



COMMENT

ECI biocommentary—June

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I was born in Lexington, Kentucky and have lived in Texas, North Carolina, and now Cincinnati, Ohio. While passionate about mud, bikes, and baseball, as a child my parents read to me and took me to the library often, and our house was filled with books. My dad was in academic medicine (hematologist–oncologist), and my mom was a writer. Each was an inspiration. I majored in math at Davidson College, attended the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine, and completed residency and primary care research fellowship at Cincinnati Children’s Hospital. I am currently an Assistant Professor of General and Community Pediatrics and Director of the Reading and Literacy Discovery Center there.

My career arc has been adventuresome. Initially planning to specialize in emergency medicine, I went on leave from pediatric residency after 15 months to be a stay-home dad and write novels, a longtime dream. Soon thereafter, in a stroke of serendipity, my wife and I rescued a beloved yet failing children’s bookstore (contract signed in green crayon) and ran it for 18 years. Meanwhile, reading with my three daughters from infancy through adolescence has been among the most meaningful experiences of my life. This immersion reinforced passions for nurturing shared reading experiences, reducing profound disparities in these, and halting the engulfment of childhood by screen time. After almost 8 years amidst *Sneetches* and *Wild Things*, I returned to residency (started over) with a newfound focus. During training, I worked on reading advocacy projects, devoured articles, and developed a series of children’s books channeling American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) screen time recommendations (*Baby Unplugged*). This led to my first paper and other children’s books (I’ve now published 32), several distributed via statewide infant health campaigns and benefiting non-profit groups.

During fellowship, I was fortunate to work with mentors expert in magnetic resonance imaging (MRI); Dr. Scott Holland and

Dr. Tzipi Horowitz-Kraus), screening measures (Dr. Rick Ittenbach), and clinic-based programs such as Reach Out and Read (Dr. Tom DeWitt). The AAP released literacy promotion recommendations during fellowship, including references to brain development. My first project involved application of MRI to explore relationships between home literacy environment—my conceptual model—and brain function in preschool-age children. As it was the first such analysis, this received considerable attention. This led to a series of MRI studies, which reinforce the importance of early experiences and interventions to promote healthy brain development. To support this work and address gaps in validated tools, I developed several screening measures intended for primary care use, including the ScreenQ.

My advice to other emerging researchers is to focus on an area aligned with your passions. Develop a conceptual model to define gaps and inform hypotheses. Beyond academia, envision how your work may impact children and families and how you will translate findings. Be nice to your colleagues—this is hard, existential stuff—and have fun!

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