



**national summer  
learning association**

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



# winning strategies

parent engagement

## Believe 2 Become Baby Scholars:

*Empowering Parents to Help their Young Children Grow Smarter*

### introduction:

Summer is a time of great opportunity for youth but it is also a time of great inequity. While some students have access to a wealth of opportunities such as visiting museums and new places during the summer months, other students are far removed from these experiences that help bridge the gap between the end of the school year and the beginning of the next. Many young people lose access to critical supports to keep them safe, healthy, and engaged in learning. As a result, a typical child loses between one to three months of reading and math learning in the summer. <sup>1</sup>

One promising strategy for decreasing the impact of summer learning loss is to empower parents and caregivers to support their children's learning during their pre-kindergarten years. Summer and out-of-school time (OST) programs that offer high-quality enriching activities and interventions are in a strategic position to teach parents and caregivers effective strategies to reinforce responsive parenting and help parents incorporate skills to structure their child's learning capacity. Children in programs that are able to successfully empower families to support the development of their child's social, emotional, and cognitive skills before they enter kindergarten are more likely to experience overall academic success, attain higher education, and find employment. <sup>2</sup>

One such program, the **Believe 2 Become (B2B) Baby Scholars** program located in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is empowering parents to focus on school readiness<sup>3</sup> in meaningful and impactful ways. The B2B Baby Scholars program is an education and skills-reinforcement program that helps parents of infants and young children, five-months to five-years old, in low-income areas reinforce responsive parenting and storybook reading skills. The program's goal is to empower parents to improve their child's school readiness through stakeholder partnerships and implementation of a parent education model. This brief highlights several strategies being implemented by B2B that parents can use to support their child's school readiness as well as other best practices programs can use to strengthen their parent empowerment component.

### School Readiness is fostering children's growth in five areas:

1. physical well-being and motor development;
2. social and emotional development;
3. approaches to learning;
4. language development (including early literacy); and
5. cognition and general knowledge.

<sup>1</sup> Boulay, M. (May 2016). Summers Matter: 10 things every parent, teacher, and principal should know about June, July & August. Portland, Oregon: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

<sup>2</sup> Child Trends Data Bank (July 2015). It Matters: Early School Readiness, Indicators of Child and Youth Well-being [https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/07\\_School\\_Readiness.pdf](https://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/07_School_Readiness.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> National Education Goals Panel (1995). Reconsidering children's early development and learning: Toward common views and vocabulary. Washington, DC: National Education Goals Panel. Available at: <http://govinfo.library.unt.edu/negp/reports/child-ea.htm>

# a model program

In Grand Rapids, Michigan, the Believe 2 Become Initiative aims to bring all students in qualifying disadvantaged neighborhoods up to grade level through coordinated application of best practices identified in existing national and metropolitan research. B2B targets four “Hope Zones” which are low-income areas with high proportions of students who are achieving below grade level in elementary and middle school. In these neighborhoods, eight of ten children, age five or younger, are historically without access to formal early care and education experiences, due to shortages of services and of childcare or preschool placements. The core research-based practices used by B2B include engaging residents in community dialogue; empowering families and parents with opportunities to support the academic success of children; and expanding learning for students in school and during out of school time.

Baby Scholars, a key component of B2B, is an example of how the B2B Initiative works hard to engage and empower parents. The overarching goal of Baby Scholars is to improve the kindergarten readiness of low-income children who have limited formal early learning experiences. As a requirement of the program, parents and/or caregivers and the child must reside in one of the designated Hope Zones to enroll in the program. Baby Scholars provides underserved parents in the targeted Hope Zones with critical access to early care and education services.



“Between the ages of 5 months and 5 years, young children are primed to learn, and parents are their first teachers. Baby Scholars equips parents with tools for early learning, so their children start kindergarten on track and ready to succeed.”<sup>4</sup>

## THE BABY SCHOLARS PROGRAM CONSISTS OF THREE MAIN COMPONENTS:

**1)** A home visiting component focused on teaching responsive parenting skills to parents of infant children, using the Play and Learn Strategies (PALS) I curriculum. This curriculum is designed to promote early language, cognitive, and social development in children and to strengthen the bond between parent and child. The PALS Infant curriculum consists of 10 sessions and is appropriate for parents of infants from about 5 months to 19 months.

**HOME COACHING** for parents with their babies 5 to 19 months. For 10 weeks a certified parent coach shows parents how positive parent- and-child interactions can help their baby’s language, social, and brain development.

**2)** A home-based and small group center-based component for parents of toddlers and preschool age children, using the PALS II curriculum. These small playgroups sessions are opportunities for parents to build relationships with one another, but also for program staff to foster positive relationships with parents.

