

Growing “Room to Grow”

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Generating referrals for new site of early childhood family support program

The first three years of a child’s life are critical to their lifelong cognitive, emotional and physical health,¹ but if families do not have the financial, social or emotional supports in place it can be difficult to provide children with everything they need during this period. Room to Grow delivers guidance and resources to NYC families with infants during this foundational three-year period. ideas42’s NYC Behavioral Design Center (BDC) designed behaviorally informed referral and outreach materials for the opening of a new Room to Grow site, and made recommendations regarding ongoing communications to ensure that more families have the opportunity to benefit from this valuable program.

Summary

The Room to Grow program provides early childhood development support to participants. Participants meet with their family advocate once every three months for one-on-one coaching on their child’s development and any challenges they are facing. At these sessions, families also receive referrals to key services, like early childhood education and healthcare; and have the opportunity to select items they need—ranging from clothes, books and toys to strollers and feeding chairs—at no cost.

Families often learn about Room to Grow through partner organizations, like hospitals, clinics and other non-profits, which refer potential participants to the program. Because Room to Grow will be able to support many more families once it opens its new, larger South Bronx location, staff are eager to increase their referrals significantly so that they can help as many families as possible. They came to the BDC for assistance creating a successful, behaviorally informed recruitment strategy. A number of behavioral barriers suggest that behavioral science can shed some light on how to improve the outreach process to support a successful launch of the Bronx Room to Grow program. For example, referral partners’ misconceptions about who could or should be referred could lead a partner to decide against referring a family, even though they are eligible.

As part of its expansion plans, Room to Grow has also started allowing community members to refer families, and allowing families to apply to the program without a referral. While this strategy lowers the barriers to entry by removing the need for an organizational intermediary, behavioral barriers could still deter its success. For example, families’ experience applying for government benefits or other programs with extensive requirements may lead them to believe they won’t be eligible—or that applying will be time-consuming and frustrating. Stigma associated with seeking help or free goods could discourage self-referral and deter friends from suggesting the program to families who would benefit.

The BDC sought to understand the barriers that limit referrals to Room to Grow and design practical solutions.

Highlights

- ▶ Beneficial programs, such as those that provide early childhood development support, can help more New Yorkers when partner organizations refer clients more regularly.
- ▶ Behavioral insights help keep Room to Grow top-of-mind for referrers and correct their mental models about who is eligible for the program.

¹ <https://www.unicef.org/early-moments>

Why not provide a referral?

A noteworthy feature of Room to Grow is that it has few eligibility requirements and a fairly simple application process. The program serves all kinds of families, from single mothers having their first child and married partners having their third to guardians and foster parents. However, in a world where many programs have stringent eligibility requirements and lengthy application processes, we found that Room to Grow's broader criteria and simpler application process are often overlooked or misunderstood. Despite its simplicity, there were a number of behavioral barriers preventing people from giving referrals.

We interviewed staff at a range of partner organizations to understand the barriers practitioners face when referring a family to Room to Grow. We also worked closely with Room to Grow's Parent Advisory Council (PAC), a group of former program participants, to understand their experiences being referred to Room to Grow as well as obstacles that could diminish referrals from community members.

Through interviews with providers, we uncovered three behavioral barriers preventing staff at partner organizations from referring people to the program:

1. Clinicians and counselors often do not even consider referring their patients and clients to Room to Grow.

In some cases, referrers did not consider the program simply because it was less familiar to them than others. Other referrers did not consider the program for some client families because the family did not specifically ask for help with pregnancy and parenthood, two requests referrers we spoke to associated with Room to Grow participants.

2. Sometimes referrers consciously decide against referring a family to Room to Grow.

This decision is often guided by an incorrect mental model of who the program is for. In some cases, referrers mistakenly thought the client would not be eligible for the program due to misconceptions about its eligibility requirements. In others, referrers screened participants based on their intuition about whether the family would be a good "fit." For example, some referrers mentioned they only refer families who are "responsible and reliable," which they determine based on how often mothers have attended pre-natal visits. That mental model can prevent families who are juggling multiple obligations and tasks from getting essential support for their children.

3. Referrers often don't refer a family because the family asks them to wait, or to refrain from referring them at all.

Referrers noted that families often delay or turn down a referral because they are intimidated by the program's three-year commitment.

Our conversations with PAC members revealed similar barriers to uptake, and additional ones, that may prevent individuals and families from applying to the program:

1. They noted that three years can seem like a long time, supporting what we heard from referrers. Families might feel uncertain about signing up for a program with that commitment.

2. They reflected on their own assumptions about the application. When they first heard about the program, PAC members thought the eligibility requirements and application process

would be similar to WIC, the supplemental food program for families, which has a number of eligibility and application requirements. Other families may make a similar assumption and decide not to even consider the program—even though they would have been eligible.

3. **They emphasized the role of stigma in uptake.** Two components of the program could trigger stigma for some families: the counseling and the free baby items, which could be interpreted as handouts.

An important insight contributed by PAC members was that they, and other program participants, are important advocates for the program. Their stories and perspective can mitigate stigma and concretize the benefits of the program. However, it wasn't always clear to members whether they could refer someone. Additionally, PAC members didn't always feel comfortable referring or answering potential participants' questions because they did not feel they knew all the details about eligibility requirements. We incorporated the input from their direct experiences into our design recommendations.

Referral and outreach recommendations

Based on these findings, the BDC developed tools, heuristics, and other recommendations to make Room to Grow top-of-mind for referrers and change their mental model about who they should refer. The BDC redesigned Room to Grow's informational flyer to address the identified barriers to client enrollment, including concerns about the three-year commitment and stigma families may associate with participating in the program.

The flyer is a fundamental, multi-purpose resource that will support both of Room to Grow's referral strategies. For referral partners, the flyer provides a clear template of the key elements of the program and its eligibility requirements to discuss with clients, or hand to those who don't want to make an immediate decision, which should increase the likelihood that these families eventually accept a referral or apply for the program on their own. For the community referral program, which relies on word-of-mouth and visibility, the flyer is a valuable stand-alone resource explaining the program and next steps for people interested in applying, learning more, or referring someone they know.

In addition to the flyer redesign, we recommended providing simple and explicit heuristics to guide referrers' decision-making around who is eligible or a good fit for the program. This could include:

1. Highlighting that pregnancy is the main eligibility criterion
2. Explicitly listing common program criteria that are **not** used by Room to Grow, such as income or residency requirements
3. Providing referrers with population statistics or other ways of estimating the number of pregnant women and families within their service area who would be eligible for the program

We also recommended equipping and empowering current and past Room to Grow families with information and recruitment material just as they do their referral partners.

Early Results

Room to Grow is using the flyer and our recommendations to recruit participants for their Bronx site that opened in early 2020. They saw increases of 26%-85% in their monthly referral statistics for August–December 2019 compared to the same time period last year, and have quickly filled the caseload for their growing team of clinicians. Room to Grow is also using insights and recommendations from this work to inspire new outreach efforts and resources. The flyer we designed has served as a basis for a number of other materials, including a poster for hospitals and libraries, and they plan to create an FAQ card for referral partners.

Incorporating behavioral insights into the messages and materials that non-profit programs disseminate, particularly at the start of a new phase or initiative such as a site opening, can enable them to extend their reach and impact.

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