

# ANNUAL REPORT



Dear Room to Grow Community,

What else can be said about last year that hasn't already been said? As difficult and life-changing as it was, it was also a year of unity and reimagination for Room to Grow. In the wake of an escalating global pandemic and racial reckoning, we were able to pivot gracefully and continue to provide high-quality and ever-engaging programming to families in Boston and New York.

Our team and community rose to the occasion, enabling us to welcome more than 400 new families into our program. Furthermore, we expanded our team and discovered new and creative ways to connect virtually, such as the CEO Coffee Chat. Because of your generous support — the calls, the well-wishing emails, the eagerness to volunteer and pitch in, and the thousands of

donated items and charitable financial gifts — we barely skipped a beat. We are on track to achieve our ambitious growth goals, and our purpose is clearer than ever.

In the following pages, we are delighted to share with you our progress and stories from this past year. Most of all, we hope you'll join us in celebrating our accomplishments and the strength and resilience of the Room to Grow community. When all is said and done, 2020 will be characterized as a defining moment for our organization. There's no doubt that the resonating highlights of 2020 will be our operational and programmatic achievements, along with the deeper connections built across our Room to Grow community.

Warmest regards,

Akilah B. King, CEO

P.S. Here are some of my favorite photos from this year:



# ABOUT

For more than 20 years, our three-year program has provided critical support to thousands of families raising babies born into low-income circumstances. We provide parents with essential baby and toddler items, parenting strategies and support to promote their children's development, as well as connections to community resources that can meaningfully expand their support network. Our dynamic, wrap-around approach addresses the multitude of needs parents face as they raise their children in the earliest years and provides the surest opportunity for establishing a strong foundation in life.



## BABY & TODDLER ITEMS

Families pick out clothes, books, toys, and other items for their children.



## PARENTING SUPPORT

Families discuss parenting questions with program staff and connect with community resources.



## CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Families develop strategies to support their children's growth and development.

## HOW OUR PROGRAM IS STRUCTURED

*a total of 13 visits*

A family has their first visit during their last trimester of pregnancy. From there, they meet one-on-one with program staff every three months until their child turns three. Each visit is two hours long and is held at one of our Family Centers in Boston or New York.



### FIRST HALF OF VISIT

Families meet with program team members to talk through the challenges and joys of early parenthood, discuss their children's development, and brainstorm strategies and resources that support family goals.



### SECOND HALF OF VISIT

Families and program staff continue conversations in our baby boutique, where parents choose the clothes, books, toys, and other items that will be useful for their children until the next visit.

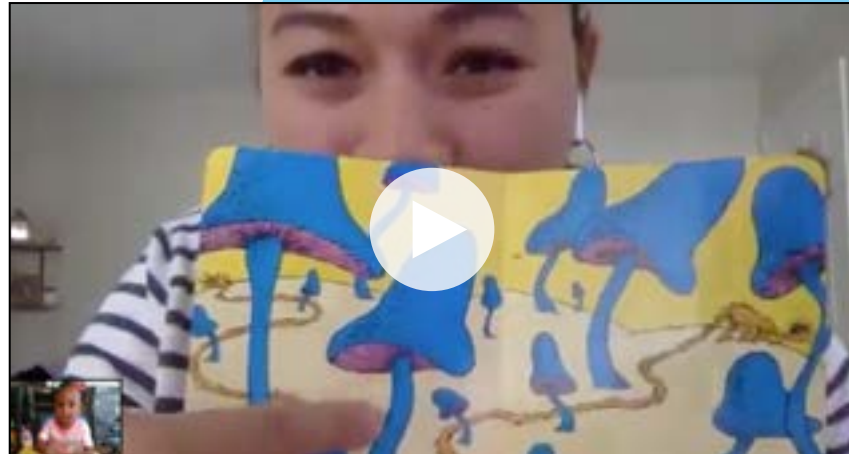
Read about how our program adjusted during the COVID-19 pandemic → → → → →



# COVID-19 RESPONSE

In March 2020, the world was transformed by COVID-19. Room to Grow quickly assessed our potential options and rapidly shifted from in-person family visits and in-person distribution of baby items to a virtual programming model and sending bundles of material goods directly to families. Over the course of the year, we conducted nearly 4,000 virtual visits with families in Boston and New York.

