

Sharing the Goods

While many new parents are overwhelmed with shower and new baby gifts, a large contingent of our city's young families have almost nothing. **Room to Grow**, a new non-profit organization in East Harlem, seeks to level the playing field, offering low-income parents a vast array of developmental toys and books, as well as clothing and accessories for kids newborn to three years.

The concept is startlingly simple. Julie Brown, a social worker, gets parents to donate new and gently used baby items, which low-income parents can select free. She only accepts items for children newborn to three because this developmental period is so critical. Brown realized through her clinical work that improving this early developmental period can make the most positive impact on children's development.

Brown says Room to Grow fills a niche that was otherwise unfilled in New York City. She works closely with organizations providing direct and support services to children newborn to three and sees Room to Grow as one more aspect of this support system.

The people who are eligible to receive the free goods are referred by a number of different agencies; Brown carefully screens these organizations to ensure that she reaches diverse populations, from teen mothers in school, to victims of domestic violence, to homeless families.

Don't call to unload stained clothes or puzzles with missing pieces. Room to Grow accepts only new items or those in extremely good condition, so the people taking the toys, books and clothes can feel dignified about their "purchases". In fact, because donations have grown at an unexpectedly huge pace, Brown can be even more selective, though she says she is more flexible about larger, more expensive items, such as strollers. Several corporations, including Hallmark, Kinderwear, Baby Gap and Scholastic, have made donations, and the store is donated, by an anonymous source.

If you find yourself with more than your baby can use, or your child has outgrown but barely touched a good supply of baby items, call Room to Grow, (212) 427-2520. Brown encourages donors to drop off items at the store, 1330 Fifth Avenue, between 111th and 112th Streets, but volunteers will make pick-ups. Please call ahead to make a donation.

— Judy Antell