



# Providing Virtual (Online) Supports to Economically Challenged Parents of Young Children

DRAFT Prepared for Discussion and Development

PRACTICE BRIEF #8

## THE PROBLEM

For many economically challenged expectant parents and parents of young children, the supports and services provided by organizations and agencies in their communities constitute a critical lifeline during one of the most exciting, yet stressful and vulnerable periods in their lives. Over the years, local GLR campaigns have formed extensive partnerships with many such organizations and agencies, recognizing that the pathway to achieving CGLR's goal of ensuring that *"fewer children will start school so far behind"* begins with supporting parent success when children are in their infancy and earliest years of life.

Although prior to the pandemic, telehealth and other virtual services were just beginning to become available in some communities, most organizations providing supports to parents of young children did so routinely in person, whether via established office hours or home visits. The rapid onset of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the status quo with little time to prepare, introducing deep uncertainties about how to maintain these supports on which so many had come to depend.

## FEATURED SOLUTION

The COVID-19 pandemic shattered previously unchallenged assumptions that primary supports for parents of young children would be provided essentially exclusively through in-person contact. Although in-person contact may be preferred, local GLR coalition partners pivoted

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quickly and creatively, figuring out how to continue to support parent success remotely or virtually in the context of orders by state and local officials variously regarding sheltering in place, quarantining and social distancing. The following case examples from GLR Network communities illustrate how this was done.

## VICKSBURG/WARREN COUNTY, MISSISSIPPI

In Vicksburg/Warren County, MS, the United Way of West Central Mississippi is the lead organization for the local GLR campaign. To support economically challenged expectant parents, the United Way and other local coalition partners, including Merit Health River Region Hospital and the members of Excel by 5, have hosted an annual community-wide baby shower since 2016.

The shower is organized to be distinctly different from a traditional “health fair,” during which individual parents or couples typically float by an assortment of tables staffed by representatives of local organizations offering particular products or services; engage in quick and often superficial introductory conversations; and leave with a handful of flyers and various tchotchkes. Instead, the community baby shower in Vicksburg is designed as a day-long opportunity for expectant parents to meet and spend time with each other while talking with local providers/experts. The goal is to build shared excitement, deeper community relationships and greater knowledge about key substantive topics related to the early years of life — all in the context of a bona fide *community* celebration of the imminent birth of their child.

Prior to the pandemic, the hospital provided the space for the shower, using fun, celebratory decorations and supplying the shower with cake, punch and other refreshments to create an atmosphere of joy, excitement and anticipation for participants on behalf of the community. As many as 13 different topical stations were set up for the pre-pandemic showers over the years, featuring experts and providers from various groups and organizations that expectant and new parents typically access to help them prepare for childbirth and the early years. One station, for example, typically was hosted by the hospital’s OB/GYN nurses; another featured breastfeeding coaches. Other stations featured local experts who focused on postpartum expectations, installation and use of child car seats, early literacy, developmental stages and exercise/wellness. Expectant parents were encouraged to spend as much time as they wished at any and all stations during the day, meeting and connecting with other expectant parents as they learned more about key topics and local resources. Typically, 75–80 expectant or new parents attended the shower each year.

When the pandemic hit and in-person gatherings were abruptly halted, plans for the 2020 shower were necessarily placed on hold; however, according to Michele Connelly, executive director of the United Way and local GLR community lead, the UW and other coalition partners were determined not to abandon the idea. They were committed to figuring out a way to do *something* that would sustain the important work of connecting young parents-to-be with critical resources and supports and that would retain the core organizing concept of a community baby shower, while accommodating the realities of COVID restrictions. “Why not,” they reasoned, “have a *virtual* community baby shower?”

Tapping into their collective determination, the coalition pivoted to developing plans to create a video that would focus on each of the topics featured in the in-person baby shower in recent years. The mayor of Vicksburg, who had always attended the in-person showers, offered a videographer as an in-kind donation. The video was filmed at the hospital over a number of weeks and included appearances by local experts who would have staffed the stations if a live event had been permitted.

Approximately an hour long, the final version of the video was released in March 2021 in conjunction with another effort sponsored by the same group of coalition partners, a local Diaper Drive to distribute diapers and wipes to new parents. The video was pushed out to all parenting classes in the community and is on a loop for viewing by all new parents while in the hospital for the birth of their child. Connelly estimates that more than 600 new parents will have the opportunity to view the video over the year ahead.