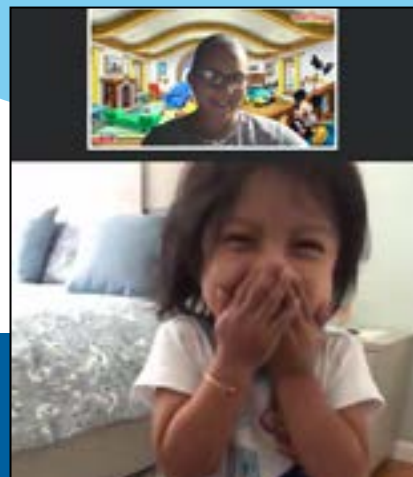
The visits were conducted by video and phone in order to continue providing support on parenting and child development. After each visit, families received a personalized bundle of baby and toddler items specific to the needs of the child and family.



Clinician Kena Mena integrates reading and counting into her visit with Juliet.



National Program Director and Clinician Amanda Ferguson reading with Millie.



Clinical Team Lead Eunice Cruz shares a sweet moment with Jemmy.

## THE PROCESS

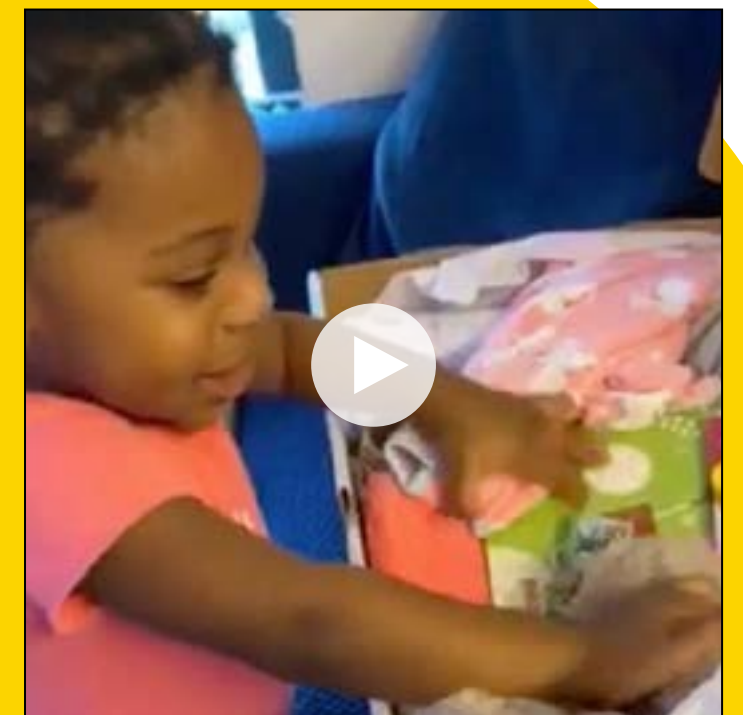
### ← SORTING + SHIPPING

The process starts in our South Bronx and Hyde Park locations with Site Operations team members curating and packing a special bundle for each family. The bundles include clothing, toys, books, and other items customized to the age and developmental needs of each child.



### ARRIVAL + EXCITEMENT →

The special bundles are then shipped to our delighted families in the Greater Boston and New York areas. Check out a Room to Grow New York toddler opening her package.



# REMARKABLE RESULTS

## WE KNOW ROOM TO GROW WORKS

Participation in Room to Grow sparks growth and development for both the child and family. We gather data from Room to Grow families using surveys and widely used assessments in order to tailor visits to every family's individual circumstances and, additionally, to reflect on and improve our program.



**9 out of 10 children in our program** are meeting or exceeding their developmental milestones



**86% of parents in our program** report self-confidence in responding to challenges and opportunities



**99% of parents in our program** engage in activities promoting their child's development daily



**88% of parents in our program** say Room to Grow helps them reduce their stress

# FAMILY EXPERIENCE

## FAMILY VISITS LOOKED QUITE DIFFERENT IN 2020 ...

Alongside virtual visits, the Room to Grow program team hosted virtual group sessions to remain connected with enrolled families and share helpful information and tips. The virtual activities also supported parents in mitigating the stresses and challenges of working remotely and creating new home routines for themselves and their little ones in uncertain times.



Listen to National Program Director & Clinician Amanda Ferguson and Family Support & Site Operations Coordinator Katie Amaro share strategies on keeping babies engaged while strengthening their language skills.

These monthly group sessions kicked off with an interactive discussion entitled, "**Baby Talk: Why is it important?**". With the aim of recreating the second half of an in-person visit with families, team members use these virtual sessions to demonstrate strategies and provide guidance to parents and caregivers to integrate into their daily routines. It also gives families the space to ask questions about their children's development and growth.



