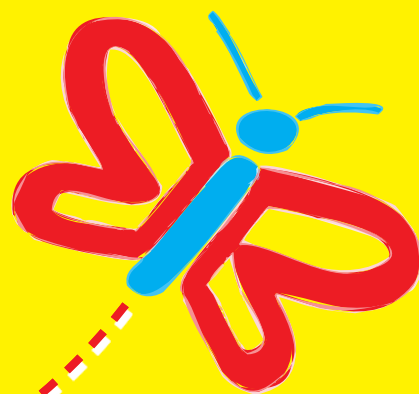


# Better Beginnings

Making a Difference: The evaluation of  
the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three*  
Family Literacy Program 14 years on  
2017



School of Education  
Early Childhood Research Group  
Edith Cowan University



RioTinto



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# Executive Summary

## Introduction to the Report

*Better Beginnings* is an award-winning<sup>1</sup> initiative of the State Library of Western Australia (SLWA), designed to ensure every child in WA has the best opportunity to enjoy the kinds of resources and experiences recognised worldwide as promoting early literacy learning. The *Better Beginnings Birth to Three program*<sup>2</sup> focuses attention on families with babies from birth to three years. Its primary goals are to:

- Ensure every family in WA receives a *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* Reading Pack, that includes developmentally appropriate books and information to guide parents<sup>3</sup> in how to provide their baby with positive and nurturing experiences through book sharing;
- Provide ongoing support to families in understanding the importance of language rich interactions in their baby's development, and in developing the attitudes, skills and knowledge needed to help parents to bond with their child and become their first teacher; and
- Encourage strong links between families, health services and local libraries to ensure babies have access to literacy orientated resources and opportunities available through community services.

The *Birth to Three* program began in 2004 with a small pilot trial that included six WA communities along with their local libraries and just over 1,000 families<sup>4</sup>. *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* Reading Packs were given to families by Community Child Health Nurses (CCHNs) when parents brought their babies to the six-eight week health check. Libraries supported the program through *Better Beginnings* outreach tool

boxes with books, puppets and literacy games which they lent to community groups. A number of libraries also established family reading centres and began regular and *Story Time* sessions for families. Since that time, the *Birth to Three* program has grown exponentially, with Reading Packs now distributed to almost every baby in WA; and thousands of families regularly bringing their babies and pre-school children to book sharing sessions such as *Story Time* and *Sing with Me*, at their local libraries.

This evidence-based report is one of a series that have described and evaluated the implementation and outcomes of the *Better Beginnings* program since its inception. The research builds on the findings from the *Better Beginnings* 2004 pilot program evaluation (Barratt-Pugh, Rohl, Oakley & Elderfield, 2005) and is part of an on-going longitudinal evaluation study. The evaluation has been funded by the State Library of Western Australia through the Department of Culture and the Arts and the longitudinal evaluation reports are available from <https://www.better-beginnings.com.au/research/research-about-better-beginnings/better-beginnings-making-difference>. Findings are also reported in several journal articles and book chapters (Barratt-Pugh, & Allen, 2015; Barratt-Pugh, & Maloney, 2015; Barratt-Pugh, Rohl, & Allen, 2017; Barratt-Pugh & Rohl, 2015, 2016, 2016a; Leitão, Barratt-Pugh, Anderson, Barblett, & Haig, 2015).

The 2017 evaluation incorporates both qualitative and quantitative data collected from state and community librarians, CCHNs, stakeholders, and most importantly parents and carers. Interviews, surveys, video recordings, and observations were used to collect primary data.

1. *Better Beginnings* received a WA Premier's Award in 2013 WA Premier's Award in 2013 'Best Practice Honoree' in the 2017 Library of Congress Literacy Awards.

2. The *Better Beginnings Birth to Three (Birth to Three)* Program, will be referred to simply as the *Birth to Three* program throughout this report

3. The term parent is used to encompass many different carer roles, including mothers, fathers, grandparents, extended family members and custodial parents.

4. Further information about the *Better Beginnings*, its history, programs, and relevant research reports can be found at: <https://www.better-beginnings.com.au/>



## Key Findings

Across all participant groups contributing to the 2017 evaluation there was an overwhelmingly positive response to the *Birth to Three* program. The *Birth to Three* program was perceived as extremely worthwhile and successful. There were many affirmations that it was being implemented and sustained in positive and effective ways. The quality of resources was widely applauded and successful distribution of Reading Packs to almost every WA family with a baby, was particularly noted as an outstanding achievement. Most significantly, evidence gathered from library staff, CCHNs and families strongly indicates that the *Birth to Three* program has been influential in enhancing and in some families introducing book-sharing and early language practices of parents in very positive ways. It appears highly likely that the *Birth to Three* program is contributing to measurable improvements in the literacy outcomes of WA children through its early years family interventions.

A number of challenges were identified, and some recommendations for improvement were offered.

### Implementation and sustainability of the *Birth to Three* program

- A Joint Management Group (JMG) which includes representation from the two main groups collaborating in the implementation of the *Birth to Three* program (The State Library of Western Australia [SLWA]; Child and Adolescent Health Service [CAHS]) is well established and meets twice a year. **The JMG plays a critical role in maintaining cross-sector liaison and sustaining successful advocacy and support for the program.** Changing membership of the group can be a challenge to consistent leadership in policy and practice, and the group may benefit from considering strategies it can use to ensure effective and efficient sector leadership across time;
- SLWA has established a strong set of policy and guidelines to support the implementation of *Better Beginnings*, and this encompasses all aspects of the *Birth to Three* program. Community librarians express appreciation for the work of the SLWA leadership team and see it as an important factor in sustaining the quality of the program;
- All of the librarians and CCHNs interviewed believe that the *Birth to Three* program has been implemented successfully and often expressed genuine amazement at the scale and impact of the delivery of book resources to families alongside the communication of key messages;
- Meaningful relationships have been established and sustained between *Birth to Three* program collaborating partners at an inter-agency level, as well as in practice between community library staff and CCHNs. This is regarded as critical to the implementation and sustainability of the program. Changes in the provision of early childhood care services and time pressures on professional staff pose potential threats to effective collaboration and will need to be monitored and managed to sustain coherent and consistent implementation;
- Staff from the SLWA leadership team, community librarians and CCHNs with responsibility for the implementation of the *Birth to Three* program express deep commitment to the program. ***Better Beginnings* professionals are articulate, well informed and passionate about their roles, and have a clear understanding of the importance of delivering the key messages of the program as well as providing quality resources;**
- *Better Beginnings* is well integrated into the work of most CCHNs and community librarians. SLWA staff, community librarians and CCHNs demonstrate confidence and expertise in managing, organising and delivering the *Birth to Three* program;

- **Better Beginnings** professionals from all sectors showed an awareness of, and commitment to serving the specific needs of families in their diverse communities. They adapted their presentations and conversations to respond to differences in culture and language, as well as individual requirements. Understanding diversity and implementing the program in locations with changing populations can be challenging and requires on-going commitment;
- A huge number of *Birth to Three* Reading Packs have been distributed. Between 2005 and July 2017, a total of 315,515 Reading Packs have been provided to CCHNs for distribution to new parents: 232,605 went to the metro areas and 82,910 to the regions;
- The number of *Birth to Three* Reading Packs distributed in recent years is close to matching the WA birth rate. Many libraries and CCHNs are creative and flexible in seeking ways to connect with families who might, 'slip through the net'. The SLWA and community libraries are very proud of their record of Reading Pack distribution, and regard this as a very successful component of the implementation of *Better Beginnings Birth to Three*: "It's about 96% coverage of the whole state, which is phenomenal, which is amazing." Staff involved in implementation are aware of persistent challenges in ensuring universal access, particularly for the most vulnerable families, and on-going commitment to the goal remains a priority;
- There have been some positive developments in data collection and analysis. These are supporting better management of resources, more informed decision-making about distribution, and most significantly the identification and solving of problems in achieving universal access. There remains room for improvement in this area, and opportunities for the further development of system-wide technology solutions;
- Professional development opportunities for community librarians have been strengthened. The approach to training, together with the quality of learning support resources available was widely regarded as leading to noticeable improvements in program delivery: "Creating a bit of a paradigm shift amongst public libraries in Western Australia, and I think that's, like, potentially quite profound";
- CCHNs are mostly satisfied that their professional knowledge equips them to understand and deliver *Better Beginnings* messages to parents, but appreciate the support of librarians in on-going development and up-dating; and
- The vast majority of parents are extremely positive about their experience of the delivery of the *Birth to Three* program. Families were very pleased to receive their Reading Packs from the CCHNs, even though a few found the information a little overwhelming at the time of delivery. Parents identified *Baby Rhyme Time* as a significant element in the communication of the key messages of *Better Beginnings*. The *Birth to Three* implementation model combining complementary resources, information and role-modelling was very much appreciated, and positive interactions with *Better Beginnings* professionals was an equally important element in the overall success of the approach.
- Additional factors identified as contributing to the longevity of the *Birth to Three* Program included:
  - Repeating the key messages through different agencies and over time rather than relying on single interventions;
  - The positive role of the independent longitudinal evaluation;
  - The commitment and collaboration of the State Government through the State Library, local governments and public libraries, and Rio Tinto;
  - Flexibility in the delivery of the program to suit individual families and circumstances of the time; and
  - Commitment to on-going adaption of the *Birth to Three* program leading to the development of new resources and services to cater for specific target audiences and needs.

## Design and distribution of the *Birth to Three* program

- The SLWA leadership group, community librarians and CCHNs were unanimous in expressing confidence in the validity of the goals of the *Birth to Three* program, the appropriateness of its design and the quality of its resources. Refinements, adaptations and updating of elements of the program are important to maintain currency and relevance, including considerations about the integration of resources and key messages across new and different programs to achieve a holistic program from birth to school;
- The central coordination by the State Library was regarded as a strength of the program design with particular support for their training, information, resources and the improved effectiveness of the *Better Beginnings* web portal;
- *Birth to Three* program resources, including the Reading Pack, were well regarded for their quality and are seen to address diversity positively. There is still, however, acknowledgement of potential for making improvements, particularly in ensuring families can consistently access at least some resources that reflect their cultural heritage and context;
- Overall parents found the design of books, information and resources to be appropriate and useful, although they had different opinions about what worked best for them as individuals. Their feedback suggests there is value in providing both written and verbal guidance to parents about the Reading Pack's contents, finding opportunities to repeat messages and maintaining flexibility for professionals to adapt the design and implementation to suit local and individual circumstances; and
- Families showed limited enthusiasm or interest in using digital resources with young babies, and sometimes expressed concern about the role of technology in early years development.

Nevertheless, they also valued technology as a way to communicate and share ideas and resources, and some thought *Better Beginnings* could exploit it more fully. The mixed messages suggest that this could be an area for further investigation, review and appropriate development, including improved support for parents understanding how to use technology effectively with babies.

## Outcomes of the *Birth to Three* program for stakeholders and participants

- Book ownership was found to be very high in homes of participant families, nevertheless the *Birth to Three* program appears to have had a positive influence on children's access to quality books at home, particularly books for very young babies;
- Many parents report that *Better Beginnings* has influenced their book-sharing and communication around books, in some cases quite significantly: 86% felt that *Better Beginnings* changed how often they read to their baby (they read more); 76% said that *Better Beginnings* changed the way they communicate with their baby (they communicated more). Survey data demonstrates an increase in the regularity with which other family members read to the baby, with a notable increase in the number of fathers who read to their baby after receiving the Reading Pack;
- Many parents reported gaining a better understanding about the importance of book-sharing and language-focused activities, particularly in relation to very young babies, and commented that their confidence was also assisted through the advice offered and through having concerns addressed or feelings and intuitions affirmed in the literacy information detailed in the *Birth to Three* Reading Pack;
- The *Birth to Three* Reading Pack, has positively influenced many parents' attitudes including the idea that babies can enjoy and benefit from books and nursery rhymes, as well as enjoy the library, from an early age;



- Parents' changing perceptions about the value of reading to babies from a young age are reflected in **increased adoption of positive everyday literacy practices**;
- Most notably parents reported a **significant increase in their child's interest in books** with almost all of them showing interest, and many more sustaining their interest through to the end of a book; and
- Librarians believe that the *Birth to Three* program is impacting positively on the children and their families at a community level, with outcomes such as better family relationships and improved communication and literacy skills as a social dividend that is potentially protective against problems of social and emotional difficulties some families experience.
- Feedback from families about *Baby Rhyme Time* was overwhelmingly positive: *Better Beginnings* sessions and other child-friendly activities that local libraries offer, can act to attract families into the library; and
- CCHNs are extremely supportive of the library-based *Birth to Three* program and believe they have a beneficial impact on positive family literacy practices and consequently on children's development.

### Relationships between *Better Beginnings* program and other early literacy initiatives

#### Impact of the *Birth to Three* program on library membership, participation and library practices

- The number of families holding memberships of a local library rose following engagement with the *Birth to Three* program for both adults and babies;
- The frequency of family visits to the library rose following receipt of a Reading Pack, with the percentage of families never visiting the library or visiting once a month falling and the percentage of families visiting fortnightly, once a week or even more regularly rising;
- Participation in the *Birth to Three* program appears to have encouraged more parents who visited the library to borrow books for their babies; and to borrow a larger number of baby books;
- Parents, librarians and CCHNs surveyed all provided strong support for the significance of the *Birth to Three* program in helping adults find social connection with others; and providing experiences in which babies can learn about social interactions;
- The *Birth to Three* program was the foundational program of the *Better Beginnings* initiative. Additional programs have developed over recent years, with a goal of providing resources and support to families with children from birth to school age. Whilst each program has a distinctive focus, positive interaction and integration is needed to ensure effective, efficient and appropriate development of a coherent and consistent service, resources, information and support. Library staff report confidence in working across the programs and comment that system flexibility is important to "making it work" at a local level. **Much progress has been made towards achieving a "seamless flow" across the different *Better Beginnings* programs.** However, refinements across all aspects of design and delivery are still required to maximise the potential benefits of the continuum, whilst managing the potential for unnecessary overlap and duplication;
- Many librarians and CCHNs have worked with the *Birth to Three* program over a sustained period and have developed very good relationships with positive communications and liaisons between them. Feedback suggests that there are some challenges to effective on-going relationships arising from pressures of work limiting the time professionals have to meet. New and changing staff need time and support to develop understandings about the program and their role in it;

- There has been an increase in the number and diversity of organisations and agencies involved in the provision of services to young children that intersect with *Better Beginnings*. Differences in structures, staffing, procedures, regulations as well as fundamental philosophies and goals create a complex environment for productive collaboration. Professional feedback suggests relationships with some of these early literacy initiatives are somewhat ad hoc, and this may be limiting the achievement of the best possible outcomes. The dynamic early childhood context highlights a need for a greater oversight of the provision of programs so that agencies could look closely at areas of responsibility. This would facilitate effective collaboration and avoid duplication and the potential of “information confusion or message overload” for families;
- Participation in early years networks and community events is an important strategy supporting libraries to link with relevant agencies and initiatives, and this requires consideration in the setting of work priorities particularly in small libraries with limited staffing flexibility; and
- In the increasing complexity of the early childhood landscape there is a potential threat to the recognition of the central role, value and achievements of *Better Beginnings* in early literacy development across the state. Feedback from *Better Beginnings* staff draws attention for the need to (re)consider the most effective ways to promote itself amongst Early Childhood professionals and organisations as well as the wider WA community.

### Challenges, barriers and opportunities for improvements

Across all surveys and interviews, participants in the evaluation were overwhelmingly positive and appreciative about the intentions, design, implementation and outcomes they associated with the *Birth to Three* program. However, contributors

have been able to comment on challenges and barriers to the on-going success of the program and make suggestions about ways it could be improved still further. A summary of key issues arising throughout this evaluation is presented below:

- *Better Beginnings* has been highly successful in contributing to significant improvements in the development of WA children. **There remain some gaps in provisions and services, and these are most likely to impact on the most vulnerable families.** Continued and focused efforts are needed to progress towards universal program access and inclusion, particularly meeting the needs of families living in vulnerable circumstances;
- **Complacency is seen as a potential threat to the longevity of the program**, so finding ways to sustain the established levels of resources, energy and commitment is critical, as is the on-going promotion of the program to all sectors of the community. The continued support of state and local governments and sponsors is essential;
- The design and implementation of the *Birth to Three* program has been effective but demands, expectations, and contexts are in continual change: **attention needs to be kept on maintaining the currency and relevance of all aspects of the program across time;**
- *Better Beginnings* has developed broad systems, processes and resources to support children’s learning from birth to school, that are proving effective. However, **flexibility in design and implementation remains critical to addressing changing local needs and conditions, and the specific requirements of individual families;**
- Continual improvement depends on effective systems of evaluation. **Continued efforts to collect feedback, collate relevant data and research the impact of different elements of *Better Beginnings* need to be sustained**, perhaps incorporating some new and different methodologies. **Ensuring adequate and**

representative forums for shared discussion about the meaning of findings (including AEDC data) and implications for development is also important;

- Further development in the use of technology is needed to support resources, services, and the collection, interrogation and management of data;
- Budgetary constraints can be seen to impact on resources and staffing, and although direct cuts to *Better Beginnings* have been limited, there remains a constant threat of diminished financial support. Sustaining the quality of services and resources, through changing economic conditions is a serious challenge; and
- Maintaining, sustaining and developing cross-sector relationships and collaborations in an increasingly complex Early Childhood services environment is a challenge, and will require attention from all parties.

### Changes in Australian Early Development Census data sets

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) provides insights into the well-being and development of young children as they begin their first year of full-time school. Three cycles of data collection (2009, 2012 & 2015) have been published. The data allows comparisons to be made across states and local government communities. It is intended that the data be used to support the evaluation of community initiatives such as *Better Beginnings*.

- The data sets show that between 2009 and 2015, the vulnerability of children in WA has decreased across all domains except the Social Domain. Improvements in WA children's language competence have been particularly notable. The percentage of children assessed as 'On track' rose from 67.20% in 2009 to 82.70% in 2016. This increase is much greater than increases in any other domain, and lifts achievements from well below national standards to almost matching national standards (84.6% in 2016);
- AEDC data does not reveal the causes of improvements, but *Better Beginnings* is one of a set of initiatives intended, and indeed expected, to raise language and literacy standards in WA. Data from this 2017 evaluation provides evidence supporting the likelihood that the *Birth to Three* program is a contributor to the improvements observed in early years literacy and language;
- AEDC data sets highlight many positive trends, but also point to persistent socio-educational inequities in access and outcomes, for example amongst remote communities, Indigenous and Language Base Other Than English (LBOTE) children: This supports the concern of *Birth to Three* practitioners for persisting in seeking ways to achieve universal access to the Reading Pack, and for finding ever better ways to communicate the key messages of *Better Beginnings* to diverse families and communities;
- Patterns of achievement and progress in the AEDC data sets highlight specific regions of WA where children are at greater risk, such as the Pilbara and the Kimberley; and also communities that are outliers, either performing at higher or lower levels than expected. The SLWA has demonstrated an awareness of the value of such information, and discussions about the relevance of AEDC findings to *Birth to Three* program policy and practice have begun. However, the data sets have not yet been fully explored or exploited, and further development of data collection and analysis tools will be required to support on-going refinements in the use of evidence to promote continuing improvements; and
- The AEDC insights re-enforce the importance of maintaining a schedule of rigorous evaluation alongside the implementation of the *Birth to Three* program, along with strong encouragement for practitioners within the program to engage in the collection and interrogation of both internal and external data which may provide insights into what works and why.

## Introduction to the *Birth to Three* program

*Better Beginnings* is an umbrella title for a family literacy program that incorporates a series of family literacy programs each focused on a specific age range or community identified literacy need. Its overall goal is to contribute to the wellbeing of all WA children, particularly their literacy outcomes. Since its inception in 2004, *Better Beginnings* has been developed and managed by the State Library of Western Australia (SLWA), and funded by the State Government of Western Australia, the Department of Regional Development and Lands through Royalties for Regions, Western Australian Local Governments and Rio Tinto.

An initial *Birth to Three* pilot program included six WA communities and their local libraries and just over 1,000 families. Between 2004 and 2017, the program expanded to include almost every WA family and their children. The *Birth to Three* program has been implemented across the full range of communities that represent WA's diverse geographical, social, cultural and economic contexts. By 2016, approximately 90% of local government areas were involved and the remaining small local government areas were either in the process of implementing *Better Beginnings* or negotiating to implement it. Approximately 27 000 of the 30,000 babies born during 2016 in Western Australia received a *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* Reading Pack from their local library or CCHN at their six to eight-week health check.

The overall aim of *Better Beginnings* is to provide positive language and literacy influences for young children through supporting parents as their child's first teachers. The program design is based on global research into effective practice and relies upon strong cooperation between health professionals, local governments and public libraries. In planning and developing the program, there has been a high degree of consultation and engagement with local communities. The overall intent of *Better Beginnings* is for government agencies to work in partnership with families to support children's early literacy learning.

While *Better Beginnings* incorporates a series of related age-specific programs, this report focuses on the resources, strategies and interventions targeted towards families with babies from birth to three years old. The specific intentions of the *Birth to Three* program include<sup>5</sup>:

- Introducing babies to developmentally appropriate books and language activities;
- Supporting parents as their child's first teacher;
- Raising family awareness about the value and enjoyment of reading together; and
- Linking families to the free resources and services at their local public library.

In 2016-17, the SLWA identified the key elements of the *Birth to Three* program as including<sup>6</sup>:

- **A *Birth to Three* Reading Pack** given to parents of young babies by the CCHN at the eight week health check. The contents of the Reading Pack could vary somewhat, but normally would include:
  - A colourful board book for babies;
  - A frieze with nursery rhymes printed on it;
  - A brochure containing suggestions for enjoying reading experiences with a baby;
  - A list of recommended books for babies and toddlers; information about local library resources; a library membership form; and
  - A DVD that shows adults reading and singing rhymes and songs to young children and babies of various ages; and information about the value of this.
- **A *Better Beginnings* handbook and set of electronic training modules**, developed to support health and library partners working with the program. These provided a guide to the responsibilities of all partners and included samples, scripts and templates to follow when delivering the program to families;

5. Source: <https://www.better-beginnings.com.au/programs/birth-three>

6. Source: <https://www.better-beginnings.com.au/programs/birth-three>



- **Baby Rhyme Time and Story Time sessions and workshops at the library**, designed and delivered, to provide enjoyable shared early literacy experiences for parents and young children. Parents and their children were invited to free sessions that introduce them to stories, rhymes and games to use with their babies/children. Some procedures for CCHNs were outlined, encouraging them to collect and pass on to the library contact details of families receiving the Reading Pack;
- **Story Time Boxes (also called Outreach Toolboxes)** that contained a rich variety of literacy resources for children and their families were developed. These were lent by public libraries to community agencies and also used 'in-house' to support and *Story Time*;
- **Family Resource Centres in libraries:** interactive early childhood learning spaces, in addition to resources were designed and developed to increase parental knowledge of early childhood language and literacy; and
- **A Reading Gateway** that included information about *Better Beginnings* was established as part of the website of the State Library of Western Australia. The website provided news and information for parents, teachers and librarians about early literacy and links to games and activities for children in order to encourage an interest in books and stories. It also included access to interactive electronic books that can be read to children by the computer.

Building on the findings from evaluations of *Better Beginnings Birth to Three*, *Better Beginnings* expanded to provide additional support and resources for Indigenous families in remote Indigenous communities (*Read To Me: I Love It!*), Kindergarten families (the *Kindergarten* program) and families with toddlers (the *Sing-with-Me* program). Evaluations of these programs can be found in Barblett (2012), Barratt-Pugh & Maloney (2015) and Leitão & Barratt-Pugh (2018).

## Research Methodology

### Introduction to the research methodology

The Edith Cowan Evaluation Research Team undertook a mixed method approach, informed by the models applied in previous *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* evaluations. It drew on both qualitative and quantitative data, collected through telephone surveys, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, observations and video recordings.

The longitudinal evaluation of *Better Beginnings* has clearly shown that given the range of intended outcomes of the programs and the complexity of home and school contexts, both quantitative and qualitative measures are essential for developing a sophisticated understanding of the factors that contribute to program implementation, outcomes and sustainability. The use of multiple sources of data has contributed to the internal validity of the overall study and allowed for a level of cross-checking and triangulation of findings. It also allowed robust comparisons to be made with previous evaluations, by the addition of comparative information from established data sets related to communities.

### Evaluation research questions

The following research questions guided the evaluation:

- How is the *Birth to Three* program implemented and sustained in each community?
- What are the participants' and stakeholders' perceptions of the design and implementation of the *Birth to Three* program?
- What are the outcomes of the *Birth to Three* program for participants and stakeholders?
- What is the impact of the *Birth to Three* program on library membership, participation and library practices?
- What is the relationship between the *Birth to Three* programs and other early literacy initiatives in each community?
- Have there been any changes in existing data sets in the communities involved in the evaluation?



## Research ethics

The research team adhered to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 (updated May 2015), (National Health & Medical Research Council, 2007) exemplified in the Edith Cowan University ethical requirements for all research projects. And the Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012). Ethics approval was gained from Edith Cowan University Research Ethics Committee and approval to conduct research in child health centres was obtained from the WA Department of Health.

