

OUR MISSION: Read to Grow promotes language skills and literacy for children, beginning at birth, and supports parents as their babies' first teachers.

Early Steps to School Success

Launching Save the Children Program in New Haven

This fall Read to Grow begins a low-literacy prevention program for young children in at-risk families in New Haven.

"I'm thrilled that we're bringing to New Haven a literacy program that has had enormous success and effectiveness in rural communities for over a decade," said Roxanne Coady, Read to Grow founder and board chair.

Save the Children has operated its Early Steps to School Success program since 2007 in areas that include Appalachia, Native American reservations and rural southern California. New Haven will be the only city-based adaptation of Early Steps, which works both in homes and in elementary schools with voluntarily enrolled pregnant women and families whose children range in age from newborn to 5.

"I'm hopeful that this New Haven program will become a model for improving kindergarten preparedness in urban

environments across the nation," said Coady. "We're particularly excited about bringing together the expertise of Save the Children and the institution of New Haven's schools. Collaborations of this caliber – of like minds, proven skills and shared goals – can only mean good things for our children, our schools and the city."

Read to Grow will fund and manage Early Steps-New Haven as an affiliate of Save the Children, following the program's protocols and best practices.

The goals of Early Steps are:

- Children enter school with skills necessary for school success.
- Parents have the knowledge and skills to support their children's education.
- Home/school connections are strong.
- Early childhood knowledge and skills in communities are significantly increased.

Early Steps staff, each based in an elementary school, will make regular home



visits to pregnant women and families with children, newborn to age 3. Additionally, the staff will organize bimonthly group meetings with those same families at the schools.

For families with slightly older children—

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Delivered through Prenatal Project

Lessons about Babies' Brains, Language Skills for Mothers-To-Be

By Marguerite Alpert

Books for Babies Coordinator

Bruna Fortunato's journeys from Brazil and to pregnancy have not been easy.



Bruna Fortunato (left) meets with Cathy Nucera, RN Coordinator at Southwest Community Health Center in Bridgeport.

When the 25-year-old first came to this country four years ago to make a better life for herself, she struggled with learning a new language and keeping up with bills. She stayed less than a year. Once back in Brazil, however, Bruna realized that she wanted to make another go of it in the United States.

Shortly after her return to Connecticut in 2015, Bruna met her husband, Christian, a former Marine now enrolled in the Connecticut Police Academy. After much sadness over a failed first pregnancy, the couple are happily expecting their first child, a son, in early December.

Today Bruna is one of about 300 women receiving their

obstetric care at Southwest Community Health Center in Bridgeport. The center is partnered with Read to Grow's Prenatal Project, which means pregnant women receive information about early childhood literacy and new, free baby books. The OB patients learn about the importance of developing the language skills of babies and how parents are their children's first teachers. With the new board books, they can create home libraries before their children are born.

Southwest is one of six partnerships in our Prenatal Project. The others are with: Connecticut Children's Medical Center in Hartford; Fair Haven Community Health Center and Cornell Scott Hill Health Corporation, both in New Haven; Women's Center at Yale Primary Care Clinic in New

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Chelsea Fitzgerald—A Tireless Champion of Children Who Need Books



Chelsea Fitzgerald with books for Read to Grow

She's done it again! For the sixth time!

Chelsea Fitzgerald, a 13-year-old who started eighth grade this fall, organized and ran another summer book drive in her hometown of Wallingford for Read to Grow. This year she collected 3,800 books, some of which she purchased as new books with money raised in a bake sale at her house.

Over the last six summers, Chelsea has donated a total of 14,106 books to give to other children across the state.

"She's our little super hero," said Evelyn Tomasello, co-coordinator of the Books for Kids program. "She's absolutely amazing."

Chelsea's efforts have gained more support from the community over the years. She has a Facebook page for the book drive and bake

sale. Her work is promoted by the Record-Journal newspaper and by Damon Scott & Cory Meyers of Country 92.5 radio, who have nicknamed her "Book Girl."

Her mother, Gina, said Chelsea has gotten to the age that she does most of the baking and planning on her own.

"I love working with Chelsea," she said. "It gives us quality time together, having fun and serving a good cause at the same time."

Chelsea is especially fond of the cause she helps. "Reading is my favorite hobby. . . . It makes me sad to think some kids don't have any books of their own."

"It's my goal to continue doing an annual bake sale and book drive until I graduate high school."

LAUNCHING SAVE THE CHILDREN PROGRAM IN NEW HAVEN

(continued from page 1)

ages 3 to 5—the staff will establish weekly book exchanges at the schools.

Early Steps-New Haven becomes Read to Grow's third program, joining Books for Babies and Books for Kids.

