

Reach Out and Read as a Foundational Strategy to Support Child Health and Development



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The critical importance of child development from birth is indisputable. The home environment and nurturing relationships between parent/caregiver and child lay the foundation for healthy development, school readiness, and all future learning. Detailed and growing understanding of early brain development, both what promotes positive development and what works against it, continually provides greater scientific explanations for how language-rich interactions in the context of a loving, responsive relationship between adult and child help to shape children's brains and promote health and development. Systematically incorporating Reach Out and Read into the health care system supports the foundational relationships between parent and child and promotes child development from birth, helping put children on a trajectory towards success in school and life.

This document provides a practical introduction to how Reach Out and Read can serve as a key foundational component of a statewide developmental promotion system. Divided into four sections—**Introduction to Reach Out and Read, Program characteristics facilitating impact, A national network strategy to support implementation, and Developing a statewide Reach Out and Read strategy**—it provides concise background information and concrete steps to implement a statewide strategy. A companion document, *Pediatric Health Care as a Key Partner in an Early Childhood System*, provides complementary information that places this Reach Out and Read strategy within the broader context of early childhood systems building to support child development.

Introduction to Reach Out and Read

Reach Out and Read is arguably the largest early relationship/literacy program in the country, yet it is often not well-known by partners interested in supporting young children and families. This section provides a brief introduction to the program model, its national scope, and its proven impact. (See <https://reachoutandread.org/> for more information.)

Program Overview

Reach Out and Read is an evidenced-based early childhood program that incorporates books into well-child visits for young children and encourages families to read aloud and create meaningful moments together. Primary care providers implement the research-based model to promote child development through daily, nurturing, language-rich interactions between parent and child at home. During each well-child visit from birth through age 5, Reach Out and Read doctors talk with parents about the importance of reading aloud with their young children, model how to do so, and offer age-appropriate tips and encouragement. During the visit, each child is given a new, culturally and developmentally responsive children's book to take home, building a collection of books in the home starting in infancy. Parents are engaged in the conversation and leave each visit inspired to read together at home.

National Scope

Reach Out and Read is delivered by 40,000 medical providers at 6,100 health care locations, with programs in all 50 states and Washington, D.C. Annually, the program impacts 4.2 million children and their families, distributing more than six million new children's books. The program is embedded in a professional delivery system and was developed by child development experts in the fields of both early childhood and pediatrics.

Coupling this program model with trainings

designed specifically by and for medical providers, and additional implementation supports for clinic staff, creates a pathway for high quality implementation of programs which have consistently demonstrated significant positive outcomes for children and families.

Reach Out and Read Scope

50 states
6,100 health care locations
40,000 medical providers
4,200,000 children and families
6,400,000 new children's books

■ Proven Impact

Reach Out and Read has been examined extensively by academic investigators studying ethnically and economically diverse families throughout the nation, providing a substantial body of peer-reviewed research demonstrating the impact of the program, including:

- Families participating in Reach Out and Read read more frequently to their children.
- Children exposed to the program had higher receptive and expressive language scores.
- Increased exposure to Reach Out and Read led to larger increases in language scores.

■ Program Characteristics Facilitating Impact

In addition to the strong evidence base and proven outcomes, Reach Out and Read is widely embraced because it works for both families and medical providers, while effectively serving diverse populations in culturally relevant ways.

■ Meets Families' Needs

Families with young children are busy and often under stress, making it challenging to add additional activities to their lives. Reach Out and Read overcomes many common barriers by being:

- Convenient - supports families “where they are,” at doctors’ offices for well-child checkups
- Targeted - serves children birth through 5 years together with their parents
- Desired - parents want to know how to develop close relationships with their child and support their child’s language and literacy skills
- Trusted - medical providers are the most trusted child development resource for most parents
- Strengths based – builds from child and family assets by increasing knowledge, skills, and confidence

■ Helps Doctors Support Families

Integrating a new program into the health care system is usually challenging. Medical providers embrace the proven Reach Out and Read program because it also

- Integrates seamlessly into existing well-child checkups
- Strengthens provider relationships with both children and parents
- Enhances their ability to assess child development and family relationships
- Provides a natural way to offer advice about supporting early language and literacy at home

■ Intentionally Focuses on Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Cultural Relevance

Reach Out and Read was originally created to support families who had limited resources and few children’s books at home. Multiple strategies are employed to systematically increase equity and reduce gaps in school readiness.

- **Engaging health systems and medical providers as partners** who deliver individualized support based on the needs of each child and family.
- **Prioritizing clinics serving low-income families** through Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHCs), community health centers, and clinics serving children on Medicaid.
- **Supporting cultural diversity** by serving families from many linguistic and cultural groups, including English language learners, bilingual populations, and immigrant and refugee families.
- **Assuring geographic diversity** by implementing programs in urban, rural, and suburban settings across the country.
- **Serving families across the developmental spectrum** with guidance for supporting children with developmental disabilities, and families where parents have low literacy skills.

Individually Selected Children’s Books:

Each clinic strives to provide books that are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically responsive for the families it serves. Books are available in multiple languages, and medical providers teach families how to share books with their child, even when caregivers themselves have low literacy skills, or a book is not available in their primary language.

A National Network Strategy to Support Implementation

The nationwide scale of Reach Out and Read is unique among both parenting support programs and health care-based interventions. While program spread was initially organic, the extensive growth of Reach Out and Read in communities across the nation is now facilitated by successful systems strategies to increase access, assure quality, and integrate programs into ongoing systems within health care. Reach Out and Read connects national, state, and local strategies to build early childhood systems partnerships, and to support program implementation. Key elements of this network strategy include a national center-affiliate structure; national data systems; affiliate professional development and technical assistance systems; and a common understanding of what it takes to support program quality.