## Participants and data collection methods

The participants for the evaluation of the *Birth to Three* program were drawn from each of four longitudinal evaluation community sites: Warreup, Kirkenin, Irwine and Manglis, with the addition of one further community (Tawbury) as requested by the SLWA. Almost 150 families who had engaged in one or more elements of *Birth to Three* program, or were expected to join the program in 2016/17, agreed to participate in the evaluation. Some participants were invited to participate by the CCHN prior to receiving their *Birth to Three* Reading Pack. Some of them completed both a pre- and post-program survey. Throughout this report, these families have been labelled the **New Parent Cohort (NPC)**. Other families were identified by a community librarian, when they attended. This cohort contributed only to a post-program survey, and they have been identified as the **Baby Rhyme Time Parent Cohort (RTC)**. A few families also agreed to be observed in a book-sharing event with their child.

Local government librarians and CCHNs in each community, stakeholders, community librarians and the SLWA team responsible for *Better Beginnings* were also invited to take part. The data were collected over a period of a year and included the following instruments:

## Surveys

- **New Parent Cohort (NPC)**: Parents (n=114) from across five community sites completed a pre-program survey at the six-eight week health check at their local child health clinic, before they received a *Better Beginnings* Reading Pack. Questions were designed to elicit information about their family demographics, their children, receipt of the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* Reading Pack, library membership and use, their language and literacy interactions with their child, and their attitudes to early language development, reading and literacy;
- **67 of the original 114 NPC group participated in the post-program survey**, three to twelve months after they received a *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* Reading Pack from the CCHN. This survey was undertaken by telephone and gathered information about their experience of the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* program. It included questions about the delivery, content and use of the program, library membership and use, and changes in literacy practices, confidence and book buying/borrowing;
- **Baby Rhyme Time Parents Cohort (RTC)**: A group of 31 parents was invited to complete the post-program survey, to provide additional data reflecting on the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* resources and experiences. The RTC survey data is presented both separately from, and integrated with, that of the NPC participants. Separation allows for the identification of any unexpected but potentially significant differences between the cohorts.

## Interviews

- **Librarians from community libraries (n=6) responsible for delivering *Better Beginnings* Programs** were asked about the implementation and sustainability of *Better Beginnings* as well as their perceptions of the Reading Pack resources and training. Information about library membership, numbers attending and *Story Time* sessions, and links to the Kindergarten program was sought;

7. Pseudonyms were given to the communities to preserve privacy. These names have been applied consistently throughout the report.

- **Community Child Health Nurses (CCHNs)** (n=14) provided insights into their own roles in the implementation of the program, their perceptions of the Reading Packs and changes in the content and design, their links to the local library and other literacy initiatives. CCHNs were also asked about parents' responses to the Reading Pack; and
- **Case study parents** (n=9) were asked to elaborate on their perceptions of the Reading Pack and how this had influenced their family literacy practices and library membership and use.
- **A Community Investment Advisor** from Rio Tinto provided a stakeholder perspective through an open-ended interview when they were asked to comment on the company's experience, expectations and relationships with the *Better Beginnings* initiative.

### Focus groups

- **Staff from the State Library Participation and Learning** (n=8) were interviewed about the overall development of the *Better Beginnings* programs and identified the specific issues around the future development and sustainability of the *Birth to Three* program.

### Observations

- **Observations of Community Child Health Nurses** (n=9) delivery of the *Birth to Three* program was observed by an experienced researcher, to identify the ways in which CCHNs were introducing and presenting the Reading Pack and also how parents responded in the first instance; and
- **Observations of Community Librarians** (n=11) delivery of *Better Beginnings* sessions were conducted to provide information about the range of activities and the interaction between the librarians and families attending.

### Videos

- **Five case study participants** were videoed sharing a book with their new baby. This elicited data about the incorporation of *Better Beginnings* key messages, and the strategies that parents use in relation to the information in the Reading Pack. This is a new form of data that strengthened the original evaluation framework, providing a link between what parents reported and what they actually did in book-sharing activities.

### Existing data sets

- The **2009, 2012 and 2015 AEDC** language and cognitive skills, communication skills and general knowledge domains was gathered for the five communities involved in the evaluation to ascertain any changes over the time in which the *Better Beginnings* program has been implemented.

Table 1 shows the number of participants in each community and the data collected. In order to comply with ethical guidelines the communities are identified by pseudonyms.

### Participant family demographics

The **pre-survey study** was conducted with 114 participants from a New Parent Cohort (NPC). These participants lived in five different locations, three metropolitan and two regional:

- Warreup: n=4 (3.5%);
- Kirkenin: n=44 (38.6%);
- Irwine: n=27 (23.7%);
- Manglis: n=15 (13.2%);
- Tawbury: n=24 (21.1%).<sup>8</sup>

Over half of the NPC participants were first-time parents (n=63 of 114, 55%). Forty-five percent (n=51) of the babies had one or more siblings. Two babies (4%) had 5 siblings. It is important to note the high incidence of older siblings, as in all probability these families would have prior knowledge of the *Better Beginnings*.

8. Not all respondents provided answers to every question in the survey. The percentages given relate to the total number of responses not the total number of parents in the cohort.

Table 1: Participants in each community and the data collected

Data Collection	Community					Total
	Warreup	Kirkenin	Irwine	Manglis	Tawbury	
Parent survey pre-program	4	44	27	15	24	114
New Cohort Parent (NPC) survey post program	0	32	19	5	11	67
<i>Baby Rhyme Time</i> Parent Cohort (RTC) survey post program	8	12	4	3	4	31
Total Parent Cohort (NPC+RTC) survey post program	8	44	23	8	15	98
Case study parents	-	3	2	-	4	9
Case study video		2	1		2	5
Librarians interview	1	1	2	1	1	6
Librarians observations	4	3	3	0	1	11
CCHNs interview	4	6	2	1	1	14
CCHNs observations	1	4	2	1	1	9
SLWA Participation & Learning Team	1 SLWA <i>Better Beginnings</i> coordinator 7 staff from the State Library Leadership Team					8
Stakeholders	1 representative from Rio Tinto					1

At the time of the survey, babies varied in age from a few weeks to 3 years: Half (50%, n=57 of 114) were aged six months or less and were born between January and June 2017; almost half (46%, n= 52) were born in 2016; four babies were born in 2015 and one in 2014.

The vast majority of NPC families (n=110 of 114, 95%) did not access child care or day care services for their babies. The survey data suggested that all respondents were mothers, with three quarters aged between 18 and 35 years. Many of the parents were highly educated and 77% of the mothers and 66% of the fathers had completed post-schooling qualifications:

- Approximately 43% of the mothers (n=49) had undertaken university studies, with 29 mothers (26%) having undergraduate qualifications and 20 (18%) with postgraduate degrees. Thirty-four percent (n=38) of the mothers had TAFE qualifications. Twenty-one mothers (19%) had completed Year 11 or 12, and five mothers (4%) had completed Year 10.

- Twenty-seven percent of the baby's fathers had completed university degrees, with 19 (17%) having undergraduate and 12 (11%) having postgraduate qualifications. Forty-four of the fathers (39%) had TAFE qualifications and 23 (20%) had completed Year 12 as their highest educational level. Twelve fathers (11%) had completed Year 10 and 2 had completed primary school, Year 8 or 9. One participant was unsure of the father's educational qualifications.

Sixty-six percent of parents were Australian born, five percent of parents identified as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent. Those parents born overseas came from 18 other nations including India, United Kingdom, New Zealand, the Philippines, China and Malaysia. While English was the main language spoken at home (88%), 20% of babies were spoken to in a language other than English by their parents, other relatives or carers. These languages included German, Italian, Portuguese, Bahasa Malaysia, Hindi, Chinese, Mandarin, Torres Strait Creole, Punjabi, Maori, Gujarati, Macedonian, Bemba, Manipari, Tagalog, Visaya and Spanish.

The post survey study included 98 families engaged with the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* program:

- 67 NPC participants who had completed the Pre-program survey; and
- 31 RTC participants who were recruited during their attendance at a community library *Rhyme Time* session.

RTC Families came from the same communities as those in the Pre-program survey:

- Warreup: Total n=8 (0 NPC + 8 RTC);
- Kirkenin: Total n=44 (32 NPC + 12 RTC);
- Irwine: Total n=23 (19 NPC+ 4 RTC);
- Manglis: Total n=8 (5 NPC + 3RTC);
- Tawbury: Total n=15 (11 NPC + 4 RTC).

No post-survey responses were received from NPC participants from one regional location, Warreup.

Participant information was not collected for the RTC. Respondents in this group were recruited whilst attending a session. It is likely that this indicated an early commitment to books, literacy and/or the *Better Beginnings* program, that would have distinguished them from other parents surveyed, however, coming from the same broad communities as NPC participants, a high level of consistency in demographics can be assumed across both cohorts.

### **SLWA participation and learning team demographics**

Eight members of the State Library participation and learning team, who had particular roles in the *Better Beginnings* program, took part in a focus group. Their roles included: the training of public library staff; the development of *Better Beginnings* Reading Packs, resources and programs; and responsibility for the logistics of program delivery throughout Western Australia, including “hard-to-reach communities” in remote areas, prisoners and migrants. Most of the team had extensive experience working in the *Better Beginnings* program.

### **Community librarian demographics**

All librarians held a position in their community library with some level of responsibility for the implementation of the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* program. A couple of librarians were new in their positions, but most had long experience working with the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* program as well as some of the new *Better Beginnings* programs.

### **Community child health nurse demographics**

All CCHNs had responsibility for conducting the 6-8 week baby health check and were aware of their role in delivering the *Birth to Three* Reading Pack to the parents. Interview data implied many had long experience working with *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* program.





# Findings

## Implementation and sustainability of the *Birth to Three* program

### SLWA perspectives on implementation and sustainability

The implementation of the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* program depends upon a joint delivery model involving the WA CCHNs working in collaboration with the SLWA and community librarians:

- CCHNs take primary responsibility for delivering the *Birth to Three* Reading Packs to new parents and providing initial awareness and information about the program and its key messages; and
- The SLWA and community libraries provided on-going support and encouragement through its loan services and family activity programs such as *Baby Rhyme Time* and *Story Time*.

The dual implementation partnership has been formalised at a state level through a Memorandum of Understanding in place between the SLWA, Child and Adolescent Community Health (CACHS) and the WA Country Health Service (WACHS). The agreement provides a sound foundation for shared policy development and resource commitment. As part of this agreement, a Joint Management Group is in place with representatives from each agency. The SLWA leadership focus group reported that the Joint Management Group has met formally, twice a year to monitor the progress of the partnership, discuss program updates as well as successes and challenges. The group benefits from the stable membership of SLWA staff with long term experience working with *Better Beginnings*. Since 2004, there have been several changes of the staff representing the Child and Adolescent Health Service. Although the structure, commitment and intentions of the Joint Management Group are good, membership instability has made it difficult to establish and build long-term goals. It may be helpful for the Joint Management Group to consider strategies that will sustain 'corporate memory' across changing staff teams, thereby

ensuring that the group maintains its effectiveness in advocacy for *Better Beginnings* and support for all the people who contribute to the *Birth to Three* program, particularly, for example, the Community Child Health Nurses, who play such a critical role, but who work outside the usual SLWA *Better Beginnings* mainstream support networks.

The significance of quality relationships between agencies has been a consistent finding from previous evaluations and the 2017 SLWA leadership team focus group emphasised the value of **current productive cross-sector relationships as critical to the ongoing effectiveness and sustainability of the program:**

*We believe that the interagency collaboration at a community level capitalises on the skills and expertise of these professionals and their position as trusted practitioners within the communities they serve. We see this as key to sustaining the integrity and quality of the program's messages and objectives, thereby contributing to creating the greatest possible impact for families* (leadership team interview).

The SLWA has an identified team of senior staff with overall responsibility for leadership, management, coordination, training, development and evaluation of the *Better Beginnings* (See Table 2), which has many programs. These include the Kindergarten program, the *Sing with Me* program, the *Read To Me: I Love It!* program as well as the *Birth to Three* program.

Evaluation interviews and focus groups conducted in 2017 with the SLWA *Better Beginnings* leadership team **provided convincing evidence of their absolute commitment to the overall program, including to the *Birth to Three* program.** The team expressed total confidence that the *Birth to Three* program has made a significant contribution to the well-being of families and their babies in WA, and in particular to their language development. The leadership team acknowledged the primacy of the first years of life and the role of parents



Table 2: Roles and responsibilities of the SLWA leadership team

Position	Roles and responsibilities in relation to the Kindergarten program
Manager, Participation & Learning (1 FTE)	Provides overarching management for the program – budget management; HR management; manages the relationships with key stakeholders and funding partners; steers the strategic direction of the program.
Coordinator <i>Better Beginnings</i> (1 FTE)	Provides input into the strategic direction for the program; leads the development of resources; coordinates state-wide communication and deliveries; monitors state-wide participation and develops/reviews communication strategies; supports the relationship with key stakeholders and funding partners
Regional Liaison Officer (1 FTE)	Provides input into the strategic development of the program; provides input into the development of resources and communications plan; provides targeted support to country libraries including travel to regional areas
Two Community Liaison Librarians (1.4 FTE)	Implements the communications plan; provides input into the development of resources from a library perspective and develops the parent messaging; develops and delivers training to public library staff
Two Education Officers (1.8 FTE)	Provides input into the strategic development of the program; provides input into the development of resources for the program as well as delivery partners in schools and child care centres; and develops the parent messaging.
One Indigenous Liaison Officer (1 FTE)	Provides input into the development of resources specifically for Aboriginal families; communicates with and supports delivery partners in remote and regional Aboriginal communities; supports the administrative requirements of the program.
Administration Officer (1 FTE)	Logistics support – ordering stock, scheduling deliveries to be sent to libraries, etc.

and families in creating the best environment to support babies to develop and thrive. They regarded the *Birth to Three* program as critical to improving literacy in WA and a top priority for the SLWA and all community libraries:

*I think we all feel that Better Beginnings is just an amazing project, and we are so proud of the way it works and what it has done for families and literacy in WA. There are always things that we can do to make it even better – but the way it's working right now is really impressive.*

Evidence from the SLWA leadership team confirmed the SLWA has a well-established policy framework for the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three*, with agreed roles and easily accessed guidelines to support *Birth to Three* implementation. All SLWA participants (N=8) were very clear and articulate about

their roles and talked about them with a strong sense of loyalty and passion. Some positions were part-time, most had responsibilities across more than one *Better Beginnings* program, and none were exclusively working on the *Birth to Three* program. Changes in the structure, organisation and management of the SLWA are on-going, and in 2017, some senior staff who were previously exclusively focused on *Better Beginnings*, joined a new team with a broader set of responsibilities:

*I guess for me probably the main change is it [Better Beginnings] used to be a team sort of in its own right. It has been merged into a much larger team now... So, the Better Beginnings program is now a part of a team called Participation and Learning, and that also encompasses education programs, eLearning, exhibitions, and those sorts of things.*

Although members of the SLWA focus group were very confident about the current priority accorded to the *Birth to Three* program, some voiced a concern that the program might be vulnerable to a loss of leadership drive and commitment in a busier, more diverse management environment. The group was concerned that whilst the program had expanded and grown in some areas fewer staff were allocated to it. In the absence of a *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* manager, former members of the team found themselves with an *“increased responsibility to support with managerial tasks and also to provide that managerial support.”* Responsibilities that had previously been delegated to the team manager had *“now devolved down to the team leaders.”* For some of the team with long experience working in the *Better Beginnings* program, there was also a sense of threat to professional roles they felt passionate about:

*It's had an increase in the sort of managerial type responsibilities, but I think that's meant that it's become a bit more stretched in terms of its core responsibilities to regional libraries [for example], if that makes any sense?*

*... one thing that I do desire, I suppose, is stronger leadership, and more dedication to the program, and I know that that's potentially impossible, but I think the maths would show that if you have one person who's dedicated to one thing they're going to have more time to be proactive than someone who has the same amount of time to dedicate to lots of different things.*

*I personally would like to have more time to devote to Better Beginnings. I would like to have more of my time available for Better Beginnings and less available for other things, because, I don't know, Better Beginnings is the thing that I care about, and am the most passionate about, and believe in the most, so it can be frustrating having to spend my time and efforts on other things that aren't related to Better Beginnings.*

The SLWA leadership team focus group felt it was important to maintain a protective spotlight on *Better Beginnings* to ensure its significance was not overlooked amongst other initiatives, particularly as the program is becoming well established and therefore perhaps easy to dismiss as a leading priority:

*I think a challenge for the program, and the team, has become maintaining some dedicated strategic leadership for the program, so keeping it on people's agendas. Keeping it on the radar of policy makers, decision makers, in not just the state government, but local government as well, and not just becoming wallpaper. That's the thing that we've talked about is a concern that now that the program is 12 – 13 years old, whether it risks becoming just core business and wallpaper.*

The potential risks to the well-being of the program were seen as particularly relevant in the context of the kinds of financial challenges that public services continually face:

*It's probably one of the biggest that the organisation has and I think they would consider it a flagship program, but sometimes you don't always feel that it's given the support that it could probably need.*

The SLWA focus group suggested that the SLWA Leadership should be active in supporting, sustaining and promoting the all the *Better Beginnings* programs, for example through:

- Identifying and publicising successful practices and outcomes;
- Promoting political and community understanding of the significance of the *Better Beginnings* programs and encouraging support for their continuation;

- Continuing to research the implementation of the *Better Beginnings* programs and supporting evidence-based developments; and
- Encouraging and supporting *Better Beginnings* champions within WA library services and the wider community.

### SLWA development and effective distribution of *Birth to Three Reading Packs*

Members of the SLWA participation and learning team have shared responsibility for the creation and selection of resources that go into the *Birth to Three Reading Pack*:

*... this is a shared responsibility between everybody, so I do some of these, but not all of them, but together we do all of them. We select books. We write and produce resources for families to provide key messages around how we want those families to use the resources. Give them suggestions for how they can engage with their children at home. Give them information about home literacy practices. Encourage them to access their local public library. Provide information about the kind of services that are available at the local public library. Give them recommendations for books that are age appropriate for the children in their family.*

The *Birth to Three Reading Pack*, otherwise known as the “*Birth Pack*” or simply the “*Yellow Pack*,” is either compiled at the State Library or component parts are given to a community organisation to be made up locally, then sent on to libraries. At this point, community libraries can add resources or information to the pack that they think appropriate and can resource. The flexibility to adjust the Reading Pack to take account of local community needs and circumstances was recognised as one way to sustain on-going relevance.

A *Better Beginnings* community librarian takes responsibility for the distribution to local CCHNs, who then undertake delivery to new parents at the first six-eight week clinic health check. The creation of a physical delivery loop encouraged a stronger relationship between the two services, with opportunities for discussion and sharing of experiences and ideas about connecting with parents and promoting early literacy. In the first instance, the provision of *Birth to Three Reading Packs* is based on estimates made by the local libraries about expected demand, with numbers adjusted through the year where necessary. As universal access to the Reading Pack is a core principle of *Better Beginnings*, ensuring there is a Reading Pack available for every newborn baby in WA is an important first step in achieving effective implementation of the program. Between 2005 when the first pilot program was launched and July 2017, an impressive total of **315,515 *Birth to Three Reading Packs*** have been provided to CCHNs for distribution to new parents: 232,605 went to the metro areas and 82,910 to the regions.



Data collection and analysis has been recognised by the leadership team as important to effective decision-making, management, and implementation. However, tracking the distribution of Reading Packs from production through the libraries and CCHNs to delivery to a family is quite difficult, and statistical data has typically been hard to obtain and use in meaningful ways. One positive development has been the recent collation and comparison of WA birth statistics with *Birth to Three* Reading Pack allocation figures. This is intended to ensure a good match of available resources to demand. Establishing the number of WA births, and where families with babies and young children are located can be quite complex. Not all babies living in WA are necessarily registered in WA, families are mobile, moving in and out of WA and across locations in the State, and, “One issue that does come up... is that families may choose to attend a Child Health Clinic which is outside of their local government area, meaning that the number of families they see may be less than the number of births recorded.”

The birth data available to the SLWA comes from a variety of sources that use different collection and recording periods. Data for the SLWA allocation of *Birth to Three* Reading Packs is recorded annually from July 1st to July 1st, however, libraries and CCHNs may provide the Reading Packs to families at any time. Neither the allocation from SLWA, nor family receipt of a package can be perfectly date matched to birth statistics. All the data has to be treated tentatively. Nevertheless, the figures suggest that whilst SLWA is getting close to a match, there is probably still a gap between the number of registered births and the number of *Birth to Three* Reading Packs allocated, with the number of births typically exceeding the number of Reading Packs allocated. The professional experience of the SLWA Team also affirms the existence of ‘gap’ that persists:

*... theoretically every child in the state has access to Better Beginnings, and I say ‘theoretically’ because, ... every local government in Western Australia has an MOU with us to deliver Better Beginnings in their area, so in theory I could dance with this question, it would be every community has access, but of course, it’s only theoretical because only 90% of all babies go to their six to eight-week health check, so obviously we’re not reaching everybody. There are some remote Aboriginal communities that we don’t reach...*

Table 3: Number of 0-3 Reading Packs allocated compared to WA Births

2011/12 Birth-pack*	2011 Birth stats**	2012/13 Birth-pack	2012 Birth stats	2013/14 Birth-pack	2013 Birth stats	2014/15 Birth-pack	2014 Birth stats	2015/16 Birth-pack	2015 Birth stats	2016/17 Birth-pack	2016 Birth stats
28,376	30,185	15,106	33,626	31,991	33,926	32,124	34,665	30,900	34,658	29,033	34,367

\* ‘Birth pack’ numbers refer to SLWA package allocations. The data year begins and ends on 1st July.

\*\* The WA birth statistics are as supplied to SLWA from the Department of Justice through the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages.



The collation and analysis of comparative data is important in terms of managing resources efficiently and evaluating the achievement of a *Better Beginnings* core goal, that of universal access to the information and resources in the Reading Pack. **The SLWA Team set a high priority on universal access:**

*How we're reaching families who aren't attending their child health checks and aren't using their local library is the ultimate question for us. This often comes down to libraries knowing the organisations and services in their local community to catch families who may be falling through the cracks.*

*...we can say from our end we might be reaching 100%, 90%, but are we, in terms of it's coming out from our end, but is it reaching the other end in the way that we want it to? And I think we've all got better at questioning that and having that discussion about how you actually fix that, and make sure that that's happening.*

As local governments contribute \$5.50 per baby born in their local government area, this can also lead to funding discrepancies, and potential challenges to financial contributions. Improved accuracy in data collection would be advantageous to the SLWA in managing the program.

**Recent improvements in the collection and management of data are also allowing the SLWA to identify differences between birth statistics and Reading Pack allocation at the level of specific communities.** A traffic light system has been introduced to highlight red-alert libraries that have not received a number of Reading Packs consistent with births in their communities. Discrepancies are more common in smaller country areas, and it is widely acknowledged that literacy levels tend to fall in locations that are further from the metro area<sup>9</sup> so this can be of particular concern. Feedback to the SLWA Team suggests that common reasons for libraries appearing in the 'red' include:

- Families reporting that they attended a child health service in another town (and therefore not collecting one locally);
- Libraries reporting an oversupply of bags from previous years;
- Turnover of staff, with new library staff not being aware of access to training and support for delivering the program; and
- Loss of local health or library services in locations with falling populations.

SLWA staff reported that the **red-alerts were proving very helpful in initiating conversations at a community level that allow them to investigate potential problems and issues with local library staff and health services, and engage in relevant problem solving** where necessary:

*... it highlights to us where we need to follow up with the library to see how the program is working, and whether we need to provide additional training and support.*

Whilst the 'red-alert' was helping to identify certain communities likely to 'miss out' on receiving a *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* Reading Pack, libraries currently have no way of tracking whether individual families within any given community have received a Reading Pack or not. In addition, several team members pointed out this could be a real disadvantage to some families, even ones often mistakenly considered not to need literacy support:

*... sometimes I think, "Oh, surely it's the people who need the books most that are missing out." But actually, then you hear anecdotes about, "Well, some very well-off families, in very affluent suburbs, their children are coming to school behind in their language and literacy development," so it's really hard for us to know who's missing out. We're not sort of privy to that, unfortunately. Maybe children from low*

9. The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC): <https://www.aedc.gov.au>



*socio-economic families are going to their nurse, and we are reaching them, whereas people who might be from more of an affluent background are taking their children to the doctor instead of the nurse, and then they're missing the opportunity to get a yellow pack.*

The SLWA is to be congratulated on developing its data collection and analysis systems and capacity. Further refinements should prove very productive in future evaluations, and in supporting on-going improvements in the implementation of *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* program. Several examples of potential data enhancements were raised by members of the SLWA team in focus groups and interviews, and their suggestions included:

- Better use of technology to automate data collection;
- Exploring possibilities for tracking the distribution of Reading Packs at a family level to ensure universal access, whilst maintaining privacy for all families and library users;
- Linking SLWA data to the developing databases available through the AEDC, to give insight to community level patterns of early years literacy progress and possible connections to the *Better Beginnings* programs;
- Increasing the sharing of data across the different sectors contributing to *Better Beginnings* programs:

*Data is something we have little access to. It's held by an analytical team within the [Health] department (independent of the joint management group) and requires approvals before it will be released. This is an aspect of the partnership we would like to explore further to see what data relevant to the program is currently being captured, and how we can access and use the data.*

- Accessing and linking town and community services data to find out about service gaps, for example, towns that do not have a CCHN permanently based there.

