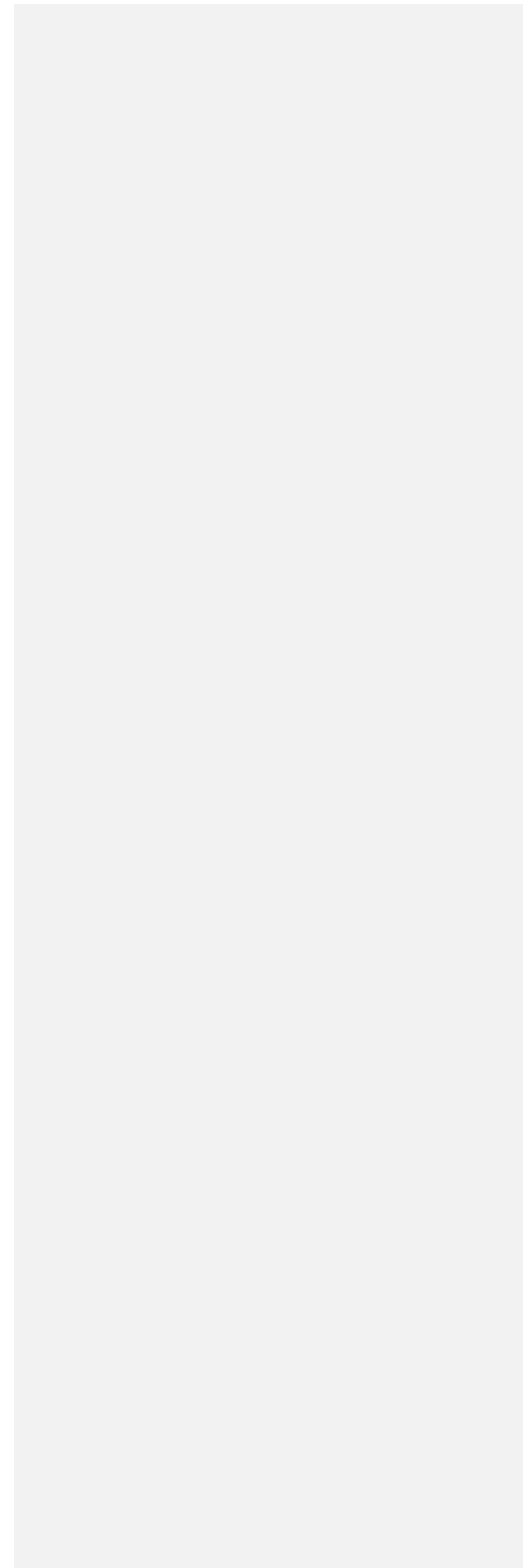


Make Way for Goslings: The Importance of Collaboration

Betsy Diamant-Cohen, Susan Sonnenschein, Rebecca Dowling, Lisa Shanty, Pat Hoge, Barb Henschel, Brenda Hussey-Gardner

September, *Children's Voice*, Special Issue on University -Community Partnerships



A community collaboration in Baltimore empowers parents to meaningfully engage with their preterm or medically fragile infants via *Mother Goose on the Loose (MGOL): Goslings* (Goslings). The program increases parents' awareness of the importance of providing a language and literacy rich environment, in a medically and developmentally appropriate manner, for the infants hospitalized in a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU; Diamant-Cohen, Sonnenschein, Sacks, Rosswog, & Hussey-Gardner, 2018; Shanty, Dowling, Sonnenschein, & Hussey-Gardner, 2019). The development and success of Goslings reflects the collaborative efforts of an early literacy program, a children's museum, a Level IV NICU, and a University Psychology Department.

