



Photo courtesy of Vroom

INNOVATION BRIEF

The Campaign for
GRADE-LEVEL
READING

Engaging Parents in Boosting
Children's Early Language and
Brain Development >

Increasing the quantity and quality of conversations between young children and their parents is a key strategy of the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading's work to boost brain development, early learning, school readiness and ultimately the number of children reading proficiently by the end of third grade.

But how best to engage those key players — parents and caregivers?

In several GLR communities, public awareness campaigns are exploring innovative ways to better involve parents and caregivers in closing the “30 Million Word Gap” — the wide gap, identified by researchers, in the number of words heard by low-income children vs. their wealthier peers that can lead to developmental delays predicting a steeper climb to literacy.

Working to promote early language development, the campaigns are sending parents and caregivers new messages in new ways, sometimes with the creative thinking of relative newcomers such as students, industrial designers and software developers.

The message includes not only *what* and *why* but *how* — explaining in an upbeat tone the value of talking, reading and singing with young children as well as offering easy ways to integrate these vocabulary-building and brain-boosting activities into everyday routines like eating lunch, playing in the park or turning off lights.

And the messages are being delivered in both high- and low-tech ways, from talking tips via smartphone app to simple suggestions printed on baby clothing and soon, perhaps, diapers.

Underpinning the work is the 1995 study by researchers Betty Hart and Todd Risley closely linking children’s academic success at ages 9 and 10 to their verbal interaction with parents during the first years of life. This and other research has shown that:

- Children with rich vocabularies are better prepared to read and learn in elementary school.
- The quantity and quality of talk with young children develops their language, reading and writing abilities.
- The amount of reading and talking parents do with their children tends to differ based on parents’ language, cultural background and economic status.

Here is a look at some, not all, of the creative parent engagement strategies being tried in Oakland, Seattle and the state of Georgia as part of multifaceted campaigns often involving broad partnerships that include philanthropic, state agency, business, community, health and GLR campaign leaders.

read on!



oakland california



Encouraging talking during everyday activities

*Let's talk about hands and feet, reads the infant onesie.
Let's count toes! Let's play peekaboo!*

The t-shirt is part of a new media campaign that includes clothing and other products for infants and toddlers being distributed free of charge to low-income new parents at hospitals, pediatric clinics and child care programs in Oakland as part of the *Talking is Teaching: Talk, Read, Sing* campaign, launched in July 2014.

“Families underestimate the power of their words to light up their children’s brains. These simple tools remind parents that the whole world is a learning opportunity,” says Susan True, education strategy director for the Oakland-based Kenneth Rainin Foundation. She consulted with the Bay Area Council, a business organization, and Goodby Silverstein & Partners, the creative agency behind the *Got Milk?* ads, to develop the campaign.

“We know from behavior change research that you need to incorporate new behaviors into existing routines. So a blankie includes prompts around talking at bedtime. We chose a bath towel because you’re already bathing your baby. Just add a song. The idea is to build language and literacy development into existing family routines.”

What used to go into a text-heavy brochure, “we’ve distilled into a t-shirt that is simple, positive, fun and actionable,”

adds True, who also is the school readiness committee co-chair for Oakland’s grade-level reading campaign.

Campaign clothing also can be purchased from the website, talkreadsing.org. With each purchase, an item will be donated to a family in need.

In addition to the messages on the clothing, blankets and towels, reminders in English and Spanish to parents to talk, read and sing with their children can be found throughout the community on billboards, bus shelter ads and neighborhood posters.

So a family stuck in traffic sees a *Let's talk about the sky* billboard. A family waiting for a bus sees a *Let's talk about the sunshine* bus shelter sign. Television and radio public service announcements provide other “reinforcing prompts.”

Also reinforcing the message will be the people many parents trust most — pediatricians and other health care providers. During the campaign’s second phase, University of California, San Francisco Benioff Children’s Hospital Oakland and Kaiser Permanente Oakland will distribute campaign materials during well-baby visits and encourage parents to talk, read and sing with their children from infancy. The hospital strategy has been supported by Bay Area philanthropists Marc Benioff,



Goodby Silverstein and Partners

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- ◀ Oakland launched a media campaign that includes clothing and other products to encourage parents to talk, read and sing to their children.

co-founder and CEO of Salesforce.com, and his wife Lynne.

