implement the program themselves.

“Our residents leave here with an excellent medical education, and as part of that education, we try to make sure they understand how someone's life situation affects their health,” says Roskos. “We want our residents to know how to counsel parents on healthy lives, and that includes encouraging parents to read to their children and improve their own literacy skills.”

What's Next?

The UT Graduate School of Medicine Family Medicine physicians and residents have big plans for their Reach Out and Read program, including providing books in Spanish, offering books to siblings and to children during sick visits. The group also will have volunteer readers in the waiting room to model reading aloud.

And because parents with low literacy skills often don't know of community resources that can help them improve their skills, our UT physicians soon will have such information available for their patients.

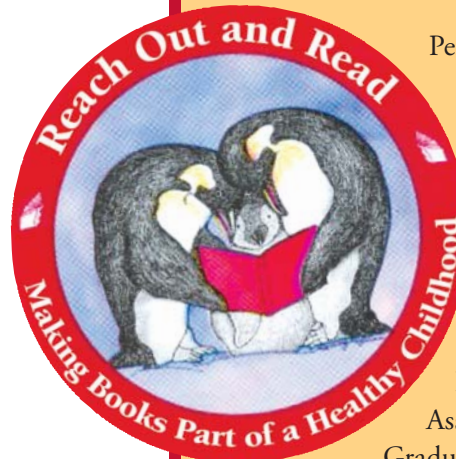
The literacy numbers might be discouraging, but at UT Graduate School of Medicine, we know that every book, every encouragement, and each interaction with parents are small steps that will make important differences.

Amanda F. Johnson, APR

The Need is NOW

Literacy Challenges Linked to Low Graduation Rate

The Reach Out and Read Program, which provides books to children during their "well" visits to their family physicians at UT, couldn't come at a better time. The most recent information from United Health Foundation shows that Tennessee has only a 57 percent high school graduation rate, and a low graduation rate tells us that literacy rates are low, too.



Perhaps an even more alarming fact is that 15 years ago, the high school graduation rate in Tennessee was 10 percent higher, at more than 67 percent. “We're moving in the wrong direction,” said Lorraine Wallace, PhD, Associate Professor, UT Graduate School of Medicine.

“History has shown that each generation is generally better prepared than the last, but that is not proving to be the case today. We must take action to positively affect the literacy of our children.”

You Can Help!

If you would like to volunteer your time as a waiting-room reader or make a donation of new books or of money to purchase books, please contact Dr. Lorraine Wallace at 865-544-9352.