



## Children, Early Reading and a Literate Australia - the Role of Australian Public Libraries

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### What we know:

Sharing a love of reading, rhyming, singing and talking with your baby is one of the best things you can do to give your baby a head start in life.

Research into early brain development shows that a child's ability to learn and to develop pre-literacy skills is greater if they are read to from birth.

Half a child's brain growth occurs between birth and age four. The best time to begin reading books with children is when they are infants - babies as young as six weeks old enjoy being read to and looking at pictures. This is the best way to help the child develop listening and speaking skills. By age two or three, children begin to develop an awareness of printed letters and words. Toddlers and preschoolers are especially ready to learn from adults reading to and with them.

The most powerful predictor of future reading success among preschoolers is awareness of the speech sounds that correspond to letters.

*Most brain development occurs between birth and the age of two. As a baby absorbs new sights, textures, scents and sounds, the connections in her brain that make learning possible multiply and become stronger. But if a baby does not use these connections, or does not use them enough, the connections are lost forever.*

*How to Talk To Your Baby, Dorothy P. Dougherty, Avery, 1999*

A historical view of how literacy is acquired can fail to recognise the links between language development, early literacy activities, emergent literacy skills and later literacy success. Literacy acquisition is a process that begins from birth and requires input from families, caregivers, and teachers with the growing, independent and professional support of the public library network.

Helping a child become literate can no longer be thought of as the exclusive responsibility of schools. Families, communities, health, educational and library professionals all have a role to play in ensuring that materials and services to promote the attainment of literacy are available to all children, and that all children are encouraged to use or explore these materials.

Children entering school without emergent literacy skills may struggle to keep up with their peers' rate of literacy acquisition. This can affect children's engagement with school and in turn, affect overall successes in education and life, perpetuating a cycle

of low literacy. However, the development of emergent literacy skills *is* attainable for most children, even those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Materials to encourage the emergence of literacy skills can and are found in all public libraries. Public libraries offer many free services such as access to reading materials and computers, and a vast array of other programs including children's 'story-time' sessions. All families need to be made aware of and welcomed into these services.

Public libraries can and do encourage the development of emergent literacy skills in children through shared book reading, exposing children to various forms of print, playing language games and singing songs. Using these methods, literacy acquisition can become an enjoyable experience and activity.

Here are some important statistics based on international research:

- There is nearly a 90% probability that a child will remain a poor reader at the end of year 4 if the child is a poor reader at the end of the year 1.
- For 60%, reading is not an easily acquired skill
- 90% - 95% of the poor readers can reach average reading skills with early intervention
- If intervention comes at 9 years – 75% still have difficulty.

### What have Australian Public Libraries been doing?

Despite the various public library delivery and governance models found across Australia, public libraries have been working at the coalface of childhood literacy in one form or another since their inception. This work goes largely unrecognised in any practical or meaningful sense and one gets the feeling that the work done by public libraries such as children's story time sessions, baby bounce and rhyme time sessions etc are viewed as merely a form of public entertainment and at best just a way of keeping children occupied. The reality is quite different – these programs, activities, services and collections are professionally designed and formatted to promote and develop the literacy acquisition of children of all ages. Importantly these programs also include support, and training for parents and care givers to provide them with the tools to build their child's literacy and importantly love of reading.

Three (3) of the main reasons public libraries have had success in children's literacy and related programs are:

1. Public libraries are inclusive (more so than many other agencies) and open to all target groups, for example children, parents and caregivers; those from our CALD communities, people with disabilities, students, young adults, seniors etc.
2. Public libraries are viewed (and this is supported by countless surveys) as being safe, non-threatening spaces where all are welcome no matter your age, your circumstances, your opinions, your beliefs, your lifestyle, your address, your country of birth or your political preferences.
3. The geographic locations of public libraries. There are still more public libraries in Australia than there are McDonalds plus many mobile libraries servicing our more

remote communities. Public libraries are well placed and within relatively easy reach of most Australians

Most of the literacy based activities; services, programs and collections delivered by public libraries are operated on shoestring budgets or via grant funding from various agencies such as State Libraries.

How have we achieved as much as we have?

So how did we achieve this; and how will we continue to achieve with poor resourcing, shrinking budgets, no consistent or common service available to all our communities', and no nationally agreed funding formula for public libraries? These questions are especially important when considering the exponential growth in the use of public libraries and their programming – this has become especially evident during the current global economic crisis and has created an even greater pressure on already limited public library resources (as it has for public libraries all over the world).

