

Issue Brief

Information for Healthcare Providers



October 2009

Effects of Literacy on Family Health

Literacy affects family health both directly and indirectly.^(3, 4) In general, literate parents:

- Are healthier parents, as they are better able to follow health instructions.
- Are better able to care for their children because they are healthier, and because they can follow instructions given for their care.
- Are better off socioeconomically, which translates into better socioeconomic circumstances for their children.
- Are more empowered and have better self-esteem than non-literate parents.
- Are more likely to find reading an enjoyable pastime.
- Are more likely to encourage book reading as an enjoyable pastime for their children.⁽⁵⁾
- Are better able to use books as a vehicle for promoting healthy living (see **Resources**).

Beyond Raising Readers Literacy as a Family Affair

by Lisa M. Belisle, MD, MPH, Medical Advisor, Raising Readers

Have you ever witnessed a patient or family member:

Repeatedly ask for help from front office staff when completing paperwork, claiming to have forgotten their glasses or offering another related excuse?

Fill out forms incompletely or not at all?

Call after receiving a new prescription or written instructions from your office, confused about what to do next?

Look vaguely uncomfortable as you hand their child a Raising Readers book?

If so, you may be witnessing a case of "print intimidation." Print intimidation, experienced by individuals with low literacy levels is more common in our country than it should be. According to one study, "the United States ranks 49 of the 159 members of the United Nations in average literacy level."⁽¹⁾ One-third of all developed countries have better literacy rates than ours.

Why should we, as health care providers, be concerned about literacy? Because it impacts the well-being of our patients and their families. Consider this statement from a study highlighted in the journal **Pediatrics**:

Reading material distributed by formula and pharmaceutical companies, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the Centers

for Disease Control and Prevention required, on average, a 10th-grade reading level, which was much higher than the average 6th-grade reading ability of the adults tested.⁽²⁾

If our patients and families cannot read, they are at a distinct health disadvantage. Literacy affects health both directly and indirectly (3, 4) (see **Effects of Literacy on Family Health**).

Conversely, reading is an important tool for patients and families who are learning English as a second language. These families may use books not only to improve their English speaking skills, but also to learn about their new culture. Books may also contribute to a greater enjoyment of their surroundings.

Whether parents and caregivers speak English as a first or second language, they are arguably their children's most important teachers.⁽⁶⁾ As we discuss in the upcoming **Parent and Family Newspaper** (see **Resources**), children operate on the "monkey see, monkey do principle." They view their parents and caregivers as role models--especially when it comes to reading. Parents who read are more likely to have children who read.

If you have concerns about whether a parent or caregiver has difficulty



reading, there are many valuable community resources. Start with a call to the Literacy Volunteers of Maine hotline

at 1.800.322.5455. Explain the circumstances, and ask how you can help.

Making this phone call may be the most important thing you ever do for the health of your patient and his family. Ultimately, literacy is a family affair. Help a parent to read, and you are helping generations to come.

References

- (1) Moon, et al, "Parental Literacy Level and Understanding of Medical Information," **Pediatrics**, Vol. 102, No. 2: August 1998.
- (2) Ibid.
- (3) Sandiford, et al, "The Impact of Women's Literacy on Child Health and its Interaction with Access to Health Services," **Population Studies**, Vol. 49, No. 1.
- (4) Sanders, et al, "Literacy and Child Health: a Systematic Review," **Archives of Pediatric & Adolescent Medicine**, Vol. 163, No. 2: February 2009.
- (5) Neuman, et al, "Access to Print for Children of Poverty: Differential Effects of Adult Mediation and Literacy-Enriched Play Settings on Environmental and Functional Print Tasks," **American Educational Research Journal**, Vol. 30, No. 1: Spring, 1993.
- (6) www.childrenofthecode.org.

Research assistance provided by Kate Bartley.

Raising
Readers

Celebrating 10 years: 2000-2010

Raising Readers Book Celebration

November 6th
5:00 – 7:00 pm
**Children's Museum
of Maine**
(Free St., Portland)

Free Admission

Join us for an evening celebrating the great books given to Maine kids at hospitals and doctor's offices.

Join picture book creators for read-alouds, book signings and book related activities.

Resources

Belisle, Lisa, "Monkey See, Monkey Do: Parents as Healthy Role Models" *Parent and Family*, November/December 2009.

<http://www.myparentandfamily.com/home.html>

Literacy Volunteers of Maine

www.lvmaine.org

Maine Family Literacy Initiative

www.mainefamilyliteracy.com

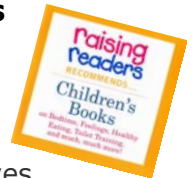
National Institute for Literacy

www.nifl.gov

Raising Readers Recommends: Great Books, Great Topics

This new resource guide features children's books on a variety of issues such as adoption, loss, new baby, toilet training and bedtime—as well as many others. Children's books with a theme or message can help support children as they confront emotional challenges -- both happy and sad -- in their daily lives.

Available at www.raisingreaders.org.



Raising
Readers



P. O. BOX 17826
PORTLAND, ME 04112

We're on the Web!

See us at:

www.raisingreaders.org