### **SLWA provisions for community librarian and CCHN training for Better Beginnings Birth to Three**

Whilst the SLWA Team thought that “*getting Reading Packs out there*,” was important, they also stressed that the critical point was the quality of interaction that the parents had with the book and the baby, rather than simply access to the book. Therefore, the effective delivery of the core messages of *Better Beginnings* leading to enhanced parental literacy practices was their ultimate goal:

*For me, the pack is a nice way of getting that message through, but the actual... what we really want them to be doing... It's a resource for them to start their reading journey with their child.*

The SLWA Team considered the training of community librarians to be a critically important element in ensuring effective delivery of *Better Beginnings*’ messages and enhancing families understanding and promotion of literacy practices. A team of centralised staff, including Community Liaison Librarians, have a specific responsibility for training, and they believe that **provisions for the professional development of community librarians have been progressively strengthened since the introduction of the *Birth to Three* program in 2005:**

*... as part of a training team, we train public librarians in all parts of delivering the program including delivering Story Time, Baby Rhyme Time, actually how to manage the program in public libraries, and making sure that public librarians know the messages of the program, and ideas on how to get the best out of it for their library as well as for their community.*

*... we do a lot of structured training programs, but also dealing with queries from public library staff, who are potentially new, and not perhaps familiar with the program.*

*... within my time at State Library the training has developed from only a couple of modules to sort of a whole suite of modules that we've developed.*

Members of the SLWA focus group reported that opportunities for *Birth to Three Better Beginnings* training and development in 2016/17 included:

- Face to face training workshops held annually at the State Library and where possible at regional meetings, or on request;
- Digital information and training resources that can be accessed online at any time, for example:
  - A *Birth to Three* handbook for Library staff: <https://www.better-beginnings.com.au/programs/birth-three/handbook-libraries> ;
  - A video giving an overview of the *Better Beginnings* program that starts with the bigger picture of *Better Beginnings* and then goes into more operational detail about how the program works on the ground and the opportunities libraries might hopefully consider leveraging: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSMUjq5o9Ks> ; and
  - “Just in time” and “on the go” support by phone or email.

Face to face professional development was offered through three training weeks a year and addressed issues relevant to the delivery of the whole program, including the *Birth to Three* program:

*It's free, and that takes place at State Library, but it's in weeks where there are other reasons for regional librarians, or library staff, to visit. So we try and tie it in with that schedule. So we've developed a number of modules [contact sessions], a number of training courses, around implementing Better Beginnings in public libraries and also how to develop the programs that tie in with the age groups for Better Beginnings, so the zero to four-year-old range of programs, like Story Time and Baby Rhyme Time, and also ideas about talking to parents of new babies.*

The SLWA staff expressed a keen appreciation and concern for the diverse support needs of community librarians, particularly those who were new to the *Birth to Three* program, those inexperienced in presenting to parents and children, and those working in rural or remote locations. Some libraries experienced a high turnover of staff, difficulties in attracting highly qualified staff. They often contended with restricted resources and with limitations on staff attending face-to-face training events:

*Yeah. I think they do have unique challenges, ... having had the opportunity to go to some of the regions and deliver training, I know the first time [a colleague and I] went to a regional meeting and realised really what a library consists of for some of those staff is a bookcase in part of the rec centre...*

*We produce resources for public libraries that help them to deliver Baby Rhyme Time and Story Time, so I would be involved in the production of those resources. What else do we produce? We produce all sorts of things. Training. I'm not so much involved in the development of the content of training, more so the logistics of the training and figuring out what it is that regional libraries in particular want from their training.*

The SLWA Team had an active plan for developing and updating resources, for example, a new video on delivering talks to new parents is scheduled for filming in 2018. The use of digital resources was regarded as a particularly important implementation strategy to support people in regional and remote WA.

*... I think a real change in the last couple of years has been the development of the resources, such as the Story Time Suitcases, and the videos that have allowed us to more easily reach regional libraries, so there's been a real focus on making sure that while they're remote from us, regional libraries, hopefully, have that capacity to access our training programs in spite of the fact they may not be able to visit us here at the State Library.*



The team articulated a strong commitment to ensuring that all the *Better Beginnings* resources they developed, whether for training of librarians or for use by CCHNs or parents, maintained a consistent quality and coherent set of explicit core messages, and further they thought this approach was leading to **noticeable improvements in program delivery**:

*I would say, in my mind, the work that they've done has actually deepened the quality of the program... the last couple of years have actually seen that with those developments and improvements that it has improved the quality.*

*... I was going to say, because I think particularly for a lot of the regional and country, you know, we're talking really small locations. They might only get five Reading Packs a year and the staff that work in those, their experiences are... it could be new to them completely, you know, so many of the things that we're talking about. So, by having it written and presented in that way, it's basically giving them the script. So, when they... if they get one of those Reading Packs and then they start reading through it, you are going to be educating them too. So it's an osmosis approach to training almost.*

SLWA data confirms that between 2012 and 2017, 310 staff attended training workshops especially relevant to the *Birth to Three* component of *Better Beginnings*. Royalties for Regions funding also supported SLWA training staff to travel to regional areas to provide training in *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* to country libraries. Between financial reporting years July 2013 to June 2017, Royalties for Regions reports indicate that 173 librarians attended country-based training programs:

- 2013-14 – 35 participants;
- 2014-15 – 37 participants;
- 2015-16 – 42 participants; and
- 2016-17 – 59 participants.

Table 4: Community library staff attending *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* training workshops 2012-17

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	Total attendance
Introduction to <i>Better Beginnings</i> for <i>Birth to Three</i>	17	0	19	15	19	20	90
Presenting to new parents	0	18	28	0	13	12	71
<i>Baby Rhyme Time</i> fundamentals	0	29	25	14	36	45	149
Total attendances	17	47	72	29	68	77	310

The SLWA Team have confidence that they have been successful in implementing improvements in their training, particularly through adopting evidence-based approaches to modelling effective delivery, and providing clear, detailed example scripts for presentations and message delivery to parents. This included an emphasis on encouraging librarians to become increasingly explicit in the messages they convey to parents through activities such as *Baby Rhyme Time* and *Story Time* sessions. The team described how the State Library training program aimed to provide librarians with the necessary tools to support parents. Program sessions were composed of three 'touch points' to enhance parents learning:

1. An explicit focus on a specific literacy skill through singing, reading, writing, talking or playing.
2. The 'example message'. The librarian uses a book or rhyme to demonstrate the skill, explaining the rationale and process.
3. The 'closing/empowerment' message. Parents are given a task to practice teaching their child the newly acquired skill at home during the week.

Librarians are no longer simply role modelling book sharing with babies to the parents, but actually targeting their conversation directly to the parents. For example, showing them "... it's eye contact, too. You look at the parent, not the kids on the floor."

*I think one of the ways in which we have, I guess, improved the training, I think there's a real focus on our training model's best practice. So, when we are delivering training sessions, we're actually modelling ... there's actually a focus on actually modelling best practice ... we're not wanting to just be able to tick a box and say, "Libraries have kind of delivered the program."*

*I think that's actually creating a bit of a paradigm shift amongst public libraries in Western Australia, and I think that's, like, potentially quite profound in that the training team is actually totally changing attitudes about why we are delivering Baby Rhyme Time and StoryTime, which I think it's really significant.*

The SLWA surveys librarians attending training events and, in general, the feedback has been very positive:

*... so we certainly receive feedback from attendees after we run a training program. [we] have also recently sent out a slightly more longitudinal survey that says, "You have previously participated. Are you still? Or what aspects of the training are you continuing to implement in your library, or with your library service?" So, the feedback has been really positive from all of those.*

Community librarian feedback affirmed that training they have undertaken was well-organised, timely, comprehensive, appropriate and very useful, both to prepare newcomers and to support the ongoing professional development of more experienced staff:

*I think, really, it did cover everything that we need, all the training that we've done.*

*I think sometimes theory is a really good thing, especially if you have got no idea about why you're doing StoryTime.*

*... if your first time doing this job, of course, it's very useful, and then when you do this job for a long time and you might have your own way, plus, you know, you might add in some of your favourite things to do... A refresher class is just so, "Okay, is there anything that I'm not doing that I could be doing?"*

The SLWA leadership team articulated **confidence in the expertise of community librarians delivering the Better Beginnings Birth to Three program**, resulting from the appointment of well-qualified people, clear roles and quality training and support. In 2016/7, every metro library had a designated *Better Beginnings* contact person, although, in some of the larger multi-branch libraries there was a dedicated contact who coordinated *Better Beginnings* for all the branches across their whole local government area. Most of the larger regional libraries also had a designated *Better Beginnings* coordinator. These positions were generally held by qualified staff in dedicated children's



services roles, with minimal turnover of staff. Many of these librarians had been in the role for a long time and had built up their knowledge and confidence over time. It was sufficient for them to seek one-on-one support when required rather than attend additional training for the *Birth to Three* program. However, the SLWA Team were also aware that new staff, particularly in regional libraries and sole librarian settings, “...may not be aware of access to training and support for delivering the program,” so diligence was required in ensuring everyone’s needs were met.

The SLWA Coordinator (for metro) and Regional Liaison Officer (for country) generally make the first point of contact to find out what support is needed in community libraries for *Better Beginnings* programs and the two Community Liaison Librarians provide ongoing support and advice for library staff who are delivering the *Birth to Three* program on the ground. A priority for the SLWA team is to develop a relationship with the libraries so that they can keep abreast of the challenges the local librarians may be facing and provide more tailored support for their community’s needs. The Community Liaison librarians are actively involved with developing and delivering *Better Beginnings* training for libraries, and maintaining understanding of what’s actually happening ‘in the field’ to inform the development and approach to training and communications.

Although the SLWA does not have direct responsibility or access to CCHNs to provide training, they do offer occasional development opportunities. In 2017, the SLWA gave a presentation to CCHNs at a Clinical Practice Update which was attended by 300 CCHNs and managers.

*This was the first time we [SLWA] have been given this opportunity and we will endeavour to attend each year if appropriate. Our line of communication with CCHNs is through the Joint Management Group, who liaise with Nurse Managers on our behalf.*

CCHNs have a handbook for each of the health checks and *Birth to Three* program information is included in this document. *Better Beginnings* has also been made available on their internal intranet.

## Community librarians’ perspectives on implementation and sustainability

The key roles of community libraries in delivering the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* program were described by SLWA as:

- The administration of the *Birth to Three* program in local communities;
- Liaison with CCHNs and the State Library; and
- Conducting *Baby Rhyme Time* sessions and parent talks to:
  - Introduce families with babies to the *Birth to Three* program;
  - Role model positive book-sharing practices; and
  - Ensure that the *Birth to Three* key messages are communicated effectively to families.

All Reading Packs are packed with the core resources by a third party, so the Reading Packs arrive complete to libraries. Libraries are encouraged to personalise the Reading Packs with local content e.g. membership forms, promotion of local *Baby Rhyme Time* sessions. The community librarians interviewed all affirmed shared understandings of these roles and were able to describe their contribution in ways that exemplified work-coherence with *Better Beginnings* expectations:

*Well, I organise the packing [of the yellow bags [with local information]], and get in touch with the childcare centres, child health nurses I should say. I also run Baby Rhyme Time sessions, and I also have run in the past the Story Time sessions, and I also talk to the mums, new mums’ groups that come through every, say, six months (self corrects) six weeks, and I have a chat then, get to chat to them about why, what and why we’re doing Better Beginnings, about why we do these things, and how it started sometimes. Just give them a bit of a background... the focus that it’s also about the babies developing, and about how parents can actually help with that development with newborns as well, so with brain development and things like that.*



Along with the *Birth to Three* program, library staff also delivered other Better Beginning programs such as the Kindergarten program and for those libraries involved in the current pilot program for two and three year olds, the *Sing With Me* program. Most librarians distinguished between the programs, but saw them as intersecting, mutually re-enforcing elements of an overall cohesive and seamless 'flow' of resources, support and encouragement to families. Whilst the different programs each had a specific age-focus, the activities offered by a library, and the presentations made to parents frequently overlapped. Effective implementation was often constrained by staffing limitations, resources or finances, or the economics of numbers (for example, not enough families with a baby to justify a regular *Baby Rhyme Time* sessions). However, many experienced and committed librarians sustained the spirit of the overall program through creative adaption to local circumstances and they continued to deliver the core messages and services as best they could, in whatever way they could:

*I did start doing outreach Story Time at one stage, and that went down to bubs at a couple of particular child health centres. Unfortunately, that role has changed again and, unfortunately, due to resourcing and time resources, and things, I've been asked not to do those any more, but I still go out to schools and do the presenting in that way. It is quite a shame that I can't do the outreach Story Time anymore, because that was really beneficial.*

Community librarians valued their role in trying to achieve universal access to the *Birth to Three* Reading Pack for all WA families. While the majority of Reading Packs are delivered through community health services, some library staff are proactive in providing Reading Packs in alternative ways: to individuals or to agencies working with families who do not access mainstream health and family services.

Most libraries kept spare *Birth to Three* Reading Packs to give directly to a family they thought might have missed out:

*... so, we would give out bags in the library, even though they'd mainly go to the Child Health Nurse, but we do have [some] people coming into the library that [are given] a bag if they've had a child.*

The local library staff interviewed were very **positive about the quality of their relationships with CCHNs, and many thought that the level of interaction based on their work on Better Beginnings had risen in recent years:**

*... as librarians, we normally go to a child health nurse parents' groups or whatever to explain to them to know how these Better Beginnings bags can help the children to develop their early literacy. ...there is the link between us, the child health nurse, the parent, we've got something significant to talk about.*

*... the nature of contact has gone up. It's not only like we go up, they also come and see us, so [it's] mutual. Both parties, start talking to each other.*

*... the main person [we liaise with] is the Child Health Nurse. They have regular parent gatherings or talks, you know, which they invite us to deliver a simple, short presentation of our library, and you know, how can Better Beginnings help the young parents, especially... I think that it's a very good mechanism to communicate with the Child Health Nurse.*

*Yes, Happy with what we're doing now, and, both parties keep talking to each other.*

Whilst recognising the improvements in the quality of relationships between the health services and libraries, some expressed concern about the increased work pressures on CCHNs that sometimes limited their involvement:

*I also think we need more child health nurses out here too, because they're really under the pump. And we've actually got them... well, at the moment, they're not, but we've got them coming out to the library every so often as well.*

*... they're busy, and they've been told that they're either losing hours, or losing positions as well, and being one of the biggest growing... babies being born in the [this] area, it's a bit harder for them to get to do things like come out and talk to parents as the child health nurses.*

**The community libraries were typically very proud of their record of distribution, and saw this as a very successful component of the implementation of *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* program:**

*Like, you know, in WA, this is a WA thing that we've done, that every single person born in WA should get a bag. Like, it's supposed to be about 96% coverage of the whole state, which is phenomenal, which is amazing. Like, every single family with a child born... I could be wrong, but I don't think there's anything comparable in any other states. I don't think so... So, it could be something that WA promoted about itself, too, its success.*

The community librarians faced similar problems to the SLWA in trying to estimate required Reading Pack numbers and monitor the delivery of Packs to families:

*... but from our perspective, that can be quite hard to keep track of when they come in in different amounts. So, we have our librarians try and carefully track everything that comes in and count everything to the bag, because ... and my boss is always quite insistent that we do make quite a big contribution to the bags, I think it's five dollars per bag, and for the amount that, you know, 2,000, 3,000 dollars is quite a bit. There was one year when we were completely out of pocket on both sides. I would say that's always a tricky science.*

*I think once you get birth data and then [the town] has a huge influx of migrants, so that complicates it, but once you've decided on that figure ... and we're doing it for six libraries ... for us, it would be easier if we got, say ... I think we worked out last year that each library got a quarterly delivery of 187 [packs] , just ... you know, that's it until the next quarter, rather than 30, 50, 60. It makes it quite hard to keep track of. That would be the main thing in sort of delivery.*

*We had an incident just recently where we were waiting for yellow bags, and that we had the child health nurse going, "I need the bags, we've run out. We need 90 bags." And I'm going, "But I can't ... I don't know what to do. I can't give you something I haven't got," and I ended up ringing up the team ... and they said, "Oh yeah, there's been some ... but it's coming now, and you're going to end up with a lot."*

Although several librarians mentioned the supply of Reading Packs as an issue, they were very appreciative of the SWLA team's efforts to assist them in resolving supply issues.

While the library staff interviewed described the *Birth to Three* Reading Pack as one of the most valuable and tangible features of the program, most reiterated the importance of *Baby Rhyme Time* and related library services to sustaining the program and its key messages. This emphasis is consistent with the perspectives of the SLWA team:

*I've seen a few kids come through who, ... their older brother or older sister had the bags, and then the younger siblings come in and they're doing StoryTime. Like, we've got one boy who's in Story Time, his brother was also brought up with Better Beginnings and learned to love books, and they're always at the library, plus it's not even Story Time day and I saw them here earlier... It's really important getting that mindset of... coming to the library, or just reading...*

The community librarians all commented on the importance of their presentations and conversations with families in helping them understand why book sharing was so important to children's development, and how they as parents can interact with their baby in ways that will really make a difference to their baby's capacity for language and literacy. The librarians expressed pride in their skills in engaging parents, communicating powerfully, role modelling techniques; and then seeing the parents build their own confidence and capacities:

*... and then I'll also show them different ways of telling stories, and what they can actually use, and also say, "This is a board book. If you use the board book you can look at this, and it's harder for them to rip." ... So, explaining the different formats that they can use and also how good singing is as well, you know, singing rhymes, and occasionally I'll sing them a couple of rhymes using their bubs as a bit of an example.*

*... I tell them that, "I've got a terrible voice. I can't sing for nuts," so I'll go, "Well, look, at least I can't sing but I still sing because it's good for me, and also some of the benefits, so in the car, little one is getting upset in the back, you don't want to have an accident, so you sing a song and hopefully that will calm them down so you can get home... and then also, just put in a joke, saying, "Well, whatever you do, don't do the rhyme, the actual actions while you're driving. Not a good idea." So, I try and keep everything a bit fun, a bit informal, and just keep the parents at ease as well.*

All of the librarians interviewed felt that the *Birth to Three* program was being implemented successfully and often expressed genuine amazement at the scale and impact of the delivery of the Reading Pack to families alongside the communication of key messages:

*... nearly 1,000 bags, from this library alone, have gone out, which is a huge amount, I think.*

In addition to their own work, community library staff attributed the *Birth to Three* program sustainability to the partnership between State Government through the State Library, local governments and public libraries, and RioTinto, and were appreciative of the commitment of both public service and private enterprise to supporting the development and implementation of *Better Beginnings*.

They also highlighted the role of the independent longitudinal evaluation by ECU as a key factor in the program's longevity. Measuring and demonstrating the program's impact over time, was seen to have contributed significantly to the recognition of the *Better Beginnings* 'brand' amongst the wider community. This in turn ensured on-going government, sponsor and organisational support.

Librarians thought that the flexibility of the program, and its dynamic nature, which saw the development of new resources to cater for specific target audiences or needs, were also factors in sustainability. They cited the introduction of the *Sing with Me* program that follows the *Birth to Three* program and the Aboriginal<sup>10</sup> community program, *Read To Me: I Love It!* as examples of sound and sustainable development:

... Because of the popularity of the *Sing with Me* bags and how we've had a lot of patrons come in and say, "Apparently I can get a bag here with a book in it?" So word's getting around and the families want it. I think there is a desire for families to prepare their children as much as possible to increase their literacy skills and have them ready for school.

### Observations of community librarians delivering Baby Rhyme Time sessions

The SLWA leaders and community librarians interviewed expressed great confidence about the effectiveness of activities such as *Baby Rhyme Time* in communicating important *Better Beginnings* messages to families. To provide an independent evaluation of such activities, a trained researcher made detailed observations of a set of *Baby Rhyme Time* sessions, delivered in normal conditions in community libraries:

- Eleven librarians conducted sessions at four different libraries;
- A total of 154 parents<sup>11</sup> attending the *Baby Rhyme Time* sessions; with an average group size of 14, (ranging from 3 to 25);
- A total of 132 babies and young children attended, with an average group size of 12, (ranging from 3 to 29);
- Each session lasted for 30 minutes; three commenced at 9am and eight at 10.30am; and
- The researcher did not interact with participants during the session, but sat quietly, at the back or side of the room and used field notes to record observations steered by a schedule of inclusions recommended in the *Birth to Three* SLWA Guidelines.

The observations are isolated examples from a series of sessions at evaluation libraries. Accordingly, the delivery and range of activities and the interactions between librarians, children and parents described here represent a snapshot of the librarians' *Baby Rhyme Time* practices. It is not possible to generalise from these examples, however, the observations provided some insight into the way librarians might be implementing the *Birth to Three* program through *Baby Rhyme Time*.

The sessions varied somewhat in terms of the content presented by the librarians, but all included well-recognised and recommended *Better Beginnings* activities and highlighted one or more of the *Birth to Three* program key messages.

### Baby Rhyme Time content

Whilst there was some variation in the content of the sessions, all but one included songs, rhymes and story-telling: some included discussion with parents about early learning; and some librarians provided highly simplified explanations of child development as it relates to early literacy.

Early literacy was mentioned in six of 11 sessions observed, and three librarians provided some explanation of child development: for example, within the context of reading books with young babies, one librarian informed the parents, "*Babies up to 6 months of age can see only 30 centimetres in front of them.*" Another spoke about child development as

10. The term Aboriginal is used to mean Aboriginal, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and Indigenous. This is based on the decision made by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice and Race Commissioner to use the term Aboriginal rather than Indigenous.

11. In this section *parent/s* is used to refer to the adult participant/s. These included one father and three grandparents; all other participants were mothers.



she used props such as 'brain boxes' (small stuffed bags) to demonstrate to parents the size of children's brains. The importance of reading to babies and young children to extend their language, and the use of actions as learning experiences, such as those in *Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear, Turn Around*, were also explained to parents.

Three librarians gave parents information about the *Better Beginnings* program, one referring to the *Better Beginnings* reading book and another to the availability of the *Sing With Me* pack. Two spoke about library membership and *Better Beginnings* library resources, one commenting on the availability of the e-resources and the website. One parent was given a *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* Reading Pack; it seemed that she had not previously received one.

In four of the 11 observed library sessions there did not appear to be any explicit discussion about early literacy, the *Better Beginnings* program, the *Better Beginnings* library resources, library membership, e-resources or the website.

### **Baby Rhyme Time format**

The format of the 11 observed *Baby Rhyme Time* sessions was generally consistent. Ten included songs, nursery rhymes and story sharing; in one session, songs and nursery rhymes were repeated twice and story sharing was omitted. Within the 30-minute format, the choice of songs, rhymes and stories varied as can be seen from the following sample of session activities presented by six librarians:

1. *Librarian One*: Played songs on the *Better Beginnings* CD, distributed instruments and encouraged everyone to join in with their babies;
2. *Librarian Two*: Sang many songs and rhymes such as *Old MacDonald*, *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*, *Once I Caught A Fish Alive*, read *Baby Ways* encouraging the children to turn the pages;
3. *Librarian Three*: Sang many songs using props, for example *If You're Happy and You Know It*, sang along and danced to an MP3 player, used a puppet for *Incy Wincy Spider* and sang a *Goodbye* song with actions;
4. *Librarian Four*: Sang various songs involving dance and actions and used a mix of sitting and standing activities;
5. *Librarian Five*: Explained the order of activities at the beginning and throughout the session, distributed reading books, props and musical instruments to parents and used large song sheets on a stand which she flipped over so that everyone could see the words; and
6. *Librarian Six*: Began the session by singing three rhymes, read the story *Weather*, sang three more rhymes, read the story *Solutions for Cold Feet* and sang three more rhymes.

The overall atmosphere of the sessions was seen as highly positive, encouraging, active and inclusive of the babies, young children and their parents, some of who were from diverse cultural backgrounds.

During the sessions the librarians provided highly enjoyable interactive experiences in which important early literacy practices were modelled. They actively encouraged participation by parents and their children in these experiences, which included singing, listening, clapping in time, whole body and finger movements, anticipating words, copying sounds and a variety of other activities, all of which have the potential to help develop early literacy learning. Of particular importance to later reading and writing were the rhymes and a focus on books; for example, following the librarian's demonstration some parents pointed to pictures in books and showed their baby and/or older child how to turn the pages. Reinforcement of these very early literacy learning practices was observed in the many interactions between librarians, parents, babies and young children as they repeated activities in a variety of ways.

### Use of *Better Beginnings* resources

Some *Better Beginnings* resources were either evident or discussed by the participants in all sessions. Resources included the CD and the Baby Ways board book from the *Better Beginnings* Reading Pack, and also the *Sing with Me* Pack for two-year-olds. *Better Beginnings* library resources, library membership, e-resources and the website were discussed in some sessions.

