

# Childcare and children's health

Health care information for childcare staff and families from the Centre for Community Child Health

Vol 8 No 4 August 2005

## Promoting Reading With Young Children

### What is the rationale for reading with young children?

Reading with young children is an important activity that you can undertake to develop a child's future literacy skills (the ability to read and write the printed word). Early positive exposure to books, especially through shared reading with parents or other adults helps children learn to read.

Furthermore, reading aloud to children supports their development in other ways – it provides intensive language exposure and supports language development, promotes parent/child bonding and socialisation, and helps parents relate positively to their children.

There are very strong links between literacy, school performance, self-esteem, and life chances. Poor literacy skills are associated with generally lower education, earnings, health and social outcomes as well as being linked to high rates of unemployment, welfare dependence and teenage parenting.

The research evidence shows that those children who experience difficulties in learning to read are unlikely to catch up to their peers. Children who struggle with reading in their first years of schooling are more likely to dislike reading, read less, and thus fall further behind. Efforts to help children who have an established reading problem and negative attitudes to reading are not always successful. We need to focus on activities early in life that encourage positive attitudes to books and reading to lay the foundation for sound literacy development at school. Although "learning to read" in a formal sense usually begins once a child commences school, the building blocks for success in literacy are laid much earlier in childhood.

Reading failure disproportionately affects children from socially disadvantaged homes, which in turn contributes to a continuation of the poverty cycle. Australian data shows that more children from families with lower socio-economic status (SES) experience difficulties in learning to read than other Australian children. Numerous studies have found that disadvantaged families report significantly lower numbers of books in the family home, significantly less time given to "reading aloud" activities and language exposure between child and caregiver and lower numbers of library membership and library visits.



## Literacy development – laying the foundations for future success

Almost all children learn to talk without being formally taught to do so. On the other hand, the development of literacy skills such as reading and writing is markedly different from the development of language, although dependent on it. Literacy is thought to be 'experience dependent' as it can be encouraged by particular experiences. Positive experiences to develop literacy may not be available to everyone.

A number of independent skill sets have been identified as early predictors of later reading success, often referred to as *emergent literacy*. These skill sets include:

- language abilities (vocabulary),
- the ability to identify the names and sounds of letters (the alphabet),
- an ability to identify and manipulate sounds (phonological awareness),
- an understanding of print conventions together with literacy environments (having books in the home).

A significant body of research has demonstrated a strong relationship between these emergent literacy skills and later success in reading when the child begins their formal education.

Two important aspects of reading aloud with young children are book selection and the style in which a child is read to.

1. The selection of *predictable* or *patterned books* and *alphabet books* is suggested as supporting carers and parents to engage young children in the activity of shared reading and to assist in the development of word identification and awareness of how letters map onto sounds. **Think about the types of books that you read aloud to the children in your care.**
2. The *style* of book reading, techniques such as *interactive questioning* and *shared story telling* all enhance the established language benefits of shared reading by promoting a number of important emergent literacy skills. The simple action of *finger pointing* at words or phrases during storybook telling assists children in acquiring important skills, such as the ability to track print, alphabet knowledge, phonemic awareness and the development of word recognition. **Think about the way that you read books to the children in your care.**

Recent research suggests that phonological awareness (a cognitive capacity that relates to the ability to identify and manipulate sounds in spoken language) is an important predictor of reading success in normally developing children.

## Encouraging and supporting parents to read with their young child

While reading with young children is a part of offering a high quality program within a child care service, this activity needs to be promoted to families and all members of the community as a fun and integral part of a child's daily routine. It would be beneficial if you could share some general information with parents, such as:

- There is no specific age to begin reading with a child, although it is accepted that the earlier the better. Some say that reading to young children should begin soon after birth, while others say it should start around 4 to 6 months when babies have a degree of head control and can be propped in the parent's lap.
- There is no magic figure about how long or how often to read with young children except to say that it should be daily. Young children do like routines so developing an everyday reading routine is suggested. This can be part of a bedtime routine however you may find that your child will choose books and share reading at any time of the day, just because they like it.
- Turn off the TV or radio as young children like to hear their parent's voice. Pointing to the words and pictures in the book helps get the child involved. Try out funny voices and sounds, and generally turn this shared reading into a fun time.
- As a child grows, the way that you read with the child needs to change to reflect their developmental stages.
- Librarians or children's booksellers can help parents select books for different ages. You can also share with parents information about the books that their child has particularly enjoyed during their time in the service.
- It is never too early to enrol a child at the local library. Many libraries have regular storytelling sessions for toddlers and preschoolers. Parents can learn a lot by watching someone else read aloud to their child.

## Let's Read – an initiative to support reading with young children

The Centre for Community Child Health in partnership with The Smith Family has developed a national early literacy initiative called Let's Read. Let's Read has been designed to be owned by and delivered in the community.

The Let's Read initiative is based on the beliefs that:

- The many professionals working in community setting already have a close working relationship with families, and are best placed to deliver the message about the importance of reading with young children. This obviously means that child care professionals are well placed to take on this role.

