

## **Ochsner Introduces Literacy Program to Promote Healthy Minds**

### *Reading to Children Early Helps Identify Developmental Delays and Promote Growth*

**NEW ORLEANS** –Ochsner for Children recently held a ceremony to “*Reach Out and Read*” with Louisiana’s First Lady Supriya Jindal as it announced a pediatrician-led childhood literacy program. In this initiative, pediatricians encourage parents to read aloud to children in order to promote overall development and identify communication delays in young children. Mrs. Jindal spoke about the importance of literacy, the Supriya Jindal Foundation for Louisiana’s Children, and she read aloud to pediatric patients.

Since literacy is one of the best predictors of overall cognitive development and behavioral health, during children’s well check visits at Ochsner for Children, pediatricians are giving infants, toddlers, and pre-schoolers a free book and encouraging parents to read aloud. Reading materials are developmentally and culturally appropriate and range from board books to more complex picture books.

The *Reach Out and Read* program is helping physicians better diagnose communication disorders by reviewing with parents their observations of a child’s ability to remember stories, point to characters in the books, and eventually develop language and reading skills. “This program takes advantage of early brain development, a time before formal education, when children are sponges for learning. The knowledge acquired during this period will impact their learning potential for life,” says Dr. Daniel Bronfin, Vice Chairman of Pediatrics at Ochsner. “A book-a-day is up there with an apple-a-day.”

The program was initiated at Ochsner by Dr. Michelle Payette, Ochsner Clinical Research Coordinator, who was inspired by her own life experiences with her son, Spencer. An advocate of literacy for children and adults, as a young girl, Payette tutored deaf children and adults in reading and math and, during her medical residency; she worked as a *Reach Out and Read* Coordinator. When her son was born with developmental delays, Payette realized the importance of exposing him to books and music to help him overcome language and speech delays.

“Detecting communication disorders early in childhood is critical because it allows children to make more significant progress in their delays,” says Dr. Michelle Payette. “With plenty of hard work and early intervention, Spencer is doing very well and is graduating from Kindergarten this year and was chosen to be in an advanced reading program. I’m so proud of my son and the hurdles he’s overcome.”

“*Reach Out and Read* increases dialogue between parents and physicians. When we read to children, we give them a gift that lasts a lifetime,” explains Dr. Daniel Bronfin. “As a father and pediatrician, I’ve found that reading to a child and encouraging literacy helps spark imagination and provides children with a lasting foundation for learning.”

*Reach Out and Read* is a national non-profit organization based in Boston that promotes early literacy by giving new books to children and advice to parents about the importance of reading aloud. Nationally, this year physicians will give out five million new books to three million families in the U.S through *Reach Out and Read* ([www.reachoutandread.org](http://www.reachoutandread.org).)