The selection of books should also be culturally sensitive. Books illustrated with photos/pictures of different backgrounds should be offered to families, to encourage and reassure parents that they can read to enjoy an illustrated children's book as the many cultures from outside of Australia, including Aboriginal, Greek, Arabic, Somali, Spanish, Turkish and Vietnamese. There are different approaches for different cultural backgrounds. In Arabic where the print goes from right to left and Japanese where the characters are arranged vertically on the page.

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Some ideas to consider:

- Parents with poor literacy may collect one to two books and use them throughout the child’s life and the cultural perceptions and expectations. The parents’ literacy levels will have an impact on how a family approaches early literacy activities with their young child. Adult literacy varies between cultural groups.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics’ Aspects of Literacy Survey 2006 found that approximately 60% of Australians aged 15 to 74 years had very poor to poor “prose literacy” (the ability to understand and use information from various kinds of narrative texts, including texts from newspapers, magazines and brochures), and 47% had very poor to poor “document literacy” (the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in various formats including job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables and charts). An even higher percentage of Aboriginals have poor to very poor literacy (ABS, 2006).

Some cultural groups from outside Australia have equivalent or higher levels of education and adult literacy when compared to the Australian population as a whole, while other groups come from a background of low literacy levels, and circumstances of disrupted education (ABS, 2006). It is valuable to ascertain a family’s country of origin, to determine the educational provision (ABS, 2006). It is valuable to ascertain a family’s country of origin, to determine the educational provision (ABS, 2006). It is valuable to ascertain a family’s country of origin, to determine the educational provision (ABS, 2006). It is valuable to ascertain a family’s country of origin, to determine the educational provision (ABS, 2006).

- Recognise that parents with poor literacy will struggle to enjoy reading and have fun with their children in this activity.

- Recognise that parents may want to protect their child from experiencing the frustration and embarrassment of not being able to read.

In group work with parents it is important not to put any parent in an embarrassing situation by asking them to read aloud.

Become familiar with the adult literacy programs in your area and recommend these to parents where appropriate.

**IMMIGRATION AND EARLY LITERACY PROGRAMS**

There are three different types of immigration and these have implications for the introduction of early literacy programs for migrants.

- **Skilled migrant**
- If a family is not familiar in Australia as “skilled” migrants then someone in the family must have qualifications that are being sought by the Australian Government. Skilled migrants hold university degrees and/or qualifications that are recognized by the government, and they bring considerable funds with them when they enter Australia. They must also have a “good English language ability.” The majority of migrants to Australia (51%) come under the skilled migration scheme (ABS, 2007).

These families are making a choice to move to Australia. “Skilled” migrants are voluntary and see cultural and linguistic differences as challenges to be overcome in making their way in a new country. They are often very keen to adopt the English language, and someone in the family is already described as having “good English language ability.”

- **Family migration**
- If a family has arrived in Australia as “family” migrants then someone in the family must have qualifications that are being sought by the Australian Government. Family migrants hold university degrees and/or qualifications that are recognized by the government, and they bring considerable funds with them when they enter Australia. They must also have a “good English language ability.” The majority of migrants to Australia (51%) come under the skilled migration scheme (ABS, 2007).

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- **Refugee migration**
- If a family has arrived in Australia as refugees then they are being offered asylum from persecution or have been subject to substantial discrimination amounting to a violation of human rights in their home country. Many refugees will have had their education interrupted. This group made up 9% of migrants in 2006-2007 (ABS, 2007).

- **Family migration**
- If a family has arrived under a “family” migration scheme, they are coming to join an existing family. They are more likely to integrate into the practices of the family and community they are joining.

By asking about the type of arrival to Australia, this information may assist with an understanding of the family’s decision in relation to speaking and reading English and/or their “home” language.

**MAINTAINING THE FIRST LANGUAGE**

Language ability is one factor that facilitates a successful transition from pre-literacy to literacy. Many families struggle with the decision about whether to maintain their “home” or first language. This decision can be very perplexing and can be made difficult depending on how the family entered Australia or the pressures that may exist within their cultural community. Families may feel under considerable pressure to balance maintaining their first culture and language while supporting their children to succeed in the Australian education system – a system that may reflect different cultural beliefs. However there is clear evidence that maintaining the home language should be encouraged and supported (NAEYC, 1995).

