



Guide to Building and Maintaining Community Partnerships

LENA[®]

Why are community partnerships important?

Building a partnership network is not easy. It takes foresight, it takes planning, it takes follow-through, and it takes consistent relationship-nurturing. The purpose of this guide is to demystify the process and to help you lay the groundwork for forming partnerships that *work*.

No single organization can achieve community-wide impact by itself. Often the best way to lift yourself up is to lift up those around you.

Forming partnerships requires investments of time and energy, but the return on those investments speaks for itself. When mutually beneficial missions align, everyone wins.

LENA itself is a prime example. We've created programs for parents, caregivers, and early childhood educators that create lasting positive results in communities around the world. However, our efforts would amount to very little without the help of over 100 partners who implement these programs on the local level. Each of those implementation partners has capacity and reach that LENA alone does not. And in turn, each of those organizations has their own network of community partners.

If you're reading this guide, you likely have a few key pieces in place already to ensure your initiative can get off the ground. Your organization may already have some of the internal capacity necessary to coordinate a program like LENA Grow, LENA Start, or LENA Home. However, there may still be some big checkboxes to complete. You may need to secure extra funding, for instance. Or you may need help widening your recruitment reach, finding convenient locations to hold parent group classes, or offering incentives for participants.

With the right partnerships mapped out, the right partners recruited, and the right communications strategies in place, the end goal of delivering high-impact programs that better people's lives can come into clear focus.



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Building partnerships can be slow-going. It can take a long time. But we also know that it's essential to having a long-lasting impact in a community. Ultimately, I think what partnerships really help us do is stay dialed in to the heartbeat of our community.

— **Ruth Ann Moss**, Executive Director, Birmingham Talks

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At a glance: Building and maintaining community partnerships



Map it out

How do you identify “good fit” partners?



Recruit

How do you establish alignment and get them on board?



Communicate

How do you clarify roles and responsibilities?



Celebrate

How do you lift up your partners?

In California, San Mateo County Libraries was one of the first adopters of LENA Start, launching the family-oriented early talk program in 2015. Initially, their classes were held at some of the 12 library branches throughout the county. In subsequent years, though, library staff leveraged their connections with local organizations to deliver the program through a multi-agency model, working with other organizations such as the San Mateo County Housing Authority, Ravenswood Family Health Center, and The Primary School to widen LENA Start’s reach.



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By expanding LENA Start through our Talk Read Sing program to local community organizations that provide services to high-need communities, we are able to strengthen our reach for providing families with early literacy engagement for their babies. The Talk Read Sing collaboration perfectly fits our mission to create opportunities for growth and enrichment in the communities we serve.
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— **Anne-Marie Despain**, Director of Library Services, San Mateo County Libraries



Know your community. Libraries, hospitals, school districts, faith groups, health clinics, universities, zoos, museums, government services: Any or all of these could potentially be valuable partners as you strive toward community-wide impact. Mission alignment is key!

Mapping out the existing resources in your community will highlight where there may be existing skills, talents, and inroads to leverage. It helps to understand the characteristics of your community and the links that already exist or can be built between different parts of the community, associations, and agencies.

For each organization you think of, ask yourself:

- What is their mission and what kind of work do they do?
- What is their ultimate motivation and what vision do they have for the community?
- What special assets or abilities might they have?
- How might they best engage with your initiative?

Know your capacity. Every organization has capacity gaps, regardless of its size. Take some time to determine what those gaps are and how you may be able to fill those gaps by forming partnerships. If you're launching a LENA Start program, for instance, you may need to turn to trusted community organizations to help implement the program, providing meeting spaces and getting the word out to parents about the opportunity. Sometimes you'll find that organizations with wide community reach — or trusted organizations within segments of the population you may not currently serve — make excellent evangelists.



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Partnerships move at the speed of trust. Really thinking about that when you're building your partnerships and understanding that you have to earn trust and you have to maintain it is critical when you're looking at the bigger picture.