A National Center that Supports Local Affiliates

The Reach Out and Read National Center has evolved over time into a support system for national program implementation through an affiliate network. The National Center currently works with 30 statewide and regional affiliates who in turn work directly with Reach Out and Read program sites to support high quality local implementation of the program within health care settings across the country. Where affiliates exist, medical practices have access to local support to implement Reach Out and Read, and early childhood partners have access to a health care system ally to help build early childhood systems that support early childhood development across their state.

A National Data, Reporting, and Quality Assessment System

Available to all Reach Out and Read affiliates through the National Center, this centralized system enables affiliates to use data-driven decision-making processes to support program quality. Elements of this include the ability to collect, store, and analyze data; support assessment of program fidelity; and tailor technical assistance to support quality improvement as needed. The national Site Quality Classification System is integrated into the data platform for use with every Reach Out and Read program. The system has specific metrics shaped around the four quality elements of Medical Providers, Books, Literacy-Rich Environment, and Program Management. This facilitates assessment, monitoring, and support for program quality over time.

Local Affiliates that Serve Programs through a Professional Development and Technical Assistance System

Providing systematic support for every program across a state is complex. The staffing and systems of an affiliate develop strategies and partnerships to facilitate program expansion and support medical clinics to start and sustain Reach Out and Read programs. Affiliates assure initial and ongoing quality through the following elements:

- New Program Identification
- Application and Approval Process
- Training and Professional Development for Medical Providers
- Technical Assistance for Program Coordinators and Medical Practices
- Ongoing Professional Development and Technical Assistance Systems

A Common Understanding of What It Takes to Support Quality

To have population level impact, Reach Out and Read must be implemented with fidelity to the model within each medical practice. Metrics have been developed to help assess and improve quality at the program level, and affiliates are responsible for supporting programs. Affiliates have had different structures and capacity over time, and evaluation processes have determined that there are key factors which are associated with a high-quality affiliate. Understanding these factors is necessary to effectively support a statewide network of Reach Out and Read programs.

Characteristics of a High-Quality Affiliate

- An Affiliate Leader and a Medical Director
- A Strategic Plan
- A system for supporting all clinic sites
- An Advisory Board
- Systems for fidelity to the program model
- Adequate revenue to sustain operations

Developing a Statewide Reach Out and Read Strategy

Once they become aware of Reach Out and Read's potential scope and impact, health care providers and early childhood systems partners across the country consistently express interest in broad implementation of the program in their states. Moving forward toward systematic, population-wide implementation requires an understanding of the national network strategy, coupled with locally driven exploration and planning. The following steps help facilitate that process.

Connect with the Local Reach Out and Read Affiliate

The first step is to see if an affiliate exists to serve your area <https://reachoutandread.org/about/affiliates/>. If so, contact them early on to express your interest, and go from there! If there is no affiliate, connect with the Reach Out and Read National Center to express your interest in exploring a statewide strategy. This conversation will also provide a pathway to learn about Reach Out and Read in your state and may even help facilitate initial conversations with potential partners.

Connect with the Reach Out and Read National Center

Reach Out and Read, Inc., is a national 501c3 organization, and any implementation of Reach Out and Read at the program or affiliate level must be connected to the Reach Out and Read National Center. The creation of new affiliates, or the expansion of existing affiliates, is done in partnership with the National Center. Contact Reach Out and Read at info@reachoutandread.org to start the conversation.

Learn About Reach Out and Read in Your State

A preliminary amount of background research will give you some idea of the baseline from which you are starting. Find out if there are programs in your state and get a sense of where they are. <https://reachoutandread.org/find-a-site/>. Connect with your state American Academy of Pediatrics Chapter(s). Ask if they are involved with Reach Out and Read, know about the status of programs in your state, and/or have a key contact you could talk to. <https://services.aap.org/en/community/chapter-websites/>

Facilitate Exploratory Conversations with Potential Partners

Bringing together a few people or groups to talk about the potential for Reach Out and Read is a good early step. This should include health care partners such as the AAP, as well as other early childhood organizations. Do you know of people, organizations, or agencies who are interested in Reach Out and Read? Or, more broadly, who are interested in early childhood systems efforts around child development, parenting, early literacy, school readiness, or leveraging the medical home? Look for alignment, leveraging, and collaborating opportunities in early childhood and health in your state, and initiate a conversation. If there is interest in further exploration, designate a small group to connect with Reach Out and Read at the national level early on.

The Child Health and Development Project: Mississippi Thrive! is working in Mississippi, the state with the highest level of child poverty, to develop a statewide system of early developmental promotion, screening, linkage to services and interventions. This project is also studying and elevating successful strategies to be used in other states, tribes and territories to improve early childhood health and development. Childhood poverty has significant deleterious effects on lifelong health and well-being, and disproportionately affects development during the earliest years. This project is built upon a recognition that when policies and practices 1) support responsive relationships between children and adults, 2) strengthen caregivers' core life skills, and 3) reduce sources of stress in the lives of children and families, improvements in child health and well-being outcomes can continue for generations.

(Citation: <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/three-early-childhood-development-principles-improve-child-family-outcomes/>).

For more information see MS Thrive Website link: <https://mississippithrive.com/>

Sources: Reach Out and Read, Inc. provided specific language and data included in the National Scope and Proven Impact sections, and the Characteristics of a High-Quality Affiliate in February 2022. For more information about Reach Out and Read impacts visit: <https://reachoutandread.org/why-we-matter/the-evidence/>

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