

## Ask the Expert

**BARRY ZUCKERMAN**

ZERO TO THREE Board Members share their expertise and insight regarding important issues affecting infants, toddlers, and their families.

**MEET:** Barry Zuckerman, MD, FAAP, is the Joel and Barbara Alpert Professor and chair of pediatrics and professor of public health at the Boston University School of Medicine, and chief of pediatrics at the Boston Medical Center, Boston, MA. Dr. Zuckerman has transformed pediatric health care to promote early child development and health by expanding access to basic needs through Reach Out and Read, Healthy Steps, and the Medical-Legal Partnership for Children. He is also an educator, researcher, and policy advocate who addresses the needs of low income families and children and advocates for policy changes to ensure that families' basic needs are met.

### Reach Out and Read

**Q: Why did you feel a need to reach out beyond traditional medical care to promote reading with children as a way to improve child development outcomes?**

**A:** As a pediatrician caring for low income children, I found I was able to keep many children healthy, in part due to the development of many new vaccines. However, if they were not doing well in school, while physically healthy, their life and health trajectory went downhill and was accompanied and compounded by unprotected sex, cigarette smoking, drinking, and other poor health behaviors. This combination will increase their risks for health problems during their adult years and likely cause death at an earlier age. At the same time, I was enjoying reading to my own children, but found that parents of my patients were not reading books to their young children, and many of them did not have children's books in their homes. I learned this was due in part to the lack of children's bookstores in the inner city, cultures where parents do not read to young children, and high cost of new children's books. I knew that when parents read to children it not only stimulates language and cognitive development, but equally important, it supports social and emotional development. The physical closeness, the shared affect and attention, and the unhurried voice of the parent create a special cocoon. Reading together is valuable for both parent and child. My interest coincided with that of my colleague Robert Needlman, and we started giving books to parents at pediatric visits. Although I recommended that parents read to their children, I found that the suggestion was hardly necessary because if a book was in the home, the child would toddle up to a parent with the book in his

outstretched arms as a clear message to parents. Reach Out and Read grew from this early clinical experience of two clinicians to a program reaching 3.5 million children with 5 million books at over 4,000 health care sites nationally in 2007.

**Q: How is Reach Out and Read making a difference?**

**A:** Reach Out and Read is a literacy-promoting intervention that is evidence-based. In pediatrics, with the exception of vaccines, there is no other preventive intervention that has as much empirical support. The data, which are consistent in more than 12 studies, show that parents who have been part of Reach Out and Read are more likely to read to their children than are parents who have not. More important, two studies of language development show that children's expressive and receptive language skills increase 4–8 points. Reach Out and Read costs about \$8.00 (2 books) per child per year. It is cost-effective because doctors "volunteer" their time and the strategic focus is on changing parent behavior, which is crucial for healthy child development.

**Q: To what do you attribute the success of Reach Out and Read?**

**A:** Changing medical practice and/or doctors' behavior is difficult. I have been quite pleased and amazed how Reach Out and Read has become a best practice for pediatricians and family physicians who care for low income children. The key to this change among doctors is that they know they are doing something important and special for children. Although giving immunizations is important, children cry and mothers are anxious and distressed. Giving books is equally important,



and parents and children smile and are happy. From the first time when there's a book in the exam room, the pediatricians will see smiles, laughter, and gratitude. The appreciation is quite positive reinforcement. Finally, unlike much of pediatric anticipatory guidance, pediatricians go beyond merely advising parents to read to their children and give them a new developmentally appropriate book to take home.

Reach Out and Read is effective because it provides:

- A trusted messenger: Parents trust and value the advice they receive from their child's physician. Reach Out and Read is unique in using a trusted authority figure and the special setting of the medical visit to promote a child's learning.
- Broad scope and reach: The program reaches all children who visit participating medical providers for primary care and repeats every time they visit the doctor until age 5.
- Guidance parents can follow: The doctors and nurses are not only giving advice to parents, but are also giving them the tools to follow that advice—free books.
- Hope for educational success: Reach Out and Read explicitly ties reading aloud to enjoyment of reading and later school success; this strategy matches the aspiration that all parents have for their children to be healthy and succeed.
- Positive reinforcement: By the time a child is 1 year old, if there are books at home, she will "demand" to hear them read aloud. The positive, loving attention children receive during story time motivates them to initiate the interaction again and again.