Janelle Wydeven, Director of Family Engagement, Calgary Reads

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Map it out. With implementation, funding, recruitment, and evaluation partners in mind, it's time to put pen to paper and map out your target structure. It's often a good idea to do this work *with* potential partners rather than going it alone.

Use the **Community Mapping Worksheet** on the following two pages of this guide to list trusted community organizations and brainstorm how they might get involved.



Community Mapping Worksheet — Sample

This exercise will highlight where there may be existing resources, activities, skills, and talents to leverage. It helps to understand the links that already exist within your community or that can be built between different organizations within the community. Below is an example of a community mapping chart from a fictional nonprofit organization called ABC Books for All, which is working to launch a LENA Start program for families in the small city of Bookville.

Finding mission alignment is key. Kindergarten readiness is important to you and the local school district alike.

Entity Name	What do they currently do?	What is their motivation for working with a LENA program?	What special assets/abilities do they have?	How could they be engaged?
Bookville School District	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing education from Preschool-12th grade • Parenting education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting and improving kindergarten readiness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships with families • Trusted community organization • Abundant facilities • Experienced staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LENA Start implementation site • Teachers may be able to serve as coordinators
Bookville Public Library	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promoting early literacy through books, other resources, and family classes • Serving as an information hub for the community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adding to their program offerings for parents of infants and toddlers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experienced literacy coaches • Trusted community organization • Inviting, centrally-located facility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LENA Start implementation site • LENA Start recruitment • Creating community awareness of early talk
Family Development Center of Bookville	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overseeing a wide variety of services to ensure a strong, healthy, secure community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building a stronger community • Economic vitality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Able to bring together multiple partners • Seek or supply grants/funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding • LENA Start recruitment • Creating community awareness of early talk
Bookville University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local private university with an enrollment of 4,500, including a college of education offering EdD degrees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing research opportunities for graduate students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expertise in data analysis and study design 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation partner
Bookville Robotics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manufacturing facility, one of the largest employers in the city 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community outreach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well-known and trusted local business 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding

There's no greater endorsement of your initiative than one from an organization that everyone in the community knows and trusts.

Your community map can cover both the public sector and the private sector, as well as both nonprofit and for-profit.

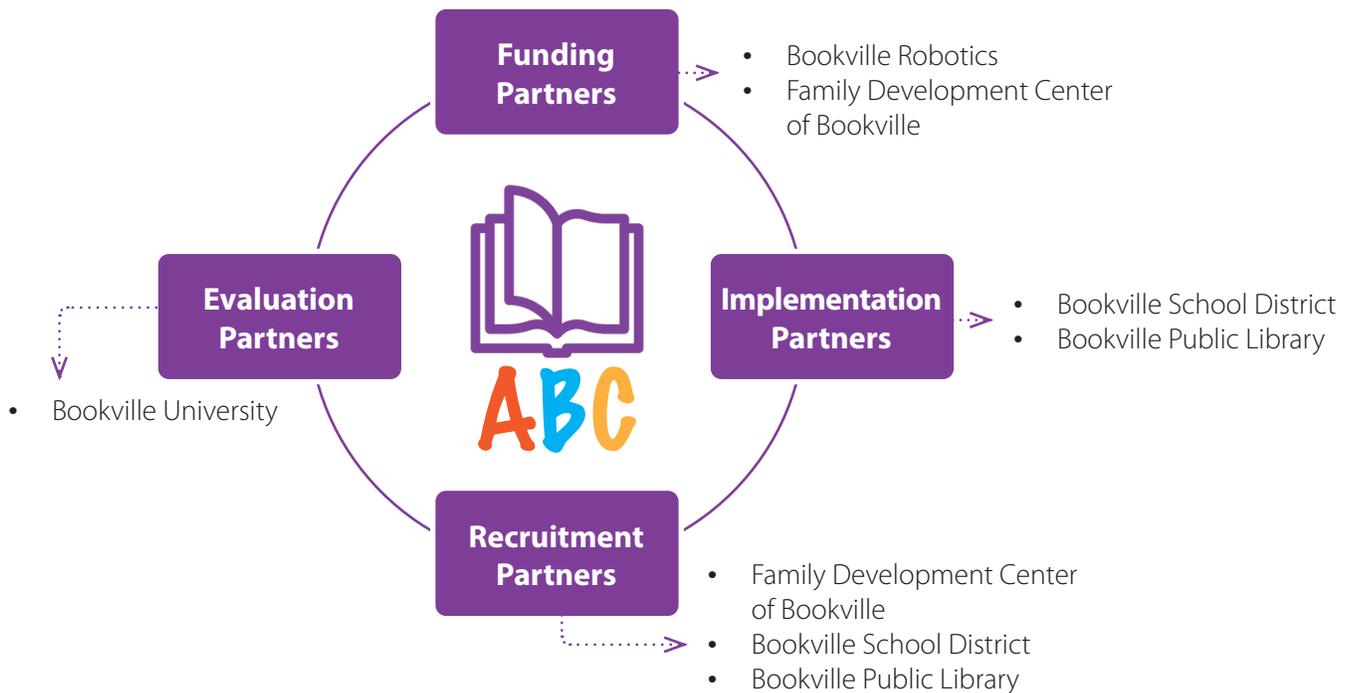
Other entities in your community may include health clinics, the YWCA/YMCA, universities, child care centers, employer groups, community associations, faith groups, and local branches of nationwide initiatives (e.g., Nurse-Family Partnerships, Parents as Teachers, Campaign for Grade Level Reading, etc.).