This unique partnership was facilitated by PNC Grow Up Great®, a foundation that supports early childhood education initiatives. The timing of the introductions was remarkable. Mother Goose on the Loose (MGOL) was already working with Port Discovery Children's Museum (PDCM) to bring its content to young children through community outreach efforts and wanted to bring programming to infants in the NICU. The NICU at the University of Maryland Children's Hospital (UMCH NICU) wanted to bring language-rich activities to the infants in their new single-family room NICU after research demonstrated the potential negative impact of this environment on language development (Pineda et al., 2017; Shanty et al., 2019). PNC Grow Up Great® learned of these desires in their work with PDCM and UMCH NICU and made the necessary introductions. The UMCH NICU then reached out to UMBC and the connection was made between PNC Grow Up Great® and UMBC. Once introductions were made, brainstorming meetings ensued, a collaboration was formed, and a grant was submitted to and funded by PNC Grow Up Great® to develop, implement, and study Goslings. The UMCH NICU, PDCM, MGOL and UMBC then formed a partnership, met monthly, and worked together to obtain

another round of funding from PNC Grow Up Great®. In addition, the collaboration received additional funding to support Goslings work from the Bearman Foundation and [???].

Commented [HB1]: Barb, who is the current granting entity funding you to be in the NICU. It's a gentleman from JHU.

Each of the partners brought unique strengths to the collaboration. MGOL had a long history of creating award-winning early literacy programs for families with young children. PDCM excelled at program delivery as well as the logistical and staffing nuances that accompany the development of a new program. The UMCH NICU understood the unique needs of medically fragile infants and their parents and knew that it was essential to develop a program that could be medically and developmentally individualized to meet the needs of each infant. A UMBC professor had extensive early childhood program evaluation expertise, based on a foundation of knowledge of children's language and literacy development, and worked with graduate students to implement such evaluations. All of the partners worked together to create, deliver, and evaluate this unique early language and literacy program. This included, but was not limited to, determining the best ways to safely conduct sessions in alignment with the unit's infection control policies, incorporating developmental tips into the program to teach parents more about their medically fragile infants and give them tools to individualize interactions based on their infant's medical and developmental needs, vetting evaluation surveys through an interdisciplinary focus group that included parents, finalizing the script, training facilitators, educating NICU staff members about the program, and advertising the program to parents in the NICU.

Program Content

The goal of Goslings is to facilitate the acquisition of optimal language and literacy habits from the beginning of life, even when that life starts too early. Goslings does this by providing parents with the education and tools needed to (1) understand the medical readiness of

their baby for interaction; (2) interpret their baby’s behavioral signals; and (3) talk, sing, read (share books), and play with their baby—in the NICU and later at home. The 90-minute Goslings session was facilitated by PDCM staff with a UMCH NICU staff member in attendance to offer support and address any medically related questions. Goslings was conducted in the family lounge using baby dolls and pretend isolettes (special cribs) to encourage active parent participation. During the session, the facilitator expressed the importance of early language and literacy activities, specifically talking, reading, singing, and reciting nursery rhymes; described, showed images of, and demonstrated infant behavioral signals that indicate when an infant is ready (e.g., smiling) or not ready (e.g., spreads fingers widely apart) for interaction; and used a “traffic light” as a visual reminder of when to proceed with visual, auditory, and tactile stimulation as modeled in the session (“green light day”) and when to limit stimulation (“yellow” or “red light day”) based on the infant’s medical status. Specifically, parents were taught to use books with and without reading (e.g., talking about the pictures) them, and lullabies were included to help parents calm their infants and themselves. Kits were given to parents for use in the NICU and later at home; and included *Understanding My Signals*, (Hussey-Gardner, 2008) the *Goslings* songbook, (Diamant-Cohen, 2020) a board book, an indestructible picture book, some musical instruments (e.g., rattles) and finger puppets.

Program Evaluation

From the beginning, program evaluation was considered essential as it would enable us to identify program strengths as well as areas for improvement. We also knew that demonstration of benefits, and no harm, was critical to program continuation in a NICU. Surveys administered at the end of each of two waves of *Goslings* sessions showed that 97% of parents agreed that *Goslings* provided them with skills and materials to promote early literacy and child

development, 94% said that *Goslings* informed them of the importance of talking to their babies, 95% said it made them aware of the importance of reading to their babies, 96% agreed that the program taught them about baby signals for readiness and interactions, and 95% stated that *Goslings* made them feel more confident in reading their babies' cues. The majority (97%) of participants were satisfied or strongly satisfied with the program, and all supported its continuation and would recommend the program to other parents of infants in the NICU. The *Goslings* partners used these data to request, and receive, additional funding from PNC Grow Up Great® and other funders to continue program implementation, evaluation, and expansion.