Connelly says that plans for next year's community baby shower will include a hybrid approach. The coalition hopes to be able to host a live event in the spring, since everyone misses the opportunity for in-person interaction. In addition, however, they plan to produce an updated series of video clips (rather than a single hour-long video), featuring local experts who will lead stations at the live event. These clips will be pushed out to parents on social media and via the various local parenting classes, as well as via the hospital's in-house video system.

For more information, contact Michele Connelly at [michele@unitedwayvicksburg.org](mailto:michele@unitedwayvicksburg.org).

## DURHAM, NORTH CAROLINA

In Durham, NC, Book Harvest — a member of Durham's GLR campaign — launched its Book Babies program in 2013.

Book Babies is an evidence-informed literacy coaching partnership that provides 20 new, age-appropriate books to participating children and parents every year from birth until their children start kindergarten. Book Babies Literacy Coaches partner with parents of more than 300 children ages 0 to 5 in two locations in North Carolina: Durham County and Forsyth County. Together, literacy coaches and parents set literacy goals for their children, mark their progress as they prepare for school and help ensure that they start kindergarten ready to learn.

The program is premised on the research finding that 80% of brain development occurs in the first three years of life; hence, access to both literacy coaching and books starting at birth is essential to kindergarten-readiness and long-term school success.

In order to enroll in the program, a child must be Medicaid-eligible and 16 weeks old or younger. By the time children graduate from Book Babies and start kindergarten, they will have a home library of 100+ books and their parents will have received 16 literacy coaching home visits. Between home visits, Book Babies Literacy Coaches provide parents with a host of supports, including reading tips by text, virtual story times, service on parent leadership teams and family celebrations.

When the pandemic hit in 2020, Book Harvest wanted to make sure that Book Babies continued to provide vital supports to young children and their parents/caregivers. Home visits and check-ins with Book Babies families have been adapted to be provided virtually through phone calls, video conferencing and text messages in both Durham and Forsyth counties.

Other group events have also successfully gone online, including an annual fall celebration and a spring graduation. Each event consists of educational activities, storytelling and movement classes like yoga and dance. They are accessible, bilingual and interactive. Additionally, Book Babies literacy coaches have continued to deliver books to each family through socially distant book drop-offs.

In 2020, there were 281 children enrolled from 274 families. Due to the pandemic, most home visits were virtual, but over 850 literacy coaching sessions were conducted. Book Babies has successfully maintained enrollment throughout the pandemic and consistently kept in contact with participating families. In fact, in May 2021, 47 Book Babies graduated and will enroll in kindergarten for the 2021–22 school year.

Book Babies will continue with its virtual components into the summer months and will base future delivery models on lessons learned and parent feedback.

For more information, contact Rachel Stine at [rachel@bookharvest.org](mailto:rachel@bookharvest.org).

## DENTON, TEXAS

Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, the United Way of Denton County, TX, received a grant from Texas Workforce Commission to support the development of a local network of family care providers. As the community lead organization for the Denton County Grade-Level Reading Campaign, the United Way proposed to offer a suite of supports for family care providers in order to build provider capacity and enhance the quality of local child care services as a means of promoting school readiness and improving early school success.

The COVID-19 shutdown in the late winter stalled the launch of the initiative, originally planned for March 2020. The United Way of Denton County made a number of adjustments that enabled the organization to launch the effort two months later, in May, with supports for both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking family care providers.

The original initiative included offering in-person training sessions for parents, primarily mothers, who either were interested in starting a home-based family care business or were already providing care and were interested in obtaining a license from the state. Due to COVID, however, these sessions were provided online synchronously and were also available as archived recordings to accommodate on-demand viewing. Upon the completion of a basic information form that verified participation, either real time or asynchronous, parents were sent a certificate for the completion of training sessions that could be presented to the state agency responsible for listing and licensure of family care centers. Participation in training sessions was further incentivized by giving family care network participants access to free supplies for their center programs.