On the next page, use the blank version of the Community Mapping Worksheet to map out potential partners in your community.



Community Partnership Map — Sample

Having brainstormed your community mapping, you can start to visualize the interconnections at play. There's no one right way to do this, categories aren't likely to stay neatly segmented, and your map may change significantly over time.



What is an evaluation partner?

LENA is a data-driven organization. Your LENA reports will offer many insights into the strides your program participants are making. However, it may also be beneficial to form a partnership with an evaluation partner to further demonstrate your program's impact, which may bring along additional funding opportunities.

For instance, many of LENA's partner organizations have invited university researchers to analyze their program's data and publish the results in academic journals. In South Carolina, one school district implementing LENA Start partnered with a researcher who was pursuing a Doctorate of Education at a local university. The researcher analyzed the program's data to show a correlation between consistent participation in the LENA Start program and higher scores on the state's kindergarten readiness assessment. The school district will benefit by being able to describe these research findings in future grant applications and recruitment efforts.



While partnerships can be critical to the success of your initiative, they can also present challenges. We recommend having a clear understanding of what your goals are and how partners will be involved. The first step: Educate potential partners about the initiative to get them interested and more likely to come on board.

Develop your messaging. Potential partners may know very little about your initiative. For example, they may not be familiar with the importance of early childhood education, let alone the latest peer-reviewed research on the importance of conversational turns. Or they may never have heard about LENA's "talk pedometer" technology. Even if they do have some familiarity, digging deeper will help clarify things.

Potential partners will benefit from hearing about both the big picture of **why** you're implementing the program and the nuts and bolts of **how** you plan to do so. You've done the work to conceptualize how your initiative aligns with the partner's mission, so following through with expressing that alignment clearly and emphatically is important!

Many LENA partners create a presentation to educate potential partners about their program. Typically, they follow this basic structure:



- **The bird's-eye view.** Why should a potential partner become involved with and help support this initiative? Why is it important to invest in early childhood education, and how does LENA contribute to long-term outcomes? What are the broader community impacts and benefits? How do those impacts and benefits align with the mission they're already working to fulfill?
- **The nuts and bolts.** In short, how does the program work and who does it serve? Connecting the dots is key: How do LENA technology and LENA curriculum come together to boost interactive talk and educate adults about the power of conversational turns?
- **WIFM.** "What's in it for me?" Is it worth it for a potential partner to devote resources to engaging with your initiative? If the initiative supports their mission and offers something of substance to the people they serve, the answer may be "yes."
- **Key responsibilities and expectations.** Just as you're trying to educate potential partners about your initiative and convince them of its importance in the community, you're also trying to lay a clear plan of action for how they may get involved and contribute.

