

SPRING 2015

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Two great contests!
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CONNECTICUT family MAGAZINE

AHOY, MATEYS!

Pirate Days are back at Mystic Seaport

Chicken Country

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Rhyme time

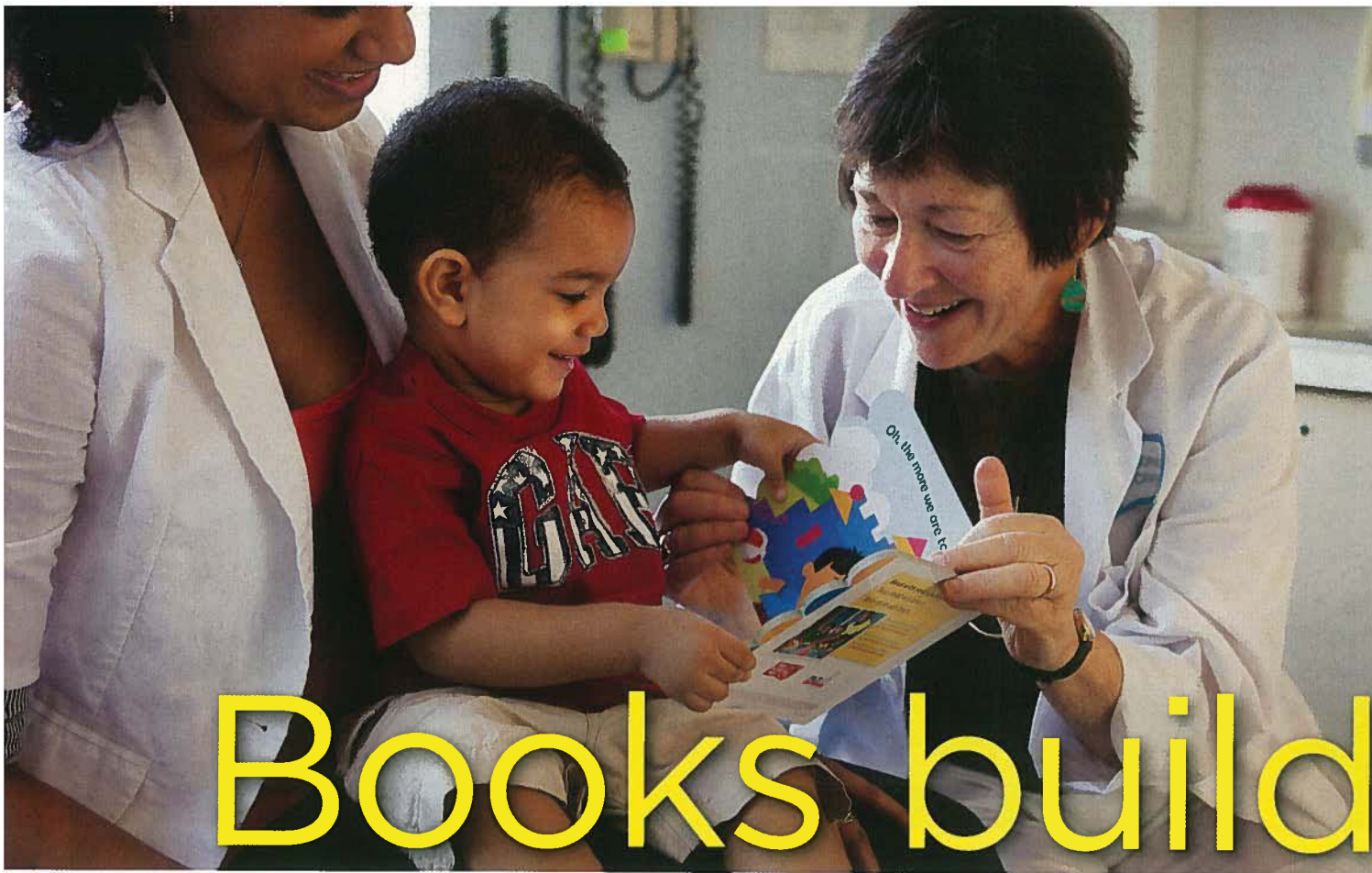
Meet Tish Rabe, the author behind *The Cat in the Hat's Learning Library*

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PLUS: Catch up with the latest apps, summer safety and a special camp!





Books build

Reach Out and Read gives Connecticut's children the books they need to succeed

Along with the stethoscope and tongue depressor, Dr. Cynthia Roque uses a book as an important diagnostic tool when her little patients come for an appointment.

A pediatrician at Pediatric Associates of Connecticut in Waterbury, she is one of the medical advisors on the Connecticut advisory board for Reach Out and Read. This nonprofit organization partners with doctors to promote young children's early literacy skills. Started in 1989, this national nonprofit organization focuses on children growing up in low-income families and is designed to develop children's early literacy skills by encouraging parents to dedicate time to read aloud to their children every day.

Children should be able to identify shapes, colors, and letters by the time they enter kindergarten. The inability to master these skills sometimes indicates that a child has a hearing problem or needs speech therapy. More often, bewil-

derment with a book simply means that the child has not had adequate exposure to reading.

