

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

Finding Peace in Books

A message from Read to Grow Executive Director Suzannah Holsenbeck

Occasionally one of our Books for Kids coordinators will quietly leave a book on my desk. These are books that have surfaced in the warehouse—they've just been donated by a generous supporter, or someone gave them to us through a book drive, or they've been uncovered as the coordinators searched the shelves for the perfect book to send to a child whose family has requested mail-home books.

Sometimes Linda and Evelyn bring me a book because they want to give me a good chuckle (we always get a laugh out of the "what-not-to-donate-to-a-children's-literacy-organization" books—*The Exorcist* for example). Sometimes they bring me a book that has the most vibrant illustrations and tender characters. Sometimes it's a new book that none of us has seen, and we hope we'll receive more of that title.

A few weeks ago, Evelyn left me a copy of Cleo Wade's *What the Road Said*. It sat on the table in my office, beckoning me to pick it up. But the meetings were too numerous and the to-do list too long. The book sat still. Finally

today, when I came into the office to do some work in the quiet that Sundays alone in the office afford, I found my moment to sit down, take a breath, and read.

Today I have a new category of books from the warehouse: the book that finds you just when you need it. It doesn't have to be the most brilliant of books; the only requirement is that there's something about the book that speaks to the feelings inside you.

What the Road Saw brings the reader on a journey with the Road as a guide. The narrator asks the Road for advice when she encounters fellow travelers who want to fight. "Lead them to peace," says the Road. "But how do I lead them to peace?" The Road responds, "by listening to their stories, telling them yours, and reminding them that you are all on this journey together."

There on the page was today's reminder of how transformational the act of sharing stories and listening to stories can be in our lives. Whether we are sharing the stories of our ancestors, or the stories of our present, whether we're sitting with our elders or have



*A child enrolled in Early Steps explores a new book.
Photo: Read to Grow*

a classroom full of children listening to a read-aloud, story telling can build bridges and resilience and understanding.

Over 130,000 books leave our warehouse each year and find their way to children across Connecticut. Each of those 130,000 books contains stories for families to share. Each shared story has the potential to plant a seed of peace.

Spring Is Off to the Races at Read to Grow with Three Exciting Events

After a long winter, the flowers are beginning to bloom again and Read to Grow is blossoming after a long break from in-person events. We are thrilled to announce an exciting series of events this spring!

First in the lineup is an event that stays virtual, but remains as important as ever. We're proud to be participating in The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven's Great Give for the 10th year in a row! Mark your calendar for May 4 and 5 as we prepare for this annual day of giving. Thanks to the always-inspiring generosity of our supporters, we were able to raise over \$31,000 during the 2021 Great Give. We're hoping to knock that record out of the park this year!

Next up to bat is our first in-person fundraiser since 2020. We are extremely

excited to announce our Make a Play for Literacy fundraiser at Dunkin Donuts Park (aka Yard Goats Stadium) in Hartford on May 20! Tickets for this unique event include a



Join us in Hartford on May 20.

VIP reception, appetizers, drinks, live music, a Literacy Champions award ceremony, and more! Join us to help celebrate those who work to level the playing field in early literacy.

Last in the pitching order for RTG is a wonderful presence at the Branford Road Race on June 19th! Thanks to the generosity of an anonymous donor, we are thrilled to be featured as one of the signature charities of the Family Fun Run. Don't want to run? Stop by to donate new or gently used children's books to our book drive set up on the Branford Green during the race.



Scan this QR code for tickets and info about the May 20 event.

Prenatal Partner Snapshot: Cornell Scott-Hill Health

Read to Grow's prenatal programming is offered to all of our prenatal patients receiving care at Cornell Scott. Read to Grow provides board books and literacy information for our practitioners to distribute. This process is divided into two sessions, prenatal orientation and again at 28 weeks. During their first visit, patients spend an hour with the nurse reviewing information regarding what to expect during pregnancy and the postpartum period. During the "28 week teach" the nurse provides the patient with two additional board books to read to the baby during pregnancy and the postpartum period.

We value the Read to Grow program as it highlights the importance of parents and caregivers reading to babies, even in pregnancy. At approximately 5 months of pregnancy, babies can start hearing their first sounds and recognizing voices. Talking and reading to babies during the prenatal period increases bonding and helps with babies' brain development. The more we read to babies the



Cornell Scott medical providers proudly display prenatal packets from Read to Grow

more it will help them understand concepts such as colors, shapes, and letters.

We have the pleasure of participating in the care of over 230 prenatal patients a year. To date our nurses have provided 2,000 books

to new Moms. We are currently working to adapt this model to all of our satellite locations.

*Jamil Harp, Women's Health Medical Director,
Cornell Scott-Hill Health Center*

NEWSLETTER OF READ TO GROW

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NICU Program Expands to Farmington



Director of Perinatal Follow-up Dr. Shabnam Lainwala, NICU Nurse Emily Millikan, and NICU Nurse Manager Lisa Dion celebrate the launch of the Tiny Tales NICU program at Farmington with Books for Babies Coordinator, Laura Noe and Executive Director Suzannah Holsenbeck.

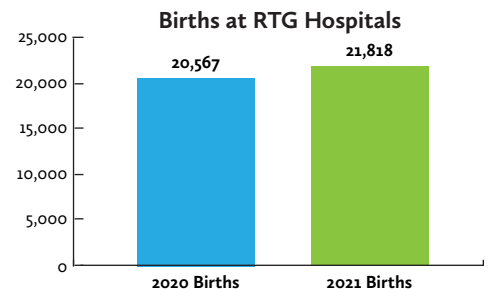
In 2021, Read to Grow launched our flagship NICU Program at Connecticut Children's NICU in Hartford with the tremendous support of Dr. Lainwala and the NICU nursing staff at Connecticut Children's. This spring we launched our second NICU site, again in partnership with Connecticut Children's, at the NICU in Farmington, CT where approximately 300 babies receive care annually.

