

Babies and Books

Earlier this month, we collaborated with The Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania (HUP) and The Friends of the Free Library on the grand opening of Babies and Books! Thanks to numerous donations of new and slightly used children's books, we were able to contribute over 1,000 books for this worthy cause.

Premature infants are at high risk for language and cognitive delay due to the nature of complications associated with being born too early. However, this risk is exponentially increased in the absence of adequate verbal stimulation to the developing auditory system. Since most premature infants spend their first weeks to months in the hospital - often in isolation - and are currently exposed to very little meaningful speech, it's no surprise that recent research has demonstrated this type of sensory deprivation during such a critical period in brain development results in serious deleterious effects on language and cognitive skills when tested at seven and 18 months corrected age. Furthermore, if these infants are not read or talked to sufficiently when they are discharged home from the hospital, the combined effect of insufficient speech exposure, prematurity, and poverty, could translate into years of falling behind in school before a child even sets foot into a classroom.

Babies and Books is a new initiative currently in the early stages of implementation in the intensive care nursery at HUP whereby health care providers are now routinely educating parents on language development and the importance of early literacy practices through the integration of mandated "story time" and creation of a family lending library. Each parent receives a new book and congratulatory card on admission that outlines the goal of reading to their infant for at least 10 minutes twice a day throughout the length of their hospitalization. Audio recorders can also be used to leave personalized messages or recorded readings when parents are unable to visit. Additionally, parents receive a welcome packet with tips and suggestions for maximizing their role in their infant's care and will receive continued anticipatory guidance during their follow up visits after hospital discharge.

By modeling and encouraging consistency in parent-infant reading time from the time a baby is born, HUP's aim is to reduce the risk of language delay among high risk infants within their unit and to empower families to take an active role in factors that influence their infants' development. Together we hope to establish a long lasting legacy within the community as well as provide an evidence base for adoption of similar inpatient reading programs in neonatal intensive care units across the country, particularly in areas where both adult and childhood literacy rates fall well below the national average.