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Reach Out and Read in the first 6 months of life: getting it right from the start

A memo to the Reach Out and Read community

Please read this important memo regarding changes in Reach Out and Read's practice and identity as a program for children newborn through 5 years

Dear Colleagues,

As you all know, ever since Reach Out and Read was first described in the pediatric literature, we have given the first book, with its accompanying guidance, at the 6-month visit. This reflected a tactical awareness that a 6-month old child is ready to sit up on a parent's lap, and begin to grab and move the pages of a board book – though of course language development begins at birth, and looking at books with babies should, and often does, begin much earlier as well. But even though many of our training materials include some recognition that the conversation about language and learning should start at birth, the reality is that many of us have come to regard that 6-month visit as "the first official Reach Out and Read visit," and you can see this reflected in our materials and our mindset.

But as we also all know, the first six months of life are tremendously important, for early brain development, and for establishing the patterns of parental responsiveness and the family routines that shape a child's development. Developing those nurturing relationships will support children as they grow and help buffer them against adversity. The AAP statement on literacy promotion in primary care recommends literacy promotion starting at birth. That's the right thing to do, and the right way to put into practice everything that we are learning about early brain development and responsive parenting.

There are Reach Out and Read medical champions who have made this a priority for a long time – a special shout-out to Dr. Jean Harty and the folks in Kansas City, who have for years given a book – and guidance – at every visit starting from birth. With these "early adopters" (no pun intended) and forward-thinkers leading the way, we want to make it a major goal now for the entire Reach Out and Read network to acknowledge the importance of literacy promotion at health care supervision visits during

those first 6 months of a child's life, and to help us find ways to bring the Reach Out and Read message to parents as early and as consistently as we can.

We encourage sites with sufficient funding to consider an additional board book earlier than 6 months, and to consider partnering with other literacy organizations which may give a book at birth. But most of all, we want to emphasize the importance of having medical providers start as early as the newborn visit recommending to parents the importance of talking, reading, singing, and playing with their babies. We ask for your help in emphasizing this message—and in gathering ideas and best practices which can help us better convey this message with the parents of our very youngest patients.

At the National Center, we are working to produce revised program materials, such as the Developmental Milestones, and the Talking Points documents—and will incorporate this into a new iteration of our training curriculum, as well as into other materials which describe the program. We believe that this will help us do our job more effectively with families, bring us clearly into alignment with current scientific thought and best practices, and help us partner more effectively with other organizations in the field.

Most of all, we think it will help us all to think carefully and seriously about what we can do to get this guidance to parents during those complicated, joyous, and sometimes overwhelming months when they are learning to care for their new babies. We want Reach Out and Read providers to use those formative early visits in the most helpful, practical, developmentally appropriate, supportive ways, helping parents develop the responsive, positive, language-rich interactions which should surround babies from the very beginning.

Thank you so much for all you do.

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