To answer the first question – we have achieved so much because we (all those who work in public libraries) believe strongly in what we do and because we also believe that childhood literacy is one of the most important and fundamental roles of the public library and are therefore prepared to be strong advocate's within our sphere of influence within Local Government for the capacity building flow on benefits that community literacy development has.

Secondly, public librarians have become the 'masters' of the beg, borrow or steal model i.e. begging for more resources and assistance from our funders, community groups, individuals, business sponsors etc; borrowing and by 'stealing' ideas from each other and from public libraries all around the world. Public libraries do share ideas and network extremely well and beyond the boundaries of our libraries - via library conferences, seminars, blogs, wikis, email, e-lists etc. We also lobby, as is well illustrated by the 2007 NSW public library 'Day of Action' protest where librarians, supporters, library patrons and local government Councillors staged a protest outside State Parliament over inadequate funding levels. This protest combined with other lobbying by Country and Metropolitan library associations has recently born fruit with increased funding being provided, in particular to country libraries. It is fair to say though that these increases are merely triage and we have a long way to go to reach realistic funding levels.

To answer the second question – 'how will we continue to achieve with shrinking budgets and no nationally agreed funding formula for public libraries' – we will do this by continuing to innovate and share ideas; and we will do this by continuing to work and collaborate together via our various state/territory associations, ALIA and PLA; and by assisting and collaborating with all levels of government to focus on areas of information access and social inclusion including the development of:

- A fairer and more equitable Australia
- Stronger community-based service organisations
- Strengthening the capacity of communities and individuals they serve

- Promoting better understanding of the needs and interests of disadvantaged and unemployed people

Working together and taking an holistic approach to public library service delivery especially as it applies to children's literacy and literacy generally will make us stronger; and importantly help us to deliver more consistent and equitable services, programs and resources to our immediate communities, across our states and territories and nationally.

We can and will do so much better for our local communities, on a state/territory level and nationally by working closely with all three levels of government to achieve a common platform for public libraries. This would go a long way towards providing consistent and equitable services, including children's literacy programs across Australia.

In principle we need to collaborate and agree on:

1. A public library delivery model that acts locally and thinks nationally
2. Library standards e.g. levels of service; connectivity; staffing etc
3. A nationally focussed and equitable Funding Formula – i.e. levels of contribution from all levels of government (direct or indirect i.e. GST funding back to the States)

We also need to:

Achieve higher levels of government recognition and support of our important community role, especially as it applies to children's literacy and community literacy generally

Without a national strategy, program and a better and more consistent recurrent funding model many of the existing early literacy programs will not be sustainable. This is particularly important considering that there are still many communities that do not have access to programs e.g. some of our remote communities due to extremely low levels of resourcing – this includes both staffing and funding for resources and programs.

When thinking about running nationally focused early childhood literacy programs it is important to illustrate the varying governance models of public libraries (as mentioned earlier) that exist across Australia.

Public libraries management in NSW for example contrasts to the centralised coordination of public library services in South Australia, Western Australia and the ACT. All public libraries in New South Wales are managed by local government authorities in compliance with the Library Act 1939. In practice this means that there is a range of different early childhood reading programs operating in local government areas throughout New South Wales. At this point in time there is no statewide program and many communities do not have access to programs.

It is logical, given the great number and geographical location/spread of public libraries across all states and territories of Australia that a national strategy regarding

the delivery of children’s literacy programs, services and resources (and library services generally) is agreed to and fully supported by all three tiers of government. No other agency has the historic tenure, the neutrality, the usage (there are well over 10 million regular users of our public libraries across Australia), and professionalism or the community respect of that held by our public libraries. It is imperative therefore that public libraries are not tucked away in the too hard basket – we know it won’t be easy BUT we do want to work closely with government to better achieve their community engagement and social inclusion agendas – which will in turn provide meaningful support to the communities we serve. Otherwise we will continue to reinvent the wheel and continue to fund too many parallel programs. Let’s use what we’ve got more effectively and efficiently – the public library network is already established and ready to go but we can’t do this without better cooperative resourcing between all three tiers of government and importantly without government involvement and support in developing a national public libraries strategy.

