

With Literacy and Justice for All

--by Jill A. Oglesby, Director, Valencia County Literacy Council
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Kids at Doctor's Office Get a Treat

Raul is about 5 years old. He has short brown hair and big brown eyes. While he is waiting for his doctor's appointment, a Valencia County Literacy Council (VCLC) BOOK Reader is reading him The Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle: "On Thursday, he ate through four strawberries, but he was still hungry..." Each time the BOOK Reader shows Raul a new item the caterpillar ate, Raul points to it and teaches her how to say it in Spanish. "Fresas," he says for strawberries. "Fresas," says the BOOK Reader. When Raul goes into his appointment, the medical provider gives him his own new book to take home and talks to Raul's parents about the importance of reading to him.

BOOK stands for Books Open to Our Kids, and Lori Griego, VCLC's BOOK Coordinator, can train and start new BOOK Readers at any time (call 865-1878 or e-mail lgriego@valencialiteracy.org). As Lori says, it may be hard for people to think about volunteering with the current economic crisis going on. Yet, as ProLiteracy Worldwide President David C. Harvey points out, many of the more than one million jobs lost during 2008 were in areas in which many adults with low literacy skills work. He goes on to point out that it is these very adults who will have the most difficulty getting another job.

Part of recovering from our current economic situation is working to ensure that no one gets to adulthood without being able to read well enough to realize his or her full potential. The early childhood years are a crucial part of this because we begin developing reading skills from the very beginnings of life. As Lori says, we used to talk about “reading readiness” to describe the early years (ages 0 – 5) as preparation for reading. Now, we use the term “emergent literacy” to describe this time as a continuous part of reading development rather than a preparation for it (Ramsburg 1998).

But, can reading in local First Choice, WIC, and Presbyterian medical clinics really help Valencia County children read well once they start school? Lori points out that the national program on which BOOK is based, Reach Out and Read, cites numerous studies showing the positive effects of reading in low-income medical clinics, giving out children’s books, and advising parents on the importance of reading to their children.

In one study in Boston, parents in medical clinics who had received these services were later four times more likely to report reading aloud to their children in the last 24 hours (Needlman 1991). In another study, in Palo Alto, California, Spanish-speaking immigrant families who had received these services reported a doubling in book sharing, defined as reading aloud to their children three or more times per week (Sanders 2000).

In Providence, Rhode Island, in Reach Out and Read clinics, researchers found significant increases in children’s language scores for children 18 months and older (High 2000). In two studies in New York City, children’s standardized vocabulary test scores were significantly higher in those clinics that provided these services (Mendelsohn 2001, Sharif 2002). Young children’s language development and vocabulary scores have close ties to later reading success.

As Lori also points out, whether they are from upper or lower-income families, there is no difference when you compare the love that parents have for their children. However, many parents may not realize how important it is to read to their children. Or, they may not have had it done for them when they were young, or they may be shy because of their own lower reading levels. For these families, trusted medical providers and BOOK Readers can change the course of a child’s life.

Many congratulations to Lori, by the way, for recently bringing in

\$1,000 in new grants that she discovered to buy books for Valencia County children. We'd like to thank the Kroger Foundation/Smith's Neighbor to Neighbor Fund and the ABEC Read to Me Campaign for these donations. Many thanks, too, to long-time BOOK Reader Marj Conner for her recent inspired reading of *There Was an Old Lady That Swallowed a Trout* at the United Way visit in February (and it wanted out!). I'll never look at a whale in the same way again.