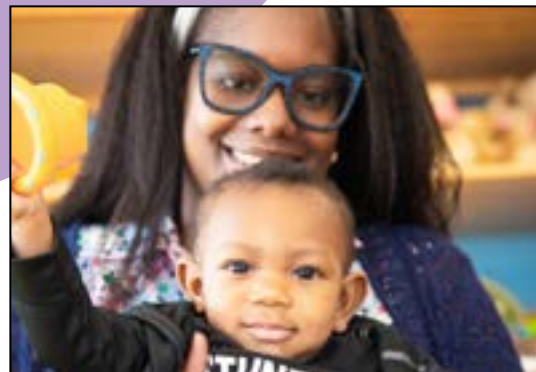
# WELCOMING A FAMILY IN 2020

During the pandemic, more than 400 new families joined Room to Grow and experienced the program a bit differently than they would have in our traditional program. The visits, which occur every three months, were conducted by video and phone in order to continue providing support on parenting and child development.

Families weren't the only ones who experienced the program differently in 2020. Clinician Michelle Castellanos joined Room to Grow in March and found herself building strong connections with families even while not meeting in person.



Boston parent Destiny and daughter Devynn (left) and New Yorkers Latisha and her son CJ (right) represent two new families who started their Room to Grow journey in 2020.



# GRADUATING DURING COVID



Estefany and Emmett arriving at one of their Room to Grow visits.

Room to Grow mom Estefany Rodriguez and son Emmett were in the cohort of families who graduated in 2020. The Dominican Republic native first learned of Room to Grow from her social worker at Mount Sinai Hospital and was eager to learn more about the program.

At the first visit, she was understandably shy and didn't know what to expect, but upon meeting her clinician Marissa Gernett, Estefany immediately felt at home, comfortable, and welcomed. Even more important for Estefany was that Emmett developed a strong connection with Marissa too.

Marissa and Estefany selected toys perfect for Emmett's age and talked about ideas and tips on how to reach developmental milestones like potty training.

Even when Emmett's speech was a little behind, Marissa reassured Estefany that all children develop at their own pace and that he was on the right track. Because of Marissa's suggestions and support, Estefany gained confidence as a young mother. She looked forward to each visit and the two never missed an appointment during the three years.



**"Although we didn't meet in person, I still felt like I was getting everything that my son and I needed. The one-on-one communication, the resources, and transparency — even during non-meeting times — made me feel heard and supported."** - Latisha, Program Participant

**"Room to Grow is not just about the toys and books; it's about the advice too. Instead of buying books and toys and other baby items, I spent money on other necessities like rent and was able to save more."** - Estefany Rodriguez, 2020 Program Graduate



**ANNUAL 5K WENT VIRTUAL**

Boston and New York came together for the first-ever organization-wide Virtual 5K.

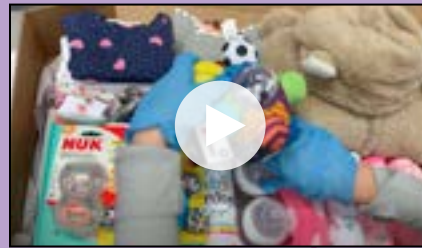


**PROGRAM TEAM APPEARED ON UNIVISION41 NUEVA YORK**

Boston and New York clinicians Kena Mena and Eunice Cruz made appearances on Univision to present the Room to Grow program and mission and discuss how the organization is still operating and supporting families during the pandemic.

**FIRST BUNDLES SHIPPED**

The Site Operations team began shipping customized bundles full of age-appropriate clothes, books, toys, and other critical material goods to families.



**ROOM TO GROW APPOINTED NEW CEO**

Having served as Interim CEO since March 2020, Akilah King was officially appointed as the new CEO of Room to Grow.



**VIRTUAL GROUP SESSIONS KICKED OFF FOR ROOM TO GROW PARENTS**

The Room to Grow program team hosted its first group Zoom session for families, titled "Baby Talk: Why is it important?"