Program Benefits

While the UMCH NICU families received the greatest benefits from this collaboration, the partners have also reaped rewards from this unique collaboration. MGOL has increased traffic to her website, was hired to do more trainings, and has been encouraged to expand her program offerings to expecting and new parents. PDCM was able to expand their community outreach efforts to include fragile infants who are not yet able to visit a children's museum and build revenue through presenting *Goslings* at hospitals. UMBC increased its research reach by expanding program evaluation into a NICU setting and publishing evaluation results in a medical journal.

Prior to COVID-19, PDCM had just begun their third year of *Goslings* at the UMCH NICU and was offering sessions at another Baltimore area hospital. UMCH NICU staff are now in the process of identifying a safe way to bring *Goslings* back into their unit and hope to do so this Fall. In addition, MGOL delivered *Goslings* training to children's librarians in Alabama, and, with the help of the UMCH NICU Developmental Specialist, to a NICU interdisciplinary team in San Antonio, Texas. In addition, they updated all of the *Goslings* materials and made

them available free of charge to everyone (<https://mgol.net/home/mother-goose-on-the-loose-goslings/>) via a grant from the National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NNLM). Team members have presented *Goslings* 18 times at local and national conferences and published three coauthored articles.

Looking Toward the Future

Since we have seen first-hand the way *Goslings* energizes parents, inspires them and encourages them to engage in early literacy building behaviors, we hope to expand *Goslings* in new locations. Training parents to use purposeful play in appropriate ways with their medically fragile infants provides comfort to the parent, promotes familial bonding, and provides parents with a sense of empowerment and engagement with their fragile infants. As *Goslings* was only possible because of the ongoing collaboration between MGOL, PDCM, UMCH-NICU, UMBC and PNC Grow Up Great®, we hope to continue pairing NICUs, community providers (e.g., children's museums, libraries), researchers, and funding partners to deliver *Goslings* and to continue to evaluate its short and long-term impact on developmental outcomes for medically fragile infants in the NICU.

References

- Diamant-Cohen, B. (2020). *Mother Goose on the Loose Goslings family guide*. Retrieved from https://mgol.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Family_Guide.pdf
- Diamant-Cohen, B., Sonnenschein, S., Sacks, D., Rosswog, S., & Hussey-Gardner, B. (2018). Mother Goose in the NICU: Support for the neediest infants and their families. *Children and Libraries*, 16(1), 3–7. Retrieved from <https://journals.ala.org/index.php/cal/article/view/6586>
- Hussey-Gardner, B. (2008). *Understanding my signals: Help for parents of premature infants* (3rd ed.). Palo Alto, CA: VORT.
- Pineda, R., Durant, P., Mathur, A., Inder, T., Wallendorf, M., & Schlaggar, B. L. (2017). Auditory exposure in the neonatal intensive care unit: Room type and other predictors. *The Journal of Pediatrics*, 183, 56-66.e3. doi: 10.1016/j.jpeds.2016.12.072
- Shanty, L., Dowling, R., Sonnenschein, S., & Hussey-Gardner, B. (2019). Evaluation of an early language and literacy program for parents of infants in the NICU. *Neonatal Network*, 38(4), 206–216. doi: 10.1891/0730-0832.38.4.206

Biographies

Betsy Diamant-Cohen, the Executive Director of Mother Goose on the Loose, LLC, has a masters in library and information science and a doctorate in communications design. She is known for creating engaging early literacy programs, presenting hands-on trainings for librarians

and children's educators, and co-authoring the "Research Roundup" column in Children and Libraries magazine.

Susan Sonnenschein, has a master's in educational psychology and a doctorate in developmental psychology. Her area of scholarly interest focuses on children's language, literacy, and mathematics development, particularly for children and families at risk for difficulties.

[Rebecca Dowling](#)

[Lisa Shanty](#)

[Pat Hoge](#)

[Barb Henschel](#)

Dr. Brenda Hussey-Gardner is an Associate Professor with the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Maryland School of Medicine and is the Developmental Specialist with the NICU at the University of Maryland Children's Hospital. She has over 30 years of experience working with medically fragile infants and their families.