

DOH-Leon WIC Staff Encourage Cognitive Development via ‘Reach Out and Read’ Project

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The Florida Department of Health in Leon County (Tallahassee) is teaming up with the Reach Out and Read project to encourage parents to read to their children, especially in their pre-kindergarten years.

DOH-Leon is taking the initiative in light of research that shows:

- Approximately one-third of pre-kindergarten youth across the United States have not developed the skills they need to enter kindergarten.
- Approximately one-half of pre-kindergarten youth living in poverty in the United States have not developed the skills they need to enter kindergarten.
- Only 36.5 percent of children in Title I schools in Leon County – that is, federally funded schools in the county that support low-income populations – demonstrated the skills needed to succeed in kindergarten. (DOH, 2017)
- Only 59 percent of fourth-graders in Leon County could score a passing grade on the Florida Standards Assessment English Language Arts test. (Florida CHARTS, 2017)



In addition to the aforementioned concerns, the “30 Million Word Gap” research study from psychologists Betty Hart and Todd Risley suggests that children under age 5 living in low-income families hear 30 million fewer words before entering school compared to children of the same age living in high-income families.

Not surprisingly, the disparity is said to put children living in low-income families at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to preparing for school and succeeding academically in later years.

To address these concerns, DOH-Leon has brought the Reach Out and Read project to area communities. Reach Out and Read, the brainchild of two Boston Medical Center pediatricians, is an evidence-based approach that has been used nationwide for the past 27 years.

The pediatricians developed a simple model: Prescribe parents books to read aloud to children as a means not only of increasing vocabulary, but also stimulating early brain development.

In 2001, Reach Out and Read was distributing 1.6 million books annually through 1,500 distribution sites located in all 50 states.

DOH-Leon is reaching out to parents countywide, particularly through the hundreds of families enrolled in the department’s WIC program.

Each WIC nutritionist gives to every child he/she sees up to age 5 a brand-new, age-appropriate and culturally sensitive book. The nutritionist reads the book aloud to the child, encourages the parents to make reading a part of their daily routines and offers suggestions on how to make reading time more interactive. The session also gives the nutritionist a chance to observe the development of a child’s motor, cognitive and speech skills.

Since September 2018, more than 300 books have been distributed to Leon County families.

Community response has been overwhelmingly positive, encouraging DOH-Leon WIC staff to expand the project to the surrounding counties that they also serve.

For more information on DOH-Leon's Reach Out and Read initiative, contact Unam Mansoor at (850) 404-6321 or Unam.Mansoor@FLHealth.gov.