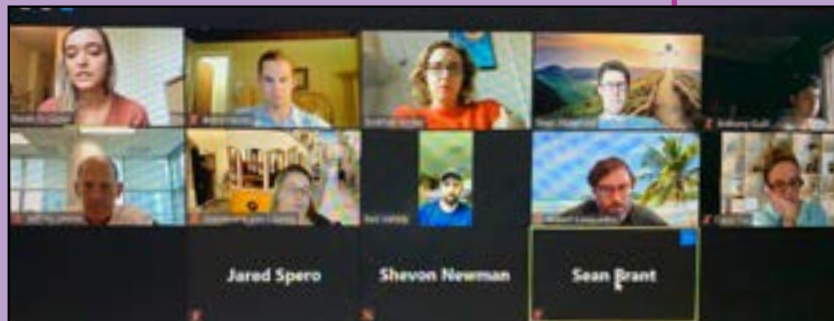
**JAN**

**DEC**



**NEW FAMILY CENTER OPENED IN SOUTH BRONX**

Room to Grow opened a 10,000-square-foot Family Center in the heart of the South Bronx, New York, to provide a greater level of engagement and convenience for participating families.



**VIRTUAL VOLUNTEERING KICKED OFF**

Employees at Houlihan Lokey, led by Room to Grow Junior Board member Brent Ferrin, kicked off the Room to Grow virtual volunteer sessions with a fun evening of financial donations and games, including Baby Trivia and Baby Price is Right.

**1,000TH VIRTUAL VISIT**

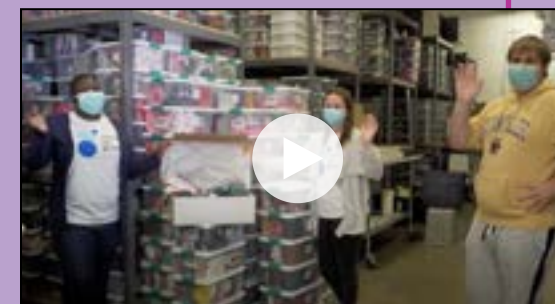
Room to Grow reached 1,000 virtual visits since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

**TRIO OF SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL EVENTS**

Room to Grow hosted a trio of successful events — a Virtual Picnic and a Health Innovations Panel by the Boston region and the first-ever Virtual Annual Benefit by the New York region. More than 400 supporters joined us virtually — what an incredible feat for first-time virtual events!

**CONTACTLESS DROP-OFFS**

Contactless Drop-Off launched in Boston and the South Bronx with a special appointment scheduler that allowed supporters to remain safe while donating their gently used baby and toddler items.



**2020 REFLECTION VIDEO**

Take a closer look at this unique year for Room to Grow.

**57 collection drives**

**223 individual donation drop-offs**

**400 new families joined the program**

**Nearly 1,000 bundles shipped to families**

**Over 3,300 virtual visits conducted**

**4,000 brand-new baby items purchased via Amazon in response to our "Count Me In!" campaign**

**35,000+ baby items donated by corporate partners**



# THE PEOPLE OF ROOM TO GROW

Allison Luciano  
MANAGER, SITE OPERATIONS

Meet Room to Grow team member Allison Luciano and learn more about her integral role in the program's operations.

**Q: How long have you been at Room to Grow?**

A: 4 years.

**Q: What does your job entail?**

A: One of the best things about my job is that it truly incorporates a little bit of everything. My main role, supporting the inventory and volunteer programs, affords me the opportunity to closely collaborate with all other teams at Room to Grow. For example, I work with the Community Engagement team to ensure gaps in our inventory are being addressed, and also with the Program team to examine any potential issues getting inventory to our families.

**Q: What does a typical day look like?**

A: Each day is different. Some days I receive and process large corporate donations, and other days I forecast how many items we need based on the number of families enrolled. I also lead on-site volunteer groups. The variety of tasks keeps me on my toes, which is how I like to work!



Allison and spouse Will Armstrong

**Q: Why do you enjoy working at Room to Grow?**

A: One of Room to Grow's greatest strengths is the collection of individuals who work here. Especially over this past year, I've known that I can count on my colleagues, and in turn, they know they can count on me. It makes the challenging times bearable and the good times more rewarding.

**Q: What are you most looking forward to in Room to Grow's future?**

A: All the possibilities. Now that we've explored new options for operating our program — video and phone visits, pre-packed bundles, virtual volunteer sessions, and more — I hope to integrate some of the new projects in a more permanent way when we return to in person programming.