For 19 years, Read to Grow has promoted early literacy across Connecticut, giving more than 1.8 million children's books to over 1.2 million people in the state.

Today the nonprofit reaches tens of thousands of parents and children from low-income households annually through 46 distinct collaborations with other nonprofits.

"As we head into our 20th year this January," said Kyn Tolson, executive director at Read to Grow, "we'll be adding this significant undertaking to our two robust programs."

"We're looking forward to the challenge and the important work of making books and reading essential elements of many more lives."

The mission of Read to Grow is driven by findings that show Connecticut among the states with the largest achievement gaps in high-school testing between teenagers in economically advantaged homes and those less fortunate. As an abundance of research shows, learning abilities and academic success can be predicted as early as kindergarten with measurements of children's language skills and comprehension.

NEWSLETTER OF READ TO GROW

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Window on Grants Empowering Our Work

STOCKER FOUNDATION

In its first-time award to Read to Grow, The Stocker Foundation has given \$10,000 for early childhood literacy in Hartford. The grant will translate into literacy packets for Hartford and Saint Francis hospitals and will provide books to children served by our partnership with the United Way of Central and Northeastern Connecticut.

The foundation, based in Ohio, focuses exclusively on lessening the reading/literacy achievement gap for under-resourced children, from pre-kindergarten through third-grade in public schools.

BRANFORD COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

A \$3,500 grant from the Branford Community Foundation will become children's books and literacy services for families in town. Most

of the funds will be spent to buy books for the "One Book, One Town" literacy event in April 2019, during the national Week of the Young Child. Branford's Early Childhood Collaborative organizes that annual happening.

FOULDS FAMILY FOUNDATION

Lucky 13! For the 13th consecutive year, the Mr. & Mrs. William Foulds Family Foundation has awarded a grant for early childhood literacy in Manchester. The \$1,000 will help Books for Babies at Manchester Memorial Hospital.

The annual cost of our program there is about \$19,800. Each year it serves more than 1,460 families with newborns, both on the maternity unit and through the Follow-Up, which delivers free books to homes.

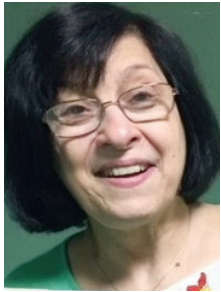
KATHARINE MATTHIES FOUNDATION

The Katharine Matthies Foundation has supported early childhood literacy in the Lower Naugatuck Valley for five years straight. This year's \$7,000 award will provide literacy packets to families of babies born at Griffin Hospital and books to children visiting the Book Place at the Valley Family Resource Center at TEAM, Inc.

OSSEN FAMILY FOUNDATION

For three years, grants from the Jeffrey P. Ossen Family Foundation have helped our Books for Kids program in Windham. Their recent \$5,000 grant allows us to purchase books—many of them bilingual—for the Windham Early Childhood Center Book Place, which serves children in Windham and Willimantic.

Volunteer Spotlight



BARBARA PENDZIWATER

Gratitude is what inspired Barbara to begin volunteering at Read to Grow's office a little more than a year ago.

"When I began working as a library media specialist in 2003, I had no money to purchase books for my kindergarten students. I called Read to Grow, and they donated books to help me get started," she said.

Barbara retired from East Haven Public Schools with 17 years as both a classroom teacher and a library media specialist. She still works five evenings a week at the Willoughby Wallace Memorial Library in Stony Creek, where she's been for more than 30 years.

Barbara's also at Read to Grow five days a week. She packs literacy packets headed to hospital maternity units and sorts children's books to be given to brothers and sisters visiting their newborn siblings at those hospitals. She also helps Books for Kids.

Barbara likes finding books that will interest children of all abilities.

"Completing an order can be a challenge," she said. "Yesterday I had to choose books for a special education class reading on first- to third-grade reading levels."

Barbara has two grown sons and lives in Branford.



ANA AREVALO

Ana is one of our newest volunteers at Hartford Hospital. She speaks both English and Spanish and loves discussing the importance of reading with mothers of newborns on Bliss 6, Hartford Hospital's maternity floor.

A resident of Manchester, Ana is in her senior year at Central Connecticut State University. She hopes to get a job in social work in a hospital or medical-care setting when she graduates. Meanwhile, Ana finds volunteering with Books for Babies just the right kind of reward—something important that makes both her and others feel better.



LOIS STEINMAN

Lois is a double-duty hospital volunteer.

She has been substituting for other Books for Babies volunteers at Lawrence + Memorial Hospital in New London since the spring of 2015. In

April this year, she started filling in at Backus Hospital in Norwich, our newest partner in the Books for Babies program. While she loves both of the hospitals she serves, the East Lyme resident feels especially close to Backus because her children were born there.