Download a LENA Start PowerPoint template [here](#).

Download a LENA Grow PowerPoint template [here](#).



Where can you deliver a presentation like this?

- Invite potential partners to an “All About LENA” event, such as a breakfast, lunch, or happy hour. This is an opportunity to explain the goals and timeline of your initiative and to answer any questions.
- Make your pitch to the board of a library, school district, hospital, or philanthropic organization, highlighting the importance of early talk and LENA’s programs as a way to improve the language environments of children in your community.
- Rent a booth at a local farmer’s market or other community event to build awareness about the importance of early talk and LENA programs.



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We really have to look at the capacity of our partner organizations. The questions we ask can be the most critical piece of a partnership.

— **Janelle Wydeven**, Director of Family Engagement, Calgary Reads

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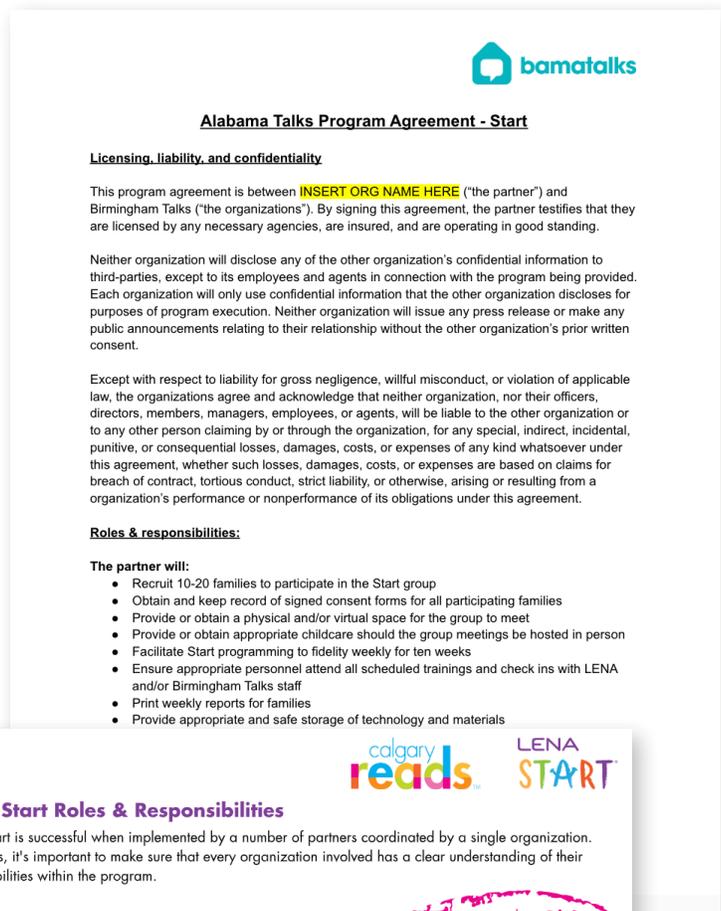
Solidify your agreement in writing.

Having a clear objective for what you are trying to achieve and how a partner can engage makes it easier for them to support your initiative.

It's also helpful to put this down in writing. A formal partnership agreement ensures that everyone is on the same page about what the partner organization will provide. A document like this sets you up for clear and consistent communication throughout the partnership.

For instance, you should aim to list out the specific commitments each partner is making (e.g., *Launch a LENA Start program in January at three sites across the city to reach first-time parents, Recruit 10 families to join our group, or Provide a consistent meeting space for 10 weeks*).

On the following pages of this guide, you'll find a **sample partnership agreement document**, as well as a **sample donation letter**. Use these samples to create documents specific to your organization and initiative.





Partnership Agreement Document — Sample

ABC Books for All — Community Partnership Agreement



Partnerships are a two-way street. What you're providing should be explained just as clearly as what your partner is providing.