Book bundles for families to keep are placed at each isolette and families are encouraged to read the books and sing and talk to their babies when they visit, even if they can't hold their baby. Studies show that reading to babies receiving care in the NICU helps comfort both baby and parents and leads to better health outcomes for babies. More than half of infants born at a low birth weight experience language delays throughout childhood. Frequent exposure to meaningful, auditory experiences positively impacts babies' brain development, whether the baby receives care in the NICU or not. Through the NICU Program, Read to Grow continues to deepen our commitment to supporting parents as their babies' first and most important teacher.

Births Surge Amid Ongoing Pandemic

Throughout the early course of the pandemic, various predictions were made about whether we would see births decline or surge. Two years later, we are seeing a birth surge. As restrictions eased, we saw an uptick in elective procedures, which included IVF births. In 2021 we welcomed 21,818 babies to the world with

the gift of literacy at our 13 partner hospitals. In 2020, there were 1,251 fewer births at the same 13 hospitals. Saint Vincent's Medical Center saw the largest increase, with 34% more births. Charlotte Hungerford Hospital clocked in at second largest with a 15% increase in births.



Books for Kids Fills Soaring Number of Family Book Requests

The pandemic may have put a pause button on many things, but not reading. More families in Connecticut reached out to Read to Grow for more books—176% more per month, to be exact. While many of our Book Place partners across the state remained closed due to the pandemic, we doubled down, literally, on our commitment to the families who needed books most. We saw a steady rise in family book requests, and we responded by mailing out more than twice as many books as had been mailed per year prior to the pandemic.

nearly 3,100 books made their way across Connecticut through book requests in 2020. In 2021, 5,729 books went out. In addition, we also made our Branford warehouse a curbside pickup option for book requests. With the assistance of our dedicated volunteers, the Books for Kids coordinators sent envelopes and boxes of books to children in cities and towns all over the state. Families from down the road in Branford came often, but we also saw folks from as far as Norwalk making the trip to School Ground Road.



A Branford area family enjoys Read to Grow books they picked up at Read to Grow's curbside pick-up option.

New Read to Grow Staff Members: In Their Own Words

YAZMIN BENITEZ, EARLY STEPS TO SCHOOL SUCCESS COORDINATOR BRIDGEPORT



Started at RTG:
August 2021

Favorite RTG moments: "I love how much support we get from one another, those who work at Read to Grow. Anything that we may need help on, the team is right

there. It's such a great feeling to have that positive reinforcement and LOVE!"

On starting ESSS in Bridgeport: "In terms of working with families, I generally work with the Spanish and bilingual demographic. A lot of things that happen in their home countries are just so different from here, so when they grasp [the importance of literacy]... It's so exciting. It feels like I've done my job."

Favorite Children's Book: *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein

LAKENYA WATFORD, EARLY STEPS TO SCHOOL SUCCESS COORDINATOR BRIDGEPORT



Started at RTG:
August 2021

On why she was inspired to apply to RTG: "This job really gives me the opportunity to reach a broad spectrum of children and families and be effective in my position. You're

working with at least 20 families in their homes, which is great because you can reach all kinds of family structures. It really allows us to get our message across that early literacy does matter."

On starting ESSS in Bridgeport: "We've had lots of success with our outreach events and connecting with families. We're recruiting more families and seeing how we can do that in a purposeful manner that connects everyone to our message and meets the families where they are."

Favorite RTG moments: "I love our team meetings! I love when we can all get together and brainstorm, collaborate, and just hear the successes and celebrate those moments with each other."

Favorite Children's Book: *Oh, The Places You'll Go* by Dr. Seuss

PAM KATYNSKI, BOOKS FOR BABIES COORDINATOR



Started at RTG:
November 2021

On why she was inspired to apply to RTG: "I was in a very high-stress position, so I was looking for a change. What I like about working here is that I'm still helping children and

focused on education, just on a different level. Before I was more hands on in the classroom; my love of children's books makes this position a nice mesh."

Favorite RTG Moments: "This is such a great place to work. Everyone is so friendly here. It's such a welcoming and helpful environment,

even down to the volunteers. We're all on the same mission."

Favorite Children's Book: *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak

ABIGAIL O'KEEFE, COMMUNICATIONS & DEVELOPMENT COORDINATOR



Started at RTG:
November 2021

On why she was inspired to apply to RTG: "I came across Read to Grow when I was at a personal crossroads. I really wanted to do something meaningful with my

life. When I found this position, it felt like the stars aligned. Books were an amazing source of comfort and support as a kid. My nose was buried in a book more often than not. Helping provide that same experience for kids is such a fulfilling experience."

Favorite RTG Moments: "I'm so lucky that I get to work with all the programs at RTG. When they send me the wonderful photos of them in action, it's a big source of pride. Making them look good is the easiest job in the world because they're doing so much good for Connecticut."

Favorite Children's Book: *Lucy McLockett* by Phyllis McGinley

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What Early Steps to School Success Families Are Saying about the Program

93% of families enrolled agreed or strongly agreed that the things they learn during home visits are helping their child

93% of families enrolled agreed or strongly agreed that they have stronger relationships with their child

100% of families enrolled agreed or strongly agreed that they read more often with their child

100% of families enrolled agreed or strongly agreed that they feel more confident as parents

100% of families enrolled indicated that they were satisfied with services

WHAT DO YOU LIKE MOST ABOUT EARLY STEPS TO SCHOOL SUCCESS?