Most of the parents used the book *Baby Ways* and the puppets supplied by the librarian during the *Baby Rhyme Time* sessions. Some had brought hard cover books with them and read them to their young children, pointing to the pictures; one parent returned books to the library before the session began; another had brought the yellow *Better Beginnings* Reading Pack to use as a library bag. The parent who had not previously received the *Better Beginnings* Reading Pack for her baby was shown the contents of the bag, and given explanations for the purpose and use of each item.

Observations of *Baby Rhyme Time* sessions suggest that:

- The high quality interactions between children and their parents, that were fostered in these sessions, appear to have implications for the strengthening of parent-child relationships;
- These sessions provided an important opportunity for babies and young children to learn to love reading and also to develop very early literacy concepts; and
- These sessions also offered an opportunity for parents to develop positive links with other parents, which has positive implications for building a sense of community and reducing isolation amongst parents of babies and young children.

### CCHNs' perspectives on implementation and sustainability

CCHNs are integral to the delivery of the *Birth to Three* program within each community. They have responsibility for:

- Liaising with the community librarians about *Better Beginnings*, including providing estimates of the demand they anticipate for *Birth to Three* Reading Packs;
- Delivering a *Birth to Three* Reading Pack to families as they come for their baby's six-eight week health check at the clinic;
- Beginning conversations with parents about the *Better Beginnings* resources and opportunities as well as the key *Better Beginnings* messages; and
- Maintaining an on-going awareness of the *Better Beginnings* resources and opportunities and actively encouraging parents to become involved.

Fourteen WA CCHNs who were working in the five evaluation communities in 2016/7 were interviewed about their experiences and observations relevant to the implementation of the program. The longevity of the program meant that for many CCHNs, *Better Beginnings* had been a part of their conversations with parents for more than ten years. Indeed, some CCHNs recalled being involved in the program's delivery since its inception in 2005. This gave them a long and deep period of engagement to reflect upon. **It was typical for the CCHNs to speak about the *Birth to Three* program as an integrated part of their role, and something that they regarded as a normal part of their interactions with parents, and therefore sustained through daily work:**

*My involvement is probably routine, and like everyone else is, I actually introduce the bag at the six-week appointment. I bring in reading at birth with a pamphlet on reading, and there's also a picture in the new baby magazine where you see a parent reading, or there's someone reading to the child, and the focus at that point is that you start reading at any time. And then*

*at six weeks there is a slightly more structured acknowledgment to the importance of literacy and that's when I introduce the Better Beginnings program.*

In addition, almost all the **CCHNs** commented that they had very positive relationships with library staff, and very much welcomed **Better Beginnings** library staff to collaborate with them in working with families:

*[Our Better Beginnings librarian] is a very, very generous spirited person and she brings in boxes and boxes of toys and bags and comes and talks to every mothers' group on the importance of literacy, access to library facilities and how much they would be welcomed.*

The consensus amongst CCHNs interviewed for the evaluation was that they considered the program to be **"Very important"** for parents, and for a **"whole range of reasons"**. By presenting the Reading Pack to parents, CCHNs took the opportunity to explain the importance of talking and reading to their babies.

*It's a great way of introducing them to the importance of language... the importance of vision, focusing, fine motor / gross motor skills, turning the pages, babies tracking left to right. You can see all that early.*

While the delivery of the Reading Pack took time during the assessment appointment, CCHNs regarded **Better Beginnings** as having an overall positive impact on their work, and was very consistent with the kinds of messages they themselves wished to share with parents:

*I think that [it's] a very necessary part of our communication. It gives us a very good vehicle for expressing the importance of not just language development, but the value of reading... So, it's very much part of the message that I would be delivering anyway, but having the Better Beginnings information... complements... or demonstrates what I'm going to say, beautifully.*

Some CCHNs felt the program showed families that they were **"valued"** by the wider community due to the collaboration amongst local and state governments, the health and corporate sectors:

*And I tell them that not every child in Australia gets a Better Beginnings bag [only in WA]. So, they really do feel quite pumped up by that, you know, "Such an important thing is given to your baby," stuff.*

There was some variation in the scheduled delivery of the Reading Packs where CCHNs in one community were giving out the Reading Packs to family at the 3-4 month developmental check in contrast to the majority of CCHNs interviewed who delivered the Reading Packs at the 6-8 week development assessment:

*It's a key part of the 6 to 8 week appointment... They're smiling. And the bonding...*

*It falls in beautifully with the six-week appointment, because by then the child is gazing, and one of the things I ask them is, "Has he started looking? Is he watching?" and they... very excitedly say, "Yes,"... By then the child has their vision. It's a good time to focus, to bring it in as an adjunct to their vision development.*

For those CCHNs delivering the Reading Pack at 3-4 month check, they felt that parents were generally more receptive to the concept of reading to their babies and could practically demonstrate using the book and eliciting responses from the babies:

*It's brilliant, it's key to my 3-month developmental check, it definitely is, because it leads me into everything to do with child development at that age, and at 3 months they're so interested.*

It appeared that the **flexibility to present Better Beginnings** according to their preferred timings and in their own ways was important to them.

Several CCHNs spoke about the challenge of explaining everything in the Reading Pack in detail, given the time constraints (1/2 hour appointment), and that their priority was to complete the physical and developmental assessment amongst other tasks. However, other comments related to the opportunity the Reading Pack provided for CCHNs to have conversations around a range of topics:

*I link it in with, like, postnatal depression. I link it in with bonding and attachment... with talking about the parents' own history of their reading. "Did they like books?" "Do they like singing?"*

One CCHN took the opportunity to provide *Birth to Three* Reading Packs to families who had just moved into the area and missed out on the 'birth gift', or those families who had limited resources aligning well with the *Better Beginnings* goal of universal access.

Opinions were divided as to the degree to which messages on the importance of early literacy initially delivered through the *Better Beginnings* program and Reading Packs were acted upon, adopted or sustained within communities. CCHNs pointed out that they reiterated these messages at subsequent developmental checks/visits and also noted healthy attendances at *Baby Rhyme Time* sessions at the library.

*I think it fits in absolutely beautifully with everything that's said around the six to eight week mark. It is a beautiful program, and it's followed up, it's a continuous program. It's one of the things I like about it is that it's not just an information session, but that there is the program, then I encourage them to meet at the library.*

They implied that **repeated messages from different sources, and over time, were more likely to be effective than reliance on a single intervention**; and that they were optimistic that messages did eventually get through. An advantage of the involvement of health services in the sustained delivery of the messages is that CCHNs do very often maintain contact with a family over an extended period. The parents may not choose to attend the library, but relatively few actively avoid health checks visits.

The very intimate nature of the relationship between parents and CCHNs sometimes allowed the CCHN to observe social and emotional difficulties being experienced within a family. In addition, **several CCHNs noted that they saw a great value in the *Birth to Three* program as a social networking opportunity that can serve the emotional needs of lonely or isolated parents well:**

*If a mum is slightly more isolated. If there's signs of depression. If there's signs of... for any parent where they seem compromised, like ESL clients, where I can see that the mum is terrified of going out, I use the program as a prompt to get them out of the house, because most parents will do anything for a child, so I kind of beat on about the importance of literacy and learning pre-school skills from a very early age, so if you're sitting on the floor with lots of other mums and lots of other babies, your child is actually learning that that is an expectation.*

Several CCHNs also noted that they made an **extra effort to encourage families who spoke English as an additional language to attend *Baby Rhyme Time*, as a way of ensuring the baby has at least some early exposure to English as a spoken language:**

*Bilingual families, I get them to attend as early as possible so the child actually gets a good feel for hearing the two different sounds, simultaneously sort of thing.*

*I think [Better Beginnings] does a very, very good job. The thing I get from parents who attend the library, and I tell them all that it's different being in India and hearing Hindi and English simultaneously, the sounds etc., of Bengali and English, and it's very easy to speak the two languages, but an expressive language is such an important thing, and I talk about learning the sounds at different times.*



While some CCHNs were very optimistic about their ability to communicate key messages to parents and influence them to take up recommended practices, others were more skeptical. They cited a range of factors that they believed disrupted the messages about early book-sharing promoted through *Better Beginnings*, for example:

- Increased screen time for very young children;
- Parents' own limited literacy skills; and
- Families with low socio-economic demographics or from cultural backgrounds with English as an Additional Language, who don't have resources or engage in book sharing practices.

CCHNs appeared to be very confident about the delivery of key messages about the importance of early interactions with babies, and the value of books to a baby's development. In the context of the interview, several demonstrated the ease with which they could talk to parents explaining the connections between the physical, emotional and social benefits of books, as well as positive language and literacy outcomes:

*I ask them is, "Has he started looking? Is he watching?" and they of course, they're very excitedly say, "Yes," and I say, "What a brilliant time for you to actually think about what footprints are being put down,"... And what is the importance? What could a child possibly learn about reading at this age? Well, this is what they learn. Pages go from right to left. Words go from left to right. There's a space between the words," and I say to them, "Before you know it, word recognition comes in, and not only is it about the literacy, but it's about the sound of your voice, and the emotional feelings that a child gets when they're sitting up against mum's chest and dad's chest, and being read to."*

Their expertise seemed to come from their own health care training rather than any specific professional development they had been offered by SLWA, although one or two had vague memories of attending in-service sessions "long, long, ago." However, it was common for the CCHNs to sit in on sessions delivered by *Better Beginnings* librarians, and also to use the parental information in the Reading Packs, both of which they found to be supportive:

*I've pinched from [librarian] talks... I used to sit in on her talks and they were so colourful. She's so theatrical. She really does, with her gloves, and her puppets.*

### **Observations of CCHNs introducing Better Beginnings messages to parents during health checks**

The CCHNs interviewed were very self-assured about their role in introducing families to *Better Beginnings* through the delivery of a Reading Pack, and in communicating the key messages to families. In order to ascertain how the program is being delivered to mothers and babies in practice, a trained researcher made observations of nine CCHNs as they delivered the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* Reading Packs to mothers:

- Nine CCHNs were observed, interacting with 9 mothers and their babies, made as they delivered the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three*;
- The babies were all aged approximately 5-8 weeks;
- The observations took place in five Community Health Centres, all in target evaluation communities; and
- The researcher did not interact with participants during the session, but sat quietly, at the back or side of the room and used field notes to record observations steered by a schedule of inclusions recommended in the *Birth to Three* SLWA Guidelines.

Each CCHN observed firstly conducted the baby's developmental and health assessment and then presented the mother with the *Better Beginnings* Reading Pack. The researcher took field notes on the extent to which the CCHNs:

- Provided the mothers with information about the Reading Pack itself;
- Explained and discussed items in the Reading Pack;
- Demonstrated items and some ways in which the items could be used; and
- Provided specific information about local and SLWA library resources.

### *Introducing the Reading Pack to parents*

The CCHNs introduced and explained the Reading Packs in a variety of ways, but maintained a consistent set of messages (see *Table 5* and *Table 6*). Introductions and explanations about the Reading Packs varied in intensity from cursory in one case, where the mother's attention was severely limited by her crying baby, to thorough examinations of the pack, accompanied by highly detailed information on early literacy and child development. Three CCHNs, who had wide-ranging knowledge of the area, provided highly detailed explanations of the importance of reading aloud and of the value of libraries. Overall, the pack was well received by the mothers, although one showed little interest, explaining that the baby was her third child and that she had previously received a copy of the *Baby Ways* book and some of the other items for an older child.

All nine CCHNs provided some explanation of the contents of the *Better Beginnings* Reading Pack, unpacked the individual items for the mothers to see, introduced and explained the storybook and DVD, and demonstrated how to use the *Baby Ways* book with a baby. All but one explained the *Better Beginnings* program, talked about the parent information booklet and demonstrated use of the *It's Baby Rhyme Time* DVD and the *Read to Me* parent information booklet; seven explained that the pack was prepared by the State Library of Western Australia and discussed and demonstrated use of the nursery rhyme frieze.

### *Explaining the Better Beginnings Reading Pack*

During the observations, the *Baby Ways* book was the main focus of all the CCHNs' demonstrations of the use of resources in the Reading Pack. Some CCHNs gave highly detailed explanations of the value of reading books with babies and young children. In one session, the CCHN made direct links between the baby's stages of development, the development of its senses and the resources in the pack. She used a 'Brain Box' model of the developing brain (similar to the one used by a librarian) to demonstrate the importance of parents as a child's first teachers and how reading aloud to a baby could stimulate brain development. She related these ideas to her personal experience as a mother, stating that her daughter loved being read to from an early age. Another CCHN spoke about the value of reading to a baby in relation to parent-child bonding,

*Table 5: Observation of CCHNs introducing the Birth to Three Reading Pack*

Introductory explanations of the Reading Pack	Yes	No
Explains that the Reading Pack comes from SLWA	7	2
Explains the <i>Better Beginnings</i> program	8	1
Explains the contents of the Reading Pack	9	0
Removes items from the bag for 'Show and 'Tell'	9	0

using the term “mutual gaze” to describe the close interaction when child and parent were looking at the same page and explained the value of parents reading books to babies for their child’s development.

The *Baby Ways* book was used to varying degrees to model the benefits of reading and talking to babies. Two CCHNs showed the baby how to turn the pages and to look in the mirror at the back of the book. One invited accompanying siblings to look at their faces in the mirror too. Another explained how a baby’s eyes started to track objects and were able to follow a parent’s finger as it tracked the words being read. She also pointed to the pages in the book, talking about the pictures of the babies’ faces and the emotions they displayed, and also the pictures of daily activities that related to the child. Two described and modelled the use of intonation in their voices whilst reading aloud to the baby and explained how babies love the sound of their parents’ voices. One reassured the mother that the hard board construction of the *Baby Ways* book was less likely to sustain damage from sucking and chewing when the baby began to explore its senses.

One CCHN, with a particular interest in bilingualism, used *Baby Ways* to demonstrate how the mother and accompanying grandmother could use a book written in English to create their own stories and to tell them in their first language, which in this case was Tagalog. She encouraged the family to maintain the home language, actively promoting bilingualism and continually reinforcing the value of reading and singing rhymes in both Tagalog and English. She explained that the DVD would be especially useful for showing them actions to rhymes that might be unfamiliar to them and also introduced the previously mentioned ‘Brain Box’ model to explain the significance of brain and language development in a child’s early years.

In terms of explanations and demonstrations on how to use the nursery rhyme frieze, the CCHNs usually unfolded it and drew attention to the pictures; in one health centre it was prominently displayed on a board. Some elaborated on the parent information booklet, with one explaining when to expect children’s first recognisable speech, such as “baba” and “mama.” Several gave mothers a *Talking Together* pamphlet from the WA Department of Health that was additional to the resources in the pack and contains photographs of very young children interacting with books.

[http://www.health.wa.gov.au/docreg/education/population/child\\_health/growth\\_and\\_development/HP11285\\_talking\\_together.pdf](http://www.health.wa.gov.au/docreg/education/population/child_health/growth_and_development/HP11285_talking_together.pdf) .

Table 6: Observation of CCHNs explaining, discussing and demonstrating individual items in the pack

Item explained and discussed	Yes	No	Item demonstrated	Yes	No
Explains and discusses <i>Baby Ways</i> book	9	0	Demonstrates use of <i>Baby Ways</i> book	9	0
Explains and discusses <i>It's Baby Rhyme Time</i> booklet & DVD	9	0	Demonstrates use of <i>It's Baby Rhyme Time</i> booklet & DVD	8	1
Explains and discusses nursery rhyme poster	7	2	Demonstrates use of the nursery rhyme poster	7	2
Explains and discusses parent information booklet	8	1	Demonstrates use of parent information booklet	8	1

### Providing specific information about local and SLWA library resources

Observations were also made as the CCHNs provided information about resources available at the local or State library. Eight of the nine CCHNs provided the mothers with information about library membership, with a particular focus on the local library. One also referred to other libraries within the local council area; another gave the mother a print-out of the local library times and activities. Two were particularly proactive in encouraging parents to join the library: they referred to free library services, such as borrowing audio books if there was no time to read, and enthusiastically encouraged the mothers to attend the local library-based sessions, emphasising that singing rhymes and songs to babies helped them settle. Eight CCHNs provided information on *Baby Rhyme Time*

sessions, and six also provided information about the library *Story Time* sessions. The *Better Beginnings* website was mentioned by three CCHNs and library e-resources by two. In addition, it was noted that throughout the observation sessions there were many general references to the local library.

Overall, the observed CCHNs provided informative explanations and demonstrations of the *Better Beginnings* Reading Pack, in addition to information about library facilities, particularly membership and library-based sessions that are targeted at very young children. Some of these professionals were particularly enthusiastic and knowledgeable about child development, early language and literacy and library resources for young children, and about making this knowledge available to the mothers and accompanying family members.

Table 7: Observations of the provision of *Birth to Three* program information to parents, by CCHNs

Library Resource Focus	Yes	No
Information about library membership	8	1
Information about library-based sessions	8	1
Information about library-based <i>Story Time</i> sessions	6	3
Information about SLWA <i>Better Beginnings</i> website	3	6
Information about library e-resources	2	7

### Parents' perspectives on implementation and sustainability

The perceptions of parents about the implementation and sustainability of the *Birth to Three* program were identified from:

- Pre-program surveys (n=114 participants from the New Parent Cohort [NPC]);
- Post-program surveys (n=98 participants: 67 from the New Parent Cohort [NPC] and 31 from the *Baby Rhyme Time* Cohort [RTC])<sup>12</sup>; and
- Case study Interviews (n=9).

A clear goal of the *Birth to Three* program is to ensure that every baby in Western Australia receives a *Birth to Three* Reading Pack and that community awareness of *Better Beginnings* is growing.

Some parents in both cohorts reported having an awareness of *Better Beginnings*, prior to receiving a *Birth to Three* Reading Pack (NPC: 19% n=5 of 27; RTC: 32%, n=10 of 31; **Total: 26% n=15 of 58**). In some cases, this was because they had an older child who had been involved in one or more elements of *Better Beginnings*, or through interactions with the

12. Figures and percentages reported throughout this Report are given relative to the numbers of participants responding to a particular question in the survey(s) completed. Not all participants answered all questions. Some questions allowed participants to enter multiple answers. Some questions allowed a response of, 'Don't know', or 'Other'.



library or schools. In other families, information had been gleaned by word-of-mouth through mothers' groups or friends. However, a significant number of respondents (NPC: 52% n=14 of 27; RTC: 68%, n=21 of 31; **Total: 60% n=35 of 58**) said they had not heard about *Better Beginnings* before receiving the Reading Pack from their CCHN.

Whilst the finding that awareness of *Better Beginnings* is spreading across the community is positive, it is by no means common knowledge. There could be value in investigating further opportunities to tap into antenatal and other services to raise awareness amongst new parents and mothers-to-be, about the availability of the *Better Beginnings* program.

Most families (NPC: 97%, n=62 of 64; RTC: 79%, n=23 of 29; **Total: 91% n=85 of 93**) received their Reading Packs through their CCHN. This aligns with SLWA expectations and data, and provides affirmation that **delivery through the CCHNs has been highly effective**. For a few families, the library also provided alternative access, with 5% receiving their Reading Packs through the library (NPC: 2%, n=1 of 64; RTC: 14%, n=4 of 29; **Total: 5% n=5 of 93**). Whilst the numbers are small, this evidence is meaningful in the context of securing universal provisions to all Western Australian families.

Most of the parents surveyed post-program, although not all, could remember receiving information alongside their Reading Pack. About three quarters of the families remembered being told about, and well over half recalled being given information about library membership. Fewer parents remembered receiving print information about the library or the website in the pack:

- 74% (n=68 of 92) remembered being told about *Baby Rhyme Time*, (NPC: 73%, n=47 of 64; RTC: 75%, n=21 of 28);
- 62% (n=56 of 90) reported being told about library membership, (NPC: 63%, n=41 of 65; RTC: 60%, n=15 of 25);

- 44% (n=24 of 55) recalled receiving print information about the library in the pack, (NPC: 45%, n=13 of 29; RTC: 42%, n=11 of 26); and
- 61% (n=54 of 89) reported they had not been told about the website (NPC: 67%, n=43 of 64; RTC: 44%, n=11 of 25).

Some families commented that the presentation of the *Birth to Three* Reading Pack had been accompanied by useful information:

*[The] CCHN was very helpful, [I] remember her talking about pack; They advised us it's a good program; Delivery was thorough and carefully explained connections with early brain development.*

*[I was told]... Information regarding Baby Rhyme Time sessions and library membership; That the program aims to increase literacy rates and offers practical advice to parents; [it is] Good for baby to learn to talk; [the] reason why we were getting pack; early brain and language development.*

Although many families indicated that the CCHN or librarian had talked to them about the Reading Pack, nearly 30% said they did not. Nearly half of the respondents recalled being shown how to use the children's book in the Reading Pack:

- 29%, (n=27 of 94) said their **CCHN had not talked** about the Reading Pack (NPC: 30%, n=20 of 66; RTC: 25%, n=7 of 28); and
- 46% (n=43 of 93) said the **CCHN had shown them** how to use the children's book. Slightly less than half (NPC: 45%, n=29 of 65; RTC: 50%, n=14 of 28).

When prompted for suggestions about the delivery of the *Birth to Three* Reading Pack, a few parents commented that they would have benefited from having more guidance from the CCHN and spending time on each item, relating the Reading Pack contents to the ages and stages of development:

*More guidance from CCHN; would be good to know what age to do reading/literacy related activities; more guidance of each item in pack + how to use it and when.*

*Maybe more explanation about the items.*

While this may suggest that some CCHNs and librarians are not fully exploiting the introduction of the *Birth to Three* Reading Pack as a time to promote *Better Beginnings* resources, activities, and effective parenting messages, this perspective has to be balanced against other priorities. Typically, CCHNs have a very short time for their interactions with parents and have many issues to address such as essential health assessments. Similarly, time at *Baby Rhyme Time* for librarians can be limited, and the focus is often on engaging babies and parents in practical activities, such as reading stories and sharing rhymes. The capacity of parents to take on ideas quickly also varies. A few parents commented that there were “too many bits of paper” in the Reading Pack, that they felt “overwhelmed,” and had “information overload” during the visit. One respondent also mentioned that she “wasn’t well at time of appointment, so probably not focusing on everything CCHN said.”

Several respondents also noted that although some parents may dismiss pamphlets or brochures in the Reading Packs and consequently overlook useful information about the library initially, print information could still serve a valid purpose:

*Receiving so much information at once; makes you pick and choose what to look at and use.*

*Even though at the time of getting pack it is a feeling of information overload, it’s good that you have something to take home to look and read through when you have time.*

Families often reported *Baby Rhyme Time* as a significant element in the communication of the key messages of *Better Beginnings*. Whilst the CCHN may introduce the ideas, community librarians reiterated, elaborated, and demonstrated ways of interacting with books and rhymes. **The *Birth to Three* implementation model combining complementary resources, information and role-modelling was very much appreciated, and the welcoming style of interactions with community librarians was an equally important element in the overall success of the approach:**

*I am a new member to the library, however in the short time we have attended I am so impressed by the librarians they are so patient, encouraging and do such a great job enhancing the children’s overall experience.*

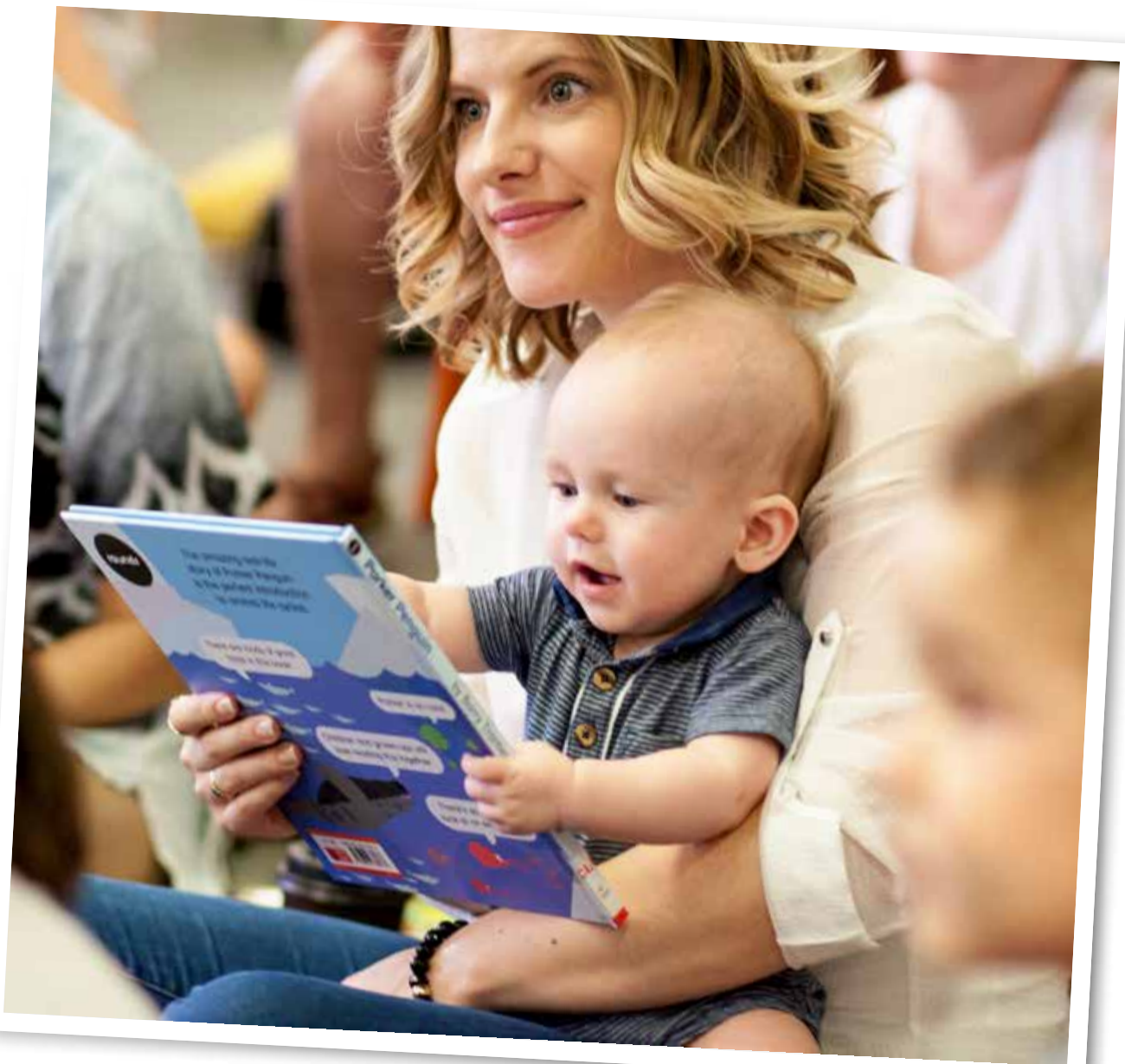
*Baby Rhyme Time has been fantastic for both me and my child. My son has been introduced to a structured group environment and enjoys listening to instructions and participating in the activities. I have enjoyed meeting other parents and library staff.*

*We absolutely love attending Baby Rhyme Time at least once a week. When my daughter grows older we will attend Story Time.*

*I was really happy with the quality of the package. Also, the librarians that implemented the free activities for the children at Tawbury library are genuinely caring educators supporting children’s development and happiness through literature and songs which is very pleasing as a parent. I believe they should be commended on their efforts in particular Ingrid who goes above and beyond to stimulate the children participating.*

These insights suggest that:

- Where time is limited it is difficult to address all important issues in one session;
- Multiple interactions and approaches to the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* program may be necessary to capture and engage all families;
- Flexibility is needed to suit different families, situations and times;
- The warm, cheerful and welcoming nature of the librarians and CCHNs is as important to successful implementation as their skills and professionalism; and
- Print and digital information and resources have a valid role, alongside or in addition to personal contacts and face-to-face presentations, even where they are not initially welcomed.





