As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of President Johnson’s call to action, statistics show that the United States continues to lag in addressing disparities that occur during a crucial period of cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development. Federal and state governments spend more than $10,000 per child annually from Kindergarten through 12th grade, and just under $5,000 per year per child for pre-schoolers (three to five year olds), while children under three years of age receive only $300 per year in government education spending.

Investing in early childhood development has been proven to build a strong foundation for academic success. Increasing parents’ responsiveness – defined by the Harvard Family Research Project as the use of warm and accepting behaviors to respond to a child’s needs and signals – is shown to result in children who are better at problem-solving, language, social and emotional skills. Furthermore, a University of Minnesota study that followed 267 children through adulthood found that “supportive parenting” in the first few years of life is just as good a predictor of high school graduation rates as IQ score.

Room to Grow is at the forefront of research-informed efforts to help at-risk children before educational delays emerge. We are dedicated to enriching the lives of babies born into poverty throughout their critical first three years of development by strengthening the knowledge and resources of children’s first teachers - their parents. For over 16 years, Room to Grow has been the only organization in New York City addressing the needs of poverty with this unique combination of support resources.
At 22 years old, Melanie discovered that she was pregnant with twin girls. She had recently ended a three year relationship with her boyfriend, and was nervous about the challenges that lay ahead as a new mother, raising newborn twins on her own. Further complicating her circumstances, Melanie’s children were born prematurely and spent several weeks in the Newborn Intensive Care Unit until health improvements enabled them to return home.

Before coming to Room to Grow, I was worried about how I would provide for my girls. Although I have a college degree, and was working at Bank of America part time, I was unsure of how I would get all of the things they need and parent them alone.

As I entered Room to Grow for my first post-birth visit, I carried a car seat in each hand, draped a huge diaper bag over my shoulder, and felt a lack of energy from sleep deprivation. Everything changed as soon as my social worker greeted me at the door. She made me feel welcome, asked how my twins and I were doing, and learned about my history. I felt as though I had found someone to bring out the best in me as a mother – someone who is genuine, friendly, and truly wanted to help.

With each following visit, I felt more and more supported, and received valuable information about the different development stages my twins experienced. I understood their eating habits, needs, and how to discipline them in a positive and effective manner. I learned how to initiate and reinforce their learning by incorporating reading into their daily lives. Most importantly, I have come to understand the importance of patience, which is a challenge when parenting two very active toddlers.

Along with the knowledge and feedback, I was showered with unbelievably great clothing, toys, books, and other necessities. I recall two special instances when my social worker provided me with a double stroller and a metal safety gate that I needed. I couldn’t contain my tears; I was in disbelief and so overwhelmed from the support.

Room to Grow is different from other organizations. Each visit is more like a conversation than an appointment. It feels personal and supportive. I’m guided on how to better understand my children, and if I need assistance that they cannot provide, they will direct me to another organization. I honestly don’t know where I would be without Room to Grow and my social worker’s dedication and patience.
In the upcoming year, Room to Grow’s expansion will enable a brighter future for more children throughout New York City. Our expanded program space will include a “boutique” and dedicated play area for children, as well as a volunteer workspace to increase the volume of sorting, cleaning, and displaying donated material items. Most importantly, Room to Grow’s expansion will enable us to increase our client capacity by serving an additional 40% more babies and their parents each year.

With a staggering 46% of New Yorkers living near or below the poverty line, Room to Grow’s services are more critical than ever.

LOOKING FORWARD
Under the leadership of a new Executive Director, Allyson Crawford, Room to Grow will increase its program capacity to better address the urgent needs of low-income children in our city.

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