**HOME COACHING** for parents with their toddlers 20 to 35 months. A 10-week quality curriculum with trained professionals helps parents help their little one learn how to follow directions, take turns, recognize sounds and letters, and use more words. Parents and children work with trained coaches in their home one day each week.

**3)** An abbreviated 10-week direct-instruction preschool experience using Texas Early Education Model (TEEM) to enrich and accelerate the pre-academic knowledge of preschool-age children whose parents are participating in the program. TEEM is one way that Baby Scholars provides high-quality learning experiences for young children.

**HOME COACHING AND FIRST SCHOOL** for parents with their preschoolers 3 to 5 years. A 10-week quality curriculum with trained professionals helps parents help their little one learn colors and shapes, develop pre-reading skills, and be ready for kindergarten. Parents work with trained coaches in their home for one day each week, while children participate in a preschool classroom two days per week.

<sup>4</sup> <https://believe2become.org/programs/baby-scholars/>

“TEEM encourages shared resources among government-funded public and private child-care programs including non-profit and for-profit childcare centers, public school districts and Head Start. Key ingredients include: a partnership among childcare and early education programs, implementing a teacher training program (CIRCLE Professional Development), using research-based, state approved curriculum, and implementing a quality rating system to certify early childhood education programs as getting children ready for formal schooling.”<sup>5</sup>

#### SESSION TOPICS IN THE PALS CURRICULUM INCLUDE:

- » Attention to babies’ and toddlers’ communicative signals
- » Responding appropriately to children’s positive and negative signals
- » Supporting infants’ and toddlers’ learning by maintaining their interest and attention, rather than redirecting or overstimulating
- » Introducing toys and activities
- » Stimulating language development through labeling and scaffolding
- » Encouraging cooperation and responding to misbehavior
- » Incorporating these strategies and supportive behaviors throughout the day and during routine activities such as mealtimes, dressing, and bathing, as well as at playtime

The PALS curriculum is facilitated by a trained parent educator who presents each session to the parent(s) and coaches the parent(s) in using the specific techniques that are either demonstrated in person or via videotaped examples of real mothers and children utilizing specific techniques at age appropriate levels. Guided practice opportunities during each session help parents move from watching, listening and talking, to doing.<sup>6</sup>

Baby Scholars’ staff and coaches receive training on the core curricula (i.e. PALS I & II) that are used in the program and training on communications and messaging to parents. This type of training ensures that the Baby Scholars’ program model is used consistently across sites. Baby Scholars also invests in assessment training for local, external assessors who administer the multiple testing measures selected for the three age groups of children that participate in the program. This attention to assessments aids in program improvement and tracks Baby Scholars’ progress toward their goal of improving kindergarten readiness in young children.

## baby scholars and parent engagement

Since 2010, Believe 2 Become Baby Scholars has provided actionable information and innovative learning opportunities to thousands of young children and their families, producing over 5,200 proud graduates. Baby Scholars’ success is due in part to their intentional attention to the importance of empowering parents to be more engaged in their child’s education. Research shows that the more parents are involved in their child’s education, the more their child will achieve academically.

Baby Scholars continuously strives to deepen parent partnerships and improve youth outcomes. In the B2B continuum of Parent Partnerships, programs move parents from involvement to empowerment. Based on B2B’s continuum, in the **INVOLVEMENT** phase parents are active observer and primarily are only active as volunteers. This type of involvement results in the lowest impact for youth outcomes.

However, when parents become **ENGAGED** they become an active-learner and occasionally a co-leader in their child’s education. During this phase parents are primarily active in awareness-building and co-planning and results in increased youth outcomes. As parents become engaged in their child’s learning they also become **EMPOWERED** to be an active leader, teacher, and resource for their child’s education. In this phase parents are taught to reinforce skills that their child may learn at school or in an educational program. When parents are empowered, they have the largest impact on youth outcomes. B2B strives to provide opportunities and resources for parents to initially become involved, then engaged, and eventually empowered to act as leaders in their child’s educational process.



<sup>5</sup> <https://www.hotworkforce.com/ChildCare/TEEM.php>

<sup>6</sup> Play and Learning Strategies (PALS) curriculum description <https://www.childrenslearninginstitute.org/programs/>

## BABY SCHOLARS USES A 3-POINT CALL TO ACTION FOR PARENT ENGAGEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT:

### » ENCOURAGING ENGAGEMENT

Engage parents early and often. Utilize varying ways to communicate with parents; be as personable and as welcoming as possible to all audiences.

