

# The simplest, cheapest way to give your child a healthy start: Read to them

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It is the simplest, cheapest, most enjoyable way to give a child a healthy start in life: Read to them.

Read aloud to your children and grandchildren. Read and sing and talk to them every day. Read to them until they can read for themselves. Then read together. And read to them some more until they start school, then encourage them to read even more.

For optimal neurological development – nutrition for the brain, if you will – reading is just what the doctor ordered.

In fact, in a new policy statement, the American Academy of Pediatrics has taken a strong stand on the importance of literacy to good health.

The AAP, which represents 62,000 U.S. pediatricians, says physicians should prescribe “reading together as a daily fun family activity” every time a child has a doctor’s visit and, for low-income children, provide age-appropriate books.

To do so, they have teamed up with two wonderful organizations, Reach Out and Read and the Clinton Foundation’s Too Small to Fail program, as well as the children’s book publisher Scholastic. The new policy is getting a lot of attention in the United States and rightfully so. Being illiterate, innumerate or uneducated almost always condemns one to poverty and poor health.

But let’s not forget that the Canadian Paediatric Society has had a similar position since way back in 2002 – one it updated and made more forceful in 2011. While the CPS campaign has been much more low-key – unfortunately, they don’t have the same clout and friends in high places as the AAP – its recommendations are even more sweeping.

They say that waiting rooms should be chock full of books, that children should be handed books during visits because they are comforting, and in addition to prescribing reading to kids, they should be prescribed library cards, and parents-in-need should be steered to literacy programs.

The CPS statement also provides some chilling data on the “crisis of low literacy” in Canada. To wit:

- Forty-two per cent of Canadians 16 to 65 years of age do not have the minimum literacy skills for coping with everyday life and work in a knowledge-based economy.

- Low literacy skills are found among 80 per cent of prison inmates, 60 per cent of immigrants (compared with 37 per cent of native-born Canadians) and 18 per cent to 38 per cent of youth, depending on the region of the country.
- Five per cent to 15 per cent of schoolchildren have reading delays, and most kids who have not mastered reading by the end of Grade 3 will never catch up.
- People with low literacy skills are twice as likely to be unemployed.
- Fifty per cent of adults with low literacy levels live below the poverty line.
- Literacy problems cost Canada \$10-billion a year.

Not only is promoting literacy good medicine, it also makes economic sense,” concludes the CPS.

Yet, illiteracy, innumeracy and lack of education are, at their root, pediatric problems.

A much-cited study showed that, by age four, children of well-to-do professionals hear about 30 million more words than children of parents on social assistance. This exposure to vocabulary – through reading, singing, talking – gives them a distinct advantage in school and carries through to school performance in later grades and, ultimately, to better educational opportunities and higher-paying jobs.

The new statement from U.S. pediatricians says that encouraging reading from an early age should help close the gaps between income and racial groups.

While reading to kids may seem like a no-brainer, the reality is that only about half of children are read to daily, and the principal reason given is there simply isn't enough time, especially with overworked parents and overprogrammed kids.

With the proliferation of tablets and smartphones, the book may seem like an anachronism but, even if swiping replaces page-turning, reading aloud remains important. It not only stimulates neurons and builds vocabulary, but forges bonds between parents (or grandparents) and children.

Literacy is the foundation of a good education and educational achievement is a good predictor of income. That trinity – literacy, education, income – is a powerful determinant of health. In fact, life expectancy, and health more generally, correlates pretty closely with education/income.

Low literacy is an issue that health practitioners – beginning with pediatricians – cannot afford to ignore. A health system worthy of its name needs to promote literacy because it is a virtual prerequisite to good health.

Of course, your babies don't need to know all this; they just have to lie back and enjoy the bedtime stories, oblivious to the fact that the soothing words will provide more comfort and joy (and good health) than they can imagine.