- Strategies that can be used to develop the emergent literacy skills in children should be modelled for parents. There is a greater chance of getting parents to use these strategies at home if they are demonstrated (modelled) and explained in a clear and simple manner. We all learn more when something is shown to us, as well as explained. The Let's Read program has parent information sheets to reinforce the modelled strategies used to develop emergent literacy skills. There is also a DVD to visually represent the strategies including some books being read aloud. This is particularly important for parents/carers who are illiterate or have a low literacy level.
- The strategies that are provided to parents to guide them in sharing books in effective and enjoyable ways with their children are age appropriate and based on an anticipatory guidance approach. Let's Read has been designed to be delivered at four points during a child's development – from 4 months: 12 months: 18 months and 3 ½ years. The materials are also designed to provide advice to parents/carers about what to expect during their child's current and approaching stage of development (anticipatory guidance). The Let's Read parent information sheets and DVD are designed around age specific and anticipatory strategies.
- Community based professionals, are provided with training to ensure that this program is delivered in a way that will support and empower parents to help develop the emerging literacy skills in their children. This training will enable a wide range of professionals to develop a full understanding of emergent literacy and to support the delivery of a consistent message using the supplied resources.
- There is a need to support the development of a community commitment and ownership of the program so it can be sustained over time. As a starting point this support consists of a resource kit that includes suggestions to empower communities to develop models, structures and systems that promote and facilitate literate communities. Exactly how a community implements the Let's Read program is determined at a local level. There are some specifications, such as the stages when the program should be delivered and the types of messages that should be promoted but the exact structures and systems will be at the community's discretion.

Childcare services have the opportunity to take a proactive role and work closely with other community agencies/organisations to implement Let's Read. You have a close working relationship with families with young children, and reading aloud and books are already a vital part of your program. You are therefore well placed to



promote these messages to parents/carers and support the development of the essential emergent literacy skills in young children.

Further information about how you and your community can become involved in Let's Read can be accessed from [www.letsread.com.au](http://www.letsread.com.au)

*QIAS Principles: 1.1, 1.3, 2.1, 4.3,*

*FDCQA Principles 1.1, 1.2, 2.2, 3.1, 3.6, 6.3, 6.7*

### **Acknowledgments**

The information in this article is provided by the Let's Read program team, which has been developed by the Centre for Community Child Health in partnership with The Smith Family. More details about Let's Read, including the literature review which outlines the evidence for this initiative can be accessed from [www.letsread.com.au](http://www.letsread.com.au)

The Parent Fact Sheet accompanying this newsletter is available in different community languages and can be downloaded for printing from the Early Childhood Connections website. [www.econnections.com.au](http://www.econnections.com.au)

### **Childcare & children's health Survey**

Thank you to everyone who returned the Survey distributed with the last edition of Childcare & children's health. Congratulations to the following organisations, who have each won a \$50.00 book voucher and a copy of Professor Frank Oberklaid's book "Health in Early Childhood Settings".

- Wallaroo Child Care Centre, NSW
- Sunbury Family Day Care, VIC
- Beattie Road Children's Centre, QLD

Enclosed with this newsletter is a summary of the results from the survey.

## Children reading: a case study

Makin & Jones Diaz Eds. (2002) believe that “readers must construct their own knowledge”... and that it is important for staff in early childhood settings to understand “the interconnectedness of literacy and social practices.”

The shelves in the book area in the 2-3's room are laden with a wide selection of children's books. Many of these books are representative of the diversity of cultures within the community. There are also magazines and newspapers and catalogues that families and children bring in to the centre.

Kim (2 years 5 months) searches through the bookshelves and pulls out a popular parent newspaper. She appears to be very happy about her choice and she sits herself down on the floor in front of the book shelves. There are other children in the book area sitting together sharing books. Kim seems not to notice these children as she sits down alone, laying out the parent newspaper in front of her.

Kim opens to the first page and painstakingly turns each page after scrutinising each one intently. She scans each page and continues on for most of the paper. Finally, on turning to the entertainment pages she finds something that she appeared to be looking for in the newspaper. She pointed to an image of “Bruce” the shark from the film Nemo. She picked up the newspaper and took it over to the teacher to tell her that she had found “Bruce”.

Why was this seemingly ordinary experience so remarkable? The teacher who had been observing Kim's investigation of the parent newspaper knew her well enough to know that she had selected the newspaper with some intent, disregarding the inviting selection of children's books and the other children. Kim usually enjoys “reading” with her friends.

Kim's deliberate selection of the newspaper and her determined investigation of each page indicated to the teacher that she had a goal in mind. At the end of the day the teacher discussed Kim's reading project with her parents who acknowledged that this research or investigation of newspapers and magazines was something that Kim did at home as well. Being able to identify a particular image on a printed page indicates an ability to hold an abstract image until a match has been made.

The parents reported that Kim had been interested in Bruce the shark for some time and she has been finding and collecting as many images that she could find. Her parents said she could find a picture of Bruce in the most surprising places.

### The questions for reflection are these:

Is this child's ability to satisfy her curiosity and desire to identify a visual image an indication of the development of her emergent reading strategies and skills?

Is this child demonstrating an ability to seek information in various places and is this evidence of a particular ability that the child is refining?

Some children are naturally acquisitive and the notion that a young child has developed such a keen interest in collecting images of a particular subject demonstrates the complexities of children's thinking and disposition.

The integral role of the early childhood professional in engaging with the child and the family is clearly demonstrated in this case study. Such connections and relationships support children's learning and understandings about their world and enhance their intrinsic motivation and desire to learn. In early childhood settings this is a shared responsibility and builds bridges within communities.

*Wendy Shepherd, Director Mia-Mia Child and Family Study Centre, Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University.*

**Reference:** Makin and Jones Diaz (Eds.) Literacies in Early Childhood. Changing Views Challenging Practice. Sydney: MacLennan and Petty

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Community  
Child Health



ROYAL CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

SUPPORTED BY AN  
EDUCATIONAL GRANT FROM

*Johnson & Johnson*

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