

Meeting the needs of learners with low literacy skills

In a library context, there are many challenges associated with learners, both young and old, who have low literacy skills. These learners may require a higher level of support and encouragement to enable them to effectively access library services, and can be reluctant to attempt new or difficult skills in an open library environment. However with support and appropriate provisioning, they can become skilled library users who enjoy and learn well within a library setting.

Causes of low literacy skills

There are a wide variety of reasons that could be behind a learner having literacy skills which are lower than expected. They may have:

- Failed to learn some fundamentals of reading such as decoding skills or the use of context to determine meaning, and understanding throughout their primary years
- Missed critical or extended periods of schooling
- Learnt English as a second or additional language
- Other learning difficulties, or a disability such as a visual or hearing impairment which made learning to read and write a challenge
- Acquired a brain injury later in life, which has impacted upon their ability to learn new skills and perform pre-existing ones
- Problems with attention, concentration or behaviour which hinder their learning.

Low literacy and associated issues

In a primary school setting, these learners are supported through programs such as reading recovery. However, once they reach secondary school and are still having difficulty reading, they can begin to fall through the educational cracks as they become more adept at evasion strategies which can include avoiding questions in class, failing to make eye contact with the teacher and engaging in disruptive behaviour. Some learners also begin to show higher levels of absenteeism from school. In adolescence, peer group pressure and the importance of image can make problems with literacy highly embarrassing. In some cases, young people may choose to leave school early or move to an alternative learning environment such as TAFE. They may avoid settings such as libraries altogether, believing them to be places where a literacy problem will be all too apparent.

Library support

Librarians can be vital sources of support for young people with literacy difficulties but it should be remembered that there will be a vast difference in skill level between learners with literacy problems. Being approachable in manner, while recalling that learners with literacy difficulties need constant repetition and encouragement over an extended period, can be extremely beneficial.

Library layout and presentation

To the extent that librarians have control over the layout and information presented within the library itself, there are a few considerations that can be helpful for a low literacy learner:

- Keep written material simple, clear and well presented
- Promote reading material which appeals to a wide range of interests
- Provide materials such as magazines, newspapers and low text but high interest for older learners with low literacy levels
- Use pictures, photos and graphics to enhance meaning around the library, linking visual prompts with simple, consistent text
- Provide examples of wordless books or picture books which can be used for multiple purposes, such as Graeme Base's *Animalia*.

Technology

- There are a number of computer programs which are becoming more widely used by learners with lower literacy skills, making it easier for a learner to access information without being able to necessarily read all (or any) of the text. Examples include *Browsealoud* and *Dragon Naturally Speaking*. Information services such as the Independent Living Centres in each state and territory can be additional sources of information about technology to support low literacy learners.

Anne Vize M.Ed (Special Education)
aavize@rabbit.com.au

Better Beginnings: Family literacy program



A partnership between the State
Library of Western Australia,
Rio Tinto WA Future Fund and Local Governments

Early years research shows that learning to read is the single most important factor in achievement at school and that an early exposure to books and stories substantially contributes to success in early literacy.

Responding to this evidence, in 2003 the State Library of Western Australia developed Better Beginnings, an early intervention family literacy program targeting children aged 0–3 years. Focusing on working in partnership with families and communities to support children's early literacy and learning, a significant strength of the program has been the ability of the State Library and the Western Australia public library network to reach parents, caregivers and children, providing a unique asset in providing resources and professional expertise to foster the emergent literacy skills of children.

Better Beginnings has been designed using a strong collaborative approach capitalising on the shared goals of health and library professionals in reaching and communicating with families of young children. Through



Better Beginnings, the State Library partners with public libraries to provide a hub for early literacy activities supporting families and developing links with early literacy professionals to reach out to their communities. Better Beginnings activities resonate with the fun and satisfaction that comes from parents bonding with their babies when they share books. The program has shown itself to be a comprehensive, practical and effective family literacy model that builds relationships between families and literacy resources in the community, opening the door to a lifetime of literacy and learning for young Western Australians.

Funding from the Rio Tinto WA Future Fund, the State Government and Western Australian local governments helps to provide a strong sustainable program taking advantage of the child's first three years, in which to develop necessary pre-literacy skills to ensure that they begin school ready to learn.

To date, Better Beginnings has reached over 46,000 families across the State with over 110 local governments participating in the program. This year, Better Beginnings expects to reach the families of over 23,000 new babies, making up over 90% of babies born in the State.

2007 was a year of highlights for Better Beginnings; winning the Better Services – Large Organisations category in the 2006 Premier's Awards for Excellence in Public Sector Management. Other awards followed including the Toyota Community Award and being nominated as the Western Australian finalist of the Australia Council Young Arts for Young People Award as well as being highly commended in the Western Australian Business and the Arts partnership Awards.

Another of the highlights of Better Beginnings has been the publication of *Baby ways*, a unique title featuring photographs of diverse Western Australian babies together with playful rhythmic text. A second board book will be published this year.

Outcomes from Better Beginnings show that the program's carefully co-ordinated strategies are successfully connecting with families of young children, encouraging them to read and share books with their children. 2008 will see the release of the second phase of an independent program evaluation by researchers from Edith Cowan University.

It is hoped that the research will emphasise the value of Better Beginnings in raising awareness amongst parents of the importance of reading to their baby, while showcasing a successful partnership between big business and library services; both committed to improving outcomes for children and extending the reach of reading and literacy in the Western Australian community.

Sue North
Manager Outreach and Subject Specialists
State Library of Western Australia
sue.north@slwa.wa.gov.au

Central West Libraries Baby Rhyme and Read: Music to your ears

Press play and the music fires up, toes start tapping, arms begin waving and smiles appear as parents and babies move to the music. Welcome to Baby Rhyme and Read Central West Libraries (CWL) style with a book of rhymes and a CD of classic baby tunes.



*Early preparation
for reading*

Now in its second year, the popular Baby Rhyme and Read program is being held each school term at Orange City Library and has been opened up to community groups who would not routinely visit the library including Orange Family Support and a mother's group at Glenroi Public School. There are also plans to extend it to other library branches and the Bush Babies Aboriginal Group.

Babies aged up to 12 months enjoy rhymes, singing and sounds aimed to assisting them to develop and learn. Librarians, parents and carers tested the songs, books and rhymes for the program, selecting stories and songs they believed would engage the group.

The chosen songs have been recorded by local musicians and a CD will soon go on sale at CWL.

"We are really excited about this CD", said CWL Manager Jan Richards. "Parents, carers and adult role models have a powerful impact on their child's enjoyment of reading and their ability to read. By singing nursery rhymes, reading and talking to your baby, they will experience language and learn to enjoy it - that is what this program is about."

Rhyme and Read classes are free, catering for up to 15 parents at a time. The session goes for 45 minutes and each participant is given a booklet and CD which provide details of all the rhymes, finger plays and songs performed in the informal classes and can be used as a resource at home.

Jasmine Vidler
Reading and writing co-ordinator
jvidler@orange.nsw.gov.au

Other tips to help children get ready for learning to read include:

- speak and sing to your child
- read aloud wherever you go - reading signs in the supermarket or while driving
- explain what you are doing when writing shopping lists or messages
- introduce books to your child as early as possible
- read to your child and use different voices and read at different speeds
- spend time with your child each day reading something you both enjoy.