Cindy Del Villar

Meet program graduate and New York Parent Advisory Council (PAC) member Cindy Del Villar. The mother of three reflects on her time with Room to Grow:

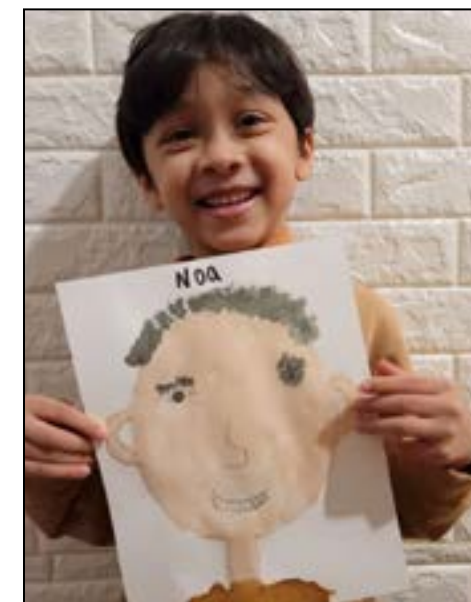
I have endured some pretty tough times in life, including homelessness and critical judgment, so joining Room to Grow was like nothing I had experienced before. Amanda Ferguson welcomed my family and me with open arms and a warm smile, and it immediately made us feel special, supported, and heard.

When I was 24 and my oldest child was just 6 months old, I found out that I was pregnant with my son Noa. Through Nurse-Family Partnership, we were referred to Room to Grow and things really started to change for the better. During that same time, I was also opening my first fully licensed group family daycare. Life was both overwhelming and gratifying, to say the least.

We attended the sessions as a family, with our oldest, Caleb, in tow. He wasn't an official part of the program like Noa, but Amanda included him in the sessions and shared strategies and ideas with my husband and me about Caleb and his development too.



Cindy and her husband Lester



Creative Noa showing off his self-portrait

One thing that really stood out is that Room to Grow isn't just about the kids. Imagine having two children in diapers at the same time — less than a year apart in age. It put a strain on our marriage and Amanda offered my husband and me helpful exercises to better communicate and reconnect.

Since graduating more than four years ago, we refer families to the program every chance we get. I also joined PAC in 2019 because I believe in the mission and know that the program is very important.

As a family unit, we are excelling; we now have a 1-year-old daughter, Luna, and recently opened our second licensed family daycare in New York. We are proud of our time with Room to Grow and are hopeful that more families will be fulfilled as we have been.



# THE PEOPLE OF ROOM TO GROW

Lionel Harris

Meet Boston Advisory Board and National Board member Lionel Harris. The finance and human resources executive has been a part of the Room to Grow family for the last five years.

**Q: How did you learn about Room to Grow?**

A: I happened upon a “pop-up donation center” in Boston’s South End, in front of the Tadpole store. My wife Irene and I donated six bags of toys in the spring, followed by dozens of books and puzzles in the fall. I recall being especially impressed by the “retail store” (baby boutique) setup and warm environment at Beacon Street. We, as a family, resolved to learn more about the organization. Years later, I’m honored to be serving on the National and Boston boards.



Lionel with his wife Irene and their three children

**Q: What makes Room to Grow special?**

A: For me, Room to Grow is special because the organization’s mission places it in the “eye of the storm” with regard to racial and social inequity in this country. The organization has a history of success with closing the gaps that contribute to the imbalances that persist locally and nationally. Furthermore, Room to Grow delivers an exceptional “social return on investment” — where a relatively small upfront investment can drive big societal benefits down the line. Lastly, Room to Grow finds itself at a unique juncture in its journey — where the opportunity set and the organizational stars are aligning in a way that accelerated growth is all but certain. Very special indeed.

**Q: What future vision do you have for the organization?**

A: My vision for Room to Grow is, I believe, consistent with the organization’s core mission — that one day, all parents will have the resources they need to unlock their families’ full potential. We’ve seen the positive impact of the Room to Grow model on our current 1,500+ enrolled families and graduate families. In business-speak, Room to Grow has a great product. And, if that product is good enough for New York and Boston, then it’s well-positioned for a successful implementation in other markets.



Room to Grow’s partners are community-based organizations, foundations, academic institutions, families, and individuals who donate their talents and resources. They support us in many ways — by contributing financially, donating baby items, volunteering, offering program support, referring families, and more!

## PARTNER SPOTLIGHTS

**RETAIL PARTNER — JACADI**

Room to Grow and Jacadi announced a comprehensive partnership in 2020. Along with a commitment of semi-annual clothing donations, the premium children’s brand also donated 100% of first-year membership fees from The Jacadi Club U.S. loyalty program to Room to Grow. In addition, all New York-based Jacadi employees will volunteer at our Family Centers at least one workday per year through the duration of the partnership.

**REFERRAL PARTNERS**

A critical and unique part of the Room to Grow program is the community connections that can expand the support network of enrolled families. Not only do we value incoming referrals from our community partners, but we also pride ourselves on continuing the relationship with our families by referring them to supplemental resources and groups for greater support.