Core Organization: ABC Books for All

Partner Organization: Bookville Public Library

ABC Books for All and Bookville Public Library will work together to promote early brain development and early literacy through interactive talk with LENA Start, a community program designed to help parents and caregivers increase the number of conversational turns they have with their young children.

As the core organization, ABC Books for All will provide:

- Guidance throughout the program, with availability via phone or email as needed to provide technical and programmatic support.
- Payment of all associated LENA Start fees, including per-child enrollment fees.
- All LENA Start participant materials, including LENA devices, LENA clothing items, and LENA participant kits (the LENA parent guide, LENA tote bag, LENA refrigerator magnet, LENA Talking Tips flyer, and stuffed LENA elephant).
- Incentives to be given to each family participating in the program, including books and toys that promote early cognitive development.

As the partner organization, Bookville Public Library will provide:

- Recruitment of participating families:
 - A minimum of 50 families must enroll in the program this calendar year.
 - All marketing materials, including flyers, social media posts, web pages, and press releases, should include the phrase “in partnership with ABC Books for All.”
- LENA Start session coordination:
 - Two staff members will be required per LENA Start session, with at least one having completed the required LENA Start coordinator training.
 - Refreshments should be provided at all LENA Start sessions.
 - All applicable documents for each LENA Start session, including LENA reports, should be printed and ready for distribution at the start of the session.
 - Suitable locations, either virtual or physical, must be secured for each LENA Start session.
 - If sessions are to take place in-person, free child care must be provided in a separate room.
 - LENA Start data must be entered in LENA Online by trained staff, including parent consent forms, pre- and post-surveys, and Developmental Snapshots.
 - Makeup sessions should be offered to participants who miss scheduled sessions.
- LENA device distribution and upkeep:
 - Devices must be distributed to participants and must be properly charged and in working condition.
 - Device data must be processed at each LENA Start session, or no later than 24 hours after the session is held.
 - Devices must be returned to ABC Books for All within two weeks after the LENA Start program's completion.

This example shows an agreement between a core organization and a LENA Start implementing partner.

Signature

Date

Signature

Date

Anita Talk
Executive Director
ABC Books for All

Liv Bookly
Family Engagement Specialist
Bookville Public Library



Donation Request Letter — Sample

Anita Talk

ABC Books for All
123 Book Avenue
Bookville, NC 27701

January 1, 2022

Ima Partner

Bookville Robotics
456 Partnership Lane
Bookville, NC 27701

Dear Ima Partner,

I am writing on behalf of ABC Books for All. Our organization is dedicated to promoting early literacy and educating first-time parents about the importance of early brain development. In the coming months, we will be hosting a 10-week parenting class that builds kindergarten readiness and early literacy by boosting interactive talk between parents and children from birth to 3 years of age. Children whose caregivers participate in LENA Start experience richer language environments, higher early literacy scores, improved socioemotional development, and stronger family relationships.

To boost our recruitment efforts among local families, we would like to provide incentives in the form of books and toys that promote early cognitive development. We rely on the support of generous individuals and businesses in our community to provide these incentives.

We would be very grateful if Bookville Robotics would consider making a donation in support of our goals. Your support is critical to our program's ability to serve the needs of our families. We would love to keep you updated on the impact your donation made through a follow-up call and email.

Please contact me at 555-1234 if you are willing to support our efforts to make a difference in our community, or if you would like to hear more about the initiative. You may also contribute by visiting our website at abcbooksforall.org. Thank you for your kind consideration of our request. We look forward to hearing from you soon!

Sincerely,

Anita Talk



Briefly explain your organization's mission, as well as the specific initiative for which you're requesting donations.

Be specific about what you're requesting and leave the door open for further conversation.

How would a donation from the recipient of this letter contribute to the initiative's success?



With your partner on board and your partnership agreement signed, the hard work can begin in earnest. A partnership agreement is key, but in no way does it take the place of consistent communication at a regular cadence. Communication is a partnership's linchpin, keeping everyone clear on next steps and accountable to what they've agreed to.

