

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

Read to Grow and COVID-19

In the darkest of times, the human spirit craves routine and hope. As we wrestle with the pandemic, babies continue to be born and children continue to learn. Read to Grow is more committed than ever to ensuring that children across Connecticut have access to books of their own, even if it means we're distributing them in new and creative ways.

Despite our physical office closing down on March 13, the urgency of Read to Grow's mission is all the more important. Our literacy packets and *Welcome to the World!* book continue to go home with every baby born in our 15 partner hospitals across the state. Our prenatal materials continue to reach expecting moms receiving care at our partner clinics. And our Book Places continue to distribute books along with other resources families desperately need while our Early Steps to School Success coordinators continue to conduct virtual home visits

and support parents struggling with the challenges we currently face.

In mid-March, when we still thought we were running a sprint and not a marathon, our founder Roxanne Coady made an appeal to the customers of RJ Julia Bookstore: join RJ Julia and Read to Grow to purchase new books to be distributed at school meal distribution sites in New Haven. The appeal was wildly successful and caught on like wildfire, with Senator Chris Murphy joining the cause and expanding the effort to Bridgeport, Norwalk and Middletown. Long-time sponsors Pitney Bowes stepped up to the challenge as did over 4,000 individual donors. Altrusa USA and Senator Mae Flexer have partnered with us to bring the distribution to Windham County and Northeast Connecticut. As of the publication of this newsletter, more cities are being considered and by the end of June we will have distributed over 30,000 books to children who need them most.



Masks made by Read to Grow staff for volunteers distributing books at school meal distribution sites across Connecticut.

Executive Director Hand-Off

In January, Read to Grow said a very fond farewell to outgoing executive director Kyn Tolson and welcomed Suzannah Holsenbeck as the new executive director.

Tolson's robust legacy includes the launch of Read to Grow's Early Steps to School Success Program in New Haven in partnership with Save the Children. Under her leadership, Read to Grow expanded its reach to new regions of Connecticut, further developed the Prenatal Project and initiated a pilot with

CT Children's NICU (see page 2 for more information on the NICU initiative). Tolson's ever-present editorial eye paired with a knack for streamlining protocol meant that Read to Grow functioned like a well-oiled machine.

Holsenbeck joins Read to Grow after many years in education, both as a teacher and administrator. Holsenbeck's own children, born at Yale New Haven Hospital, both received their *Welcome to the World!* books and it was those brief but meaningful visits from Read to Grow volunteers that introduced her to the work of Read to Grow.

Holsenbeck spent the first two months of her tenure listening, learning and observing all the pieces that make a whole at Read to Grow. A mere three months in, the pandemic struck and Holsenbeck has been leading the Read to Grow team through uncharted waters. She recognizes the many opportunities Read to Grow has to deepen its support of the literacy needs of babies, children and



Kyn Tolson (left) and Suzannah Holsenbeck (right)

Our Annual Report and Appreciations

Please visit our website at readtogrow.org/annual-report for our Annual Report and Treasurer's Report for the 2018-19 fiscal year, which ended June 30, 2019. Also on those pages is our appreciation to donors and book-drive organizers. Please find our recognition of the many volunteers who ensure we're able to carry out our mission on page 2.

families during a long-term crisis. Under her leadership, Read to Grow has launched its book distribution efforts at meal distribution sites around the state. Holsenbeck is thrilled to be working with such committed staff to continue to hone, finesse and accelerate the potential for Read to Grow's impact to be felt by children and families for years to come.

Books for Babies Continues to Grow

NEW NICU PROGRAM WITH CHILDREN'S MEDICAL

The Neonatal Intensive Care unit (NICU) at Connecticut Children's is happy to share the news of a new partnership with Read to Grow. Read to Grow will provide free books to patients admitted to our NICU during the hospital stay. CT Children's NICU is the first NICU to partner with Read to Grow in this manner.

The NICU at Connecticut Children's is a 32-bed, level IV intensive care unit with over 600 admissions per year. The NICU is a level IV referral center for other NICUs, special care nurseries and well-baby nursery in Connecticut, and provides care to the most premature and sickest of newborns in the region.

Early language experience in children through exposure to spoken words fuels the development of neuronal connections. Preterm born children are at a significantly higher risk for language and cognitive difficulties. Preterm infants exposed to maternal voice during their NICU hospitalizations have better health and developmental outcomes. Also, reading to



their sick child in the NICU helps parents feel more connected to their baby. Parents who read to their babies while in the NICU continue to read once discharged home.

Since 2018, RTG has supported Connecticut Children's Neonatal Neurodevelopmental Follow-Up Program, by providing books to our high-risk patients. Now, Connecticut Children's NICU will be the first NICU in the state to receive books from RTG to provide to families in the NICU. The program will give books to high-risk newborns to support their language and cognitive development. Books in the NICU will empower parents to nurture, care and bond with their babies.

By Shabnam Lainwala, MBBS, PhD, Assistant Professor of Pediatrics, University of Connecticut, School of Medicine; Director, Neonatal Follow-up Program and Attending, Neonatal-Perinatal Medicine

PRENATAL PROJECT EXPANSION

Books for Babies now has nine prenatal partners! Southwest Community Health Center in Bridgeport serves over 300 OB patients a year in their four locations. In a city of more than 145,000, 63% of births in Bridgeport are Medicaid funded. We look forward to working with Southwest and have already supplied them with literacy materials that cover brain development, bonding, and limiting screen time...and of course books!

