

Raising Readers: Celebrating Books and Children

By Lisa M. Belisle, M.D., M.P.H., Medical Advisor, Raising Readers

SOPHIE STILL TALKS ABOUT VISITING the Blaine House for the first official Raising Readers Graduation. My outgoing daughter was entertained by the ‘drawing guy’ (Maine illustrator and author Scott Nash), and enjoyed meeting Mrs. Baldacci. Sophie recalls many specific details about this event, which is impressive given that it happened more than two years ago. This, and the fact that first-grader Sophie still regularly asks to be read the ‘Raising Readers’ books she received from her doctor (Portland family physician Ann Skelton), tell me that she received our program’s message loud and clear. The message? Books are special, and children are important—and both are worthy of celebration.

Recognizing the rewards of linking books and children, the Libra Foundation began the Raising Readers program in 2000. The idea was simple: pediatric healthcare providers have a unique opportunity to encourage the development of emergent literacy and language skills. Multiple studies have shown the impact of distributing books and guidance about reading to children in medical offices. Children who have this exposure are more likely to be ready to read upon reaching school age.

Children become ready to read by developing early literacy skills. According to the State of Maine Early Learning Guidelines, these “provide the child not only with the tools for lifelong learning, but also with the ability to become a critical thinker and effective communicator.” Early literacy skills include:

- **Narrative skills** – telling stories by looking at pictures.
- **Letter knowledge** – familiarity with the alphabet.
- **Vocabulary** – learning names of things that are encountered in daily living.
- **Phonological awareness** – discriminating between different sounds,
- **Print motivation** – becoming stimulated to enjoy books and other written materials.
- **Print awareness** – understanding how to care for and use books appropriately.

Raising Readers books are painstakingly selected in an effort to emphasize early literacy skills. For example, the current two-month-old book, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, was chosen for:

Its bold illustrations (*print motivation*), for the introduction to numbers (*letter knowledge*), days of the week (*vocabulary*) and the depiction of a healthy appetite (*print motivation*).

Like most other Raising Readers books, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* can also be used to demonstrate narrative skills and print awareness.

Raising Readers books can be used to demonstrate narrative skills and print awareness whether or not the ‘reader’ (in

most cases a parent) is himself able to read in English—or at all. For parents who speak Somali, Vietnamese, Spanish and Chinese, Raising Readers has translated sheets that offer ‘Reading Tips’ in those languages. These sheets stress the fact that children can accrue literacy skills simply by hearing stories created from pictures in a book. Parents who have limited reading abilities can also be referred through Raising

Readers to Literacy Volunteers of Maine. This association continues to grow in popularity: 14 individuals took advantage of this referral in the first quarter of 2007 alone.

Parents (and other care providers) are clearly getting the message about literacy—both for themselves and for their children—from clinicians who participate in Raising Readers. In a recent survey, seventy-nine percent of respondents told us that their health care provider has talked to them about reading. One commented, “this program is great... years from now [my child] will still have his books, and they are all signed by his doctor—it shows he cares for his patients!”

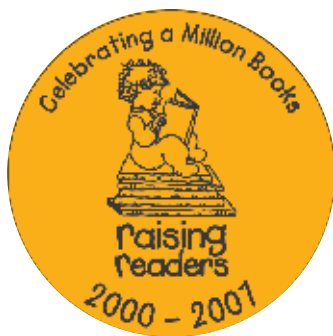
Pediatric providers also continue to give positive feedback about Raising Readers. One clinician observed, “our families love to receive a book at each [physical exam]... They still look for them after 5 years and are sad when we don’t have a book for them.” Seventy percent of survey respondents say that Raising Readers has increased the incidence of parents reading out loud, and ninety-seven percent of providers “strongly agree that counseling patients/parents about reading is important.”

JOIN US FOR A GRAND FETE IN NOVEMBER

Seven years and one million books later, Raising Readers is pleased that pediatric health care providers continue to champion literacy. Now it’s time to celebrate again: this November, Raising Readers will be holding a grand fete at the Children’s Museum of Maine. Co-sponsored by the Barbara Bush Children’s Hospital, Family Literacy Night will offer children the chance to visit the Raising Readers’ Book Nook and meet Maine authors, including Sophie’s favorite ‘drawing guy,’ Scott Nash. (For more information, visit www.raisingreaders.org.)

It’s fitting that Scott will be at the Children’s Museum in honor of the one million book milestone. No doubt Sophie will be there as well, reminding him that they’ve met once before. If he is lucky, she may let him re-sign her beloved copy of the original five-year-old graduation book, *Raising Readers: A Collection of Stories from Maine*. Then she’ll probably have me read it to her yet again, because she firmly believes the Raising Readers message:

Books are special, and children are important—and both are worthy of celebration. ■



ONE MILLION BOOKS! Raising Readers has put one million books into the hands of Maine children, from birth to age five, since 2000. We could not have done this without your ongoing support. Thank you for being a champion of both literacy and education. By encouraging parents to read to their children, you are helping set the stage for the future.

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readers**