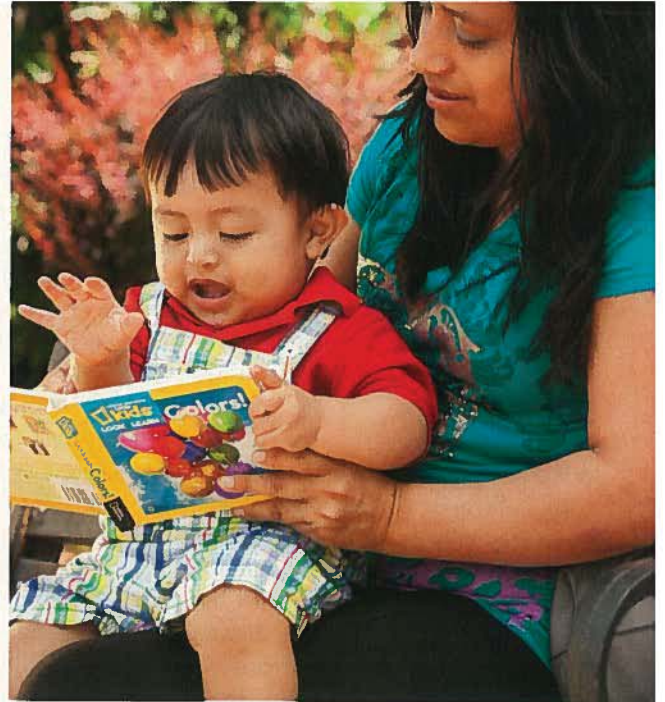
"Just by handing a book to a child, I can see how that child uses the book," says Dr. Roque. "If he or she uses the book inappropriately, or just pushes it aside and doesn't know what to do with it, I know this child hasn't been exposed to books and isn't being ready to every day."

"Reach Out and Read is different from any other organization which gives free books to underserved children," explains Christine Garber, executive director for Reach Out and Read Connecticut. "Introducing a book during an office visit helps our pediatricians assess a child's social, emotional and physical development. No other early literacy program uses pediatricians to teach parents ways to develop their young child's language skills, vocabulary, and other pre-literacy skills. Our program leverages two extraordinary

forces to improve early literacy - the power of parents and the influence of the children's doctors.

Since the process of learning to read begins long before a child enters school, the Reach Out and Read program starts when a child is only six months old. At every well-child visit from six months through five years, the child is given a new book of their very own. Medical providers can educate parents on the importance of reading aloud daily to their children, even before their children begin to speak.

"The earlier the child is presented with the opportunity to learn how to read and write, the earlier you can make these diagnoses and intervene to help them be more successful," says Dr. Catherine Wiley, medical director of Reach Out and Read Connecticut. "My key responsibility is to champion the program by speaking with pediatricians and child health providers. Physicians who wish to take part



better brains

in the program are trained in how to apply their expertise in child development to the evaluation of a child's emerging literacy skills."

"People may be surprised to learn that there is still an 'achievement gap' in this country between low income children and their more affluent peers," explains Garber. "Unfortunately, across the nation that gap is the largest here in Connecticut. But we are working to fix that."

THE DEDICATED DOCTORS

Clinics must apply to become recognized Reach Out and Read program sites, and all of the medical providers must complete a Continuing Medical Education accredited training prior to delivering the program. Doing so gives them access to books, literacy programs, and continuing education opportunities provided by the Reach Out and Read National Center.

"It's definitely one of those things that I feel really positive about, that I'm happy to do," says Roque. "It's exciting how this simple piece of advice can really truly impact such a huge number of children.

It's a privilege and an honor to be able to use this program and implement it in our offices. Even more, when I see one of my patients' faces light up when he or she holds a book for the first time that is theirs to keep, it is a wonderful moment for all of us."

Reach Out and Read visits continue every three to six months until the child turns three, and yearly visits continue until age five. Some of the strategies taught by the pediatricians include reading as part of playtime, using rhyming books and talking about the stories as they are read—a form of learning known as "dialogic reading." Additionally, since parents are likely to trust the recommendation of a pediatrician, they are more likely to take the advice to heart.

"Engaging parents and changing their behavior to read more frequently to their children is what makes our program work," says Garber. "If you just give a family a book, it might just stay on the shelf. But if you educate parents on how important it is for them to read to their children daily, they will want to do what's

best for them and will incorporate this advice into their daily routines."

These shared experiences can have a lasting effect on a child's learning. A 2012 study concluded that regular shared reading time results in long-term increases in reading, spelling, and comprehension.

Reach Out and Read is both an effective and economical model, since the program intervenes at a critical time in a child's development and requires less investment than literacy programs for older children.

Over the years, Reach Out and Read has expanded to every state in the country. There are about 20,000 physicians participating in 5,000 clinical locations, and approximately 4 million children are served by the program.

In Connecticut, Reach Out and Read distributes nearly 70,000 new books a year through seventy-one clinical locations. Almost 40,000 children in the state benefit from the program.