The hospitals also will encourage families to sign up for Text4Baby, the free national health texting service that sends health- and safety-related messages to parents in low-income government health programs.

“Parents will receive the standard three text messages a week but one will be customized to address early brain development, the word gap and language development,” says Kara Dukakis, cities strategy senior manager with campaign partner, Too Small to Fail, a joint initiative of Next Generation, a San Francisco nonprofit, and the Bill, Hillary & Chelsea Clinton Foundation.

“Nationally 89 percent of young women in the United States carry cellphones. We believe that this will be a valuable and effective way to relay important information and practices, particularly to parents who don’t

have the support system, resources or knowledge base to attend as well as they can to the health and safety of their very young children.”

Some customized messages will include links to videos and audio clips developed by the campaign, Text4Baby and the Sesame Street Workshop, which also has developed a resource guide for hospitals to distribute to parents.

Beyond Oakland, several cities including Tulsa and San Francisco will benefit from a more intensive campaign supported by Too Small to Fail. The initiative hopes to offer its campaign materials to other cities following a rigorous evaluation in Oakland.

“We are excited to open source the campaign’s creative materials and make them available to any community who would like to launch their own Talk, Read, Sing effort,” says True.



seattle

Sharing early brain science in new ways

In several Seattle-area neighborhoods, low-income parents have been trying out a new smart phone app that sends them a daily tip to boost their young child's brain development — customized to their child's age and even their name.

“The basic message is that whatever time you have as a parent is all the time you need and everyday moments can be brain-building moments,” says Lynda Petersen, associate director of the Community Center for Education Results, the lead organization for Seattle's grade-level reading campaign, which is embedded in the Road Map Project, a cradle-to-career initiative.

Offering easy activities for parents to do with their young children while grocery shopping, doing laundry, waiting for the bus or other routines, the free *Daily Vroom* app is one component of *Vroom*, a movement to engage parents in positive interactions with their children, ultimately leading to behavior change.

“More than the number of words being shared, it's about the quality of the interaction,” adds Marissa Kaiser, early learning manager at the Seattle-based Bezos Family Foundation, which is leading *Vroom*, which was piloted in spring 2014.

Vroom was developed in partnership with national experts in brain science, behavior change, early childhood

development and psychology, including from the University of Washington's Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences.

“They have thought a lot about how to take the latest in what we know of brain science and how parents can support their babies' development and bring that to parents, particularly low-income parents, in a way that is informative, positive and accessible,” says Petersen.

The *Vroom* app sends out push notifications that alert parents when the daily tip arrives. Tips and activities also are shared via the *Vroom* website, joinvroom.org.

Tailored to parents of children ages birth to 5, each *Daily Vroom* highlights an everyday parent-child moment; an activity that helps them interact at a deeper level; and a “brainy background,” sharing the science of how this interaction builds a child's brain and a foundation for early learning.

So while running errands with a 4-year-old, a tip suggests, *Put your child in charge of the list and cross things off the list together. Why? Because this helps the child learn that written words represent real-world activities.*

The website also offers five overarching “Brain Building Basics” such as *Look: Make eye contact so you and your child are looking at each other* and *Chat: Talk about things you see, hear and do together, explaining what's happening to you.*

Parents in and around Seattle most often hear about *Vroom* from community-based organizations (CBOs) already working with low-income parents, such as Head Start, housing authorities, home visiting programs, summer meal sites and community centers.

“The messages are most effective when they come from a trusted messenger. Who better than the people already serving them with information about their children’s development?” says Kaiser.

Vroom also tested public service messaging, in various languages, via posters, bus ads and even by adorning tables at a mall food court with tips. Work is underway with top children’s brands such as Pampers to include tips on their products or packaging. The idea is “to intercept parents on their daily journey with something they can do in that moment,” says Kaiser.

Findings from the pilot, which ended in July 2014, will be used to craft a best practices playbook and to grow *Vroom* in Seattle and beyond. The app and website remain available.