Lois was a reading consultant and literacy coach in the towns of Colchester, Coventry and Plainfield before retiring. She also gave literacy workshops to teachers throughout Connecticut.

Lois recently talked with a mother who had just given birth to her eighth child. The conversation was a fun one, and she was impressed with the mother's listening skills. The woman was grateful, Lois added, to learn that reading aloud to her children will enhance their language development.

In the Partnerships of Books for Kids

Surveys Show More Parents Reading to Their Children

Surveys of parents who have received childhood literacy information and free books from Read to Grow show the greatest change in their behavior when it comes to the number of times they read to their children.

After receiving our information in workshops or conversations, 46% of 73 surveyed said they read to their children multiple times daily. Before hearing or reading our information, under 30% gave the same answer.

All 73 people completed the same survey two times: first before hearing our information and getting our children's books, then afterward. The surveys are intended to measure possible change in their knowledge and behaviors because of our interventions.

All the parents surveyed participate in programs run by other nonprofits that are collaborating with Read to Grow. In these formal Partnerships, we work with agencies already helping at-risk families to add or enhance their early childhood services. Since 2015, we have formed 13 Partnerships, ranging from those with the Nurturing Families Network to the Grow Truck, which is operated by Connecticut Food Bank.

The surveys also show that, because of our Partnerships, many families learned about another feature of the Books for Kids program: Book Places. At the 33 Book Place sites across Connecticut, families can select free children's books to keep. Locations and other details about the sites are available on our website (www.readtogrow.org).

Other positive outcomes of our work are revealed in slight increases in the number of parents understanding the importance of minimizing screen time for their families and who feel better equipped to choose books appropriate for their children.

Of the 73 people answering both surveys, 90% were parents and 7% were grandparents. The children in their families range in age from newborn to young adults.

Of the families surveyed, 61% said English is the main language of the household. Spanish is the main language of 34%. Our surveys are provided in English and Spanish.

Completed surveys indicate that parents would benefit from a better understanding of:

- when to share books with their children;
- where to get free books;

- how to select books for their children;
- why reducing screen usage is so important.

By Linda Sylvester and Evelyn Tomasello

A Cup of Coffee, A Wake-Up for Charity

Through December, customers at New Haven's Blue State Coffee at 320 Congress Avenue can get the refreshments of their choice and place a vote for Read to Grow.

Blue State has selected four charities to receive a portion of their sales revenue, based on customers' votes. The opportunity runs for six months, ending on December 31.

We hope you will stop by 320 Congress Avenue to recharge yourself and give a boost to Read to Grow.

Visit us at
www.readtogrow.org

f: ReadtoGrowCT t: @ReadtoGrowCT
i: readtogrow



Mark the Calendar

National Family Literacy Day is November 1st — a date to remember if you would like to give a special donation for the work of Read to Grow through the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven (CFGNH).

For online gifts to Read to Grow on November 1, donors can go to our profile page on the CFGNH's website: <http://givegreater.guidestar.org>.

We will send out email reminders before and on Nov. 1. To add your address to the email list, simply send a request to: readtogrow@readtogrow.org.

LESSONS ABOUT BABIES' BRAINS, LANGUAGE SKILLS

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Haven; and UCONN Health Nurturing Families Program in Farmington.

Read to Grow staff continue to expand this work at other community health centers.

Over the months, Bruna has jumped at the chance to learn about the best ways to prepare her baby for success. Even though she grew up with books and could read before kindergarten, she became aware through the Prenatal Project of just how early that learning begins.

"I am so happy to have this opportunity," she said. "I never knew about a baby's brain connections and how important it is to stimulate them by talking and reading and singing."

Bruna also learned during a prenatal session that her baby could hear voices and other sounds at 20 weeks of gestation. "My baby can hear me right now!" she said. "It's awesome. I also love that the books have two languages."

The Fortunatos hope their son will eventually have command of not only English but also Bruna's native Portuguese and Spanish, which Christian speaks.

Cathy Nucera, RN Coordinator at Southwest Community Health Center, said, "It's so good to hear that what we do makes a difference in someone's life. It gives us motivation to continue to give the message of literacy."

Bruna already has three books ready for her son when he is born. In fact, she added, Christian is "already reading the Read to Grow books to Zachary (in the womb)!"

For her part, Bruna has cut down on her use of screens. After learning that screen time is not recommended for children under 2, she gave her tablet to her mother to avoid temptation. "I was on Facebook too much, and I want to avoid screens as much as I can for Zachary. For me, it's a no-no!"

From the beginning of motherhood, she said, "I want to get this right."