## INCOMING

**BOSTON**

**Boston Medical Center Project RESPECT**

BMC Project RESPECT has been a supportive referral partner for the past three years. In 2020, clinical social worker Caitlin Clark referred over 10 families to our program.

**NEW YORK**

**Lincoln Hospital**

A partner since 2014, Lincoln Hospital referred more than 40 families to Room to Grow in 2020.

## OUTGOING

**BOSTON**

**Dimock Early Intervention**

The Dimock Center has partnered with Room to Grow since 2019. We have referred over 15 families and children to the early intervention program for developmental evaluation and services.

**NEW YORK**

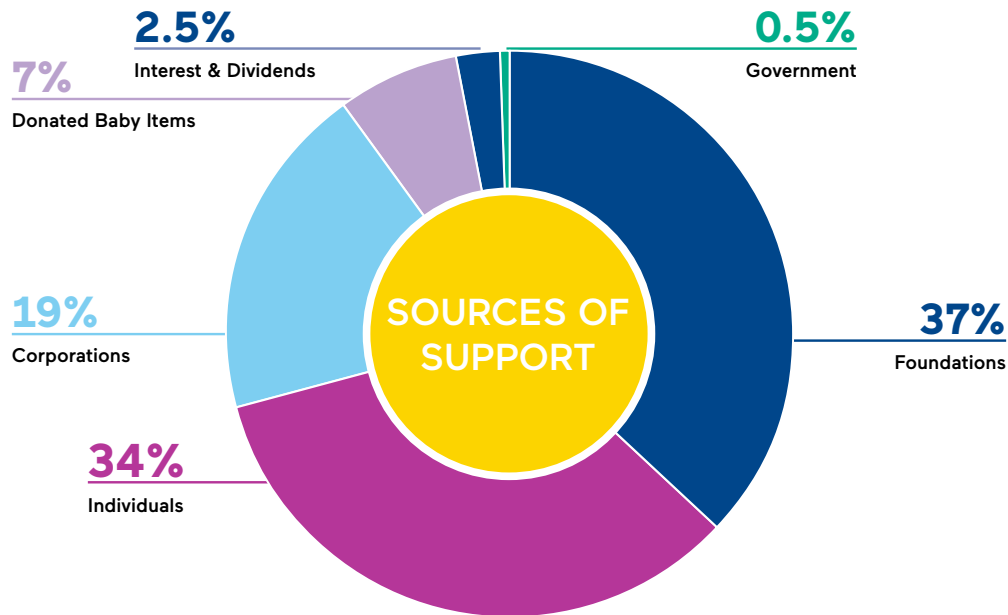
**New York Center for Infants and Toddlers**

Lillian Rivera from New York Center for Infants and Toddlers is a supportive partner to Room to Grow. When families are referred to NYCIT for evaluation, Rivera proactively updates the referring Room to Grow clinician with progress reports on the family and also shares trainings for our program team to attend.



# FINANCIAL HEALTH

## DIVERSIFIED SOURCES OF REVENUE



Room to Grow financials audited as December 31, 2020.

# LEADERSHIP

**National Board of Directors:** Julie Burns, *President* • Cleo Cavolo • Lionel Harris • Rashaan R. Reid • Jeff Scherer  
Uma Thurman

**Boston Advisory Board:** Robert Baldassarre • Tamar Frieze • Danielle Frissell, *Co-Chair* • Lionel Harris • Jeff Hoffman  
Andrew McCarthy, *Co-Chair* • Alison G. Nogi • Shadman Riaz • Jessica Scherer

**New York Advisory Board:** Cleo Cavolo • Richard B. Chalker III • Tim Creedon • Jennifer Dowd, *Chair* • Claire Ellis • Julia Haley  
Jaclyn Lasaracina • Hady Mendez • Eric Sutherland • Christi Wood

**Executive Leadership:** Akilah King, *CEO* • Sandra Medeiros, *New York Executive Director* • Oneda Horne, *Boston Executive Director*

**Founder:** Julie Burns, CSW

[Check out the full Room to Grow team here.](#)

## MISSION

We offer structured coaching, material goods, and community connections to support parents as they activate their natural strengths and expand their knowledge, so children thrive from the start.



[roomtogrow.org](http://roomtogrow.org)

400 Shawmut Avenue, Boston, MA 02118 | 424 E 147th Street, Floor 5, Bronx, NY 10455