

Program Supports NICU Parents While Helping Babies' Neurological Development

The Goslings program teaches parents how to engage with their baby in early language activities.

Brenda Hussey-Gardner has seen the look before.

"They (parents and caregivers) have no idea what to expect when they walk in the room," says Hussey-Gardner, Ph.D., M.P.H., associate professor of pediatrics at the [University of Maryland School of Medicine](#) in Baltimore and co-developer of the Mother Goose on the Loose Goslings program at [University of Maryland Children's Hospital \(UMCH\)](#). "In the beginning, when we start singing, you can see them looking at us like we are crazy."

But the skeptical looks on the faces of parents and caregivers participating in the Goslings program fade when they see how it can benefit their babies as patients in the hospital's [Drs. Rouben and Violet Jiji Neonatal Intensive Care Unit \(NICU\)](#).

Two key principles

Now in its second year, the Goslings program's mission is to promote neurological development for these medically fragile patients by teaching parents how to engage their children in early language activities through a mixture of talking, singing, reading and playing. To date, parents and family members of about 200 NICU patients have completed the Goslings program, which is based on two key principles:

- **Stoplights.** Based upon his or her medical condition that day, the NICU staff assigns a color value to indicate the baby's readiness for stimulation. A "red" day would denote a medically fragile condition, so only light talking is appropriate. Parents are advised they can hold their babies on a "yellow" day, while a "green" day means go—the baby is medically ready for books and rattles.
- **Read and respond.** Regardless of the current medical condition, parents are trained to recognize their baby's signals and adjust the stimulation level accordingly. "It could be a green light day, but if you're getting fingers splayed, the baby's grimacing and turning away—it's too much," says Hussey-Gardner.

Positive feedback

Parents often walk away from the one-hour Goslings sessions with more than just knowledge, according to Hussey-Gardner, and they often become informal support groups for the parents. "It's a safe environment," she says. "They're learning about their baby in a group, and they see 'it's not just me going through this, all these other parents need to learn this too.'"

Feedback on the Goslings program has been overwhelmingly positive. Hussey-Gardner says every parent who has completed the program says in post-program surveys they'd recommend it to other NICU parents. UMCH has also conducted interviews with program participants who report using its principles at home one to two weeks after discharge from the hospital. They are not only reading and singing to their babies, but they're doing it the right way based on what they learned.

It Takes a Village

The Goslings program is the result of a collaboration of several partners from the community:

- Betsy Diamant-Cohen, DCD, created "[Mother Goose on the Loose](#)," which served as the basis for Goslings
- Brenda Hussey-Gardner Ph.D., M.P.H., worked with Diamant-Cohen to develop Goslings
- [Port Discovery Children's Museum](#) assisted in the program's development
- [University of Maryland Baltimore County](#) collaborated with UMCH staff to design and administer an evaluation of the program
- PNC Foundation's [Grow Up Great](#) initiative provided funding and brought together the team to develop and pilot the program

NICU Mother Goose on the Loose Goslings Program



Next steps

The next step in proving the Goslings program concept, according to Hussey-Gardner, is extending the interview process to families who've been home for several months, to see if the program's information is still being applied. Meanwhile, she says UMCH has received requests from other children's hospitals looking to implement the Goslings program. Funding is in the works to build a replicable Goslings curriculum that can be shared nationally.

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