Features

The 2011 Family Favorite Awards
We asked, you voted. Here are your top picks for places to shop, dine and explore with your families.

Happy Eating
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- Romantic Night Out
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Rainy Day Escapes
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Buying for Baby
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Meet Our Family Advocate of the Year!
Room to Grow in Boston provides baby gear and vital support to families who need it most.

Low Cost or No Cost
Our updated annual list of freebies, deals and discounts on local family attractions.

Plus

Editor's Note
A Treasure Trove of Family Fun

Special Advertising Section
NAEYC - Accredited Schools & Centers

Cover Design By: Lauren Deyeso
Room to Grow Provides Baby Gear and Support to Parents Who Need It Most
Each year, the *Boston Parents Paper* honors a person or organization working selflessly to help Massachusetts families in need with our Family Advocate of the Year award.

We’ve recognized a wide range of people and organizations over the past 22 years, from a longtime volunteer teaching at-risk kids to read, to our 2010 winner, Angelflight Northeast, for its commitment to flying (at no charge) children, adults and their families to lifesaving medical care hundreds of miles from home.

This year, our Family Advocate stands out for its approach to helping low-income and struggling parents during the first three – and most critical – years of their child’s life. At *Room to Grow* in Boston, social workers, administrative staff and more than a thousand volunteers contribute to the respect, generosity and support that each parent and child feels as they walk through the door.

It is what amounts to a strong, reassuring hug at a very challenging time.

**Unimaginable Obstacles**

One mom had just given birth to triplets when her tenuous housing situation fell through. Three infants to care for. No place to live.

Another worried so much about the lead paint where she lived that she wouldn’t put her baby down on the floor. As a result, the child’s muscles were weak and not fully developed.

And a third, an immigrant from Somalia, was only 16 when she learned she was pregnant. With no more room in her family’s small Boston-area apartment, she was forced to move into a shelter.

Housing crises are common among the new parents referred to Room to Grow, a 6-year-old social service agency on the fourth floor of an office building in Boston’s South End. Here, parents struggling to meet their infants’ needs find new and gently used baby and toddler clothes, blankets, feeding and bathing supplies, toys, books and bigger items like strollers and bouncy seats. All for free. They also find knowledge, support and advice from two full-time social workers on staff.

The Boston location is a branch of the original Room to Grow that has operated in New York City since 1998. It’s the brainstorm of psychotherapist Julie Burns, who saw the need for this kind of organization while working with struggling families on New York’s East Side. She wanted to provide a stable start for the infants of needy families while removing the stigma that many associated with accepting charitable help. So Burns, wife of renowned filmmaker Ken Burns, transformed donated business space into a boutique-like refuge where these parents could get high-quality clothing and supplies for their child free of charge, along with professional advice and support for overcoming any obstacles they faced at home.

Like its New York flagship, Boston’s Room to Grow works with parents referred by area birthing hospitals and community health centers because their circumstances – a lack of housing, joblessness, difficulty making ends meet, substance abuse, a disability, or a serious need for parenting knowledge – could put their baby at risk.

The help begins in a mother’s third trimester of pregnancy and ends on the child’s third birthday. A staff of seven professionals here (including the two social workers) schedules two-hour visits to Room to Grow every three months. The client base? About 350 families at any given time of the year.

Visits begin with private time with a social worker, who can answer parenting questions from the very basic – “My baby cries a lot; what can I do?” – to the more complex – “I’m losing my apartment in a week; where can we go?” or “My partner and I are fighting all the time; it’s hard with the baby.”

With more serious crises, the social workers devise a plan of action, often involving referrals to specific organizations that can help with such problems as housing, abuse or unemployment. They also interact

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**How to Help**

Want to keep Room to Grow thriving?

- Send in a financial donation.
- Spread the word to your friends.
- Volunteer your time to help sort through and shelve donations.
- Donate new or gently used baby and toddler items. (Visit [www.roomtogrow.org](http://www.roomtogrow.org) for a list of the most needed items.)

*Room to Grow, 142 Berkeley St., Boston, 617-859-4545; [www.roomtogrow.org](http://www.roomtogrow.org)*
with every family’s baby or toddler to check for developmental delays. If there are problems, they connect parent and child with the state’s Early Intervention program to address any issues as soon as possible.

