



BRIGHT SPOTS

WALLOWA COUNTY, OREGON

At a small rural health center in northeast Oregon's Wallowa County, young children and their families browse through the waiting room's lending library, connect to a home visitation program and leave with a free book.

These activities are designed to promote a child's healthy development, early literacy and school readiness and are the result of a partnership between two local nonprofits — [Winding Waters Clinic](#) and [Building Healthy Families \(BHF\)](#), which provides family support and education programs to low-income families.

In 2013, Maria Weer, executive director of BHF, and Dr. Liz Powers, of Winding Waters, spearheaded the partnership. "We wrapped our brains around how we could encourage early literacy and positive parenting," says Weer, whose organization leads the local grade-level reading campaign.

The partnership benefits both organizations — and young children. For example, BHF staff are located with clinic staff at the clinic's front desk and administer the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ), a developmental and social-emotional screening, to about 200 patients under age 5. BHF staff flag families and clinic staff if a child might benefit from more support, which parents often can learn to provide at home.

The ASQ helps reduce the number of children with undetected and untreated developmental delays. In the rare instance when severe persistent developmental issues are identified, the child is referred to the local early intervention program. Exact numbers are hard to come by, in determining the impact of screening, but during one month in early 2015, the clinic referred two children to early intervention.

Having BHF staff on site also means clinic staff can introduce them to families. "Being able to bring that support into the exam room is huge," Powers says. "That warm handoff, physically shaking the hand of BHF staff, makes the difference in whether or not people actually connect with services."

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Bright Spots showcase the work that Grade-Level Reading communities are doing to make progress on school readiness, school attendance and summer learning by 2016. They are written and produced by the Campaign. You can nominate a Bright Spot in your community by emailing Betsy Rubiner at brubiner@gradelevelreading.net.

Many children were arriving at the clinic with “risk factors but the follow-through wasn’t there. Now we’re there,” Weer says. “So if you don’t have any books in your house — ‘here are books.’ If you don’t have fine motor skills because you don’t have money for scissors — ‘here are scissors, jumbo crayons and pencils.’”

Brainstorming led by the two women, both mothers of young children, has spurred other activities to support early literacy including a designated “book of the month” with a suggested activity that families can complete while waiting for their appointment or take home. The clinic’s four physicians and three paraprofessionals also participate in Reach Out and Read, the national effort by medical professionals to distribute books to parents of young children.

Although some medical practices fear adding administrative burden, “these things can happen without cutting into visit or staff time with some problem solving,” Weer says. “Winding Waters has integrated parent education and early literacy into practice-wide systems.”

For example, when BHF materials were not always making it out of a storage closet, the procedure was changed. The clinic receptionist preparing for the day’s appointments now adds these age-appropriate well-child materials so both await patient and physician.

And these efforts are paying off, when measuring outcomes that matter. Surveys of Winding Waters’ patients evaluating their experiences [via a consumer assessment](#) found that between 2013 and 2014, the percentage reporting that they received parent education on health behaviors and injury/accident prevent rose from 40 to 63. For parent education around physical and emotional development, the percentage rose from 46 to 72.

“It takes creativity and the capacity to change,” says Powers. The partnership with BHF furthers the clinic’s work to promote not only health but also wellness by addressing social factors such as low literacy that “have way more impact on health, productivity and quality of life than anything we do in the medical field,” she adds. “Low literacy levels correlate with poor health outcomes. We see the consequences of low literacy not just in grade school but beyond.”

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