# Design of the Birth to Three program

## SLWA perceptions of the design of the Birth to Three program

As shown previously, the SLWA Leadership group liaise across sectors through the Joint Management Groups to agree on broad principles for the design of the *Birth to Three* program, including overall goals, guiding principles, and arrangements for delivery. However, it is the SLWA that has responsibility for the design of the *Birth to Three* Reading Pack and supporting information resources. **The SLWA focus group were unanimous in expressing confidence in validity of the goals of the Birth to Three program, the appropriateness of its design and the quality of its resources.** They acknowledged that there had been many changes of staff since its first trial in 2004, but were very assertive in describing it as, *'Well established, well integrated, successful'*:

*From my perspective the integrity of the program as it was established from the beginning hasn't changed. It is still a proven successful model. It is well established, and it works. What I can say is that it is almost an entirely new complement of staff that we have on board since the program was developed originally and rolled out state wide, and drawing on that expertise we have refreshed the content. So not changed again the integrity, but really the clarity of the messages to parents I think has come really clear.*

The SLWA design team demonstrated a high level of awareness about the need to select age-appropriate resources that were hard-wearing, attractive, visually engaging and likely to stimulate high levels of interaction between parents and their babies. In addition, they were very articulate about cultural considerations such as avoiding bias and prejudice, as well as positively reflecting diverse linguistic, ethnic, socio-economic and differently structured families.

Application of such consideration has been deliberately extended to digital resources including the *Better Beginnings* website which features mixed genders and cultures on its public page<sup>13</sup>, and SLWA forward planning includes a focus on diversity:

*[We are actively looking for] feedback on the experiences of families from diverse backgrounds and their engagement with the program... This is going to become a key area for program development over the next four years for us.*

The range of programs encompassed within the umbrella of *Better Beginnings* has grown and changed over time, and members of the SLWA focus group raised the naming (and renaming) of programs and their associated activities and Reading Packs as an issue of sustainability. The *Birth to Three* program, for example, has variously been known as the Birth-Three program, the Birth program, or simply the 'Yellow Pack'. In addition, many libraries integrated sessions to match local needs, so *Baby Rhyme Time* in one library might be focused on babies, whilst in another it might accommodate mixed ages; or *Baby Rhyme Time* might be delivered alongside 'Story Time'. **Flexibility and adaption was seen as positive design features by most people**, however, clarity of audience and purpose was also seen as important.

*I guess one of the other changes is that we don't really refer to our program as the Zero To Three or the Birth To Three program anymore because of Sing With Me, which is for two year olds, we have now started referring to our programs as the Birth program, the Two-Year-Old program, and the Kindergarten program.*

13. See for example: <https://www.better-beginnings.com.au/programs/birth-three>.



The SLWA design staff are now working towards a new conceptualisation of *Better Beginnings* as a 'seamless flow' of resources and activities that are integrated, yet distinctive. This may require some adjustments in program naming and design.

## Community librarians' perceptions of the design of the Birth to Three program

Librarians commented very positively on the design of the *Birth to Three* program both from the perspective of its approach to delivery and the resources used:

*It's fantastic, and we should all be incredibly proud of it in WA. You know, it's a WA home-grown, evidence-based... each year, I've been with it from the start, researching, and getting feedback, so it's proven and there's statistics to prove it, that... and I just think it's... we should all be very proud of it, and everybody should know about it.*

*I think it's essential to the future of libraries to be honest with you because, especially in Kirkenin, because it's low socio-economic... and the literacy levels are quite low in this area.*

*Yeah, it's the best program we have, I think. And we do a lot of good stuff, and I know that Manglis does a lot of good stuff, especially.*

Librarians judged the *Birth to Three* Reading Pack resources and information to be reliably appropriate and engaging for the age-group, and this gave them confidence to recommend them to parents who come to the library:

*It's a good resource for young family, you know, when they got a new baby. They're not sure where to start, how to start, and it is a guideline for them, yeah.*

*Yes, yes. Sometimes, parents come and see me, "Oh, what should I borrow for my one-year old child?" for example, so I refer that website to them, say, "Oh, those are the books suggested by the Better Beginnings website. If you like, you can choose any one of those books, and [be able to find a book]."*

*I always refer them for the... you know the yellow colour Baby Rhyme Time book with a DVD? Yeah, some parents, their first time coming to a Baby Rhyme Time, for example, or Story Time, I say, "Oh, do you have this book? You might have it from your Child Health Nurse, if not, you can always get it from us." That book is very useful because there are some songs with the DVD, show them how to sing together with the children, yeah.*

*... It's a good resource to suggest to people and they'll enjoy, yeah.*

Several of the librarians interviewed made special note of the **positive cultural values represented in the resources**. When contemporary Australian culture was represented in the texts, images, songs and rhymes, it was seen as an opportunity to help migrant families come to share in common knowledge of their new country:

*...I'm thinking, it's like, the Better Beginnings packs have very good resources. For example, you know, they have a book with a DVD which, like, shows parents how to sing some baby rhymes or songs, you know? It is very helpful especially for those, like, say, new migrants, a newcomer, they have a different set of rhymes, of songs they sing or songs from when they are little. But those Better Beginnings Reading packs are a very good start for... resources for you to start with.*

*[The It's Rhyme Time book and DVD] It's a very helpful resource... Believe you me, you know, we got so many newcomers here, they are like, "So, oh, okay, this song I never heard before," and because they learn different songs when they are little.*

Librarians also commented on the positivity of cultural diversity represented in the resources, which reflected the multicultural nature of Australia, and the variety of people and environments that might be familiar to the babies and their families receiving the Reading Packs: *"We've got so many newcomers here, so it's very helpful for them. So, culturally, it's quite important."*

Community librarians regarded the central coordination by the State Library as a strength of the program design with particular comments relating to information, resources and the improved effectiveness of the *Better Beginnings* web portal.

### **Opportunities for design enhancement of Birth to Three Reading Packs**

Whilst thoroughly endorsing the design of the 2016/7 program, community librarians were also able to identify aspects that could be improved upon, including:

- Maintaining a schedule of updating the *Birth to Three* Reading Pack, both to ensure currency but also to make sure there would be a different pack available for families with more than one child;
- Simplifying the naming of different *Better Beginnings* programs and activities to ensure clarity and transparency about what was available and appropriate to whom;
- Improving still further the promotion of *Better Beginnings* as a coherent state-wide program; and
- Improving the use of technology to encourage and support families as their child's first teacher.

Whilst the book choices for the Reading Pack made by the SLWA were generally applauded by community librarians, they reported a consistent ongoing issue of repeat Reading Packs going to parents with more than one child:

*... because one thing that we did get in the recent surveys, that we had a lot of people saying that they have the same book. So, you'd have one kid and then three years down the track, you have another kid, and then they've got exactly the same book in there.*

As noted by the SLWA, there have been a series of adaptations and developments since the *Birth to Three* program was first introduced including the addition of several new Reading Packs to provide age appropriate resources from birth to school age. It was quite common for the librarians to agree with the SLWA that there were some design issues in communications about the variety of Reading Packs, their naming, and their different target audiences. They said that this sometimes led to confusion, and sometimes simply failed to fully promote the availability of resources and services, and the outstanding quality of the whole early childhood program:

*They might say ... yeah, I've just heard, "Yellow bag." Like, "Oh, we had one of those with our first child." I think, if they worked on selling a brand ... and I think it should be in the public consciousness for everyone in WA.*

*For me, I think Better Beginnings, all three bags are absolutely amazing, but what I do find is that they don't really promote themselves as a brand, so we do have to go to schools, we do have to go to kindys and talk about Better Beginnings. Like, I've talked to lots of parents and tell them about Better Beginnings, and they've got no idea about ... That it's something that everybody should have in their heart*

*and look forward to when you have a child, and then when your child becomes two and then when your child becomes kindy, we're always promoting either yellow bags or green bags. There's never anything that's promoting everything all together, and when they've had the recent advertising which is a Better Beginnings... like, a small thing. It didn't say what Better Beginnings was, and it's not sort of... I think Better Beginnings is definitely good enough that it should have that cultural market...*

*Promote with the rest of Better Beginnings. Again, just promote it [Birth to Three] with the rest of Better Beginnings as a state-wide program, really, that everybody is entitled to. Every child born in WA can get three bags as they progress up to kindy.*

Community librarians were very committed to maintaining hard copy resources, however, they did observe that many families did not access e-resources and information as much as they expected, and thought that some re-consideration of the way technology was exploited to support *Better Beginnings* goals could be advantageous:

*Nowadays, all the young parents, they know how to use technology. So, if maybe a program can create apps which could include promotions material, the book [list?] that would be useful, we still would like to see the DVD or the booklets to show people how to do the song with children, because there are always some communities, they prefer it that way.*

## **CCHNs' perceptions of the design of the Birth to Three program**

The working relationship between CCHNs and librarians ranged considerably from functional delivery arrangements to conducting early parenting group sessions at the library to collaborating on *Baby Rhyme Time* sessions. Generally, CCHNs contacted libraries about replenishing Reading Pack supplies and, depending upon circumstances, would collect Reading Packs or libraries would arrange delivery to the community health clinic when requested. Some comments indicated that the CCHN and the local librarian had a strong working relationship and mutual respect for each other's role, where the CCHN saw value in attending weekly sessions at the library to informally meet and talk about any health issues with families.

Some CCHNs who worked across different communities reflected on the contrast between their relationships and involvement with library staff situated in different libraries. Their comments reiterated the notion that parents gained the most benefit from the program in those communities where both the CCHN and library staff were well informed and enthusiastic and proactively linked families with other relevant services and resources.

*We need to be aware of the services that's available for parents here in Kirkenin so they can access them, because usually we're... one of the main professionals, health professionals, that they see, so it's an important part of our role to be able to let them know what local services are available to them, so [we] let them know about the library.*

*When we're introducing the early parent group we'll say, "We're going to go to the library, and you will meet the librarian, and she's just fantastic"... and so they generally do turn up for that session, and I think... they really get why it's so important, and what they can do to contribute to their baby's development.*

Suggestions for increasing effective liaison between CCHNs and library staff included:

- Face-to-face introductions when library staff deliver Reading Packs or when CCHNs come to collect the materials;
- Being provided with a contact person at the library;
- Utilising the library and its facilities for early parenting groups and other related groups/programs; and
- Exchanging email contacts; being updated on relevant library programs and events to promote to families through the provision of newsletters and other promotional materials such as posters:

*I think it could be just so we know if programs change in the local library that we can then pass on to parents... I know about a couple of the groups, but... I haven't actually had any conversations... I wouldn't actually know if there's something else that's coming up that might interest parents, even with older kids as well.*

*I would love to get a newsletter from the library telling me what's going on at the local library, and then pass that on to the mums each month just to make it a more valued service.... It would be nice to have, like, a poster... I give information, but... just a poster might be helpful.*

CCHNs with a long-standing involvement with *Better Beginnings* recalled receiving informal training either through initial meetings with library staff or presentations at network meetings. Most CCHNs did not receive any formal training about the program, however one recent graduate from [local University] recalled observing the delivery of Reading Packs by CCHNs and participating in an early parenting group session at the local library during her month-long practicum at a community child health clinic. Many CCHNs were familiar with the program and Reading Pack contents and felt confident in delivering the pack to parents, while some welcomed the opportunity to

either receive training or speak to library staff about the program, particularly when changes were made to the Reading Pack contents or what was on offer to families at the library.

*I think we can always learn more, because I went to a talk in a conference, early years conference, with Mem Fox reading a book, and that's changed my view of how you read to [young children], and I think just giving that bit more vitality to it... I've got better at that since having that training. So, training's never lost.*

Some CCHNs identified the *Birth to Three* Reading Pack as the most significant component of the program:

*A lot of them it's their first book that they've got for their child, so I think it's very important... So sometimes I think the good thing about the program, I guess, is even if they don't read any other books, at least they've seen that book. They've seen a book.*

This fact was further reiterated in the CCHNs' comments about their focus on the book, Reading Pack and references to the library's *Baby Rhyme Time* sessions during the time available to them at the developmental assessment visit. The CCHNs described the Reading Pack books as well chosen, age-appropriate, and highly engaging. They reported that the main title, *Baby Ways*, was well received by the vast majority of families; and they referred positively to the book's reflection of the multicultural WA community and the baby's response to the mirror in the book:

*Oh, Baby Ways is a successful book.*

*That's right. With the highly successful, most successful book. Please don't change it. Really every child is telling an amazing story, and they're often emotional feeling that the child obviously identifies with it. I love the mirror. But this is from the kids, the toddlers. The mum's going, "It's the most boring book, but they just love that book."*



CCHNs re-iterated the librarians oft-repeated comment that there was the need for a better variety of board book titles to accommodate mothers with second or subsequent children, or those with twins/multiple births.

Other aspects of the program such as the website and e-resources were seen by CCHNs as a low priority in their conversations with parents. Time constraints and other priorities were cited as reasons for the majority of CCHNs who were either unaware of or had not accessed the website.

### Parents' perceptions of the design of the *Birth to Three* program

Whilst the feedback about design features of the *Birth to Three* program from the SLWA, community librarians and CCHNs was extremely positive, families are primary users of the resources and services and their experiences and perceptions therefore must have primacy in any evaluation. The 2017 *Better Beginnings* post-program survey posed a series of direct questions about the design of the *Better Beginnings* resources and activities.

### Parents' perceptions of the design of the *Birth to Three* Reading Pack and usefulness of its contents

The *Better Beginnings* post-program survey asked parents to rate the usefulness of each of the resources in the Reading Pack and the discussion around the delivery by the CCHN. Responses from participants in both cohorts (NPC & RTC) were typically positive with at least 50% reporting that they found each component to be either 'quite useful' or 'extremely useful':

A difference can be observed here between the two parent groups, with the RTC responding a little more positively to all components. Although the evaluation did gather feedback through parent interviews, there were not sufficient numbers to provide reliable insights to explain the differences. More refined probing in future evaluations could prove interesting.

A number of post-program survey participants recalled (n=14) snippets of the information provided in the *Birth to Three* Reading Pack about the library. Most typically, their recall was generic rather than highly specific, however, 10 of the 14 respondents explicitly mentioned *Baby Rhyme Time*. This suggests that the message about this service appeared relevant to the parents, and its 'brand name' was remembered. This might be an expected response from the RTC group, since the surveys were conducted through *Baby Rhyme Time*, but seven of eight responses from the NPC also mentioned *Baby Rhyme Time* by name.

Table 8: Parents' ratings of the usefulness of resources in the Reading Pack and the discussion around the delivery by the CCHN

	NPC	RTC	Combined Total all responses
The discussion provided judged to be either 'quite useful' or 'extremely useful'	61% (n=34)	81% (n=21)	61%
The parent information booklet <i>Read to Me</i> judged to be either 'quite useful' or 'extremely useful'	63% (n=30)	79% (n=19)	69%
The book suggestions listed in the parent booklet judged to be either 'quite useful' or 'extremely useful'	51% (n=23)	80% (n=20)	61%
Watching the <i>Its Baby Rhyme Time</i> DVD judged to be either 'quite useful' or 'extremely useful'	56% (n=25)	61% (n=14)	57%

Table 9: Survey examples of information from the Birth to Three Reading Pack about libraries remembered by parents

Library information recalled by NPC	Library information recalled by RTC
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Library Baby Rhyme Time session times</li> <li>• CCHN gave Baby Rhyme Time library session times</li> <li>• Coffee and chat times</li> <li>• Information about Baby Rhyme Time, Story Time</li> <li>• Location and times of Baby Rhyme Time</li> <li>• Membership details and opening hours</li> <li>• Pamphlets about toy library, Baby Rhyme Time, Story Time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Told me opening times and about Baby Rhyme Time</li> <li>• Times of activity timetable along with future community news</li> <li>• Pamphlet of services, application for membership</li> <li>• Can't remember exactly what it was, but I'm guessing it was about children's library and that's how we got to know about Baby Rhyme Time and the toy library</li> <li>• The Baby Rhyme Time sessions</li> </ul>

Comments about the items in the *Birth to Three Reading Pack* were offered by some participants, and these were typically positive, for example:

*Everything in pack is good and useful; I love any information to assist my child.*

*It was very useful; The activities demonstrated questions I can use to encourage my daughter's learning using other books, gave me great book ideas also.*

*I found the Reading Pack very useful especially for someone from a non-English speaking country like me.*

*The CD helped me learn the rhythms and rhymes; And ideas for how to show my daughter the book.*

A few comments suggested challenges that parents face in following up on the recommendations and advice offered:

*Really good. Just not enough time but loved Baby Ways.*

*It is important but I was still overwhelmed with new baby. Depressed. Threw [the book] in the room, I was also studying law.*

Several (n=4) parents suggested that the pack could contain more books, particularly bedtime stories and include more information for parents with English as an Additional Language.

### Parents' perceptions of the design of the *Birth to Three Reading Pack* book resources

The post-program survey suggests that parents in both cohorts responded very positively to the book they received in the Reading Pack:

- **More than half were able to recall the name of the book** (NPC: 54%, n=31; RTC: 56%, n=15; Total: 55% n=46);
- **A majority of parents had read the book to their baby** (NPC: 75%, n=48; RTC: 88%, n=23; Total: 79% n=71);
- **An overwhelming number of parents liked the book** (NPC: 88%, n=46; RTC: 100%, n=21; Total: 94% n=67); and
- **Almost all respondents commented that their babies enjoyed the book** (NPC: 94%, n=50; RTC: 89%, n=17; Total: 94% n=67).

*The book is relatable and well chosen, rhyming text, clear photos, depicts baby's activities.*

*The Baby Ways book is a very good book because baby gets excited at other babies faces.*

*[It was] the first book that we had.*

*We read it every day; it's her favourite book, it makes her smile.*

*[The book is] aesthetically pleasing, interactive with children, cognitively stimulating.*

*I put the book on the table where my baby can see. He would look at it and sing a song or read the words in Baby Ways.*

*Information in the pack was so valuable to me. Having the first book there without having to go out to buy one that was suitable because I would not have known which were the right ones for this age or thought of reading to a baby.*



### Parents' perceptions of the design of the Birth to Three 'Read to Me' booklet

At the time of the survey, only about a quarter of all parents (27%, n=23), had read additional books suggested in the 'Read to Me' parent booklet (NPC: 15%, n=9; RTC: 58%, n=14). Again, there was a marked difference between the two groups, which would be interesting to investigate in further evaluations, but it is easy to speculate that perhaps attendance at *Baby Rhyme Time* was a factor.

Where parents had followed up book recommendations from the *Birth to Three* Reading Pack, they were most likely to access the texts from the library, with 52% (n=23), of them reporting using the library (NPC: 48%, n=10; RTC: 54%, n=13). Several parents commented favourably on the value of the booklets and some

were able to quote specific tips from the *Read to Me* booklet, for example, 'how to sit and share books, to see baby's face while reading':

*Read to Me - very useful, info on sharing books from birth very good.*

*[Read to Me] gives good advice as to additional resources.*

*Read to Me was very useful, information on sharing books from birth very good; I didn't know about reading books to baby from birth, only when they started talking.*

### Parents' perceptions of the design of the Birth to Three Nursery Rhyme Frieze

Just over half of all respondents (51% n=46), had used the Nursery Rhyme frieze (NPC: 45%, n=29; RTC: 65%, n=17). Of those parents who had used the frieze, many commented that they had used it with their child, "daily" or "many times" while others described placing the frieze somewhere prominent in the house where the baby would see it regularly, and it would remind them as parents to refer to it:

*The Nursery Rhyme frieze is on the wall near baby's cot. [It acts as a] prompt to say nursery rhymes when changing nappies.*

*[The frieze is] on the wall; near the cot; sitting on cabinet near baby's cot.*

*It is up on the bedroom wall and we look at it every day.*

*Nursery Rhyme frieze and the rhyme time booklet [were] very helpful to remind my husband and me about remembering the words to rhymes.*

The vast majority of these parents and almost all the babies liked the rhymes featured on the frieze:

- 95% (n=43) of parents liked the rhymes (NPC: 93%, n=27; RTC: 94%, n=16); and
- 98% (n=44) of the babies liked the rhymes (NPC: 97%, n=28; RTC: 100%, n=16).

## Parents' perceptions of the design of the *Baby Rhyme Time* booklet and DVD

Over half of the parents surveyed post-program (55%, n=25 of 45) found the *Baby Rhyme Time* booklet and DVD 'quite' or 'extremely useful'. They commented:

*... very useful to learn rhymes; it helped me learn rhymes... easy book to read, ... introduced me to a few extra rhymes.*

*[It] gives good advice as to additional resources and is also good confidence building statements (like don't be self-conscious of your singing voice).*

*It's Baby Rhyme Time book/DVD helped me to remember and learn words of nursery rhymes.*

*It was beneficial for my husband to learn words of rhymes, particularly unfamiliar rhymes.*

A couple of parents commented that they had not used the DVD because they did not have a DVD player. In addition, several parents' comments showed a little confusion about the purpose of the DVD accompanying the *It's Baby Rhyme Time* book, thinking that it was intended for viewing by their child:

*The baby was not interested in watching the DVD.*

*I thought it was for the baby to see and baby was too young to watch DVD.*

Other feedback referred to faults with the DVD: "I think the format of the CD [was problematic] because it's not working."

Some parents also commented on their unease about young children engaging with technology too early. They had heard that it might be problematic, although they were not always sure why:

*DVD sends mixed messages about screen-time, I understand the use of educational TV but this age is too young – does not align with health guidelines.*

This range of feedback indicates the value in providing both written and verbal guidance to parents about the Reading Pack's contents and finding opportunities to repeat messages whether this occurs at the time of delivery by the CCHN or is offered at parenting sessions conducted for new parents or through the library as part of *Baby Rhyme Time* where an item in the pack could be highlighted and promoted:

*Program has given me something to use as part of baby's routine; read book after morning nap and morning tea; read book to help settle and calm when he doesn't want to sleep. I think it's very important to read to him to help him learn and interpret English. I found out more about Better Beginnings at a mum or baby session when someone from the library came and talked about the pack and .*

*Going through pack at a mother's group session in more detail helped me.*

Overall parents found the design of books, information and resources to be appropriate and useful. They were however, able to make suggestions for further improvements and these mostly concerned increasing the number of resources, updating them and simplifying the package, for example:

*Too many separate leaflets, it would be better if all information was in one booklet.*

*More books, more books, more books.*

*[More] Books appealing to younger babies e.g. picture books, touch/sound books; more pictures with child or babies or animals in the books.*

*More songs, more modern songs.*

*We enjoyed the nursery rhymes, was great having a book with all the words, but found the reading book a bit dated looking.*



## Outcomes of the Birth to Three program

The *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* program was designed and implemented with a very specific goal in mind: achieving a positive and measurable impact on children's early development and particularly literacy and language, through enhancing the ways that families communicate with their babies, and in share books, stories, rhymes and songs with them. Intended outcomes include:

- Increased access for young children to developmentally appropriate books through the provision of *Birth to Three* Reading Pack to every family with a baby in WA; and encouraging families to buy or loan recommended books for the home;
- Increased frequency in the number of times a baby is read to by members of the family;
- Increased engagement between babies and their families in language games, rhymes and songs;
- Raised parental awareness of the potential value and enjoyment of reading with their baby; and
- Enhanced parental confidence and skill in engaging their babies with books, language games, rhymes and songs.