### » RECRUIT YOUR CHEERLEADERS

Parents are the best recruiters for other parents to become involved; intentionally rely on their support.

### » RECOGNIZE PARENTS AS PARTNERS

Include parents in key roles if possible; request and incorporate their feedback, empowering them to be an influence within the program.

Through Baby Scholars, Hope Warren Plummer learned how to read her 8-month-old son Jayden's signals so she could tell when he was done eating, tired of playing, or ready for a story. For 10 weeks, a coach came to her home for two hours each week to help her learn essential parenting strategies to support Jayden's brain development. She said Baby Scholars even helped her better understand her 9-year-old son, so she feels like a stronger parent for both kids.<sup>7</sup>

As partners in children's learning, summer programs must strive to support parents' efforts to become involved, engaged, and empowered in their child's learning process. First and foremost, programs must provide high-quality learning experiences that keep young people's minds and hearts engaged.

## what can programs do?

### TO SUPPORT PARENTS, HERE ARE SOME BEST-PRACTICES PROGRAMS CAN IMPLEMENT:

#### » CULTIVATE POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES

A positive relationship is the foundation to strong parent engagement.<sup>8</sup> A first step toward developing these relationships is creating a welcoming environment for parents. Greet parents warmly, learn their names and show parents what youth did during the day. When discussing activities, program staff can share which skills youth learned. This kind of sharing may spark ideas for parents about how they can extend the learning at home. During these interactions, encourage parents to share their views about the program and any suggestions they may have.

#### » CONNECT PARENTS TO EDUCATIONAL AND OTHER SUPPORT RESOURCES

Parents are often juggling multiple responsibilities and families have various needs in addition to investing in their child's education. Programs can be a link between families and the community resources that can meet their needs.<sup>9</sup> To do so, programs can establish relationships with organizations that offer educational resources as well as support services such as health care, housing, and food security. A resource corner displaying the contact information for these resources is one way to help parents access the resources they need.

#### » MAKE PROGRAM ACTIVITIES ACCESSIBLE TO PARENTS

High-quality summer programs are chock-full of structured activities that spark learning and excitement in youth; parents can capitalize on these activities. Programs staff can share extension activities that parents can do with their children at home or provide questions that parents can ask about what students learned. When adults in multiple settings (e.g. programs, home, and/or school) coordinate about learning in this way, children tend to benefit.<sup>10</sup>

#### » PROVIDE STAFF WITH TRAINING TO HELP THEM PROMOTE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Ongoing professional development is a staple for high-quality summer programs. Programs should add training that explicitly makes a link between parent engagement, school readiness, and a reduction in summer learning loss.<sup>11</sup> Trainings should also introduce staff to best practices (like those presented in this brief) on how to promote parents' engagement in school and the program. Other topics that could be included in professional development include what families believe about connections between family engagement and school readiness, and how to respond to beliefs that are different from personal beliefs.<sup>12</sup> Ensuring that program staff have access to quality training will also prepare them to share their expertise with families.

7 <https://believe2become.org/story/starting-success-early/>

8 Porter, T., Guzman, L., Kuhfeld, M., Caal, S., Rodrigues, K., Moodie, S., Chrisler, A. & Ramos, M. (2012). Family-provider relationship quality: Review of existing measures of family-provider relationships, OPRE Report #2012-47, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

9 Rouse, H. L. & Fantuzzo, J. W. (2009). Multiple risks and educational wellbeing: A population-based investigation of threats to early school success. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 24, 1-14.

10 Bronfenbrenner, U. (Ed.). (2005). *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development*. Sage.

11 Head Starts Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center. *Understanding Family Outcomes: Family Engagement and School Readiness*. <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/family-engagement/article/understanding-family-engagement-outcomes-research-practice-series>.

12 Ibid.

» **PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARENTS TO LEARN ABOUT SCHOOL READINESS AND SUMMER SLIDE**

Parents will be ill-equipped to deal with a lack of school readiness and the impact of summer slide if they are uninformed. Programs can educate parents about the importance of school readiness and strategies to combat summer slide by hosting learning opportunities for parents. Programs are encouraged to experiment with a variety of formats to keep parents informed such as videos, workshops, presentation, or roundtable discussions.<sup>13</sup>

There are also steps that parents can take to become more involved, engaged, and empowered in their child's education. Parents are essential to the academic growth of their children. When parents are involved in their child's schooling, children tend to earn better grades, attend school regularly, enroll in advanced programs, and graduate high school.<sup>14</sup> These children are also likely to have strong social and emotional skills.<sup>15</sup>

