

# THE WALLA WALLA VALLEY weekly

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## Doctors prescribe books

The Reach Out and Read program and local Early Learning Coalition provide free books for families.

By Jill Sells, M.D.  
for The Walla Walla Valley Weekly

Reading aloud is one of the most important things parents can do to help their children be ready for success in school.

Talking, singing, and reading with a young child from infancy are not only wonderful bonding experiences; they are vital to language development and future reading skills.

Reach Out and Read helps Walla Walla doctors share this message with families every day at Family Medical Center, St. Mary Physician Group Department of Family Practice and the Walla Walla Clinic Department of Pediatrics.

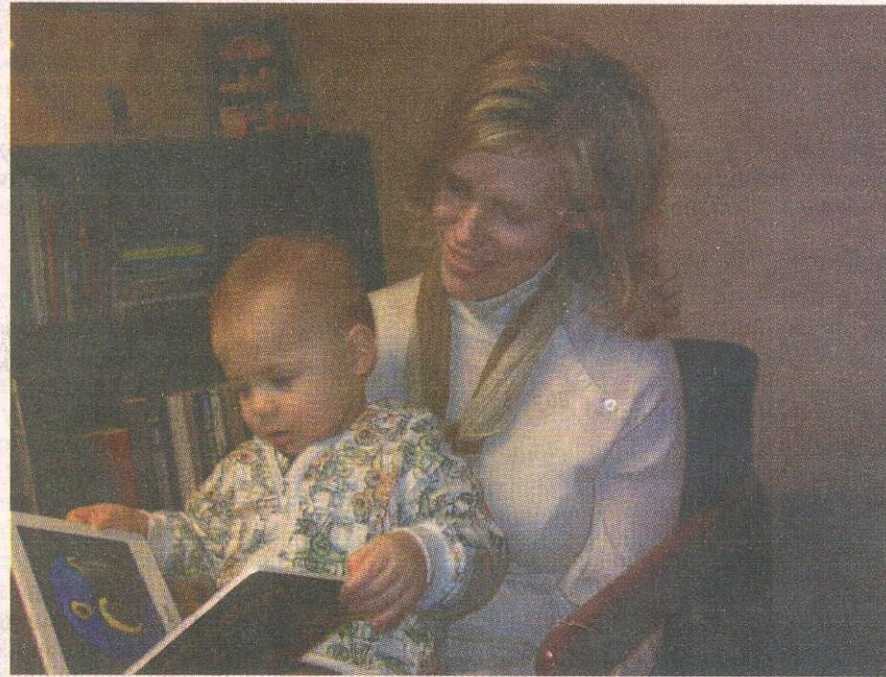
When families bring their young children in for regular checkups at these clinics, doctors talk with parents about the importance of reading aloud and the child leaves the visit with a brand new book to take home.

Family Medical Center has been participating in Reach Out and Read since 1998; St. Mary Physician Group since 1999.

"Early literacy has always been a priority of the Walla Walla Valley Early Learning Coalition (ELC). The Reach Out and Read program complements our efforts," says Samantha Bowen, ELC program manager.

A public-private partnership, the ELC's mission is to mobilize the community to support parents as their child's first teacher and improve access to high-quality early learning opportunities for all children in the Walla Walla Valley.

Reach Out and Read prepares young children to be ready for school



Courtesy photo by Dr. Alison Kirby

Dr. Nicole Villareal, pediatrician at Walla Walla Clinic, reads a book to her son. Dr. Villareal and other Walla Walla area physicians participate in the Reach Out and Read program, distributing books and a "prescription" for reading to children and their families during well-child visits.

by partnering with doctors to prescribe books and encourage families to read together.

Reach Out and Read is a national, evidence-based early literacy program that trains doctors to talk with families about the importance of reading aloud with young children, as they give each child a brand new book at well-child visits from 6 months to 5 years of age.

"We launched a state-wide Reach Out and Read effort to help communities support parents and children through the trusted relationship families have with their child's doctor," says Dr. Jill Sells, director of Reach Out and Read Washington State.

"We recognized there were longstanding programs that were not integrated into community early learning coalitions and that we could help bring doctors to these vital efforts.

"Our goal is to support parents and children by increasing access to high

quality, sustainable Reach Out and Read programs through community partnerships," says Dr. Sells.

The Walla Walla Clinic is the newest Reach Out and Read program in town, launched through a partnership with the ELC.

"Building on the success of the two medical clinics participating in Reach Out and Read, it made sense to expand in the largest pediatric clinic in Walla Walla," says Bowen.

The Walla Walla Clinic participated in the program from 1999-2003, but it was difficult for the doctors to sustain the fundraising needed to purchase books on their own. "I treasure our Reach Out and Read program at Walla Walla Clinic," says pediatrician Dr. Alison Kirby. "Half of our children in Walla Walla live in poverty. At one of our elementary schools, 90 percent of the 300 children

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## Reading: Free books are a start

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receive free/reduced lunch and most are ESL (English as second language) learners.

"This school is one of 47 schools in Washington to be on the federal list of 'persistently lowest achieving schools.'

I believe this designation is less about the school's resources or staff than it is about the uphill mountain disadvantaged children must climb to achieve in school.

"I view the Reach Out and Read Program as one tool our community can use to introduce children to the love of reading and learning, preparing them for a lifetime of success."

"I often have moms tell me how much their child loves books. I believe this is a direct result of the program," notes nurse Cynthia Shields, Reach Out and Read coordinator at Family Medical Center.

"Doctors like handing out brand new, colorful, age-appropriate books almost as much as the kids enjoy receiving them. Doctors have a great tool to help them assess their patient's development during their well child checks. The kids get so excited about getting their own new book that time passes quickly for them and it makes coming to the doctor's office much more fun! In this "techie" age, Reach Out and Read plays an important part in emphasizing the importance of reading together."

"By combining the strengths of local medical practices, Reach Out and Read Washington's State's

for more  
information

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[www.reachoutandreadwa.org](http://www.reachoutandreadwa.org)

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training and technical assistance and financial support through the ELC, we are creating a sustainable, effective system to support thousands of children and families in the Walla Walla Valley," says Dr. Sells.

Policy makers like Representative Maureen Walsh also recognize the vital importance of partnerships to support early learning in Walla Walla and across the state.

"If parents can engage in early learning, and show children their enthusiasm, they can assist their children in learning. Reading together each day will go a long way to help a child want to be a great learner," says Walsh.

"The legislature has come to recognize the tremendous value in programs like Reach Out and Read that empower parents to be their children's first teachers. Doctors providing free books to families during office visits, and advocating to young parents about the importance of reading to their kids, strengthens the parent-child bond and goes a long way in assuring that kids will be ready for school."