Then, based on the child’s stage of development and specific needs, the social workers help parents select baby clothes, gear, toys and books (10 books at each visit to help promote early literacy) from Room to Grow’s donated stock to take home at no cost.

**Dignity in a Boutique Setting**

This work is all done in a sunny, welcoming environment; the main room looks more like an upscale children’s shop than a social-service agency.

Colorful baby and toddler clothes, toys, books and supplies from top name brands fill floor-to-ceiling shelves along the walls and an attractive wooden display cube at the center of the room. Comfortable couches, chairs and a carpeted floor give moms and dads plenty of room to lounge and play with their little ones.

“The space is deliberately organized to look like a beautiful, warm, inviting boutique,” says Saskia Epstein, executive director of Boston’s Room to Grow. “When families walk in, they really understand that the quality of service here is high and that we’re here to work with them.”

Epstein exudes the empathy that makes Room to Grow so special. After years of helping abused and neglected kids through the Home for Little Wanderers, she herself became a new mother in 2008 and experienced firsthand the extraordinary joy – and challenges – a new baby brings.

“I had a much better understanding of families in crisis and how crucial those first three years of life are to a child’s healthy development, how much a baby needs a stable environment and an attachment with the parent,” she says. Epstein sought out a new job to put her heart and soul into, and she found it in Room to Grow.

“If you’ve ever walked into a secondhand store, it’s an environment where families are often relying on others’ help. And that can be a challenging experience for many,” Epstein says. “Here, we want to provide a high level of care, beautiful items that meet these families’ needs and an effort to maintain their dignity. We want them to know that their child and family are worthy of the best, even if the parents are not able to provide that for themselves.”

Room to Grow’s Community Relations Manager Elizabeth Chernack agrees. “The first time families walk in here, you can see the awe and surprise on their faces [when they see the clothes, toys and supplies]. They think they’re only here to see a social worker. Today, I watched a mom in her third trimester come in here and her face just lit up. She was so thankful.”

**Stocking the Shelves**

About 20 percent of the donated clothing and gear on Room to Grow’s shelves comes from child and baby product companies, including Discovery Toys, the Dorel Juvenile Group, Magic Beans, Green to Grow and First Book (a national literacy organization whose grant helped Room to Grow purchase hundreds of children’s books).

Some businesses house collection sites for family donations to Room to Grow, among them the Goddard School for Early Childhood Development, Isis Parenting and Mamas Move fitness center in Norwell.

Large corporations provide thousands of dollars in support, including Partners HealthCare and Genzyme. Others sponsor collection drives or send employees over for volunteer work.
Voices from Room to Grow

Jamie, a single mom, came to Room to Grow while pregnant with her third child. Her two older children were living with her mother then because Jamie was unable to care for them. (Today she’s an involved parent to all three.)

– “I didn’t know how to be a mother then. I need to learn now so I can do this.”

Jocelyn and her 3 1/2-year-old son, Alex, are recent “graduates” of Room to Grow, which she credits for supporting them through a very difficult time.

– “At first when I found out I was pregnant, I just cried ... I was worried about how my son was going to be living – if we were going to be in the streets, if he was going to have enough food. It scared me. I love it here. They are so friendly when you come through the door. They help you a lot.”

But the bulk of donated items come from local families. Some drop off clothing, toys and more at the curb outside the building, and Room to Grow staff bring them up to the fourth floor. About 1,200 local volunteers – individuals, moms’ groups, book clubs, sororities or employees from local companies – each work a couple of hours on a weeknight or weekend to help sort donations, inspect them for quality and safety, and place them neatly on the shelves.

Continuing Need

While all of this support may make it appear that Room to Grow doesn’t really need more help, Epstein and Chernack say the organization is expanding and its needs are growing. Just securing enough new baby bottles, sippy cups, big-ticket gear like safety gates, and books requires constant donations of items, time and money.

“We really do require a lot of community support to be successful,” Epstein says. “We’re by no means fully resourced.”

And while administrative staff like Epstein and Chernack don’t get to interact as closely with the parents helped by Room to Grow as the social workers do, the work is still incredibly rewarding.

“When I get to hold a baby and see, at any point, a parent’s pride when I remark how beautiful their child is – that intense pride that a parent has – that is completely emotionally fulfilling. It makes my day,” Epstein says. “I have full confidence that we are making an impact.”

Deirdre Wilson is senior editor of the Boston Parents Paper.