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Giving books with booster shots

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Stethoscope? Check. Tongue depressor? Check. Curious George? Check.

Doctors should give out books just as routinely as they give out shots. That's one of the beliefs behind Reach Out & Read, a national nonprofit organization that engages pediatricians in the fight against illiteracy. The Arkansas arm of the group is based in Little Rock but serves the entire state.

"It's such a simple and easy program as far as what good it does," says state Reach Out & Read board chairman Amber Richart.

The group cites studies that show families who use participating clinics are four times more likely to read together. The children are three to six months ahead of their peers on vocabulary tests.

It works this way: Doctors who partner with Reach Out & Read go into each regular check-up for children 6 months to 5 years armed with an age-appropriate book. At some point during the exam, in addition to checking reflexes and making recommendations about diet, the doctor takes a couple of minutes to talk to the child's parent or caregiver about the importance of book sharing. Parent and child leave with a prescription not filled at a pharmacy: spend time every day reading together.

If children attend every well-child visit at a participating clinic, by the time they start kindergarten, they'll have a home library of more than 10 books. Richart says \$50 will provide a child with a library of books, and that can make a huge difference, especially for children from low-income families who have less access to books than their middle- and upper-class counterparts.

If serving up Green Eggs and Ham isn't on the syllabus of a first-year medical student, it's nonetheless a very good fit.

"The American Academy of Pediatrics wants to treat the whole child," says state board member Tasha Ward. "This is a very important part, even with infants."

When the "prescription" comes from a trusted professional like a pediatrician, the message is more effective.

Infants, toddlers and preschoolers are learning and developing at a rapid rate, building vocabulary and critical thinking skills that are the foundation for school advancement. Parents don't have to be strong readers for their children to benefit from sharing book time.

"The studies have shown that just looking and pointing at the pictures in books with a child is developing their minds," Ward says.

Children who have early experience with books and reading aloud usually begin school with a strong base of words and letters. Children without that exposure typically start kindergarten at a deficit. In most cases, they don't catch up.

"With ARKids First, more kids can go to well-child visits," Ward says. "We are reaching a broader base of even lower socio-economic communities."

Arkansas' Reach Out & Read program is funded largely through grants, sponsorships and private donations, with a large portion of the budget secured at the annual fundraising party. The board has made a few changes for this fourth year, starting with the name. What was Once Upon a Time is now Rx for Success.

"To kind of ramp up the whole fact that it is kind of a prescription for success from the doctor to the child, we took a collective board vote to change the name," Ward says.

Ticket prices have been lowered to \$35, and the Sept. 11 party has moved to Next Level Events, 1400 W. Markham St., "which is more centrally located downtown, easy to get to for folks from all different suburbs around Little Rock," Ward says.

Adds Richart, "And it's just a fun venue."

For the most part, they say, it's a "typical fundraiser," with heavy hors d'oeuvres, dancing and a silent auction. The B-Flats, a band of, appropriately enough, doctors, will provide the entertainment.

Dr. Laura McLeane, a Reach Out & Read adviser who, through her work at Arkansas Children's Hospital, introduces pediatric residents to the program, will be honored.

The main goal of this year's fundraiser is getting more people involved and spreading the word.

"We're hoping to play a few videos and really dig in so people are truly aware of what Reach Out & Read is and does," Richart says.

How does the nonprofit get the books? Some are donated; others are bought in bulk through publishers such as Scholastic. Ultimately, of course, the number of clinics they can provide for is determined by how much money is raised.

"The more money we can raise or if we can attract any corporate sponsors through this event through awareness, the more clinics we can reach," Ward says. "Without catapulting with more fundraising, we get at a stalemate with the number of clinics we can support unless a clinic says, 'We'll take this on 100 percent,' which has happened with some of our clinics."

There are 36 clinics in Arkansas that participate in Reach Out & Read, with more on the waiting list.

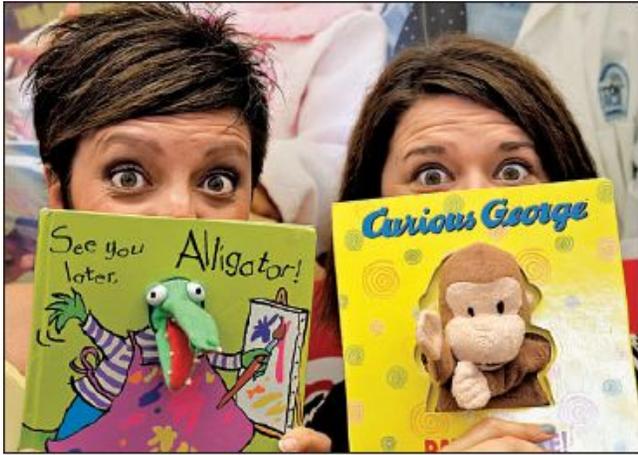
"We're a very small board with a very large mission," Richart says. "It's such an easy program to execute. That's why we made some changes — so we can reach more visibility and a broader base to bring those volunteers in."

There are many ways people can help, beyond writing a check.

"If someone's looking for a literacy nonprofit to help, this is one that's easy to volunteer for," Ward says.

Volunteers are needed to read to children in clinic waiting rooms as an example for parents — part of the Reach Out & Read model. They can help sort donated books into age groups. Or they can throw book bash parties.

Rx for Success is 6:30-9:30 p.m. Sept. 11 at Next Level Events, 1400 W. Markham St. Tickets are \$35. Call (501) 226-9444 or visit reachoutandreadarkansas.org for more information or to volunteer.



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/JOHN SYKES JR. Amber Richart (left) and Tasha Ward demonstrate just how much fun reading can be. They are board members for Reach Out & Read, an organization that works with pediatricians to supply free books to children, and co-chairmen for the Rx for Success fundraiser.



Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/JOHN SYKES JR. Medicine and reading should go together, as Amber Richart (left), the Cat in the Hat and Tasha Ward demonstrate. Richart and Ward are co-chairmen for this year's Rx for Success party, a fundraiser for the Reach Out & Read program that encourages doctors to give books and "prescriptions" for book time to their patients.