### Parents' perceptions of the outcomes of the Birth to Three program

Evidence from the *Better Beginnings* post-program Parent survey affirmed that the percentage of parents reading to their baby increased significantly following engagement with the *Birth to Three* program, with only a very small number (n=7 of 93, 7.53%) reporting that they did not read to their baby post program:

- 85% (n=79 of 93) parents said they read to their baby after receiving their *Birth to Three* Reading Pack;
- 8% (n=7 of 93) parents said they already read to their baby prior to receiving their *Birth to Three* Reading Pack; and
- 8% (n=7 of 93) parents said they did not read to their baby after receiving their *Birth to Three* Reading Pack.

The survey highlights some differences between the two cohorts, with the RTC families reporting a higher incidence of reading to their child both before receiving their pack (21%, n=6 of 28); and an implied 100% (n=28 of 28) post-program book sharing (21% read pre-program+ 79% read post-program = Total 100%, n=28 of 28). Not one of the seven parents (8%, n=7 of 93) who reported that they had not read to their baby following the receipt of a Reading Pack was in the RTC. This could be related to differences in the composition

Table 10: *Better Beginnings* post-program Parent survey results: Parents reading children's books to their child since receiving the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* Reading Pack

Since receiving the BB Reading Pack do you ever read to your child?	NPC	RTC	Combined totals
Yes	87.69% (n=57 of 65)	78.57% (n=22 of 28)	84.95% (n=79 of 93)
No	10.77% (n=7 of 65)	0.00%, (n=0 of 28)	7.53% (n=7 of 93)
I already did	1.54% (n=1 of 65)	21.43%, (n=6 of 28)	7.53% (n=7 of 93)

of the cohorts, but it is quite possible that the actual ages of the babies may also have been a significant factor. Although the ages of babies in the RTC were not noted at the time of the survey, it is likely that they were older than the babies in the NPC families.

A direct comparison between evidence from the NPC group pre and post-program surveys shows that the percentage of NPCs reporting they *'did not read to their child'* dropped from 20% (n=22 of 112) pre-program to 8% (n=7 of 93) post program. In the NPC pre-program survey, 50% of respondents who did not read to their child said they thought their child was too young to read to. Post-program the percentage dropped slightly to just three of the non-reading NPC respondents stating that they believed their child was too young to read to. This suggests a positive shift in attitude and belief. One explaining that:

*[My] baby was premature and has been sick so I haven't started reading to her yet. But now at 4 ½ months I can see she is ready and I will start reading to her.*

Whilst the increased age of the child between pre and post-surveys may be a factor in this change, it nevertheless indicates a positive trend towards increased reading activities.

The combined post-program survey data suggests that many parents think *Better Beginnings* has influenced their book-sharing and communication around books, in some cases quite significantly (See *Tables 11 and 12*). When parents from both cohorts were asked about their perceptions, they reported that since receiving their Reading Pack:

- 86% (n=80 of 93) felt that *Better Beginnings* changed how often they read to their baby (they read more); and
- 76% (n=68 of 89) felt that *Better Beginnings* changed the way they communicate with their baby (they communicated more).

It is noticeable that the RTC reported higher levels of positive change than the NPC. This could reflect the difference in cohorts (for example, interest levels and multiple exposure to messages), the specific collection method, or timings, or differences in the ages of the babies at the time of the surveys. Certainly, the data would be worthy of further investigation.

Where applicable (in families where there was an older child), over three quarters of respondents (80%, n=35 of 44) also noted that they thought the impact of the *Birth to Three* program extended to an increase in the frequency that they read to their older child(ren). Whilst the numbers in this

Table 11: Mothers' perceptions of the impact of *Better Beginnings* on how often they read to their child

How much has <i>Better Beginnings</i> changed how often you read to your child?	Not at all	A little	Quite a bit	A great deal	Total number responses	Totals all positive change responses
Responses from New Parent Cohort (NPC)	19.05% (n=12)	30.16% (n=19)	34.92% (n=22)	15.87% (n=10)	63	81% (n=51 of 63)
Responses from Rhyme Time Cohort (RTC)	3.33% (n=1)	20.00% (n=6)	40.00% (n=12)	36.67% (n=11)	30	97% (n=29 of 30)
Total responses from Combined Cohorts (NPC+RTC)	13.98% (n=13)	26.88% (n=25)	36.56% (n=34)	22.58% (n=21)	93	86% (n=80 of 93)

Table 12: Mothers' perceptions of the impact of Better Beginnings on how they communicate with their child\*

How much has <b>Better Beginnings</b> changed how you communicate with your child?	Not at all	A little	Quite a bit	A great deal	Total number responses	Totals all positive change responses
Responses from New Parent Cohort (NPC)	32.76% (n=19)	10.34% (n=6)	32.76% (n=19)	24.14% (n=14)	58	67% (n=39 of 58)
Responses from Rhyme Time cohort (RTC)	6.45% (n=2)	19.35% (n=6)	25.81% (n=8)	48.39% (n=15)	31	94% (n=29 of 31)
Total responses from Combined Cohorts (NPC+RTC)	23.60% (n=21)	13.48% (n=12)	30.34% (n=27)	32.58% (n=29)	89	76% (n=68 of 89)

\* Numbers & % recorded here exclude 'not applicable' figures

category are small, the trend is a very encouraging finding in terms of changed communication. This is an important finding in considering the value of the *Birth to Three* program contributing to wider literacy gains in the community. Care must, however, be taken in assuming cause and effect, since many other factors may be relevant in the change, including the likelihood that older children might also be participants in other *Better Beginnings* programs such as the *Sing with Me* program and the *Kindergarten* program.

Parental confidence is one of the most significant factors known to either hinder or support parents sharing books with their baby. **An increase in confidence due to having received the Reading Pack was acknowledged by almost half of parents surveyed post-program** (NPC 46%, n=30 of 65; RTC 44%, n=12 of 27; **Total: 46%, n=42 of 92**). The remaining parents felt their confidence had remained much the same.

Table 13: Mothers' perceptions of the impact of Better Beginnings on reading with an older child or children

How much has <b>Better Beginnings</b> changed the way you communicate with an older child/ren?	Not at all	A little	Quite a bit	A great deal	Total number responses	Totals all positive change responses
Responses from New Parent Cohort (NPC)	26.09% (n=6)	17.39% (n=4)	30.43% (n=7)	26.09% (n=6)	23	74 % (n=17 of 23)
Responses from Rhyme Time Cohort (RTC)	14.29% (n=3)	4.76% (n=1)	9.52% (n=2)	71.42% (n=15)	21	86 % (n=18 of 21)
Total responses from Combined Cohorts (NPC+RTC)	20.45% (n=9)	11.36% (n=5)	20.45% (n=9)	47.73% (n=21)	44	80 % (n=35 of 44)

\* Numbers & % recorded here exclude 'not applicable' figures

This is a pleasing outcome since a comparison of the NPC pre and post-survey results suggests that the NPC confidence levels were already quite high: The NPC pre-program survey shows that 66% (n=73 of 111) of NPC parents were 'very confident' in sharing books with their baby. Significantly, not one of the parents in either cohort surveyed reported a loss of confidence following the receipt of the *Birth to Three* Reading Pack. This suggests that there were no unexpected negative outcomes from the *Better Beginnings* experience.

A number of parents (n=23 of 39, 59%) in the post-program survey identified the availability of an age appropriate book as contributing to the increase in their confidence, with similar percentages in each of the two cohorts:

- RTC: 60% (n=12 of 20) identified the book as helping to increase their confidence; and
- NPC: 58% (n=11 of 19) identified the book as helping to increase their confidence.

Parents' feedback pointed to the importance of having a book that engaged and elicited positive responses from their baby which served to demonstrate that book sharing was a valuable learning and bonding activity:

*The book is a good example of the type of book babies enjoy. My baby loves the book and asks for repeated readings. Its great to have a book there to use at the beginning.*

*When he started looking at it, he got excited about the book and so then I would read more books to him.*

Although many NPC parents reported owning a board book prior to receiving their *Birth to Three* Reading Pack, 12% (n=12 of 101) of the mothers did not own any board books that they could read to their babies, and more than a third owned five or less board books (34%, n=34 of 101). Before receiving the Reading Pack, approximately 54% of NPC mothers (n=56 of 104), felt that their babies were, 'not very' or 'not at all interested', in books, with only a quarter of babies (25%, n=27 of 106) engaging with a book to the end.

After receiving the pack, parents reported a **significant increase in their child's interest in books with almost all of them showing interest, and many more sustaining their interest through to the end of a book.** Further these changes were often perceived as resulting from the program:

- 42% of post-program parents (n=38 of 91) felt that the *Birth to Three* program had influenced their child's interest in books, (NPC, 40%, n=25 of 63; RTC 46%, n=13 of 28);
- 96% of post-program parents (n=44 of 46) described their child as being either 'quite interested' or 'very interested' (RTC, 100%, n=10 of 10; NPC, 94% n=34 of 36); and
- 69% of post-program parents (n=41 of 59) said that their child now enjoyed hearing the entire book read aloud (NPC 71%, n=32 of 45; RTC 64%, n=9 of 14).

The positive responses of babies were very motivating to parents who frequently noted how happy their babies were when engaged in book activities both at home and at the library, and how their baby's responses often surprised them:

*My baby enjoys going to Baby Rhyme Time, it's good to read books along with other mums and babies... he really enjoys it... It helped me knowing that what you're doing is a good thing, not wasted effort, knowing that it makes some difference is very important.*

*It made me realise how important sharing and reading books, and talking to my baby is. As I'm a first-time mother, I didn't know many songs to sing to my baby. The Baby Rhyme Time pack is brilliant.*

*My child loved it... Baby will hear me say words from his favourite book and will go and get the book to read. I didn't realise how much he would enjoy listening to nursery rhymes.*

*... my daughter likes to watch the older kids and she likes looking at the books.*



Although the increase in the child's interest may be attributable in part to the child's age or development, it is important to note that the availability of an age appropriate book, the increased awareness of the parent and other supporting factors are also likely to have contribute to this change.

The Reading Pack was successful in improving the book environment for babies, at the same time that it raised confidence for these families.

A small group of parents identified the parent brochure as being particularly useful:

- 20% (n=8 of 40) identified the parent brochure as useful, (RTP 17% n=4 of 24; NPC 25% n=4 of 16).

In addition, quite a few parents commented that their confidence was also assisted through the advice offered and through having concerns addressed or feelings and intuitions affirmed in the literacy information detailed in the *Birth to Three Reading Pack*:

*The parent brochure included useful info like, Don't worry if your child doesn't sit the whole way through the book.*

*I had a hard time remembering nursery rhymes before, so it helps me remember a better selection.*

*As my baby is first one and being a new mum I learned so much from the Reading Pack.*

The *Birth to Three* program had an explicit intent to positively influence parental attitudes to books, libraries, and sharing reading and rhymes with babies. Feedback from the post-program survey indicates that after receiving the *Birth to Three Reading Pack*, parents' perceptions had changed about the idea that babies can enjoy and benefit from books and nursery rhymes, as well as enjoy the library, from an early age:

- 51% of parents (n= 47 of 92), agreed they had changed their minds about the idea that babies can enjoy and benefit from books at an early age;
- 51%, of parents (n= 47 of 92) agreed they had changed their minds about the idea that, babies can enjoy and benefit from rhymes and songs at an early age; and
- 61%, of parents (n= 56 of 92) agreed they had changed their minds about the idea that, babies can enjoy the library at any age.



Table 14: Post-program changes in parents' opinions about the idea that babies can enjoy and benefit from books and nursery rhymes, as well as enjoy the library, from an early age

Parents changed ideas post program	Yes, my opinion has changed		No, my opinion has not changed		N/A I thought this before	
The idea that, babies can enjoy and benefit from books at an early age?	NCP 56.92% n=37 of 65	RTC 37.04%, n=10 of 27	NCP 7.69%, n=5 of 65	RTC 3.70%, n=1 of 27	NCP 35.38%, n=23 of 65	RTC 59.26%, n=16 of 27
	Combined Total 51.09%, n= 47 of 92		Combined Total 6.52%, n= 6 of 92		Combined Total 43.39 %, n= 39 of 92	
The idea that, babies can enjoy and benefit from rhymes and songs at an early age?	NCP 56.92% n=37 of 65	RTC 37.04 % n=10 of 27	NCP 7.69% n=5 of 65	RTC 7.41% n=2 of 27	NCP 35.38% n=23 of 65	RTC 55.56% n=15 of 27
	Combined Total 51.09% n= 47 of 92		Combined Total 7.61% n= 7 of 92		Combined Total 41.30% n= 38 of 92	
The idea that, babies can enjoy the library at any age?	NCP 61.54% n=40 of 65	RTC 59.26% n=16 of 27	NCP 12.31% n=8 of 65	RTC 0.00%, n=0 of 27	NCP 26.15% n=17 of 65	RTC 40.74% n=11 of 27
	Combined Total 60.86% n= 56 of 92		Combined Total 8.70% n= 8 of 92		Combined Total 30.43% n= 28 of 92	

Every NPC participant felt that it important to share books with babies before the program:

- 83% (n=94 of 113) said it was, 'Very important'; and
- 17% (n=19 of 113) said it was, 'Fairly important'.

However, after receiving the *Birth to Three Reading Pack*, those who considered book sharing with their baby to be 'Very important,' increased from 83% (n=94 of 113) to 94% (n=65 of 69); all the others thought it was 'Fairly important' and no parents thought it was either, 'Not very important' or 'Not important'. Parents' comments from the post-program survey demonstrated that changes of attitude could be quite profound:

*Better Beginnings did introduce me to what libraries offered families with babies. I didn't know what libraries had to offer; I hadn't thought about taking her to the library before - it was something new.*

*It made me realise that reading to her is important for her growth and development; I knew it was good for bonding with your baby but it's more than just an activity, reading with her stimulates her.*

*I did not know you should read to babies and found this information so beneficial.*

*It reinforced the importance of reading, so for my toddler's recent birthday I asked for everyone to give him books and not toys. We have so many now I have to buy a bookcase.*

*Just reminds me how important it is to read and when I first got yellow pack taught me so much.*

*Extremely helpful especially for new mums and me as I am from the Philippines. I love it.*

Parents' changing perceptions about the value of reading to babies from a young age were also reflected in their **increased adoption of positive everyday literacy practices**. Survey results showed more parents thought they were reading to their children and some were reading more often. And similarly, **parents reported sharing rhymes more frequently through books and singing after receiving the *Birth to Three* Reading Pack:**

- Close to 100% (92%, n=86 of 93) of parents indicated they read to their child post-program (NPC 89%, n=58 of 65<sup>14</sup>; RTC 100%, n=28 of 28), compared to 80.36% NCP mothers (n=90 of 112) pre-program; and
- 78% (n=39 of 50) of parents surveyed post-program reported they read to their babies at least once a day, (82% RTC, n=23 of 28; 73% NPC, n=16 of 22).

Whereas prior to receiving the Reading Pack, only:

- 36% of the parents (n=37 of 103) read to their babies at least once a day.

Before receiving the Reading Pack, a little less than three quarters of the mothers (73%) read nursery rhymes or shared other simple rhyming books with their babies. **After receiving the Reading Pack parents shared rhymes with their babies much more regularly:**

- 98% of post program respondents (n=51 of 52) sang nursery rhymes to their baby (NPC, 96% n=22 of 23; RTC, 100%, n=29 of 29); and
- 90% of post-program respondents (n=43 of 48) sang rhymes once or twice daily (NPC 95%, n=19 of 20; RTC, 86%, 24 of 28).

And nearly three quarters of the respondents (71%, n=30 of 42), felt that **the Reading Pack had helped them reading to and saying or singing nursery rhymes with their baby** (NPC 69% n=11 of 16; RTC 73%, n=19 of 26).

Post-program survey results also indicated that **parents were actively using the Nursery Rhyme frieze**, and when they did, both **parents and their babies were enjoying the rhymes:**

- 51% (n=46 of 90) of parents were actively using the Nursery Rhyme Frieze (NPC, 45% n=29 of 64; RTC 65% n=17 of 26);
- 93% (n= 43 of 46) of parents who were using the Nursery Rhyme Frieze enjoyed the rhymes (NPC, 93% n=27 of 29; RTC, 94% n=16 of 17); and
- 98% (n= 44 of 45) of their babies enjoyed Nursery Rhyme Frieze (NPC 97% n=28 of 29; RTC, 100% n=16 of 16) rhymes.

Parents provided many commentaries explaining that information from the Reading Pack and their exposure to the *Birth to Three* program had been influential in changing their attitudes, beliefs and practices:

*[Better Beginnings]... increased my awareness of the need to stimulate my baby's mind through reading, singing, talking. I was not aware how important this was right from Day 1.*

*I wasn't aware that babies enjoy nursery rhymes as much as he does.*

*It made me realise how important it was to join Baby Rhyme Time, to go out socially with my son. I never did with older daughter. Now I'm well informed about community activities through Better Beginnings.*

Many parents said they had **adopted literacy practices as they shared books with their babies, which are explicitly recommended in the *Read to Me* parent booklet**, and in some cases a high percentage described their practices as '*Frequent*'.

14. Includes responses '*I already did*'.

Table 15: Literacy practices **frequently** adopted by parents as they shared books with their babies

Literary practices adopted frequently	NPC	RTC	Combined NPC+RTC
Choosing a comfortable place and the right time to share a book together with their child;	68% (n=41 of 60)	67% (n=18 of 27)	68% (n=59 of 87)
Holding the book within the baby's visual range and turn pages slowly;	83% (n=52 of 63)	73% (n=19 of 26)	80% (n=71 of 89)
Letting their baby hold and play with board books;	68% (n=42 of 62)	68% (n=17 of 25)	68% (n=59 of 87)
Choosing books with bright pictures and a small amount of print;	81% (n=52 of 64)	81% (n=21 of 26)	81% (n=73 of 90)
Reading stories aloud with expression;	84% (n=52 of 62)	81% (n=22 of 27)	83% (n=74 of 89)
Choosing stories with a lot of rhyme and repetition;	68% (n=42 of 62)	73% (n=19 of 26)	69% (n=61 of 88)
Pointing to pictures and naming them or describing them;	78% (n=49 of 63)	77% (n=20 of 26)	78% (n=69 of 89)
Reading and re-reading favourite stories to baby.	87% (n=54 of 62)	78% (n=21 of 27)	84% (n=75 of 89)

## Parents' perceptions of Influence of the *Birth to Three* program on other family members reading to babies

When mothers were asked for their perceptions about the impact of *Birth to Three* program on the frequency that other people read with their child, **most had noticed an increase in shared reading practices** (See Table 16). Three quarters of all respondents reported a positive increase in 'How often other people read to their child' of 78% (n=73 of 93), and across both cohorts more than half of these mothers said that the increase was either, 'Quite a bit' or a 'Great deal'.

The post-program survey indicated that there was also an **increase in the regularity with which other family members read to the baby**, and the increase in the number of fathers who read to their baby after receiving the Reading Pack was particularly significant:

- 90% (85 of 94) of respondents indicated that either they or someone in the family had shared a book with their child in the past week (NPC 89%, n=58 of 65; 93% RTC 27 of 29). This is from the pre-program data which shows this occurred in approximately three quarters of the families (n=79, 75%);
  - Fathers read to their baby at least once a week in 80% of respondent families (n= 71 of 89) post program (NPC 76%, n=48 of 63; 88%, n=23 of 26). By comparison to RTC, just over 50% (n= 53 of 105) who read to their baby before receiving the pack;
- 41% (n=25 of 61) siblings read aloud to their baby sister or brother at least once a week, post-program (NPC 36% n=16 of 45; RTC, 56%, n=9 of 16). By comparison to just over 33% (n=30 of 91) of siblings read to the baby before receiving the pack; and



Table 16: Mothers' perceptions of the impact of Better Beginnings on how often other people read to their child\*

How often do other people (partner, baby sitter) read with your child?	Not at all	A little	Quite a bit	A great deal	Total number responses	Totals all positive change responses
Responses from New Parent Cohort (NPC)	25.80% (n=16)	33.87% (n=21)	32.26% (n=20)	8.06% (n=5)	62	74% (n=46)
Responses from Rhyme Time Cohort (RTC)	12.90% (n=4)	41.94% (n=13)	32.26% (n=10)	12.90% (n=4)	31	87% (n=27)
Total responses from Combined Cohorts (NPC+RTC)	21.50% (n=20)	36.56% (n=34)	32.26% (n=30)	9.68% (n=9)	93	78% (n=73)

\*Number and % recorded here exclude 'not applicable' figures

- In 32% of post-program families (n=25 of 78), grandparents read aloud to their grandchild at least once a week post-program (NPC 33% n=18 of 54; RTP 29% n=7 of 24). This is a slight rise from the pre-program which suggested grandparents and extended family read to the babies in 30% of the families (n=27 of 90).

Some mothers reported feeling their beliefs about reading to their babies were 'validated' by the information in the Reading Pack, and this emboldened them to encourage other family members to share books with the baby:

*Always helpful to encourage my husband to read to her.*

*Validation for me and was able to show family and stress importance to them. Validated what I already believed. I didn't realise you should start reading to a baby from birth though and I am glad I learned this now.*

## Parents' perceptions of the value of the Birth to Three program

*Without this pack I would have this doubt in my mind. When do I start reading? I don't have family here so it is very important for me.*

Comments from parents about receiving the program were overwhelmingly positive and reflected one of the program's main aims of '*supporting parents as their child's first and most important teacher*'. Parental feedback indicated that the program affirmed their role and ability to assist their child's early literacy development. The information and resources provided in the Reading Pack introduced the concept of reading to a baby from birth for many first-time parents:

*Knowing that what you're doing is a good thing, not wasted effort. Knowing that it is helping your baby. It helps build a routine every day including reading a book.*

*Good for first time mums and dads who don't know the importance of reading to babies.*

*It's a good reminder about importance of reading books to your baby.*

*It encourages and motivates you to read with your baby; not just an activity or fun bonding exercise, it stimulates her.*

*Lovely surprise. Grateful I was made aware of importance of stimulating baby's mind so early.*

*It's a kick start. The information and encouragement.*

*Brought my attention to the fact that you can read to your child at an early age and the importance of books.*

Parents valued the timeliness and convenience of receiving high quality and age appropriate resources that could be used with their baby from the beginning. For some families, the board book in the Reading Pack was the first book that they had in their home to read aloud to their baby. Parents observed and commented on their baby's engagement with the book, which reinforced the information in the Reading Pack and advice received from the CCHN about the ages and stages of their child's language and early literacy development:

*Has helped my baby to make sounds.*

*It is there when you need it. Offer advice on how to read to your child.*

*Giving me the tools to teach my kids to read and as a 1st time it is very helpful choosing other books to give my kids knowledge.*

Parents' awareness of the services and resources offered by libraries to families with young children was also raised. *Baby Rhyme Time* sessions offered by libraries were seen to be beneficial to both child and parent alike providing interactive and educational activities, and social opportunities. Parents reiterated the importance of free, regular *Baby Rhyme Time* sessions in reducing social isolation.

*I got information about the library and how to help the baby/child's development.*

*Knowing that something is out there.*

*[We] love going to Baby Rhyme Time; good to get out of the house, meet other mums; [my baby] loves seeing other babies.*

*Love them all. We both get a lot out of them. Gets me out of the house.*

*Baby Rhyme Time and Story Time at the library are fabulous and the fact that it is free is fabulous.*

## **Parent case study interviews and video observations as evidence of outcomes in action**

Feedback from the post-program survey clearly demonstrates that a significant number of parents thought that their literacy attitudes, beliefs and practices had all changed in positive ways as an outcome of the *Birth to Three* program. Case study parents (n=9) agreed to be interviewed. Their interviews supported data and comments from the surveys but captured more extended explanations about ways the *Birth to Three* program impacted on family ideas, experiences and practices.

One mother, for example, described in detail how her partner had found the Reading Pack, in particular, the content and layout of information in the parent booklet *Read to Me!* to be extremely useful and practical:

*It also has been very helpful to my partner. He's been able to sit down and read all that information...it taught him how to interact. It's given him confidence in what he's doing. He said, 'I can do that.'... He's actually better at it than I am. He'll make all the noises and he'll point out things. By that time, I'm tired but he'll sit there and read and go here's a lion. He'll point out everything and discuss it.*

To explore the incorporation of the *Birth to Three* key messages and strategies in practice, five of the case study mothers also agreed to be videoed sharing a book with their new baby. This was a new form of data intended to strengthen the original evaluation framework, by providing a link between what parents report and what they actually do in book-sharing activities.

