

Report shows less than half of kids in California are being read to daily

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A report released today reveals that California ranks in the bottom half of the nation — 42nd out of 50 states and the District of Columbia — in the percentage of children who are read to daily by their parents.

According to "Reading Across the Nation: A Chartbook," prepared by the UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities for the nonprofit Reach Out and Read National Center, only 44.6 percent of Californian children between birth and the age of 5 are read to every day by a parent. The national average is 47.8 percent. California brings up the rear, along with a number of Southern and Southern border states.

For children, early exposure to books — including being read to aloud each day — is critical for long-term academic success. Research has shown that up to one-third of American children enter kindergarten underprepared to learn, mostly because their early years leave them without the necessary language and literacy skills.

"This report proves that physicians and policymakers have work to do," said Dr. Shirley Russ, associate clinical professor of pediatrics at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, who led the research team that compiled the report. "Early learning starts in the home with parents. We need to do more to ensure that parents have the information and tools they need to provide their children with a strong foundation for learning."

The report provides state-by-state information on the percentage of

children whose parents read aloud to them daily. The statistics show that reading rates vary significantly by state, with Vermont posting 68 percent and Mississippi only 38 percent.

Among the findings for California:

- Reading rates vary by race/ethnicity, with 58.5 percent of white (non-Hispanic) parents reporting daily reading, compared with a 37.9 percent average for all other groups.
- Among children living in or near poverty, about one-third from birth to age 5 are read to daily, putting California 48th out of 50 states and the District of Columbia.
- Among children in families with middle incomes, California fares better than many other states, ranking 25th in the nation.
- Only 22 percent of California fourth graders display proficiency or better on national reading tests, putting the state 45th nationally.

"Many of the states reporting the lowest rates of reading also report lower reading proficiency rates among their fourth-graders," said Dr. Neal Halfon, professor of pediatrics, public health and public policy at UCLA and director of the Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities. "We are trying to connect the dots between the investments parents make to foster early language and literacy skills and their child's eventual academic achievement. These are important connections to make if we hope to prevent poor academic achievement and school failures that have important implications for children, their long-term earning potential and for our local economy."

UCLA's Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities understands the importance of reading aloud and has several innovative programs in place to help serve the community, especially children from low socioeconomic backgrounds and minorities.

Along with faculty from the UCLA Department of Pediatrics, the center has helped Mattel Children's Hospital UCLA to launch the Community Health and Advocacy Training Program in Pediatrics (CHAT). CHAT uniquely enhances the traditional education of young pediatricians by training pediatric residents to work with community partners at schools and clinics to emphasize the importance of school-readiness activities in the home, including reading aloud.

UCLA pediatricians and residents also partner with Reach Out and Read, a national organization that helps promote reading aloud by providing information to parents about the importance of reading to their children every day and by giving children a free, age-appropriate book at each of their 10 well-child visits between the ages of six months and 5 years. Dr. Alice Kuo, director of the CHAT program and a researcher at the Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities, found in a recent national study that parents whose child health providers discussed reading at a well-child visit were almost twice as likely to read every day with their young child.

Reach out and Read has a strong presence in Southern California, with more and more pediatric practices joining this national effort, which has received support and endorsements from Congressional leaders on both sides of the aisle.

"I have seen firsthand the valuable contribution Reach out and Read is making in Southern California. It's an innovative program that gets results," said Rep. Henry A. Waxman, D-Calif.

"Of all child-parent activities, reading aloud provides the richest exposure to language and represents an important activity for building the knowledge required for eventual success in reading," said Dr. Victor Perez, assistant professor of pediatrics at Mattel Children's Hospital UCLA. "As physicians, we are on the front line to encourage parents to

read to their kids."

Recommendations for reading aloud to children include:

- Using the pictures in a book to tell your own story.
- Using reading aloud to your child to establish a bedtime routine.
- Using the pictures in a book to talk with your child — pointing and naming or describing objects in the book — or to relate the book to the child's experiences ("He has a sister, just like you").

"Reading Across the Nation: A Chartbook" includes data from the 2003 National Survey of Children's Health and the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress. For the full report and state breakdowns, please visit the Web site of the UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities at healthychild.ucla.edu.

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