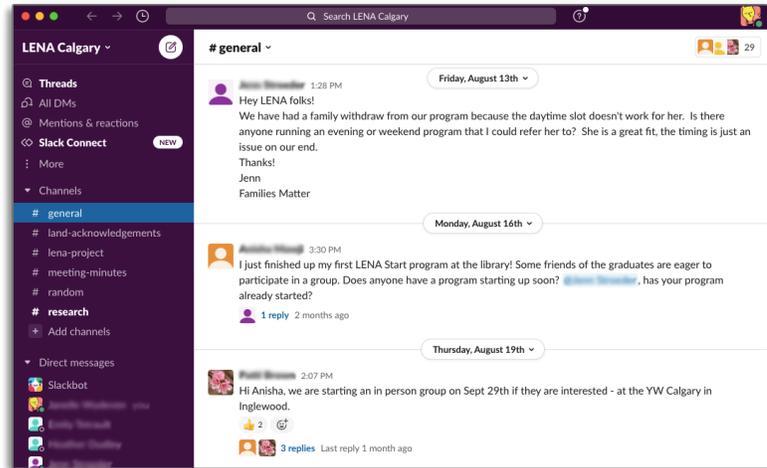
Schedule a kick-off meeting. There's no better time to model preparedness and enthusiasm than at a kick-off meeting. At a kick-off meeting, you can reiterate the goals of the partnership, walk through your New Partner Checklist, and inform each partner of what other partners are responsible for.

Avoid "death by meetings."

Sending a clearly outlined agenda in advance of a monthly meeting ensures that everyone knows what to expect and can prepare accordingly.

Keep track of your communications and resources.

There's no shortage of collaboration software at your fingertips. Some LENA partners have found success establishing Slack channels for efficient back-and-forth. For compiling partner resources — inventory sheets, flyers, and consent forms, for instance — many turn to Google Drive.



On the following pages of this guide, you'll find a **LENA Start Partner Responsibility Mapping** sample and a **New LENA Start Implementing Partner Checklist** sample.



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I used to think that I needed to work really hard to make partnerships happen. Now I know that it's worth waiting for true synergy and timing alignment between both organizations.

— **Ruth Ann Moss**, Executive Director, Birmingham Talks

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LENA Start Partner Responsibility Mapping — Sample

LENA Start Partner Responsibility Mapping

LENA provides the program’s technology, curriculum, and support to the core organization, ABC Books for All:

- Synchronous and asynchronous resources to support LENA Start recruitment, marketing, and program delivery.
- Coordinator training and recertification.
- Program materials, including participant kits, LENA devices, and LENA clothing.
- Guidance and technical support to ensure program fidelity and rigorous curriculum delivery.
- Ongoing research and policy initiatives.

This document informs each partner of what all other partners are responsible for. It’s all about transparency.

ABC Books for All sets the vision for Bookville’s LENA Start implementation and oversees all logistics, funding, and strategy within the community:

- Coordinates between LENA and implementing partners.
- Collaborates with implementing partners to determine responsibilities for program delivery.
- Agrees to a Program Agreement with each partner organization.
- Serves as first line of support for implementing partners.
- Leads inventory and logistics management.
- Provides incentive packages for each implementing partner, to be distributed to participating families.
- Reports to stakeholders on program impact and outcome.

Bookville School District and **Bookville Public Library** serve as implementation and recruitment partners, engaging families in the LENA Start program with fidelity:

- Agrees to a Program Agreement with ABC Books for All.
- Recruits families to participate in the LENA Start program.
- Communicates with ABC Books for All regarding inventory needs.
- Ensures staff attend training and have the time and resources needed to deliver the program.
- Implements the 10-week program as defined in the LENA training.
- Reports to ABC Books for All on program outcomes.

Family Development Center of Bookville serves as a recruitment and funding partner, recruiting families to participate in the program and co-writing grants to fund the program.