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## EXAMPLES

### Library Childhood Literacy Program Examples:

#### NSW Public library based programs:

Many NSW public libraries offer a lapsit or early literacy program for 0-2 year olds. Story time programs for preschool children 3 - 5 years are even more common. In many cases the program is funded by the local government authority and in several cases was assisted in its development by a State library development grant: Some examples of lapsit programs in operation in NSW public libraries include:

- Babytime - Mosman Library
- Joey tales - Hurstville Library
- Babytime - Fairfield Libraries
- Cool babies - Fairfield Libraries
- Babytime - Blue Mountains Library
- Books for Babies - Campbelltown Library
- First Steps: a Lapsit Program - Sutherland Libraries
- Rhymetime - Sutherland Libraries
- Toddler storytelling - Woollahra Library
- Monkey Business Bankstown Library
- Bubba Time - Holroyd Library
- Babies into Books (Bibs) - Camden Council Library Services
- Baby Storytime - Kiama Library
- Books for Babies - Southern Tablelands Regional Library
- Lapsit for babies - Central Northern Regional Library [Tamworth]
- Toddler time - Central Northern Regional Library [Tamworth]
- Lapsit - Singleton Public Library
- Lapsit - Albury City Library
- Lapsit - Singleton Library

Here are some more detailed examples of children's literacy programs being run in public libraries across Australia:

### **WA – Better Beginnings**

Better Beginnings was developed by the State Library of WA as a family literacy program that aims to support parents as their children's first teacher

It works through strong partnerships with health professionals, local governments and public libraries to:

- Build awareness in the whole community, particularly amongst parents and other adults who care for children, of the value and pleasure of reading and sharing stories with young children
- Encourage and support parents in sharing books and activities that foster language and a love of reading with their young children

- Assist parents in selecting and getting books and activities suited to their young child's age and needs
- Promote the vital role of public libraries as community hubs that provide ongoing support to parents and caregivers in giving their children a love of reading.

Better Beginnings aims to put research into practice by supporting parents of newborn babies to enjoy books, rhyme and song with their young children - to give their children a love of reading and language.

Public Libraries sit at the heart of the Better Beginnings program.

Research conducted for Sure Start in the UK has found that introducing a young child to the library is one of the most significant things a parent can do to make a difference to their child's later education. Educational outcomes for children are enhanced when they develop a library habit early in life.

In Western Australia, public libraries are responding to this need through their involvement with Better Beginnings. Public libraries sit at the heart of Better Beginnings with this exciting new initiative being delivered via the unique, state-wide network of 239 public libraries already operating as a partnership between State and Local government.

### **Palmerston (NT)**

Runs Nurserytales sessions that:

- Provide information for parents on early development and skills development
- Currently have up to 52 babies and parent/s at each session.
- They sing nursery rhymes, do hand rhymes, sing songs to bounce babies to, using hand and finger puppets and also use scarves for sensory activities and musical instruments eg: shakers, bells etc.
- Each new parent joining the baby to the library and attending 2 Nurserytales sessions received a library bag with parenting information, library information, bookmarks, ebook (Alison Lester story), a discount coffee card for our café in the library and a board book.

### **Noosa Library (QLD)**

The session is called "Babes in Arms". It's specifically designed for parents and babies up to 12 months. Older preschoolers and toddlers are catered for in other storytime sessions.

### **Auburn Library (NSW)**

The Baby bounce sessions: Auburn Library has bought 500 copies of 'Its storytime' (book of rhymes and song and a DVD) published by The Little Big Book Club to give away to first timers. This material is in 10 different languages. All this helps parents to get the most out of the session although the sessions have tips liberally sprinkled through the session and lots of demonstration of the effectiveness of strategies.

### **Willoughby (NSW)**

Willoughby Library runs Baby Bounce sessions in groups of five weeks.

**Mosman Library (NSW)**

Mosman Library Babytime sessions are run once a month, with a morning and afternoon group. Most of the session is rhymes and action songs, occasionally with a children's CD to accompany, and usually just one short interactive story.

**Caroline Springs (VIC)**

Runs a baby time once a week – this includes reading from a simple books and finishing with a couple of interactive songs. The library also has "Bubble Time" at the end where the children get to blow bubbles with there mum/carer.

**Blacktown Library (NSW)**

Blacktown Library holds Baby Rhyme Time sessions with approximately 380-420 carers and babies each week across all branches.

The library promotes and hands out the Early Words kits, free library bags and board books; and use songs, finger-plays, simple pop up or lift the flap books and felt board stories, do a dance and more songs.

**Dorrigo Library (NSW)**

Dorrigo library is run by only one staff member and is able to run one Baby Bounce session per month at Dorrigo with support from the neighbouring Bellingen Shire Librarian.

Dorrigo also holds a baby bounce session for mothers' at the local Baby Health Clinic in partnership with a local mothers group and the Dorrigo Neighbourhood Centre. The librarian provides verbal information for parents on "how to get the best out of baby bounce"

**Manly Library (NSW)**

Manly library attracts around 110 eager participants to their monthly language enrichment sessions. The 30 min language enrichment program introduces rhymes and songs and is aimed at developing both interaction and engagement between parent and child.