Infants and toddlers have the ability to learn more than one language at the same time and can manage to do this easily (Swarlow, Pascol & Craig, 2004). The cognitive skills such as thinking, reasoning, problem solving and word choice which the child uses in learning their home language are the same skills needed to learn English. It is interesting to note that in the 2008 national benchmark study (see Table 1), there was little difference between Year 3 students from a background other than English as their first language (ABS, 2008). Perhaps the most important finding of the study is the recognition that children do need to develop their language skills in their home language. Child health nurses, teachers and children’s learning programs can assist in this process by encouraging parents to tell stories and share books in their first language. Many of the most popular children’s books are also available in dual language versions. These books support parents to read aloud in their home language, while also being able to see the English language. Parents can also use illustrated books written in English and talk about the pictures in their home language.

Research has found that there are social and emotional benefits associated with maintaining the home language. “A child who can communicate socially with his parents, grandparents, and extended family will maintain the connection to his cultural identity and acquire a sense of belonging” (NAEYC 1995).

As a health professional it is important to explore with families about their views and feelings about dual language acquisition and support and encourage them to maintain their home language as the evidence suggests this is beneficial for the child.

**CULTURAL NORMS IN RELATION TO BOOKS AND STORYTELLING**

Primary school teachers still report many children starting school have not opened a book, and do not regularly read with their parents. The evidence would suggest that these children are at a disadvantage; however it is also understandable that many families feel activities such as book reading are not an integral part of their home culture. The Aboriginal culture has traditionally been more oral than written. If parents were story tellers, then
To engage with all families there is a need to determine where the issue of literacy sits within the family, the child's life, and the cultural perceptions and expectations. The parents’ literacy levels will have an impact on how a family approaches early literacy activities with their young child. Adult literacy varies between cultural groups. The Australian Bureau of Statistics’ Aspects of Literacy Survey 2006 found that approximately 60% of Australians aged 15 to 74 years had very poor to poor literacy (the ability to understand and use information from various kinds of narrative texts, including tests from newspapers, magazines and brochures), and 47% had very poor to poor “document literacy” (the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in various formats, including job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables and charts). An even higher percentage of Aboriginals have poor to very poor literacy (ABS, 2006).

Some cultural groups from outside Australia have equivalent or higher levels of education and adult literacy when compared to the Australian population as a whole, while other groups come from a background of low literacy levels, and circumstances of disrupted educational provision (ABS, 2006). It is valuable to ascertain a family’s country of origin, to determine the languages they speak and the education opportunities for males and females.

Most adults will not want to publicly admit to poor literacy. A parent may accept early literacy resources without admitting their poor literacy level. This creates challenges for professionals in implementing an early literacy program.

Did you know – an example

Most Sudanese in Australia speak a language other than English at home. The main languages spoken at home by Sudan-born people in Australia are Arabic (51.2%) and Dinka (23.6%). Only 4.4% of Sudanese say they speak mainly English at home (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2008). Sudanese children who are under five years of age are less likely to attend preschool or childcare than children from other non-English speaking backgrounds (ABS, 2007). Children from non-English speaking backgrounds are more likely to be enrolled in ESL programs at school than children from English speaking backgrounds (ABS, 2007).

IMMIGRATION AND EARLY LITERACY PROGRAMS

There are three different types of immigration and these have implications for the introduction of early literacy programs for migrants.

- Skilled migrant
  If a family has arrived in Australia as a “skilled” migrant then someone in the family must have qualifications that are being sought by the Australian Government. Skilled migrants hold university degrees and/or qualifications that are recognised by the government, and they bring considerable funds with them when they enter Australia. They must also have a “good English language ability”. The majority of migrants to Australia (51%) come under the skilled migration scheme (ABS, 2007).
  These families are making a choice to move to Australia. “Skilled” migrants are voluntary and see cultural and linguistic differences as challenges to be overcome in making their way in a new country. They are often very keen to adopt the English language, and someone in the family is already described as having “good English language ability”.

- Refugee
  If a family has arrived in Australia as refugees then they are being offered asylum from persecution or have been subject to substantial discrimination amounting to a violation of human rights in their home country. Many refugees will have had their education interrupted. This group made up 9% of immigrants in 2006-2007 (ABS, 2007).
  They have not had this choice.