Bookville Robotics serves as a funding partner, contributing incentive gifts for participating families.

The **Speecher Lab** at **Bookville University** serves as an evaluation partner, conducting a study using the LENA Start data to assess the program’s potential impact on kindergarten readiness.



Partner Responsibility Mapping

There are many ways that a partner organization can be involved in LENA Start. You can use the chart below to map out which tasks or materials the lead organization or partner organization will be responsible for.

Responsibilities	Lead Organization:	Partner Organization:
Leadership & staff		
Providing LENA materials		
Program support		
Funding		
Recruitment		
Location		
Coordinating Start sessions		
Incentives		
Shared reading books		
Child care		
In-kind donations		
Snacks		
Entering data in LENA Online		
Preparing participant kits		
Printing session documents		
Processing and charging devices		



New LENA Start Implementation Partner Checklist — Sample

ABC Books for All: New Partner Checklist

- We have completed all required LENA Start training sessions.
- We have read and understand the LENA Guidelines.
- We have signed the Partnership Agreement document.
- We have confirmed that our computer systems meet all technical requirements.
- We have informed our organization's senior leadership of our participation in implementing LENA Start.
- We have shared our LENA Start session schedule with ABC Books for All.
- We have secured virtual or physical meeting space for each LENA Start session.
- We have ensured that each LENA Start session will be sufficiently staffed and that all printed materials will be ready for distribution at the start of the session.
- We have worked with ABC Books for All to obtain all necessary LENA devices, LENA clothing items, participant kits, and incentive packages.

This sample checklist is specifically for community partners implementing LENA Start programs. Similar checklists can be made for other types of partners — child care centers that adopt LENA Grow, for instance.

Celebrate



The best way to attract your next partner is to acknowledge your current partners. Mention them everywhere you can. Just as your missions align, so too should your celebration of each other!

On your website. Calgary Reads is a longstanding organization promoting early literacy throughout the city. LENA Start is just one of the many initiatives they offer families. They rely on local implementation partners — the public library and the YWCA, for example — to recruit participants and to provide meeting space. Those partners' logos are featured prominently on the organization's website.



In social media posts. Birmingham Talks brought LENA to Alabama in 2019 as one of five Providence Talks replication cities, funded by Bloomberg Philanthropies. On Twitter and Instagram, they regularly highlight partners of all sorts and sizes, both implementation partners such as Sixth Avenue Baptist Church and statewide scaling partners such as the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education.

On certificates. In Wisconsin, a public-private partnership among four different organizations brought LENA Start to the community in 2018. When local restaurants donate food for program graduation ceremonies, LENA Start Marathon County recognizes them with certificates. It's a win-win situation: The restaurants get to demonstrate their commitment to community, and the LENA program gets to further spread the visibility of LENA Start.



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We knew that targeting early childhood was a way to increase our partnership with the local school district to achieve their goals. We were laser-focused on how we could really elevate the work of Detroit Public Schools.
— **Kenyatta Stephens**, CEO, Black Family Development, Inc.

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Hear about these strategies in action

[Stream a webinar](#) with two of the organizations highlighted in this toolkit. We discuss key elements for building successful partnerships, featuring Ruth Ann Moss, executive director of Birmingham Talks, and Janelle Wydeven, director of family engagement with Calgary Reads. Topics include:

- Structuring partnerships clearly.
- Communicating them effectively.
- Setting realistic expectations.
- Managing relationships for ongoing success.

Who is LENA?

LENA is a national nonprofit on a mission to transform children's futures through early talk technology and data-driven programs.

During a child's first five years, interactive talk is among the biggest factors driving brain growth and kindergarten readiness. LENA's wearable language technology provides objective, actionable feedback that helps caregivers increase interactions with children and create sustainable improvements in children's talk environments. LENA also generates real-time metrics for all stakeholders, measuring program fidelity, effectiveness, and progress.

Learn more about bringing LENA to your community at:



www.lena.org/programs

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LENA[®]
Building brains through early talk

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