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NEWS

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PEDIATRICIANS URGED TO GET INVOLVED IN ILLITERACY
DIAGNOSIS, MANAGEMENT AND PREVENTION

Boston, Mass.--Pediatricians, who traditionally have not been involved in combating illiteracy, have special contributions to make toward its prevention, diagnosis and management, according to a commentary published in the March issue of Pediatrics in Review. In this article, members of the Division of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics at Boston University School of Medicine (BUSM) and Boston City Hospital (BCH) also discuss a new program at BCH, which is believed to be the only program in the country that incorporates literacy promotion into each pediatric office visit.

Literacy, or the ability to read fluently, is the major challenge that children face in primary school and is a major contributor to their future academic and social success. Illiteracy is most often the result of a combination of factors in school and at home that make reading an unpleasant experience.

According to Robert Needlman, M.D., the principal author of the paper who also is a pediatrician at BCH and a fellow at BUSM, pediatricians are in a unique position to address literacy issues with parents as part of well-child care long before problems develop or are recognized in school. "Since pediatricians see parents on a regular basis at a time when very few other professionals do and since parents look at pediatricians as a source of guidance on childrearing, pediatricians are in an ideal position to affect parents' beliefs and behaviors about reading to their children," says Needlman.

The authors say there is experimental as well as anecdotal evidence that children benefit from early exposure to books and parent modeling, which teach the children that books are treasured objects and that reading is a positive

experience. Most importantly, exposing children to books--even before they can read--will help instill in them the desire to read.

Pediatricians can convey this important information to parents, many of whom assume that preschoolers are too young to "understand" books or that they get enough exposure to reading in school. They can also help parents who regard reading as a chore or who are illiterate themselves and who may have difficulty passing on a love of books to their children. Without intervention, these children often learn to regard reading as unrewarding and uninteresting.

Needlman also outlines a program he and other pediatricians developed and implemented at BCH--called Reach Out and Read (ROAR)--to encourage children to regard reading as a positive or fun experience. ROAR uses several approaches to promote literacy: volunteers read aloud to children in the waiting room of the primary-care clinic; during face-to-face counseling, physicians urge parents to read to their children but not to pressure them; seminars are held to train pediatric residents about encouraging literacy; and free books and guides to libraries and other pre-literacy activities are given out during each office visit to children between the ages of six months and five years.

Needlman and the other authors conclude that reading aloud is not a panacea, but it can play a significant role in the development of literacy.