“Parents are their children’s first teacher, brain builder, tech navigator, advocate, and coach. They are the secret sauce to their children’s success.”<sup>16</sup>

-THE CAMPAIGN FOR GRADE LEVEL READING

## what can parents do?

TO SUPPORT THEIR CHILDREN, HERE ARE SOME STRONG EDUCATIONAL HABITS THAT PARENTS CAN ADOPT:

» **READ TO YOUR CHILD**

Reading is a great way to boost language skills. For younger children, read to them as much as possible. Setting aside a time of day to read together can help create a regular reading practice. So, can setting up a comfortable, well-lit and quiet place to read. The library is a great resource for children of all ages. Libraries often host story times and offer a wide selection of books that can cater to the varied interests of youth.<sup>17</sup>

» **EXPLORE YOUR COMMUNITY**

This can be as simple as taking a child to the park, going to museums that offer free admission, or attending free community events. For younger children parents may begin by drawing their children's attention to the new sights, smells, sounds that she is experiencing. While parents of older children may engage in conversation about these experiences. What do you see, hear, or smell? How does what you notice compare to other places we've gone? This kind of guided exploration can help children practice scientific skills, because they are gathering information. They are also learning about people, places, and activities, which is at the core of social studies.<sup>18</sup>

» **TAP INTO YOUR CREATIVITY**

In many schools, students have very little time dedicated to art. Summer is a wonderful opportunity for students to spend more time expressing themselves through dance, song, drawing, photography, videos, and more. Using your creative side need not be complex. Parents can sing and dance with their children, particularly with younger youth. Older youth may enjoy creative writing, journaling, or taking photos that capture how they feel. Parents may also want to take advantage of free or low-cost opportunities to take children to see performances and works put on by artists of all ages. Summer camp exhibitions count!<sup>19</sup>



13 Ibid.

14 Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on student achievement. Austin, TX: National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools SEDL.

15 Ibid.

16 <http://gradelevelreading.net/our-work/successful-parents-3>

17 NSLA. Top 10 “Easy Summer Learning Tips” for Parents. <http://summerlearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Tip-Sheet-for-Parents.pdf>; Ready at Five. Help Your Child Learn to Communicate. <http://www.readyatfive.org/download-document/for-parents/parents-tips/1140-communicate/file.html>.

18 NSLA. “Top 10 “Easy Summer Learning Tips” for Parents.” <http://summerlearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Tip-Sheet-for-Parents.pdf>; Ready at Five. “Prepare Your Child for School.” <http://www.readyatfive.org/download-document/parents-matter/238-prepare-your-child-for-school-english/file.html>

19 NSLA. “Top 10 “Easy Summer Learning Tips” for Parents.” <http://summerlearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Tip-Sheet-for-Parents.pdf>.

» **STAY HEALTHY**

The importance of health cannot be underscored enough. Parents can help children continue to get enough rest by sticking to bedtime routines. In summer, many students risk gaining weight from eating too many unhealthy snacks and reduced movement.<sup>20</sup> Parents can have healthy snacks like fruits and veggies available, and take walks with children. Some local schools may allow families to access playgrounds during the summer, which parents can use to encourage their child to get adequate exercise.<sup>21</sup>

» **SPEND TIME WITH OTHERS**

Positive social interactions give children opportunities to practice social and emotional skills that they will use in school. Listening, asking questions, and teamwork are just a few. This means getting children around peers but also supportive adults. For parents with younger children parks, playgroups, and libraries may do the trick. Older children may help parents by suggesting outings with friends. Of course, summer programs are an option for children of all ages. Parents can model positive interactions for children with family, friends, and community members.<sup>22</sup>

» **SEEK MATH**

Math enthusiasts will tell you that math is everywhere. There are multiple opportunities in day-to-day interactions to encourage children to use math skills. Parents can encourage younger children to count and sort everyday objects. These young people can also practice recognizing numbers, which can be accomplished with homemade or store-bought flashcards. Math will likely be most engaging for older youth if it has practical applications. Parents can ask children to add shopping receipts or help cook (measuring is great math practice).<sup>23</sup>

## in conclusion...

Scientific studies show that children learn earlier and more than people once thought. Children from birth to five years old are developing social, emotional, and cognitive skills that will shape the rest of their lives. Unfortunately, children in low-income areas often do not receive formal early care and educational experiences, due to limited services and poor preschool placement. Programs such as B2B Baby Scholars are helping to fill this void by providing families in low-income areas early-childhood educational resources and teaching families responsive parenting and storybook reading skills. B2B Baby Scholars also helps parents move from being involved in their child's education to being empowered to act as teachers, leaders, and partners in their child educational journey. We encourage programs to use this brief as a resource to implement strategies to empower families to see themselves as their child's first teacher. We also encourage parents to use this brief to implement strategies in their homes that will prepare their child to succeed in school, career, and life.



