

Georgia Promotes Early Brain Development By Encouraging Parents and Caregivers to Talk with Their Children

The Georgia Department of Public Health used a collective impact model to lead key stakeholders in an initiative to increase early language development among infants and children receiving WIC services.

Early exposure to words has a strong effect on language development and reading ability. A child's vocabulary at the age of three is a key predictor of third grade reading achievement, and third grade reading level ability is itself a powerful predictor of academic and economic success.^{1,2} Lower educational attainment is associated not only with lower income over a lifetime, but also with higher infant mortality, shorter life expectancy, and poorer overall health outcomes and economic outcomes.³

In 2013, only 34 percent of fourth graders in Georgia were reading at or above grade level.⁴ Georgia's [Talk With Me Baby](#) initiative uses a collective impact model to support early language development through increased quality and quantity of language exposure among low-income infants and children accessing the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). The effort focuses on training key workforces to coach parents and caregivers to talk, read and sing with their children, with an emphasis on reinforcing home languages for families who speak a languages other than English. Key partners include the Georgia Department of Public Health (GADPH), the Georgia Department of Education, the Atlanta Speech School, Emory University's School of Nursing and Department of Pediatrics, the Marcus Autism Center at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, and the Get Georgia Reading Campaign for Grade Level Reading.

- In 2013, only 34 percent of fourth graders in Georgia were reading proficiently.
- Children who are not reading proficiently by the end of third grade are four times less likely than their peers to graduate high school on time.

Steps Taken:

- Because more than 50 percent of all new and expectant parents in Georgia utilize WIC benefits, in August 2014 Talk With Me Baby initiative partners launched a language-building training program for 1,000 WIC nutritionists and staff. The training, developed by the Marcus Autism Center, included webinar and video components and focused on counseling women to frequently speak to their children in their native language. The nutrition educators in WIC clinics were trained in adding language-building components to their food, nutrition, and activity counseling programs.
- At the same time, GADPH conducted a baseline Preschool Language Scale assessment and the MacArthur-Bates Communication Development Inventory with 100 dyads of WIC mothers and their 18-24-month-old children. The language scale assessment found that the sample children's auditory and expressive language skill were in the bottom quartile compared to a national sample. The communications development inventory of parents indicated that the children receiving WIC benefits knew on average 147 words, which put them in the 40th percentile compared to national standards.

- In August 2014, GADPH provided DVD players to all 199 of its WIC clinics to show a Talk With Me Baby video in clinic waiting areas. The video aims to raise awareness among WIC clients about the importance of talking to children to support early brain development, and provides information on how to integrate language interactions with children into day-to-day activities. In conjunction with WIC nutrition education visits, GADPH also distributed books that reinforced nutrition messaging for participants and encouraged reading alongside materials that reinforced the Talk With Me Baby messages.
- In February 2015, GADPH conducted a mid-year review in eight WIC locations in urban, suburban and rural communities. Researchers conducted anonymous observations of WIC clinic waiting areas to ensure that the video and materials were being displayed appropriately and surveyed WIC clients to understand message penetration and awareness.
- GADPH also developed a statewide network of 100 Talk With Me Baby champions who help promote the initiative in their communities. The champion network includes nutritionists, public information officers, nurses, and other program staff. Champions implement a variety of activities in their communities, including social media contests where clients send in videos of “conversations” with their babies and the crafting pins for clinic staff that say “Talk To Me About Talking With Your Baby.”

Results:

- More than one third (38.5 percent) of surveyed clients reported having seen the Talk With Me Baby instructional video in the past year. Those who had seen it reported seeing it twice in the last year, on average. In addition, 79 percent of surveyed WIC clients recalled receiving counseling on the importance of language from WIC staff, and 88 percent recalled having seen posters related to the initiative.
- When asked if they were fully aware of the initiative in a way that would change their behavior, clients responded on average 1.2 on a scale of 1 (unaware) to 4 (very aware), indicating opportunities to continue improving message penetration, which will be critical to promoting behavior change.
- GADPH has demonstrated its ongoing commitment to early brain development by creating a staff position to oversee all early brain development efforts.

Next Steps:

- Based on the outcomes of its mid-year review, GADPH is testing new strategies at select WIC sites to increase message retention and develop action plans for behavior change.
- The Talk With Me Baby leadership team has developed a training curriculum for nurses working in OB-GYN, labor and delivery, neonatal, and pediatric settings. Once the curriculum is finalized, Emory University’s Nell Hodgson Woodruff School of Nursing will conduct a randomized controlled trial to test the curriculum’s effectiveness. Georgia Regents University is also exploring plans to incorporate the curriculum into its medical residency training program.
- In spring 2016, GADPH will conduct a follow-up Preschool Language Scale assessment with 100 additional mother-child dyads.
- GADPH Commissioner and State Health Officer **Brenda Fitzgerald** is developing a comprehensive approach to supporting early brain development that will include developing a community

engagement campaign, training additional key stakeholders (including other state employees, early childhood educators, and faith-based program employees), developing multi-disciplinary research centers, and developing strategies for telehealth and employer groups. GADPH is partnering with the Georgia Pathway to Language and Literacy project to explore opportunities to promote early brain development and language acquisition among additional at-risk populations, including deaf and hard of hearing children. GADPH is also exploring strategies to enhance the social-emotional health of children, a key contributing factor to the healthy development of the growing infant brain architecture.

Lessons Learned:

- Closely engage WIC staff at the beginning of the project to understand their workflow needs and opportunities (such as individual versus group nutrition counseling) and to better understand the families served. Because frontline staff can serve as key influencers with WIC clients, engaging WIC staff as partners early in the development process can both increase overall staff engagement and support more effective implementation strategies.
- Plan for a long-term strategy with scheduled updates to print and media materials. When developing a budget, incorporate a sustainability strategy up front and account for potential additional costs, such as curriculum revision and video updates. For example, consider potential messaging fatigue among front desk staff who will hear videos many times a day. Planning for a staged rollout of new videos or messages can eliminate the likelihood of a decline in program implementation fidelity.
- Provide specific implementation detail guidance to each site: be specific about setting up displays and where to place TVs in waiting areas to maximize client exposure. GADPH found it important to have champions in each WIC district who “owned” the initiative at the ground level and ensured that the initiative was being implemented with fidelity.
- Test messages with the target audience—in this case, WIC families—before finalizing and distributing materials.

For more information:

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¹ Hart B and Risley TR, 1995. “Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children.” Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

² Annie E. Casey Foundation. “Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters.” 2010. Available at <http://www.aecf.org/resources/early-warning-why-reading-by-the-end-of-third-grade-matters/>. Accessed 9-9-2015.

³ Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Commission to Build a Healthier America. “Issue Brief 6: Education and Health.” September 2009. Available at <http://www.commissiononhealth.org/PDF/c270deb3-ba42-4fbd-baeb-2cd65956f00e/Issue%20Brief%206%20Sept%2009%20-%20Education%20and%20Health.pdf>. Accessed 7-13-2015.

State Story



⁴ U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress. Available online at <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>.