By Laura Noe, Books for Babies Coordinator

NEWSLETTER OF READ TO GROW

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Early Steps to School Success: One Year In



Photo: Save the Children

1-year-old Sofia pages through books supplied by the Book Bag Exchange during an Early Steps home visit.

One year after Read to Grow launched Early Steps to School Success in New Haven (ESSS-NH) in partnership with Save the Children, over 130 families are being served by four ESSS coordinators in different neighborhoods of the city. Up until the pandemic, each coordinator was conducting home visits every other week with up to 20 families. ESSS coordinators were also facilitating monthly parent child playgroups for participants. Additionally, ESSS coordinators conducted monthly book bag exchanges with children enrolled in Pre-K at Celentano, Columbus Family Academy, Truman and Lincoln-Bassett.

When schools closed in early March, ESSS coordinators quickly adapted their programming to check in with families virtually and conduct virtual playgroups. Coordinators continue to connect families to resources they desperately need, like diapers and food, in addition to dropping off books at families' homes. Two coordinators speak Spanish fluently and have helped to translate for families who need support.

Recognizing our Read to Grow Volunteers

Read to Grow celebrates the tireless commitment of our incredible volunteers. Our board of directors and volunteers in our office, warehouse and across all programs, including book drives, Books for Babies and Books for Kids, gave a combined 9,921 hours of service—the equivalent of \$308,047 in funds—to our cause in the 2018–2019 fiscal year.

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Celebrating Diversity in Children's Books and Children's Lives

This was the title of the Books for Kids' workshop coordinators Linda Sylvester and I facilitated for the parents and staff at the



Books for Kids Coordinator Evelyn Tomasello leads through a workshop on the importance of reading to children.

Family Resource Center at Franklin Mayberry School in East Hartford. Sharon Walker, the coordinator of the Family Resource Center, thought it would be a "nice tie in" for the week of Martin Luther King's birthday.

One of the goals of the workshop was to explore ways that children's books can help a child develop self-esteem. "Kids need to have books that feature characters that look like them," Linda explains. "Mirror" books allow kids to identify with the characters and helps them form a connection to the book on another level.

The second goal of the workshop was to promote the use of children's books that address a broad range of issues about diversity in order to help parents and children experience and understand many different

kinds of people in the world. "Window" books that feature characters of many ethnicities and different cultures can impact the way the children view themselves and understand the world around them. Several examples of diverse books were provided and each of the parent participants were able to choose four books to build their home libraries.

Parental and coordinator feedback on this diversity workshop exceeded expectations: "Thank you so much for providing such a wonderful program for our families. You and Linda did a tremendous job!" writes Sharon. "I really like the way the parent's facial expressions reflect a high level of engagement."

By Evelyn Tomasello, Books for Kids Coordinator

"Why and How to Read Aloud" Workshop for Mothers Struggling with Substance Abuse

In partnership with Galit Sharma, director of The Children's Community Programs of Connecticut, Family Education and Support Services programs, Read to Grow Books for Kids coordinators presented a workshop at APT Foundation, Inc., Amethyst House in New Haven in February. Amethyst House provides residential addiction services for women and men with problems related to substance abuse or dependence.

15 women, all of whom were pregnant or had young children, participated in the workshop. Most of the moms in the group were already familiar with Read to Grow. They were enthusiastic, eager to share stories of reading with their children and interested in learning more about how to improve their

read aloud skills. Our workshop was further enhanced by the five infants who were with their moms. One mom happened to have the Read to Grow packet in her stroller, and held her 5-week-old daughter and Read to Grow's *Welcome to the World!* in her lap while we spoke. Her daughter gazed intently at her mom and the illustrations and reached toward the pictures while mom read. The vignette of mother and child sharing a book was a perfect example of why we should share books from the very beginning of our children's lives.

The women left the workshop, supplied with more books for their children's home libraries and the knowledge that they were on the right track to giving their children the skills they need to become readers.

Bridgeport Book Festival

Read to Grow is the proud managing sponsor of the first-ever Bridgeport Book Festival. Originally set to launch in May 2020, due to the virus, the Festival has been postponed until spring

2021. In partnership with Senator Murphy, the City of Bridgeport, the University of Bridgeport, Bridgeport Public Schools, RJ Julia Booksellers and many other sponsors and partners, the Bridgeport Book Festival is set to be a destination for children and families from all over the region.

There are two main goals of the festival. The first is to bring world-class authors and booksellers to Connecticut's largest city to establish a high-profile annual literary event to connect Connecticut readers of all ages with the books and the authors they love. By presenting hands-on, interactive activities with engaging authors, artists and musicians, The Bridgeport Book Festival aims to inspire, excite and motivate students in Bridgeport and the surrounding communities to become life-long readers and leaders.

Please visit www.bridgeportbookfest.com for more information and for ways to get involved!



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A community comes together to distribute books to children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Children in New Haven, Bridgeport, Norwalk and Windham County picked up books at school meal sites in May and June thanks to the generosity of our volunteers, donors, RJ Julia Booksellers, Senator Chris Murphy, Altrusa USA, Pitney Bowes, and the Scripps Family Foundation.

Book Donations Update

Good news: Starting July 6, 2020 we will again be accepting donations of new and gently used books by appointment only. Due to COVID-19, we temporarily suspended book donation intake for several months, but we have put safety protocols in place to receive books.



Please visit our website at readtogrow.org to sign up for an appointment slot to drop off books or email readtogrow@readtogrow.org to learn more. Due to safety protocols, please do not drop off without scheduling a drop off time first. Thank you!