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# Make Way for Goslings: The Importance of Collaboration

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**M**other Goose on the Loose (MGOL): Goslings (“Goslings”) is a community collaboration in Baltimore that has been working to empower parents to meaningfully engage with their infants who are preterm or medically fragile. 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 who have been hospitalized in a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU; Diamant-Cohen, Sonnenschein, Sacks, Rosszog, & 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. MGOL already was working with Port Discovery Children’s Museum (PDCM), based in downtown Baltimore, 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 the UMCH NICU and made the necessary introductions. The UMCH NICU then reached out to the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (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 Herbert Bearman Foundation and the Child Health Foundation.

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 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; these 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.



Parents participating in Goslings use dolls to practice new skills before implementing them with their infants who are medically fragile.

## 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. MGOL has increased traffic to its website, was hired to do more trainings, and has been encouraged to expand its 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. 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. They also updated all of the

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Goslings materials and made them available free of charge to everyone (see <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 firsthand 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 children. 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 impact on developmental outcomes for medically fragile infants in the NICU. ■



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