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Apr. 25, 2018

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Parkland promotes literacy through Reach Out and Read program

Providers encourage children, parents to read

DALLAS – Most children don't expect to leave the doctor's office following their check-up with a special gift. But pediatric patients of Parkland Health & Hospital System look forward to their next check-up because they know they'll be rewarded with a new book they can take home to read with their parent. In an effort to increase literacy among its patient population, young and old, Parkland participates in the national literacy program Reach Out and Read.

The program was founded in 1999 and implemented the same year at Parkland's Community Oriented Primary Care health centers (COPCs) throughout Dallas County, encouraging countless children to develop their language skills, learn and grow through reading. In just the past 18 months, more than 12,300 books have been distributed among Parkland patients. The books are provided through donations from Reach Out and Read Texas, Half Price Books, the Parkland Foundation and other donors.

"The program is aimed at families whose first language is not English. The goal is to encourage parents to read to their children while they learn to speak English, too. It's a way to kick start the learning process at home," said James Perez, Parkland's Reach Out and Read coordinator.

Dallas County is home to more than 2.6 million residents and an estimated 42 percent of them speak a language other than English at home, according to 2017 estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Through the Reach Out and Read program, a new, age-appropriate book is provided to every child age 6 months to 5 years after each visit to one of Parkland's COPCs for a routine physical checkup. Books are offered in English, Spanish and bilingual formats. As part of the program, doctors and nurses offer guidance to parents about the importance of reading aloud with their children every day.

"It's a great program that encourages parents to read to their kids to prepare them for school," said Raul Rodriguez, MD, lead pediatrician at Parkland's Garland Health Center. "Along with the books, we are given training on how to approach parents to explain why literacy in the home is vital."

During preschool years, children served by Reach Out and Read score three to six months ahead of their non-Reach Out and Read peers on vocabulary tests, research shows.

According to Dr. Rodriguez, families enjoy the reading material. Luis Flores, 37, and son Ricardo, 2, of Mesquite agree. "We love the program. Dr. Rodriguez gave my son his first book,"

Flores said. "Even though he is just two, my son knows the colors and is starting to count. He loves the books."

"We want children to see books and reading as something that's fun," Dr. Rodriguez said. "Our pediatric patients view the books as a reward for visiting the doctor, which can sometimes be a frightening experience for them."

Dr. Rodriguez said Reach Out and Read is now a routine part of pediatric visits at Parkland COPCs and when the books aren't there, patients notice. "Not so long ago we had a child come in for a checkup, but the doctor who saw him forgot to give him a book. A few days later, the child returned for a sick visit. As soon as I walked into the room he told me, 'I was here the other day, but I didn't get a book.' I immediately told him not to worry and we got him his book," Dr. Rodriguez laughed.

Flores said he appreciates the program and the staff at Parkland for caring for his family, beyond their medical needs. "Our goal as a family is to become fully bilingual. The books and the support from Parkland are helping us achieve our goal."

For more information about Reach Out and Read, please visit www.reachoutandreadtexas.org. For more information on services at Parkland, please visit www.parklandhospital.com.

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