Video observations of mothers and babies sharing the board book *Baby Ways* were successful in providing valuable insights into how parents interpreted the information contained in the Reading Pack and utilised the resources. In all video instances, mothers ensured that the book sharing experience was intimate and relaxed, reaffirming the role that reading together plays in parent-child bonding.

All mothers were observed carrying out at least four or more of the following practices recommended and demonstrated in the *Birth to Three* program:

- Be comfortable and relaxed;
- Read the story out loud;
- Read stories and point to the pictures as you read;
- Talk about the pictures;
- Talk about personal experiences that relate to the story;
- Let your child touch the book;
- Introduce your child to language of the book;
- Improve your child's listening and concentration skills;
- Prepare your child for learning to read;
- Choosing a book with bright pictures and a small amount of print; and
- Having fun sharing books together.

In interviews throughout the evaluation, CCHNs often spoke about the critical importance of 'attachment' – that is, when a parent notices and responds to what a baby needs and likes – and how reading and singing nursery rhymes together were effective and simple ways of achieving this. In several of the videos, **mothers were captured exemplifying attachment practices.** They naturally sat with their baby in a way so that they could see each other's faces and the book which enabled them to share particular moments in the story or allowed the parent to attend to or talk about the child's point of interest on the page.

The videos showed several **mothers reading confidently and also extending the text by relating their baby's experiences to activities described in the book**, such as enjoying baked beans, grabbing the spoon during feeding and having a bath with a favourite toy. The baby's responses to these and other story-related conversations demonstrated how book-sharing can develop and improve a child's listening and concentration skills. When one mother read aloud the stanza about the sleeping baby, she added, "Shhh," and her baby immediately responded

by sitting still and quiet. Mothers were observed pointing to words or pictures on a page in response to their baby's gaze or touching the page. At the end of the book's reading, mothers would hug, kiss and cuddle their babies concluding the experience on a positive and nurturing note.

Many parents in both the surveys and interviews praised the choice of *Birth to Three* resources and commented particularly favourably on the board book *Baby Ways*. The videos clearly captured the effectiveness of the book in action with all the **babies engaged by both its content and format.** In one instance, a seven-month old baby handled, patted and looked at the images on the front and back cover of the book for almost 10 minutes. One mother comfortably handed the board book to her baby clearly unconcerned that the baby could damage or tear the pages. She also commented that he loved to hold the book and would get frustrated if he could not do so. The mirror on the last page of the book elicited a smile of recognition from another baby to which her mother responds with words of encouragement, "Good job!"

## **Community librarians' perceptions of the outcomes of the *Birth to Three* program**

**Community librarians were unanimous in viewing the outcomes of the *Birth to Three* program as outstanding impacting positively on the health, well-being and literacy outcomes of WA children, families and indeed whole communities:**

*Hugely. Hugely, like, I do so many roles for so many programs for adults and juniors for all different ages, but I think Better Beginnings, that is probably the most important thing that we do. Just seeing the impact that it has had on a community. And when you're talking about one in four, one in five people in the country are having literacy problems, and WA, I think, has kicked against that since the introduction of Better Beginnings.*

They described specific outcomes as including:

- An increased number and quality of books available in the home for almost all WA babies;
- Increased incidence of positive family interactions with their babies focused on language, literacy and books;
- Improved family relationships and bonding with babies;
- Higher level of book and literacy related activities in young children;
- Impacting positively on the literacy outcomes of whole communities; and
- Improved professional expertise amongst library professionals.

*I would say my role is to promote literacy, promote stronger families and to promote the library as a community space, those three things. And that's what I usually take to those meetings, and I think Better Beginnings definitely does the first two of those, which is something else relating to the role it plays in strengthening families and parental bonds by reading to each other as well.*

*it is really good for family bonding, it's really good for making that connection. There's parents that haven't read to their... or weren't read to, but over and above that, I think it is that sort of promotion of literacy, and I think that's one of the strongest things that we do, and it's that sort of love of reading. And I've always said it, but I'm actually really seeing it now with my kids.*

Several librarians described the *Birth to Three* program as impacting positively on the children and their families at a community level, with outcomes such as better family improved communication and literacy skills as a social dividend that was potentially protective against problems of social and emotional vulnerability:

*... also, because I've talked to child health nurses and Ngala and that, and there are issues of parents that haven't been chatting to their*

*kids. Drugs, the social conditions happening at homes where domestic violence, all of these things. If they know about these type of things, and how it can affect the bub, actually it helps, and I think, and if we're continually making those comments, that actually is a benefit to say, like go, "Hang on. Look, this little bubby needs to have all this information... I say it to my boss all the time, it's like, "Well, we need to make sure we have someone dealing with early years as a lifespan type of thing, because if we don't have that thing we can then turn around and say, "Well, okay, in 15-20 years that's when we really need these youth workers to help them out. If we don't have... these are the starting blocks...*

## Librarian observations as evidence of outcomes in action

The research observations of librarians delivering *Birth to Three* messages to families through *Baby Rhyme Time* provided powerful affirming evidence of the *Birth to Three* program outcomes in action, particularly:

- A high level of professional expertise and confidence in librarians delivering the *Birth to Three* program;
- Positive interactions between mothers and their children;
- Multiple examples of parents demonstrating confidence in the use of recommended literacy focused strategies; and
- Positive responses from babies to books, rhymes and language-based activities.

The librarians were observed to be animated, cheerful, enthusiastic and patient as they delivered the *Baby Rhyme Time* sessions. In all sessions interactions appeared positive, engaging, friendly and encouraging. The librarians used various forms of positive non-verbal communication, such as eye contact, smiling and other 'happy' facial expressions, modulating their voices, and clapping to keep children



and parents engaged and on task. In three sessions participants were greeted by name on arrival, and their names included in *Hello* songs. One librarian was observed to encourage both parents and children to '*sit closely for better vision and hearing*'. Another praised the children for their '*beautiful singing voices*' and asked them to help her with the props. On the whole the sessions were highly interactive, with both parents and children being asked to actively participate by, for example, predicting what might happen next in the story, performing actions for songs, playing musical instruments, singing, dancing and pointing to images.

For the majority of time the parents appeared to be actively involved in the sessions as they imitated the librarians' actions of singing, shaking hands, blowing kisses, counting with fingers, tickling and lifting babies up and down, covering their eyes, clapping and standing up and down. In one session, the parents walked in a circle for *Round And Round The Garden*, and moved their fingers and hands to represent the spider climbing '*up the water spout*' in *Incy Wincy Spider*. In other sessions parents actively joined in dancing, stamping, rocking, rhythm-making, puppet play and pointing to images in books. One mother held her baby while she danced; another made *Pepper Pig* noises.

Throughout the sessions, parents were seen to encourage their children to imitate the voice, actions and singing of the librarian. Facial expressions and oral language were reinforced as the parents followed the librarian's lead. Parents pointed to pictures and mirror reflections in *Baby Ways* and held their children's hands to guide them through the action movements, moving them in time to the music. Prompts such as, '*your turn now*', were given to their children. Many appeared to know the words of the nursery rhymes and songs as they whispered or sang the words into their baby's ear.

Many parents made eye and physical contact with their babies as they held them in their laps and cuddled them, providing them with words of praise and encouragement. In one session, a parent interacted with the librarian by making friendly comments during the story reading. Parents also helped their children to focus their attention on the librarian by encouraging them to listen and join-in and calling to them to return if they wandered away from the group. Some shy children were particularly encouraged to participate by their parents. The parents were also observed to interact with each other and with each other's children, making eye contact as they did so. They appeared to be relaxed and happy as they smiled and laughed.

Parents of diverse cultural backgrounds attended three sessions in one of the libraries. Some of these parents appeared to be somewhat shy at the beginning of the session, especially when taking part in singing activities, but by the end they appeared to be more relaxed as everyone was singing and imitating the actions for the songs.

Most parents helped their babies imitate the actions of the librarians in the songs and rhymes presented. They used finger movements for *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star*, put their arms over their heads for *Tick Tock*, and counted to ten using their fingers for *This Little Piggy Went to Market*. Arms were moved to imitate the bus wheels in *The Wheels on The Bus*. Some of the babies were too young to join in but their mothers did their best to include them. One child asked if he could give a musical instrument to his baby brother.

The older children were observed to imitate finger rhymes for *Incy Wincy Spider*, *Hickory Dickory Dock* and *Heads And Shoulders*. They generally followed actions, even when using props, and clapped their hands in time with the librarian. Following the librarian's demonstration, these older children mimicked animal sounds, held books in similar ways and opened and closed their hands. During one session the children pretended to be horses and also made a falling out of bed action; in another a child lifted a teddy bear over her head to imitate the librarian.

In another session the librarian produced a parachute in the centre of which she had placed coloured balls for the children to count as they removed them one by one. Babies and toddlers shook bells, tambourines and shakers and pointed to noses, eyes and tummies. The children laughed, squealed, listened intently, looked at the librarian, kicked their legs, turned pages, spun in circles and played peek-a-boo. During the *Old MacDonald* song, another librarian showed the children a horse; then waited. The children responded by saying the word 'horse', and then made neighing sounds. In some sessions children played with puppets and helped clean up the toys after the *Baby Rhyme Time* session had finished.

Several children appeared initially to be very shy and did not join in the singing, but they were repeatedly encouraged to do so by their mothers as they quietly observed their peers. The older children clapped, blew kisses, turned around, swayed and jumped up and down independently. Overall, the babies and young children appeared to be happy and engaged.

### **CCHNs' perceptions of the outcomes of the *Birth to Three* program**

CCHNs described the impact of the program on their work in highly positive terms. They acknowledged the challenge to allocate adequate time during health checks to talk about the Reading Pack and its related messages, but nevertheless CCHNs gave a high priority to the program. This was because of the strong links between the key messages of *Better Beginnings* and core messages they were themselves committed to, as exemplified in Health Department publications such as the *Talking Together* and *Yarning Together* booklets: Including early brain development, language development, secure attachment, bonding.

*"A lot of people... think... 'what's the point reading to a baby? They don't talk much' but... it can hopefully prevent a lot of literacy issues, and a lot of the speech issues that we do get down the track... it just gives parents a different way that they can play, interact, and engage with their child... it gives them some suggestions of what they can do with their baby."*

Some CCHNs used the program as an opportunity to empower mothers with postnatal depression or facing other challenging circumstances.

*"It's a normality that you can do... the one thing you can actually do is pull out a book and read to a child and no-one would ever know that you're falling apart underneath there, so it's something that PND mums really need to be doing a lot of... for any parent where they seem compromised, like ESL clients, where I can see that the mum is terrified of going out, I use the program as a prompt to get them out of the house, because most parents will do anything for a child..."*

CCHNs reiterated the ongoing need for the program and particularly the Reading Pack to reinforce the importance of early book sharing to parents. Particular mention was made about the usefulness of **the pack for parents with English as an Additional Language** where the CCHN could reiterate the importance of modelling and repetition in early language development where, *"children actually learn through imitation and many, many opportunities of practice... and how important it is for the developing brain to hear that language every day, many times through the day."*

For those CCHNs with a long association with delivering the program, it was evident that **the Reading Pack provided a tangible tool when discussing the critical importance of the parent's role in their child's first three years of life in early brain development.**

*"I just hope it continues... a lot of people wouldn't access books if we didn't give the Better Beginnings pack, to spark that interest in reading and literacy and language skills. So, I just hope it continues... It's just, the book, even if it's not that the child's learning about literacy, just the fact that someone sat with them and read the book instead of plonking them in front of TV or letting them play on the iPad, or just not interacting with them. So, the fact that you've sat your child there and interacted, is profound in itself."*

## The impact of the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* years program on library membership, participation and library practices

*The personal introduction to the library [was fantastic]. I have always been a very enthusiastic reader, but wasn't a member of the library. It has helped enormously to have a welcoming community centre for my son and I to visit, with great access to fantastic kids books.*

An overall goal of the *Birth to Three* program is to encourage families to join their local libraries, make good use of the loans services and participate in library activities, and for libraries to maintain or strengthen their positive role in sustaining thriving communities. Feedback on library use and attitudes towards them was collected through:

- Pre and post-program parental surveys;
- Interviews with parents; and
- Interviews and focus groups conducted with library staff.

### Parents' perceptions of the impact of the *Birth to Three* program on their library membership

Survey feedback from parents suggests that engagement in the *Birth to Three* program succeeded in encouraging parents to become members of their local library. Pre-program, just over a third of the NPC participants were adult members of the library. Nearly two thirds of the parents were not members of the local public library. The post-program survey shows a rise in respondent memberships with a further 16 families joining the library after receiving the Reading Pack. Sixteen families also took out a membership for their baby.

Although a rising trend is evident in both the NPC and RTC, the significant difference is weighted from the RTC respondents. Since the survey for this group was conducted at the library, increased membership amongst that particular cohort might be predicted, but is nevertheless encouraging.

The survey also suggests a trend towards an increase in the post-program frequency of family visits to the library, with the percentages of families never visiting the library or visiting once a month falling and the percentages of families visiting fortnightly, once a week or even more regularly rising. Again, it should be noted that library visits are most evident amongst the RTC, of whom 87% (n=13 of 15) visited the library once a week or more.

Participation in the *Birth to Three* program appears to have encouraged more parents who visited the library to borrow books for their babies. Of the NPC families surveyed who did visit the library pre-program, only about 20% (n=10 of 51), borrowed books for their babies, whereas post program, 63% (n=26 of 41) of families borrowed books specifically for their babies (NPC 54% n=14 of 26; RTC, 80%, n=12 of 15). Respondents (particularly RTC) also indicated that if they were members of the library pre-program, they tended to borrow more items for their child post-program:

- NPC: 13% (n=2 of 16) borrowed more items; 69% (n=11 of 16) borrowed about the same; and
- RTC: 53% (n=9 of 17) borrowed more items; 41% (n=7 of 17) borrowed about the same.

Table 17: Frequency of pre and post program library visits

	NPC Pre-Program	NPC Post Program	RTC Post Program	Combined total Post Program NPC+RTC
Never	45.28%, n=24 of 53	17.39%, n=4 of 23	0.00%, n=0 of 15	10.53%, n=4 of 38
Once a month	33.96%, n=18 of 53	8.70%, n=2 of 23	6.67%, n=1 of 15	7.89%, n=3 of 38
Once every 2 weeks	13.21% n=7 of 53	30.43%, n=7 of 23	6.67%, n=1 of 15	21.10%, n=8 of 38
Once a week	3.77% n=2 of 53	34.78% n=8 of 23	60.00%, n=9 of 15	44.74%, n=17 of 38
More than once a week	3.77% n=2 of 53	8.70% n=2 of 23	26.67%, n=4 of 15	15.79%, n=6 of 38

While 62% (n= 53 of 85) of parents surveyed post-program (NPC 77%, n=44 of 57; RTC 32%, 9 of 28) had not taken out library membership for their child it appeared that the generous number of items that can be borrowed made it easy for parents to borrow a range of material:

*The librarian did say that I could join baby at (the?) time when I was joining but didn't because I can take out so many books on my card; something I will do when baby is older.*

The most popular items that were borrowed by parents at the library were:

- Board books (NPC: 30%, n=6 of 20; RTC: 29%, n=14 of 49);
- JK/picture books (NPC: 30% n=6 of 20; RTC 39%, n=19 of 49); followed by,
- Parenting books (NPC: 15%, n=3 of 20; RTC: 16%, n=8 of 49); and,
- E-resources (NPC: 10%, n=2 of 20; RTC: 12% n=6 of 49).

One reason given for not borrowing books was the fear of the baby damaging them:

*Baby loves Baby Rhyme Time when we're able to attend; Baby is eating books at the moment so don't always take out library books – not because of hygiene issues but don't want to damage books.*

This provides another sound justification for the inclusion of a baby board book in the Reading Pack rather than relying on loan systems.

## Parents' perceptions of the impact of the Baby Rhyme Time sessions

Feedback from families about *Baby Rhyme Time* was overwhelmingly positive:

*Baby Rhyme Time has been fantastic for both me and my child. My son has been introduced to a structured group environment and enjoys listening to instructions and participating in the activities. I have enjoyed meeting other parents and library staff.*

More than three quarters of post-program respondents (82%, n= 42 of 51), said they were attending sessions at the library (NPC 73% n=16 of 22; RTC: 90%, n=26 of 29); and many of these families were attending either weekly or fortnightly:

- Weekly attendance: 58%, n= 22 of 38 (NPC: 57% n=8 of 14; RTC: 58%, n=14 of 24); and
- Fortnightly attendance: 21%, n= 8 of 38 (NPC: 29% n=4 of 14 RTC: 17%, n=4 of 24).

A number of parents cited *Baby Rhyme Time* as the main factor motivating them to visit the library regularly with their babies. Word-of-mouth recommendations at mothers' group or via online forums such as Facebook were the main source of promotion of these activities for some mothers. Some mothers cited the sessions as not only beneficial for their babies but also opportunities to socialise with other parents and seek advice on age appropriate books from library staff:

*Baby enjoys going to Baby Rhyme Time; [it's] good to read books along with other mums and babies... [I] didn't realise how much he would enjoy listening to nursery rhymes.*



*We love going to Baby Rhyme Time; it's good to get out of the house, meet other mums; [my daughter] loves seeing other babies.*

*Only used library once before Baby Rhyme Time; but we now come weekly to go to Baby Rhyme Time; my baby loves joining in at Baby Rhyme Time.*

*My baby likes to interact with other children, look at people and enjoys Baby Rhyme Time sessions.*

*It re-acquainted me with nursery rhymes. The physical props were great and gave me ideas. My baby is a bit young for it but it gave me a real boost. It's great for me.*

*Love them all. We both get a lot out of them. Gets me out of the house.*

**The parents surveyed provided strong support for the significance of the *Birth to Three* program in helping both adults find social connection with others and providing experiences in which babies can learn about social interactions.** This finding is particularly interesting in the light of recent AEDC findings highlighting the social and emotional vulnerabilities of many young children, and the positive role of strong, socially connected communities in reducing developmental vulnerability amongst their children<sup>15</sup>.

Those parents who were not attending *Baby Rhyme Time* sessions stated a variety of reasons including that session times that were 'too early' or coincided with baby's sleep times; difficulty with getting to the library where they did not drive; the demands on parents who were very busy or who had returned to work; finding that their child did not settle in the session and they were concerned about the disruption; and one with an older child who found the session did not match their interest level:

*My youngest is four in July, it has been offered, however I believe her developmental skills are above this program as to be expected at her age.*

Several parents voiced disappointed that *Baby Rhyme Time* sessions were not held during school holiday periods.

The difficulties of families in attending re-iterates the requirement for libraries and community services to work closely with their individual communities in evaluating local needs, and being flexible in offering a variety of options to draw everyone in.

### **Parents' perceptions of their interaction with library staff**

*I am a new member to the library, however in the short time we have attended I am so impressed by the librarians they are so patient, encouraging and do such a great job enhancing the children's overall experience.*

Post-program survey data suggests that many respondents reported that visiting the library and participating in library activities such as *Baby Rhyme Time* not only supported their baby directly, but also provided them with useful information about what was available, and how they could access resources and services. When parents visited the library either independently or as part of their mothers' group visit with their CCHN:

- 67% (N=38 of 57) indicated that library staff assisted them in finding age appropriate books for their babies (NPC: 64%: n=21 of 33; RTC: 71%, n=17 of 24);
- 60% (n=35 of 58) were introduced to the facilities available in the library (NPC: 50% n=16 of 32: RTC: 73%, n=19 of 26);
- 58%, (n=32 of 55) were encouraged to join the library (NPC: 47% n=14 of 30; RTC: 72%, n=18 of 25);
- 60% (n=32 of 53) were introduced to the *Better Beginnings* activities on offer (NPC: 45% n=13 of 29: RTC: 79%, n= 19 of 24); and
- 49% (n=24 of 49) were shown the *Better Beginnings Discovery Back Reading Packs* for 2-3 year olds (NPC: 45%, n=13 of 29: RTC 55% 11 of 20).

*I love going to these so professionals can point me in the right direction and I meet other mothers.*

15. See Report section on AEDC data sets

Several parents commented on concerns they had about bringing their young children to the library and the importance of the attitudes of librarians in making the library a welcoming place:

*The librarian's encouragement to bring the kids into the library and still let them be kids (noisy, active) and to borrow books without stressing about books being bent or torn was a big factor in my attitude changing to using the library for kids.*

While most feedback suggested librarians were providing appropriate information, a few comments in the survey suggested that not all parents received the assistance they wanted:

*I would have liked the librarian to show me where age-appropriate books for [my baby] are. She doesn't like books with too many words and I would have liked more guidance to help to find the right books.*

This, perhaps, re-enforces the need for community librarians to maintain a continual watch with regards to the parents in their communities, to develop and implement local evaluation processes to monitor the effectiveness of their local *Better Beginnings* provisions, and to sustain vigilance in ensuring all families receive the support and encouragement they want.

### **Community librarians' perceptions of the impact of the *Birth to Three* program on library practices**

The establishment and growth of the *Better Beginnings* program as part of a public library's core service has clearly impacted the way that library staff view and carry out their role as facilitators and supporters of early literacy development within their communities. Library staff observed that as a result of delivering the *Birth to Three* program they had experienced increased awareness of the library within the community and demand for outreach services which resulted in links with new agencies and organisations:

*The community is requesting more from us in terms of, "Can you come out to us, and tell us about the library?" and the bags are the things that have kind of initiated that..."Oh, we've*

*heard that you give out free bags, what does that involve?" so then I go into, "Well, it involves me coming out and reading a story to the kids, talking about what's available in the library" and because the services of the library have changed a lot that ignites their interest and they're like, "Oh! I didn't know the library offered all of that," and so, it kind of has a snowball effect... getting out into the child care centres is also something that we didn't do before...*

*There's been an increase. I mean, a lot of groups organising themselves are using us as a resource, which is awesome. And then throughout our outreach programs where we go to other day cares or we go to other family health centres... trying to get as many people to know that it's important.*

*Baby Rhyme Time* sessions regularly held at libraries offered opportunities for library staff to meet and engage with families that have received Reading Packs through the CCHN. Reported attendance figures varied greatly between libraries and between sessions: from 10 to 40 parents and children, depending on the library's approach with some capping the sessions to an optimal number. Almost all librarians commented that the demand for *Baby Rhyme Time* sessions had increased, sometimes by 50% from when the program commenced to the present. In some cases, the increase in numbers presented problems of space, and occasional concerns for the appropriate safety of larger numbers. Some librarians also noted that physical spaces dedicated to early literacy had diminished due to competing demands from other sectors of library users.

*The space is like, always change, because you know, I mean, kids or parents like some new things, you know? So, we move shelves sometimes to create more space... we change, according to... for example, the LOTE program, we have sizeable lots of books here compared to other libraries...*

A number of libraries responded to space and group size issues by increasing the frequency of sessions and the number of sessions being offered from weekly to twice weekly.

Most librarians reported an increase in library membership and book loans with specific reference to high usage of JK (Junior Kindergarten) picture books and board books related to under 5 age group:

*We definitely have had a big increase in our membership here at [Library]. We've had big major membership drives in the past couple of years.*

*We definitely have a lot of children. We've got a big family orientated area, and we have a lot more multicultural families as well.*

*Board books, yeah, they would be about... I reckon that about half [of all children's loans].*

*JK Picture Books. That's three quarters of our collection are often out at the one time, much to the amazement of my boss.*

Library staff said that they sought opportunities to promote the growing number of e-resources that were freely available to families with young children, the newest addition to the suite being *Story Box Library*, an Australian picture book website featuring the work of Australian creators. However, this was mainly with reference to children aged over five, and, particularly the target audience of the *Better Beginnings* Kindergarten program.

### **CCHNs' perceptions of the impact of the Birth to Three program on library practices**

CCHNs interviewed offered interesting perspectives about the role and value of *Birth to Three* program library practices. In addition to the resources provided through the Reading Pack and loan services, **the program was also seen as a 'platform' for CCHNs to tackle social isolation, which they considered to be a significant issue for many new parents.** After mentioning *Baby Rhyme Time* during the delivery of the Reading Pack at the 6-8 week check, several CCHNs said they would repeatedly raise attendance at subsequent visits with parents, particularly for those that they felt needed social support.

Libraries were strongly promoted by some CCHNs as a non-threatening, informal environment where parents could "*tap into*" activities such as *Baby Rhyme Time* sessions.