- Family migration
  If a person has arrived under a “family” migration scheme, they are coming to join an existing family. They are more likely to integrate into the practices of the family and community they are joining.

By asking about the type of arrival to Australia, this information may assist with an understanding of the factors that are bringing the family in relation to speaking and reading English in their home language. The language ability is one factor that facilitates a successful transition from pre-literacy to literacy. Many families struggle with the decision about whether to maintain their “home” or first language. This decision can be very perplexing and can be more difficult depending on how the family entered Australia or the pressures that may exist within their cultural community. Some families may have to balance maintaining their first culture and language while supporting their children to succeed in the Australian education system – a system that may reflect different cultural beliefs. However there is clear evidence that maintaining the home language should be encouraged and supported (NAEYC, 1995).

Parents and toddlers have the ability to learn more than one language at the same time and can manage to do this easily (Girard, Paredes & Craig, 2004). The cognitive skills such as ‘thinking, reasoning, problem solving and word choice’ which the child uses in learning their home language are the same skills needed to learn English. It is interesting to note that in the 2008 national benchmark study (see Table 1), there was little difference between Year 3 students from a background other than English at either Primary 2008 or Primary 2009. Parents who speak two languages still love their children. Do they need to develop their language skills in English? The child health nurses’ language benchmark and this compares with 92% for all students. There are clearly some additional challenges facing the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, including health issues (related to poverty) which impact on language and literacy.

Table 1: Benchmark Achievement of Year 3 Students: Proportion reaching the reading benchmark

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State or Territory</th>
<th>% New South Wales</th>
<th>Victoria</th>
<th>Queensland</th>
<th>South Australia</th>
<th>Western Australia</th>
<th>Tasmania</th>
<th>Northern Territory</th>
<th>Australian Capital Territory</th>
<th>Language background other than English</th>
<th>Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander students</th>
<th>All students</th>
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<td></td>
<td>*Depending on State or Territory, this group was either identified from responses to questions asked about traditions in the home; activities at home; from questions asked about their own or their parents’ country of birth; from enrolment records; or from English as a second language program records.</td>
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</tbody>
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In 2008, the National Reading and Writing Taskforce (2008) recommended that the teaching and learning activities for each student should be literacy connected. Reading and writing are not an integral part of their home culture. The Aboriginal culture has traditionally been more oral than written. If parents were story tellers, then

MAINTAINING THE FIRST LANGUAGE

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(Source: Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy)
COMMUNITY PAEDIATRIC REVIEW

PARENTS’ LITERACY LEVEL

To engage with all families there is a need to determine where the issue of literacy sits within the family and the cultural perceptions and expectations. The parent’s literacy levels will have an impact on how a family approaches early literacy activities with their young child. Adult literacy varies between cultural groups.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics’ Assets of Literacy Survey 2006 found that approximately 60% of Australians aged 15 to 74 years had very poor to “prose literacy” (the ability to understand and use information from various kinds of narrative texts, including texts from newspapers, magazines and brochures), and 47% had very poor to “document literacy” (the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in various formats including job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables and charts). An even higher percentage of Aboriginals have poor to very poor literacy (ABS, 2006).

Some cultural groups from outside Australia have equivalent or higher levels of education and adult literacy when compared to the Australian population as a whole; other groups come from a background of low literacy levels, and circumstances of disrupted educational provision (ABS, 2006). It is valuable to ascertain a family’s country of origin, to determine the languages they speak and the education opportunities for males and females.

Most adults will not want to publicly admit to poor literacy. A parent may accept early literacy resources without admitting their poor literacy level. This creates challenges for professionals in implementing an early literacy program.

Immigration and Early Literacy Programs

There are three different types of immigration and these have implications for the introduction of early literacy programs for migrants.

- Skilled migrant
  - If a family has arrived in Australia as “skilled” migrants then someone in the family must have qualifications that are being sought by the Australian Government. Skilled migrants hold university degrees and qualifications that are recognised by the government, and they bring considerable funds with them when they enter Australia. They must also have a “good English language ability”. The majority of immigrants to Australia (51%) come under the skilled migration scheme (ABS, 2007).