Training sessions focused on the licensure process, preparation for home inspection, creation of lesson plans and classroom management techniques to support providers who were accommodating a wider-than-normal age range of enrolled children in the context of school closures due to COVID. Through a unique partnership with the Women’s Entrepreneur Program at Texas Women’s University, the initiative also offered assistance in obtaining an LLC designation. Among other benefits of having this designation, an LLC makes a home-based center eligible for a small business loan for home improvements, such as air conditioning or renovations to enable expansion of enrollment.

Through a partnership with First Book, the United Way provided books to family care providers to give children access to a wider selection of children’s books and to help providers incorporate reading to the children as a regular activity during the day. The First Book partnership also included a book distribution program to enable providers to send books home with children to build home literacy libraries. This proved to be an especially important strategy to help parents and caregivers cope with the limited access to books since public libraries were closed. The initiative provided tips to parents on how to encourage and promote reading at home, during the car ride to and from day care, and other places and spaces.

As the COVID-19 crisis wanes, the United Way plans to continue to support the family care network that has grown to over 30 as-yet unlicensed providers, along with a group of currently licensed providers. Both virtual and in-person supports will be used, with a goal of enhancing quality of services and care.

For more information, contact Shelby Redondo at [Shelby@unitedwaydenton.org](mailto:Shelby@unitedwaydenton.org).

## GUILFORD COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA

Since 2014, Ready for School, Ready for Life (hereafter referred to as Ready Ready) has served as a community backbone organization charged with building a connected, innovative early childhood system within Guilford County, NC. The organization has also functioned as the GLR community lead since joining CGLR in 2019. Ready Ready focuses on implementing a community-wide vision to improve outcomes — while reducing persistent disparities — in five areas:

- Planned and well-timed pregnancies
- Healthy births
- On-track development for infants, toddlers and preschoolers
- School readiness at kindergarten entry
- Success at the end of third grade

Through a partnership with The Duke Endowment, Ready Ready is building the foundation of the system of care by partnering with home visiting programs and OB and pediatric practices across Guilford County. Partner programs have continued serving families in innovative ways.

When the pandemic hit in March 2020, Ready Ready partners shifted rapidly to virtual connections for families to ensure safety. One such partner is Guilford Family Connects, which offers home visits to families with newborns. Typically, a registered nurse visits their home within the first few weeks after leaving the hospital to check on the health and well-being of the new baby, the mother and other family members. Due to COVID-19, home visits were not possible. After in-person visits were prohibited, families with newborns were supported by nurses through visits and consultations by telephone and via Skype. These services were supplemented by porch drop-offs of needed items. To date, the response from families has been positive, and nurses have found it easy to connect by phone as families shelter in place.

Providers have reported that engagement of families has been effective through remote means. During prenatal Navigation, for example, which had been offered on-site in OB settings, Navigators have reported that the expectant mothers with whom they work have been generally comfortable discussing sensitive topics over the phone and that Navigators are able to engage participants effectively.

As COVID-19 restrictions are removed, Ready Ready and partners plan to follow the lead of families. Partners are gathering input from local families about their comfort level and preferences for in-person services, remote services or some sort of hybrid service. Also, several of Ready Ready's partners are members of the National Alliance of Home Visiting Models, which will be making recommendations collectively about a return to in-person services.

For the Navigation system, Ready Ready proven programs will continue to offer families options for how to connect, whether in person (when safe to do so), by telephone or by video call. This had been the intention from the start, but the forced "crash course" in remote options for both families and providers has enabled those options to be implemented more rapidly and effectively as they return to OB and pediatric sites. This will allow families the flexibility to access these services according to their individual needs — drawing on their concerns for health and safety, limitations of their work schedule, care for children, or simple convenience or preference. Additional processes to gain consent electronically, supported by on-site clinic staff, have streamlined the enrollment process, and this will also be sustained as a regular part of the support system.

For more information, contact Heather Adams at [heathera@getreadyguilford.org](mailto:heathera@getreadyguilford.org).

Organizations and agencies that support expectant parents and parents of young children are expected to return to providing mostly in-person supports and services because of the socioemotional health benefits and opportunities for deeper connection. As the above examples demonstrate, however, some services can be effectively provided virtually as a means of reaching more clients more efficiently. This suggests that organizations could embrace a hybrid/blended approach to delivering these supports and services as the “new/next normal.”