

Reach Out and Read brings literacy message to pediatric clinics

At the El Rio clinic, on Congress just west of Interstate 10, a young mother and her three children wait patiently to see their pediatrician. The younger two, a girl and a boy, are immersed in two picture books, covered in vibrant animals, pulled from the clinic's reading area. The third child – the oldest – was probably too big to be interested in the picture books that his younger siblings were reading, and had instead brought a young adult book from home. The area on the opposite side of the waiting area – which featured a wall-mounted TV – was empty. Facing the opposite way, the children blissfully ignored it, engrossed in the words and pictures in their lap.

Literacy has been a targeted focus of the El Rio clinic since 1999, when it became one of the first clinics to participate in Reach Out and Read – a program that works to broaden pediatric focus beyond strictly medical care toward helping families create a culture of reading and literacy in their homes. **Reach Out and Read is a member of the Literacy for Life Coalition, a Tucson Festival of Books beneficiary.** The program provides families, with children age six months through five years old, free books and reading tips when the child gets a checkup.

“The Reach Out and Read program is special,” says Pediatrician Dr. Andrew Arthur, who helped institute the program at El Rio. “It encourages doctors to develop relationships and trust with the families. It's not just about giving vaccines to kids – although that is important – it's about more than that. When a doctor speaks to the importance of reading to your child, and then hands you a brand new book to keep, it reinforces the trust and the importance.”

Last year over 55,000 new, developmentally-appropriate books were given to nearly 40,000 southern Arizona families, and thousands more gently-used books were distributed to clinic waiting rooms. The number of Reach Out and Read Southern Arizona has grown from eight to 55 in the last eight years.

Reach Out and Read Southern Arizona works with its clinics on a sliding scale basis, some clinics pay for 100 percent of their books costs, others get their books at reduced cost, said Reach Out and Read Executive Director Will Creamer. All clinics have a hand in the books they order and covering the costs, something he says is unique to Southern Arizona's Reach Out and Read program.

“We want doctors to be invested in the program and to see it as an important part of the work they do,” said Mr. Creamer. “It's just as important as inoculations and physical care. Our goal is to make literacy a standard part of pediatric care.”

Literacy for Life is proud to recognize the work done by its members. For more information about Reach Out and Read Southern Arizona please visit <http://roraz.org/southern-arizona.asp> .