20 von Hippel, P. T., Powell, B., Downey, D. B., & Rowland, N. (2007). "The effect of school on overweight in childhood: Gains in children's body mass index during the school year and during summer vacation." *American Journal of Public Health*, 97(4), 796-802.

21 NSLA. "Top 10 "Easy Summer Learning Tips" for Parents." <http://summerlearning.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Tip-Sheet-for-Parents.pdf>; Ready at Five. "Prepare Your Child for School." <http://www.readyatfive.org/download-document/parents-matter/238-prepare-your-child-for-school-english/file.html>

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

### » **READY ROSIE**

[www.readyrosie.com](http://www.readyrosie.com)

*ReadyRosie* is an early education tool that is currently helping schools and communities across the nation deepen and scale their parent engagement efforts by leveraging the power of video modeling and mobile technology to meet and equip parents where they are. *ReadyRosie* has hundreds of brief videos in English and Spanish that model everyday interactions in familiar environments with real parents.

### » **VROOM**

[www.joinvroom.org](http://www.joinvroom.org)

Vroom turns shared moments into brain building moments. Whether it's mealtime, bath time, or anytime in between, there are always ways to nurture children's growing minds. Vroom provides parents with tools and activities to turn those shared moments into learning opportunities.

### » **U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION | HELPING MY PRE-SCHOOL CHILD**

[https://www2.ed.gov/parents/earlychild/ready/preschool/part\\_pg3.html#p3](https://www2.ed.gov/parents/earlychild/ready/preschool/part_pg3.html#p3)

This booklet has tips to help parents prepare their child for school and learning. It contains simple activities that parents can do with their child, and encourages them to create and try many more on their own.

## ADDITIONAL PARENT ENGAGEMENT RESOURCES FOR PROGRAMS

### » **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT GUIDES FOR PARENT, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/pro-dev-guide-pfce-approach.pdf>

A training toolkit for early childhood programs who are building on parent involvement to reach full scale community engagement. It includes step-by-step instructions on leading staff training modules that are designed to give staff the foundational knowledge and skills they need to partner with parents and families.

### » **HEAD START | EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING & KNOWLEDGE CENTER. PARENT, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SIMULATION: BOOSTING SCHOOL READINESS THROUGH EFFECTIVE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT SERIES**

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/family-engagement/article/parent-family-community-engagement-simulation-boosting-school-readiness>

Explore and practice everyday strategies to develop Positive Goal-Oriented Relationships with a family. These relationships are key to working with children and families, including the journey toward school readiness. Simulation 1 allows staff to practice building bonds with families, beginning with an intake visit. Simulation 2 explores the process of developing and implementing goals with families. Simulation 3 explores using strengths-based attitudes to partner with families during challenging times.

### » **READY AT FIVE**

<https://www.readyatfive.org/about-us.html>

Ready At Five is a dynamic, statewide organization that elevates the discussion, practice, and quality of early childhood education in Maryland. Their vision is that all children will have the foundation for success in school, career, and life. They achieve their mission by: developing and implementing data-driven solutions based on analysis and dissemination of Maryland's early childhood data and national research; advancing the knowledge and skills of the early childhood workforce through high-quality professional development, curriculum and resources; supporting young children and their families through information, publications, and tools; and engaging educational and health leaders, policy makers, and the philanthropic and business communities through advocacy and education.



**national summer  
learning association**

**ABOUT THE NATIONAL SUMMER LEARNING ASSOCIATION**

The National Summer Learning Association is the only national nonprofit exclusively focused on closing the achievement gap by increasing access to high-quality summer learning opportunities. NSLA recognizes and disseminates what works, offers expertise and support for programs and communities, and advocates for summer learning as a solution for equity and excellence in education. NSLA's work is driven by the belief that all children and youth deserve high-quality summer learning experiences that will help them succeed in college, career, and life.



*An Initiative of the Doug and Maria DeVos Foundation*

**ABOUT BELIEVE 2 BECOME**

Believe 2 Become builds successful futures by empowering more young people to achieve their unlimited potential, fulfill high expectations, and seize real opportunities in a supportive environment.

**BABY SCHOLARS COLLABORATIVE PARTNERS**

**Arbor Circle  
Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative  
Groundwork Consulting  
Spectrum Health Strong Beginnings**

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

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