

Military Pediatricians Join Reach Out and Read at Naval Health Clinic New England

by Anthony Amaio, MD

To help military children succeed in the classroom and cope with anxieties about their parent's deployments, pediatricians at 30 US military bases send their patients home with free books and important advice for parents: "Read to your child every day." Naval Health Clinic New England in Newport, RI, was selected as one of the initiative's pilot sites.

Since February, Naval Health Clinic New England has participated in Reach Out and Read's (ROR) Military Initiative, which was launched last fall to extend the 20-year-old early literacy program to American military families.

At every checkup from age 6 months to 5 years, healthcare providers give each child a free new book, starting with board books for babies followed by picture books for preschoolers. Along with the free book, providers dispense advice to parents about the importance of reading aloud with their children. Each child who participates in ROR starts kindergarten with a home library of up to 10 books.

Naval Health Clinic New England, like all military bases participating in ROR, has created a literacy-rich waiting room, with child-size furniture and bookcases, where ROR-trained volunteers read with the children while their families wait for appointments.

This year alone, doctors and nurses at Naval Health Clinic New England will distribute more than 1,000 books to the 534 preschool children they serve.

ROR has one of the strongest records of research support of any primary care intervention. More than a dozen peer-reviewed studies indicate that parents who get books and literacy counseling from their health care provider are more likely to read to their children, read to them more often, and provide more books in the home. Children who participate in ROR score significantly higher on vocabulary tests and show improved language development—the single strongest predictor of school success.

According to ROR founder Barry Zuckerman, MD, more than one-third of American children arrive at school without the basic literacy skills they need to learn to read.

Reach Out and Read in the Military serves more than 90,000 children of soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines at military installations across the globe. That represents more than 25% percent of the children in U.S. military families ages 0-5 years worldwide.

In addition to the program's selection of "doctor-recommended" children's books, children will receive books designed specifically to calm anxieties about deployment and military service, such as *While You Were Away*, by Eileen Spinelli.

Pediatricians recognize the benefits of this program for children whose parents are deployed. When children and parents share books that deal with deployment, it provides an op-

portunity to determine how well the child is dealing with her parent's absence. Reading books together that deal with deployment opens up dialogue and lets the child know that she is not alone in going through this.

In addition, the children reap the same rewards enjoyed by all infants, toddlers, and preschoolers whose parents read to them. Anything that increases parents reading to their children is beneficial on so many levels – their cognitive learning, their speech development – but also the bonding that takes place between parents and children when they read together.

ROR's Military Initiative is funded by the Department of Defense and jointly administered with Strategic Resources Inc. ROR is endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics and was one of five organizations worldwide to be awarded a 2007 UNESCO literacy award.

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