“The pilot was extremely successful,” says Kaiser. Anecdotal reports “and initial data results reveal that not only are CBOs able to layer on the message of brain development to their parents, but parents are changing their behavior because of these messages. We’re seeing an uptick in parent self-reporting of increased eye contact and chatting about their shared experiences with their children.”

And the Bezos Family Foundation and the GLR Campaign are discussing ways to partner. “It’s potentially a great way to get all of this information and resources to all parents and take our work to improve school readiness and third-grade reading to another level,” says Petersen.



Photos courtesy of Vroom

- < Daily Vroom is a smart phone app that sends a daily tip to parents to boost their young child’s brain development.

georgia



Enlisting creative tech and design minds

When leaders of Georgia's *Talk With Me Baby* heard about an opportunity to infuse their new public health initiative with fresh thinking from some of their region's best and brightest tech minds, they jumped on it.

"We were thrilled to get the ideas," says Arianne Weldon, director of Get Georgia Reading, the statewide grade-level reading campaign. "These are potential partners. If they come up with something that's going to engage parents and spread innovation, the more the merrier."

The ideas bubbled up from an August 2014 "hackathon" — a three-day competition in Atlanta where teams of students, engineers, clinicians, designers and business consultants create and pitch innovative solutions to health care problems.

At the hackathon, before a gathering of about 100 "hackers," Weldon and two colleagues requested a new product that will promote early language exposure to close the word gap and promote healthy child development, especially for lower-income families.

Seventeen teams competed, each choosing from among a handful of requests. Four teams, involving about 20 people, chose the *Talk With Me Baby* challenge; brainstormed for 34 hours, with help from engineering professors, industry professionals and expert clinicians; and pitched their idea to judges (not including those who requested products).

First prize went to a *Talk With Me Baby* team — three Georgia Institute of Technology undergraduates who came up with Chatterbox, diapers printed with conversation prompts to inspire parents to talk with babies during one of parenting's most basic chores, plus a complementary children's book included in the diaper box.

"It can be really challenging for some parents to talk with a baby who doesn't talk back," says Ashley Darcy-Mahoney, an assistant professor at Emory University's School of Nursing, a *Talk With Me Baby* partner.

"It sounds so easy but coming up with something to talk about with their baby can be a foreign concept. This simple easy tool gives them a starting place."

The other *Talk With Me Baby* ideas included: a device worn by a child that features an app tracking the number and quality of words the child hears; electronic books that, when read, log the number of words and time spent reading; and an app and toys that encourage healthy conversations and include incentive-building coupons for baby products.

The Chatterbox team's prize includes \$5,000 toward product development, free patent filing and a development session with a venture capitalist company. "We've connected with them and we're also following up on the others," says Weldon. "We liked all the ideas."

Launched in early 2014, *Talk With Me Baby* is a “language nutrition” initiative underway in 13 Georgia counties that will rapidly scale up statewide by 2020. The initiative will train maternal-child health nurses, midwives, preschool educators and staff of WIC — the government health and nutrition program for women, infants and children — to deliver messages to expectant and new parents about the practice and benefits of talking with their babies.

Supported by the United Way of Atlanta, the initiative also seeks to increase the early identification of babies who have hearing loss, developmental delays, autism and other conditions.

Other partners include the Marcus Autism Center, a nonprofit subsidiary of Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta; the Georgia departments of public health and education; Emory School of Medicine; and Georgia Tech.

The hackathon, sponsored by Atlanta’s health care startup community, offered a welcome opportunity to enlist not-the-usual suspects to come up with solutions to the word gap. “Engineers might be able to help us — what a fascinating thought,” says Darcy-Mahoney.

And it is helping to change the conversation in Georgia and in the marketplace about how best to connect with parents to build their understanding of simple things they can do to boost their child’s language and brain development — and ultimately change their child’s future.

“We’re in a crisis right now — children can’t read and there’s this word gap,” says Weldon. “We welcome anything that’s going to solve that.”

For more information about the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, visit gradelevelreading.net. Follow us on Twitter @readingby3rd.



Talk With Me Baby is a “language nutrition” initiative underway in 13 Georgia counties.



Subway poster and buttons are prototypes.