Reach Out and Read has been the focus of numerous research studies. To date, there are 15 studies demonstrating that children served by the program are read

to more often, have better expressive and receptive language skills, and are better prepared for success in school.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recently acknowledged the importance of reading to children in its 2014 policy statement, "Literacy Promotion: An Essential Component of Primary Care Pediatric Practice."

WHY IS LITERACY SO IMPORTANT?

To learn how to read, children need to master a number of complex concepts. They have to recognize how printed words represent spoken language, learn the different sounds made by letters, distinguish between words with similar appearances or sounds, and understand how the same word can have multiple meanings.

"As humans we have an innate oral language instinct but not so much for the written word," says Garber.

"Reading is also the most important skill for a child to learn, as reading is the foundation for all learning."

A child's brain experiences its strongest period of growth between birth and age five. Reading offers a number of benefits for a child's development as well. The activity increases the development of brain cells, and regularly setting aside time for reading creates a familiar routine that can aid in learning. Reading also helps with fine motor skills as a child learns how to hold a book and turn pages, while the subject matter teaches simple concepts like patterns, colors, and story structure.

"You're creating a strong foundation when you're introducing the child to reading during the critical period of brain development," says Roque.

In addition to these benefits, reading aloud fosters a strong bond between a parent and a child. It is a shared, non-disciplinary activity that can open up new discussions on a number of subjects. This interaction can also have a positive effect on the developing brain, better preparing it cognitively and socially.

"Daily shared reading, on the lap of a parent or snuggled in a bed or chair together, builds strong family bonds due to the nurturing, one-on-one attention

from parents," says Garber. "Parental engagement is critically linked to the educational, emotional, physical and social health of children."

"If children are not read to at an early age, they will not develop the foundational skills necessary to succeed when they enter school," Wiley explains. "A child who begins school with poorer

reading skills than his or her classmates will have additional difficulties as well. These challenges may include lower self-esteem, difficulties in expressing themselves, and behavioral problems."

Children who are most at risk for reading difficulties may show a number of symptoms. They may have poor phonemic awareness, or the inability to recognize individual sounds in words.

"Early childhood is a critical time for exposure to language and reading, since the growth of neurons in the brain is especially rapid in the first two years of development," says Wiley. "During this time, new neuronal connections are being formed at a rate of 700 per second. If these connections are not used, they will be eliminated in a process known as synaptic pruning."

Studies have shown that children of low-income families are more at risk of this impeded development. They may not have a parent or guardian who has the time to take them to the library or to read to them on a daily basis, or they may have parents who struggle with reading themselves or do not like to read.

As a result, low-income children are exposed to an average of 30 million fewer words than more affluent children by the time they reach age three. These children are typically twelve to fourteen months behind the normal levels for language



and reading skills when they enter kindergarten. This disparity usually persists throughout their time at school, making it extremely difficult for them to catch up with their peers.

TWO NEW BOOKS HELP CAREGIVERS READ TO THEIR CHILDREN

Tish Rabe, a bestselling children's author in Connecticut who writes *The Cat in the Hat's Learning Library* (see page 32), has written two books to specifically meet the needs of Reach Out and Read. *Love You, Hug You, Read to You* encourages parents to let children interact with the book by including questions they can ask their child to foster discussion about the story—a successful learning tool known as dialogic reading.

The book has also been published in a bilingual English/Spanish version: *Te amo, te abrazo, leo contigo*, for families for whom English may be a second language.

"I am convinced that I became a children's book author because my mother read to us every night when we were little," says Rabe.

"It's difficult for those of us who grew up being read to and who read every night to our children to imagine a home where there are no books in the house or apartment at all, and in this wonderful state of Connecticut that is hard to be-

lieve. When the dedicated, passionate doctors of Reach Out and Read hand a child a book, it is often not the only children's book in the home, but the only book of any kind. But we can change that. We can get every Connecticut child in need the books they need to succeed."

HOW YOU CAN HELP

Reach Out and Read is constantly working to get word out about the program and gather support. Wiley says her duties include speaking to community groups and government agencies about the program, giving updates on scientific research on childhood literacy, and ordering books for pediatricians to distribute.

The program is largely a volunteer effort, and there are many ways to help. A \$20 donation will support one child in the program, including the purchase of two books for them to keep. A \$100 donation supports a child for the full five years of the program.

People or companies can also help cover program costs which, depending on the size of the clinic, range from \$5,000 to \$60,000 a year. All monetary donations can be made online at reachoutandread.org or mailed to Reach Out and Read Connecticut, P.O. Box 290, Madison CT 06443.

Reach Out and Read welcomes new book donations. People can organize a book drive through their workplace, school, church, library, or other community organization. The program asks donors not to give holiday, potty training, religious, or TV or movie related titles.

"Magical Milestones" is another way of donating to the program. Tish Rabe is donating her time and talent to write personalized poems to celebrate an important milestone in a family's life such as the birth of a baby, a graduation, or a new home. For a \$50 donation to Reach Out and Read, she will write a personalized poem presented in a format suitable for framing. People interested in ordering a poem can do so at crowdrise.com/MagicalMilestones. •

— Dirk Langeveld

If you would like to become involved in Reach Out and Read's mission, contact Executive Director Christine Garber at christine.garber@reachoutandread.org