- Family migration
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- Humanitarian/refugee
  - If a person has arrived under a “family” migration scheme, they are coming to join an existing family. These families are making a choice to move to a country and community they are joining. They are more likely to integrate into the practices of the family and community they are joining.

Children, including those from refugee backgrounds, may struggle to read and enjoy reading. Many of the most disadvantaged families struggle to enjoy reading and have fun with their children in this activity. Recognise that parents may want to protect their child from experiencing the frustration and embarrassment of not being able to read. In group work with parents it is important not to put any parent in an embarrassing situation by asking them to read aloud.

Families with a migrant background need to be introduced to the literacy programs in your area and recommended to parents where appropriate.

IMMIGRATION AND EARLY LITERACY PROGRAMS

Table 1: Benchmark Achievement of Year 3 Students – 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State or Territory</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>New South Wales</th>
<th>95.1</th>
<th>Victoria</th>
<th>95.2</th>
<th>Queensland</th>
<th>87.1</th>
<th>South Australia</th>
<th>91.5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>89.4</td>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>92.8</td>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>Australian Capital Territory</td>
<td>94.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Language background other than English</td>
<td>90.4</td>
<td>Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander students</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>All students</td>
<td>92.1</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Proportion reaching the reading benchmark

State or Territory

New South Wales 95.1
Victoria 95.2
Queensland 87.1
South Australia 91.5
Western Australia 89.4
Tasmania 92.8
Northern Territory 67.7
Australian Capital Territory 94.6
Language background other than English 90.4
Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander students 68.3
All students 92.1

Depending on State or Territory, this group was either identified from responses to questions asked about the child’s cultural/ethnic background at home; from questions asked about their own or their parents’ country of origin; from enrolment records; or from English as a second language program records.


A child’s first teacher is their parent. It is difficult to expect a parent who does not speak English to be the best teacher for their child in relation to learning English. However they are equipped to teach their child at home. Whatever language is being spoken, it is important to be consistent, have frequent exposure and repetition, and encourage the child to develop their language skills. Children do need to develop their language skills in their first language. Child health nurses and other professionals can include this process by encouraging parents to tell stories and share books in their first language. Many of the most popular children’s book titles are available in dual language versions. These books support parents to read aloud in their home language, while also being able to see the English language. Parents can also use illustrated books written in English and talk about the pictures in their home language.

Research has found that there are social and emotional benefits associated with maintaining the home language. “A child who can communicate socially with his parents, grandparents, and extended family will maintain the connection to his cultural identity and acquire a sense of belonging” (NAEYC 1995).

As a health professional it is important to explore with parents about dual language acquisition and support and encourage them to maintain their home language as the evidence suggests this is beneficial for the child.

CULTURAL NORMS IN RELATION TO BOOKS AND STORYTELLING

Primary school teachers still report many children starting school have not worn a book, and do not understand the importance of pages. The evidence would suggest that these children are at a disadvantage; however it is also understandable that their parents’ own early literacy activities are not an integral part of their home culture. The Aboriginal culture has traditionally been more oral than written. If parents were story tellers, then

Some ideas to consider:

- Parents with poor literacy may prefer to one to one interactions where they can be encouraged to ask questions without embarrassment.
- If possible, role model positive adult/child interaction with books.
- Recognise that parents with poor literacy will struggle to enjoy reading and have fun with their children in this activity.
- Recognise that parents may want to protect their child from experiencing the frustration and embarrassment of not being able to read.
- In group work with parents it is important not to put any parent in an embarrassing situation by asking them to read aloud.

- Become familiar with the adult literacy programs in your area and recommend these to parents where appropriate.

The Aboriginal culture has traditionally been more oral than written. If parents were story tellers, then...
this skill is much more culturally appropriate for the family, and more likely to be perpetuated. If parents feel this is a natural part of family life? Reading storybooks to children is not an everyday activity in all cultures, and grandparents, who are also carers of the child, may require the information in Chinese. Additionally, the words may have been translated but the pictures in the book are not representative of the culture.

It is vital that families are given the choice about whether they want any translated materials. They should be offered the English version and the translated version, or given a dual language book which ensures they receive both the home language and the English version.

When implementing an early literacy program it is important to be cognisant of the following:

• Practice Resources have been developed to help professionals working with children and families supporting children's development of 'emergent literacy' (see Box 1).

