

## JACLYN SISKIND, MD '09

## The Doctor Who Prescribes Books

Upstate Golisano pediatrician Jaclyn Siskind, MD '09, doles out prescriptions at every office visit, using her special pad that's always in her pocket.

But she's not dispensing pills to chew or liquids to swallow. Instead of the pharmacy, she sends patients to the library.

For Siskind, the pages of a book are perhaps the most important tool in her medical bag. She uses them as a diagnostic tool to check developmental milestones of babies, the social-emotional intelligence of toddlers, and to help teens find their bearings.

What grew from her own passion for reading and her desire to connect with patients has grown into a whole new identity for her.

Now known as the "Readiatrician," Siskind has her own website ([readiatrician.com](http://readiatrician.com)), 15,000 followers on Twitter, and a monthly virtual book club for local pediatricians. She has connected with authors, been asked to speak at reading conferences, and has written blog posts about her experiences, including a January 3 piece published in the *School Library Journal*, the premiere publication for librarians and information specialists who work with children and teens.

"I always ask kids what they're reading because it's an important question. And when a doctor asks them something it makes them realize this is something they should be doing," she says. "It also makes the caregiver realize, 'Wow this is important enough that the doctor is asking about it.'"

Prescribing books started causally about nine years ago. Siskind carries Post-it notes in her pockets and she started jotting down titles of books she thought her patients would enjoy. When she realized how powerful that could be, she created her reading prescription pad and applied for grants to supply books for young readers. Since most grants only cover early readers, her book supply only covers patients from babies through age five, and each receives a book at their well-child visit. Siskind's office, the Baldwinsville location of Upstate Pediatrics, is in the process of becoming a Reach Out and Read site. Reach Out and Read is a national program that provides grant money for books for young patients.

Siskind shows parents of babies and toddlers that books can be used for so much more than reading. She uses board books to check milestones like passing an object from hand to hand, identifying colors, counting, and even just using them to make noise or toss around.

She gives older patients recommendations, hoping they will find the book at their local or school library.



Upstate Golisano's Jaclyn Siskind '09 is known as the "Readiatrician," for prescribing books and trips to the library for her patients.

Using books with her teen population is perhaps her most profound use of books. Siskind uses books to build trust with patients and to help them with physical, emotional, and psychological well-being.

She recounts an episode with a patient she met as a teen, who had faced medical issues since birth. Siskind struggled to connect with the patient and even conducted some appointments through the office door. Nothing worked to build trust until she saw a book poking out of the patient's bag. She knew the book and started to talk with the patient about it. Everything changed from that moment, and now the patient is a thriving college student.

Whatever the issue—sexual identity, bullying, body image, loss of a parent, racism, fitting in—Siskind always has a book at the ready to help patients see they are not alone. Sometimes she just recommends a funny book that she and the patient can laugh about together.

A huge fan of children's and young adult literature, Siskind can easily recall relevant texts from the books she is reading or ones she read as a kid.

"My brain tends to hang on to that information," she said. "I wouldn't have to look up the Krebs cycle so often if I could have memorized that in medical school. But I can recall lines and titles and themes and authors. It is just the way my brain is wired."

Siskind says she always has a book with her and reads during lunch, with her three boys, who are in eighth grade, fourth grade and kindergarten, and before bed.

"I need to read in the same way some people need to exercise," she says. "I wish I had the relationship with my treadmill that I have with books. I am a happier person when I am reading."

—Jean Albanese