

# Program uses doctors to encourage reading

Children participating in Reach Out and Read receive a book at each health care visit.

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A decade-old relationship among books, doctors and families will be celebrated this morning with a literary meal of Green Eggs and Ham.

Reach Out and Read, a national program that got its Iowa start at the House of Mercy Free Clinic and Blank Children's Hospital in Des Moines, along with Gunderson Clinic in Decorah, will host the book benefit breakfast. The program uses a platform of 10 pediatric health care visits between birth and age 5 to nurture a love of reading, particularly among children who grow up in poverty. The child gets a free book at each visit.

The program is "not a very complicated thing," said Reach Out and Read — Iowa spokeswoman Molly Olinger Topf. "It's just a consistent message."

That message really took off in Iowa three years ago, when 17 independent Reach Out and Read sites formed the heart of a coalition that quickly grew into the nearly 60 Iowa health care locations that sponsor the program today. About 67,000 books paid for with a combination of federal money, grants and donations are given out each year and are used to assess cognitive development at

the same time other key growth measures such as height and weight are checked.

Dr. Mary Ann Abrams, coalition leader and medical director of Reach Out and Read — Iowa, said the evidence from multiple studies shows families have increased the amount of time they spend reading aloud because of the program. That helps close the kindergarten-readiness gap between children living in poverty and their wealthier counterparts, she said.

On average, children living in middle-income households tend to recognize 22 letters of the alphabet at the age of 5, while children from poorer households typically know nine.

"We build on an ongoing, trusted relationship that families have with doctors, and we are reaching children way before they get to kindergarten or even preschool when brain development is happening," Abrams said. "Literacy is one of the single best predictors of overall health."

Doctors in the program can see how children are learning at home through comments children make during the reading, such as their ability to count the number of animals in a story, or calling people standing together on one

## Breakfast today to aid program

The Green Eggs and Ham Benefit Breakfast for Books will be held from 7:30 to 9 a.m. today at the State Historical Museum, 600 E. Locust St. in Des Moines.

**READING:** "Green Eggs and Ham" will be read to children in attendance.

**GUESTS:** Expect an appearance by the Cat in the Hat. Sen. Charles Grassley and former Iowa first lady Christie Vilsack, the former Reach Out and Read — Iowa advisory committee chairwoman, will be honored for their support of Reach Out and Read.

**LEARN MORE:** For information about Reach Out and Read — Iowa, call (515) 991-0872 or e-mail Molly Olinger Topf at mollyroriowa@gmail.

of the pages "a family."

Some parents are encouraged through the program to fit more family reading into their schedules and to give even infants exposure to books.

Others, said Blank physician Jennifer Groos, would need more interaction than any 10 visits to the doctor could fix, but it turns out that helping kids figure out their ABCs is usually as good as any other medicine she can dispense.

"We see families that have utter chaos at home," Groos said, "so that book we give the child may be the one book they have."