1. Language ability (speaking, listening and understanding), including vocabulary development and comprehension of the narratives, stories and conversations one is exposed to.

2. Letter identification/knowledge (knowing the names and corresponding sounds of letters).

3. Phonological awareness/ sensitivity (being able to identify and manipulate sounds of words).

4. Conventions of print, or understanding the basic concepts of reading and writing (for example, the left-to-right, top-to-bottom direction of print on a page and the progression of print from front to back across pages). In other languages these conventions may be different in Arabic where the print goes from right to left and Japanese where the characters are arranged vertically on the page.

5. Print-exposing environments (keeping books in the home, conducting home literacy activities such as shared book reading).

Adapted from ‘Centres for Community Child Health, The Royal Children’s Hospital, Melbourne’

This article will provide an update on current early literacy knowledge and address challenges professionals encounter when introducing literacy programs in culturally diverse communities.

In recent years, the promotion of early literacy has gained increasing attention. Commonwealth, state, territory and local governments, as well as not for profit organisations, have introduced literacy initiatives and resources for remote early childhood services.

While the theoretical framework and the delivery model may vary for each early literacy program, there is a common belief that literacy development begins before a child starts school. Most programs place an emphasis on providing families with information and support in an effort to create an environment that encourages the development of ‘emergent’ literacy (see Box 1).

One of the challenges in implementing an early literacy program in Australia is being aware of and responding to the cultural diversity of the population. This means recognising the indigenous culture as well as the many cultures from outside of Australia.
this skill is much more culturally appropriate for the family, and more likely to be perpetuated. If parents did not read to the young child, then where in turn would a parent learn to read to their child, and make this a natural part of family life? Reading story books to children is not an everyday activity in all cultures, which ensures they receive both the home language and the English version, or given a dual language book where possible. The words may have been translated but the picture in the book are not representative of the culture. It is vital that all families are given the choice about whether they want any translated materials. They should be offered the English version and the translated version, or a dual language book which ensures they receive both the home language and the English version.

The selection of books should also be culturally sensitive. Books illustrated with photographs of Aboriginal people who have died are not acceptable to the family and their culture.

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**INTRODUCTION**

As a child and family health professional, opportunities may arise in your daily interaction with families to encourage and support the development of early literacy. This article will provide an update on current early literacy knowledge and address challenges professionals encounter when introducing literacy programs in culturally diverse communities.

In recent years, the promotion of early literacy has gained increasing attention. Commonwealth, state, territory and local governments, as well as not-for-profit organisations, have introduced literacy initiatives and resources for remote early childhood services.

While the theoretical framework and the delivery model may vary for each early literacy program, there is a common belief that literacy development begins before a child starts school. Most programs place an emphasis on providing families with information in a clear and understandable manner. The messages related to early literacy should be used, and a clear explanation of the concept and practical strategies provided.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

**1. Are you familiar with the cultural background of the families you support?**

**2. What is the value of being familiar with adult literacy programs?**

**3. Do you currently have translated materials available for parents? If yes, how are they distributed?**

**4. What would you tell a family about teaching their young child their ‘home’ language?**

**5. Do you feel confident in your ability to address the cultural needs of families when promoting early literacy?**

Resources

- www.letsread.com.au

A complete list of references for this article is available from the Centre for Community Child Health’s website www.rch.org.au/cccch (click on ‘Resources and Publications’, then ‘Child Health Newsletter’). The website contains many resources for Child Health professionals.

**PROMOTING EARLY LITERACY AND BEING CULTURALLY AWARE**

Child health nurses have a role in promoting early literacy, using their access to children and families to encourage and reinforce parents that reading from an early age is appropriate (L Whyatt, D 2006). To do this effectively, the messenger needs to be respected by and responsive to the family and their culture.

When implementing an early literacy program it is important to be cognisant of the following:

- **Practice Resources** have been developed to help professionals working with children and families understand and promote early literacy in Aboriginal communities (A CHP, 2008).

- **Parent Fact Sheets** are written specifically for parents and cover a range of health, social and environmental topics including hygiene and infection control, music experiences, and emotional and environmental sustainability. These sheets are available in Arabic, Bosnian, Croatian, Somali, Spanish, Turkish, and Vietnamese.

- **Books, CD-ROMs and posters** are available online or by order.