*I would ask what their networks are, "Have you got a playgroup that you're going to?" or, "Have you got an early parent group that you're still catching up with?" When they're saying no to those, and they feel a bit hesitant, I say, "Do you know that even just going to the library, they do that every Tuesday and Friday," and just letting them know that network's there.*

*Baby Rhyme Time* sessions were regarded by CCHNs as a vital aspect of the program with some commenting on being aware that sessions at the local library were well-attended or that the library had introduced additional sessions to accommodate increased demand. From engaging with the community to pro-actively supporting child's literacy development, CCHNs considered that the ongoing delivery of this service was an intrinsic and essential component of the *Birth to Three* program:

*I've spoken to mothers who they've had their baby, child on a waiting list for speech therapist, in the meantime I've encouraged them to go to Baby Rhyme Time and they've been astounded at the progress and development in their child just through going to Baby Rhyme Time... It's setting up that pattern of, "We go to the library. We've got Baby Rhyme Time today. We go along. We sit down. We focus. We listen," ... It's not just about the literacy. It's listening and following instructions.*

*I think the actual Baby Rhyme Time is very vital. I think that half an hour at the library every week is so important, and I think for more than just the literacy point of view... from a child health nurse's point of view, engaging clients within their own community, and the library is an ideal place for people to meet and to go and... to have opportunity to have more resources there.*

# The relationship between the *Birth to Three* program and other early literacy initiatives

## Relationships across the different *Better Beginnings* programs

The *Birth to Three* program was the foundational program of *Better Beginnings*, first piloted in 2004. Additional programs have been introduced over recent years, with a goal of providing resources and support to families from Birth to School age. In addition to the **Birth to Three** program, *Better Beginnings* now includes: *Sing with Me* program (2-4years); and the *Kindergarten* program (4-5years), as well as *Read To Me: I Love It!* a program dedicated to supporting remote Aboriginal communities. All libraries delivering the *Birth to Three* program also delivered the *Kindergarten* program and regarded it as an important continuum and platform for reinforcing key messages about parental involvement in children's literacy development.

For some libraries, the suite of literacy activities conducted under the umbrella of *Better Beginnings* had expanded still further to include the *Learning English Through Storytime (LETS)* program aimed at parents and children under five years with English as an Additional Language. For some librarians the distinction between *Better Beginnings* and other library initiatives concerned with young children was not clear, and did not appear to matter greatly, as they all had the same kinds of underpinning philosophy and intent:

*Well, there's Story Time, Baby Rhyme Time, I hadn't actually thought about Coffee and Cuddles under that type of... under the Better Beginnings brand, but I guess you could in some ways say that also falls under them too. And we do run LETS as well, which is the Learning English through Storytime.*

Whilst each *Better Beginnings* offering has been designed with a distinctive focus, and an associated Reading Pack is delivered to the child at a relevant age point, librarians recognise a blurring of

boundaries between them; and between them and other library offerings. In practice, children of variable ages may attend any of the *Better Beginnings* sessions: sometimes because they are better suited to a different age focus, sometimes because they come in a family group of mixed aged children, and sometimes because the library combines aspects of different programs into one offering, as a way of managing small numbers or staff shortages. And sometimes *Better Beginnings* provisions are delivered in an integrated way with other initiatives:

*... we run a few little programs besides Baby Rhyme Time and Story Time. On Thursdays we run Coffee and Cuddles, which is for mums [with babies] from zero to about 18 months, and we've got three year olds that come to that as well, which is a drop-in centre, and we're making that as a way of organisations coming in and talking to parents, like Irwine Women's Health, Clan Irwine; child health nurses.*

Library staff observed that they would usually explicitly point out the connections between different *Better Beginnings* programs during face-to-face presentations, and sometimes children, parents and teachers would make links through the branding and packaging (such as the 'Yellow Reading Pack') or recognition of the book received in the *Birth to Three* Reading Pack. The links between the *Birth to Three* program and the *Kindergarten* program were also strengthened in mutually supportive ways through interactions in local schools:

*From what I've heard from feedback from teachers... I ask them, "What are you seeing in the classroom?" and I'm getting a lot of positive feedback from teachers about, "Yes. We absolutely love this program..."*



*We're getting invited out to... school expos to promote the Better Beginnings program so that parents are getting that information again about, "Even though they're 4, you can still be reading to them at home and doing all those sort of things, and singing to them and taking them to the programs at the library and things like that."*

*[The Birth to Three and the Kindergarten programs] are quite separate, In terms of promoting the program, it's quite separate, but in terms of the individual child's literacy, definitely is connected.*

Library staff reported confidence in working across the programs and were often able to make local adaptations across them to suit the libraries, schools and communities. They appreciated the flexibility the SLWA allowed them to work creatively to "make it work" at a local level.

The SLWA leadership team and community librarians felt that **much progress had been made towards achieving a 'seamless flow' across the different Better Beginnings programs**, however, they were able to identify a number of refinements needed to maximise the potential benefits of the continuum, many of which have already been noted elsewhere in this report, and were already on the SLWA agenda for attention, for example:

- The naming of Reading Packs should be made more consistent, so there is a stronger *Better Beginnings* identity and clearer understandings for parents about who should get which Reading Pack and when;
- Amending information provided to parents to explicitly encourage continued engagement from birth, through each of the Reading Packs and associated activities until the child is of school age; and
- Keeping a focus on developing *Better Beginnings* as a 'brand' that is well recognised and understood.

## Relationships between the Birth to Three program and other initiatives

Many community librarians liaised with local childcare organisations or welfare or education agencies to assist in the distribution of the *Birth to Three* Reading Pack, for example: Indigenous home visiting services, foster parent groups, Aboriginal health services and childcare centres:

*...we've got a couple of childcare centre, child health centres that actually pick them up and they do tend to give them to them. If I find out that the parents haven't received one, like a new mum's group, I often will go and give one to them, and then just put in there.*

*...we deliver the info sessions to parents, or sometimes, [the CCHNs] come over here to pick up some bags, you know, to deliver to parents when they do any immunizations for children, yep. We also give out some bags to library customers or users.*

*[and through] KindiLink, that is the child and parents and run by the Smith Family. Yep, I visit them, and then they will come to visit us as well. I mean, just happens.*

*AMEP [Adult Migrant English program]. I used to go there once a term to read stories to children there, but the adults would go for English class there for the care centre to take care for the baby, so I go there once a term to read a story and sing a story and then deliver the yellow bag, and inform what services we have in the library, and they came here. Yeah, that is the addition I can add on.*

Some community librarians identified a range of alternative ways they sought to deliver *Birth to Three* Reading Pack to families, through community events:

*We do deliver these Packs to, like, special event, like, say, Harmony Day, for example.*

*... if we have any special events... like, say, Harmony Day, for example, we always promote our Better Beginnings material, and sometimes, we do give away the Better Beginnings Pack to an appropriate aged group of people. Like, say, a parent [might have] a baby of, like, say, less than two years old, and we would give them one year so that they could enjoy.*

**The determined and creative strategies of committed and passionate community librarians was often responsible for making connections with families that live in vulnerable circumstance and that have, 'slipped through the net elsewhere'.**

Library staff were typically very aware of the importance of liaising with other groups concerned with early childhood and literacy. In the past, their main *Birth to Three* contacts had been with health services through the CCHNs, but they reported that in recent times the number of agencies providing services to families and young children had both grown and diversified. This has created quite a **complex early childhood environment and they found it required more time and energy to collaborate with the changing organisational structures, policies, and staff.**

Some library staff still conducted parent information talks as part of the early parenting group sessions offered through subcontracted agencies such as Ngala rather than by the Health Department. In addition, where they could be organised, these sessions remained a useful way for library staff to introduce parents to relevant services, such as *Baby Rhyme Time*, and to collections including the parenting and board books. Librarians reported that they covered topics ranging from early brain development to promoting specific library materials, such as magazines for recreational reading or in languages other than English. Attendance at these sessions varied from around 2 to 15.

Several of the community librarians interviewed noted that the commitment to early literacy through the *Birth to Three* program had grown and deepened over time, often leading to the introduction of

additional local initiatives supporting similar objective. Some libraries had become a pivotal point in cross-sector liaisons, contributing significantly to community capacity building by bringing new parents together and linking services:

*And sometimes [life for new parents] is really hard, which is the reason why we actually started this Coffee and Cuddles, was because [community] is so big and parents didn't know where to go. Parents know where to come to get information. If it helps with their health as well, post-natal, because they've got to know that there's someone that they can come to, have a chat to. We can point them in the right areas, and parents also, it's easier to have a chat to parents but one-on-one with each other, to know that, "Okay, your Johnny isn't sleeping," "Oh, yeah, my little Sam didn't sleep very well at this age either," so we can actually go and they can say, "Well, what did you do?" and they've got that better idea and they feel a bit more secure as well.*

**Participation in early years networks was regarded as important for libraries to link with relevant agencies and promote their role in early literacy development.** Some library staff attend monthly meetings where they engaged with not for profit agencies and childcare service providers and learn about or collaborate on community literacy initiatives such as *Paint the Town REaD*:

*I also take part in a [town] Early Years group, which is a number of community groups in the... area that operate such as Smith Family, that also operate a number of playgroups, early learning centres...*

*So, often, I'm in those meetings really touting Better Beginnings as well. Well, again, the [local Early Years Group] which is made up all of these groups, as well as a whole bunch of other not for profits... like, we worked together the other week on the national simultaneous Story Time, and we're doing the Paint The Town REaD at the moment.*

The *Let's Read* program, while operating in some areas, had ceased to operate in others due to funding cuts, while one community was a site for the Dolly Parton Imagination Library program administered by not-for-profit organisation, United Way. Opinions varied as to the way in which these programs could be considered as duplicating, competing or complementing the *Better Beginnings* program with some involved in supporting or directly contributing funds to other programs. There was seen to be a need for a greater oversight of the provision of programs so that agencies could look at areas of responsibility in order to avoid duplication and the potential of "information or message overload" for families.

*... two years ago, some of the librarians, they introduce an idea from the Eastern States... I'm not sure which state... it's called LETS, Learning English Through Story Time. That is mainly to help parents of children, they want to enhance their English [confidence] level. It's a small group of Story Time sessions. It's a bit like Better Beginnings...*

Some librarians also spoke about making connections with non-library based groups adopting *Better Beginnings* strategies to provide early years and family support in different community settings for example prisons:

*It's a private organisation which deals with Family Baby Rhyme Time... like where you've got [parents] in jails, and parents have got babies, and to keep them... keep that bonding going, and knowing how to look after bub, and things like that, they've got this training that you learn the rhymes off rote.*

## **SLWA perspectives on cross sector liaison and collaboration**

The SLWA focus group felt that one important advantage of the recent organisational restructure, was an increased capacity to work to 'deepen the level

and quality of the engagement' by collaborating with non-government agencies who already had trusted relationships with community groups that were difficult for librarians and child health nurses to access:

*We're really consolidating how we're working with [particular] communities and deepening the reach of the program to families in those communities that perhaps haven't been engaging with the program.*

With the former *Better Beginnings* team now part of the State Library's Participation and Learning team, they were able to draw upon the knowledge, expertise and connections of the wider pool of members. For example, the team member responsible for adult literacy explained that, since the restructure, she had helped facilitate the use of *Better Beginnings* in adult migrant programs and also in prisons. Additionally, *Better Beginnings* Reading Packs and *Baby Rhyme Time* sessions were now being delivered to a crèche at a metropolitan TAFE, while the parents attended adult migrant English programs. Another described how, in conjunction with a Save the Children parenting support program, librarians were delivering *Baby Rhyme Time* and *Story Time* to playgroups in prisons, and also provided support and information at library-based sessions where parents were shown how to access library programs and services.

The *Better Beginnings* training team had been approached by several non-government organisations to train parents in early literacy. One member attributed this to community recognition that the team was providing high quality training and that there was a "lack of commercially available training in this space." She could see potential for *Better Beginnings* to "lead the way in training parents in early childhood literacy":

*We are developing more and more partnerships as we go with other service providers that are providing more holistic services to parents with a child from age zero to five.*

## CCHNs' perspectives on the relationship between the *Birth to Three* program and other initiatives

CCHNs shared the librarians' perspectives on the importance of collaboration across agencies. In interviews, they often stated that they valued their connections across agencies, and felt that liaison groups such as Early Years Networks were very productive, and had encouraged them to be active users and promoters of the *Birth to Three* program:

*Oh, highly important. I'm very sure that that Better Beginnings wouldn't have had such a high standing in my output if I hadn't met [the librarian] and been part of the [local] Early Years Group... So, I've been part of that little group, and so when you can put a name to a face, and you hear at each visit what each person is doing, it does make a difference. So it's highly important.*

CCHNs referred parents to other services dependent on their child's needs including home visiting nurses, Best Beginnings, a home visiting service for families of new infants administered by the State Government Department of Communities, Child Protection and Family Support, *Sing and Grow*, a national music therapy program, and speech pathologists. A few CCHNs spoke about the literacy issues facing young children in particular communities and the need for *Better Beginnings* and other targeted early literacy initiatives, such as the *HIPPY* program for Aboriginal children. Other community literacy initiatives that CCHNs were aware of included the *REaD* program promoting reading and literacy events and activities across a range of agencies from government to non-profit; *Simultaneous Story time*, a national story reading event held in libraries, schools and other related organisations; and the *Learning English Through Storytime* program (LETS) being run by libraries for families with English as an Additional Language.

## Stakeholder's perspectives on *Better Beginnings*

The Rio Tinto Senior Advisor of Community Investment contributed to the evaluation through an open-ended interview conducted by and independent researcher. The following narrative was constructed from a transcript and captures the key points of the interview.

Rio Tinto's Senior Community Investment Advisor has responsibility for managing the partnership with the State Library in relation to *Better Beginnings*. Although she had not been involved with *Better Beginnings* since its commencement and did not know all of the different programs intimately, she was involved in current policy making, actions and communications, and was able to provide powerful insights and observations from a Rio Tinto perspective that included feedback relevant to the *Birth to Three* program.

Rio Tinto has been involved with *Better Beginnings* since its inception. As an industry partner, it has collaborated with the State Government and the Royalties for Regions, to provide support through funding, promotions and publicity. Where possible the active involvement of employees is also encouraged in a volunteering capacity, or some in-kind or pro bono work or even as a parent... *"it's important for us that our employees are aware of the partnerships that we have with community groups, and that they can engage."*

### Alignment of values and goals

The Rio Tinto senior advisor reported that their Community Investment Strategy had recently been refined however, commitment to education, "...remains a cornerstone..." School readiness has been reaffirmed as one of three current educational priorities:

*...so, early childhood education, of which Better Beginnings obviously falls straight into ...is an absolutely essential part of what our outcomes are for the future... to ensure that all young children are getting access to the facilities and to the resources required to ensure early literacy and school readiness.*



The Community Investment Strategy demonstrates priorities and values that align perfectly with *Better Beginnings*, as well as articulating specific deliverables that are shared. In addition to commitment to education, Rio Tinto also has a shared concern for the well-being of rural and remote communities:

*Our mission is to deliver positive and lasting benefits to the regions where our staff live and where our operations are located. So, if we look at that in terms of education, we believe that all children across the state have the right to have access to education, and that goes from whether they're at school or prior to that as well.*

### Organisation and management of the partnership relationship

The Rio Tinto senior advisor reported on some organisational changes that impacted on their internal management of their partnership relationship with SLWA. Initially, Rio Tinto's community investment model was a future fund, with an external board that had oversight of investment in the community. Recently the external board has been disbanded, and reporting is now to an internal executive board. The original team of four community investment advisors has reduced to three, and although she felt they were, "...a little bit under-resourced," she did not feel that much had changed in terms of the "on the ground relationship."

### Liaison between Rio Tinto and the State Library

The senior advisor maintains contact with the SLWA through two key contacts in the *Better Beginnings* team (now incorporated into Participation and Learning). There is not a schedule of formal meetings, but a flexible arrangement to meet as required... "It's probably occasional and as required, so there's no kind of specific set times, but we do try and just catch up on a regular basis or if there's something that comes up."

From the senior advisor's point of view this kind of relationship worked effectively:

*You know, for us it's very important that we work hard to build and maintain the relationships with our partners so, you know, I think we do have very open transparent relationships where we can bring up any issues or obviously providing feedback, positive, negative and otherwise.*

However, although the on-going relationship is relaxed, it is underpinned with a set of more formal documents and agreements, and the company expects there to be a regular presentation of formal reports supported by data:

*Yes, so we have a funding agreement in place, and that has a number of set deliverables. One of those is around reporting, so they (SLWA) are required to deliver an annual report and an audited financial report, and then usually it's about a six-monthly report, so six months outside of that annual report, and that would be just reporting back on some of the deliverables... probably... once a year we would do a report to the board, a bit of a showcase of the partnership.*

*Data collection is part of the objectives of the funding agreement, so it might be that they report on how many Reading Packs are going out, or how many people are engaged in the Better Beginnings programs... I do think that State Library does it better than many, better than a lot of other partners. As I said, with this kind of research [the ECU evaluation] it's fantastic.*

## Rio Tinto perspectives on the implementation of *Better Beginnings*

Although the senior advisor was seldom involved in the day to day running of *Better Beginnings*, there were several elements of its implementation that she identified as contributing to its effectiveness, including:

The quality and commitment of the *Better Beginnings* 'people'; and the quality of the training for *Better Beginnings* library staff, "...which is really important..."

*I know that our local library is very proactive and the guy who runs the childhood program is just brilliant. That's partly personality, partly passion but the training probably is quite an important part of that.*

The very particular attention that the *Better Beginnings* program pays to the families they support, and to ensuring they provide for cultural diversity and differing needs and abilities of children and their parents:

*It's a pretty good program, and from what I can see, is that the library is very good at adapting the program to the needs of the consumers, I guess you could call it, the users, so for example, the Indigenous program has been really specifically developed for the needs of that community. They're currently working on the program with visibility for audio books and Braille books and touchy-feely books for children that have got sight challenges. So, I think that they're really good at doing that.*

## Rio Tinto perspectives on the outcomes of *Better Beginnings*

The senior advisor acknowledged the difficulties of measuring direct cause and effect impacts of *Better Beginnings*, both because of the long-term perspective required to evaluate outcomes and the highly complex nature of educational and social change. Nevertheless, she reported confidently

on a range of highly positive outcomes of *Better Beginnings*, from a Rio Tinto point of view. These included:

- Improvements in the number of families reading to their children from a young age;
- Improvements in literacy levels of school readiness and literacy;
- Improvements in the quality of both quantitative and qualitative feedback on *Better Beginnings*:

*We do really appreciate some of that more quantitative feedback.... the incredible statistics about how many Reading Packs have been delivered to Western Australian families, how many schools have actually signed up to the Kindy program, which I believe is now 98 percent of West Australian schools, I mean, that's quite an incredible statistic.*

- Demonstrated effectiveness in achieving a comprehensive community impact:

*One of the things that we love about the *Better Beginnings* program is that it can reach every corner of the State and every single family, and it does a really good job of that.*

- Improvements in the quality and 'liveability' of communities for employees to live in:

*We have operations in the Pilbara region, so that's a very big focus for us... but we also run a regional fly-in, fly-out program from several towns in Western Australia... it means that if people want to be employed by Rio Tinto, they don't have to drive to Perth... and they can still live in their towns.*

- The development of a future work force for regional and remote work sites: All these children are the potential pool of employees for our future, so that is ... yeah, it's very important.

- Improvements in the well-being and educational advancement of Aboriginal families:

*We have a target within our business for Indigenous employment, and so we focus a lot of energy and resources in ensuring that our traditional owner groups that we work with in the Pilbara have got access to education [so]... that they have the skills which may one day enable them to become employees.*

### Challenges, barriers and opportunities for improvements from a Rio Tinto perspective

The Rio Tinto senior advisor acknowledged that there were challenges to be faced and opportunities for further developments and improvements in the *Better Beginnings* program.

**Networking across partnerships:** Rio Tinto has several early childhood educational partnerships in addition to *Better Beginnings*, but collaboration and connection between them is rare:

*We're the education partner for Scitech and as part of their Statewide touring program they do an early childhood program which is looking at... really similar values. It's about how parents can engage with their children from zero to five years of age around play-based science inquiry. So, they'll take little science exhibits out to community groups, playgroups, libraries and do little programs. So that's got a bit more of a science STEM focus but very similar.*

The advisor was aware of the potential for some shared interaction between the Scitech educational program and *Better Beginnings* although nothing had actually happened:

*There's been some discussions about it because Scitech also does like a DIY science kit that they can send out to community groups and libraries and that kind of thing. So there has been some talk about how the *Better Beginnings* program can do something similar.*

The senior advisor saw many possibilities for mutually beneficial links to be made between their various partners:

*There's an alignment with them, that some of them are doing similar programs, for example, one of our other partners is Music Aviva, and they are just starting to talk about a new Indigenous program looking at music and lullabies in Noongar language, so I immediately saw a link there with what *Better Beginnings* was doing with their *Sing to Me* program.*

There are definitely opportunities in future to explore potential connections more fully.

**Resource restrictions:** The senior advisor was aware that the restrictions on library resources, both human and financial, place limits on the further development of the program:

*I guess one thing I would say, and it's like any partnership and any organisation is having more resources to do more, because they've obviously got lots of great ideas, and it always comes down to resources. Whether that's financial or actual human resources.*

And better publicity for the *Better Beginnings* program was one area she identified for development:

*I guess in terms of promoting more widely, it would be great if we had more money to promote it and do, you know, advertising campaigns. More really just about awareness.*

**Data collection and evaluation:** Whilst the senior advisor spoke with confidence and enthusiasm about the on-going research of *Better Beginnings*, and appreciated SLWAs current commitment made to measurement and evaluation, she identified the collection and analysis of complex longitudinal data as a significant and on-going challenge:

*...it's a challenge across the sector. It's how do we measure the outcomes and the impacts of these programs, particularly over the longer term. You know, can we say that the program is going to make a smarter, more creative thinking population in the future? Who knows. It's very difficult.*

**Public awareness of Rio Tinto's role in Better Beginnings:**

*Perhaps one other comment I'll make is actually how much awareness the public has of Rio's involvement, which is something that we're probably not... don't really know.*

The need to demonstrate outcomes to the Board extended beyond educational and community goals to include issues of business recognition:

*There is a change in the economic times and we do want to see more return for our investment, the brand and reputation is a really key part of that. It's very important for our business to have that recognition.*

Although Rio Tinto conducts regular community audience surveys asking if people can recall who the principal partner is or any of the other sponsors, this is not currently done in relation to *Better Beginnings*. The lack of community awareness and support for Rio Tinto's community investments could become a risk factor for the company, "We need to do more to demonstrate our support of the community and show what we do. Tell our story really."

**Sustainability:** Whilst Rio Tinto has maintained long-standing financial support for *Better Beginnings*, sustainability is a key part of their community investment strategy, so they do have a concern about the viability of all their programs:

*One thing that we always keep in mind, ... is the program sustainable outside of our financial support. So are there ways that the program can be financially sustainable into the future, you know, if we weren't there after 20 years or something like that. How would that program run?*

At the same time, the senior advisor also stressed the importance of the program being free to all:

*One thing I love about the program is that it's free, and it's like many programs, as soon as you put a price on that, how much uptake do you get. And again it comes down to that fundamental right to access education, that everyone should have that access regardless of whether they can pay for it or not.*

**Maintaining momentum:** *Better Beginnings* has been running for more than a decade and has been highly successful, but maintaining momentum can be a problem:

*One concern I have already mentioned it is that we can always do more to be more engaged with the partnership ... our last meeting we had a great meeting about the communications plan going forward, so we've got some really nice activities and things that are the focus going forward. So, I think both for Rio Tinto and the State Library, it's just a matter of maintaining that momentum and, you know, where possible promoting it and telling the stories. Yeah.*

Despite the success of *Better Beginnings* there is still much to achieve, so it is critical that the program continues to maintain its impetus into the future:

*I guess thinking about the longer term outcomes, I really hope that the literacy levels continue to improve, and that has a real benefit for Western Australia as a State and the economic future.*



## Challenges, barriers and recommendations for improvement

Across all surveys and interviews, participants in the evaluation were overwhelmingly positive and appreciative about the intentions, design, implementation and outcomes they associated with the *Birth to Three* program.

However, contributors were also able to comment on challenges and barriers to the on-going success of the program and make suggestions about ways it could be improved still further. Many of these issues have been raised throughout this report and are reiterated here in summary form.

### Parents' suggestions for improvements

When parents were asked for suggestions to improve the Reading Pack, their recommendations included:

- Providing additional and different books to give alternatives to families with more than one baby, and allow for even better matches to families' needs and interests for example in the case of culturally and linguistically diverse families;
- Exploiting digital technologies more fully to support the program; and
- Offering more explicit but timely guidance at the time of pack delivery or at a follow-up mothers' group session.

### Providing additional and different books

While the majority of parents and babies enjoyed the book in the pack, several parents with other children mentioned receiving the same book in the past:

*[It would be good to get], different books so you don't get the same book for each child.*

*Getting same pack and information the third time; I felt like it was a waste of resources that I didn't use.*

*Would be great if a few different Reading Packs so if you already received one can have a different one. I learnt a lot first time I received pack and nurse explained it to me and from Baby Rhyme Time and Story time but now too busy to go.*

There were also a number of comments about having "more books" in the pack:

*More books would be good but one is a good start; ... include more reading books, nursery rhymes, and other activities age appropriate.*

*For me I would like more books in the package.*

*Would love more books.*

*Please include more board books, small ones for small fingers.*

And there were also a few comments about having "better books" in the pack. This usually referred to a preference for particular kinds of books or books with special features, such as some with even more cultural or linguistic diversity:

*It should be made in other languages.*

*Make items from cardboard so they will last longer.*

*I think the alphabet chart could be printed separately from the rhyme so that we get a bigger alphabet reading material.*

Parent feedback also referred to receiving, *“Different Reading Packs and information for each child, so I learn more.”* This reflects parents’ interest in having ongoing access to parenting information but suggests that perhaps some were not making a link between receiving the Reading Pack and being encouraged to join the library where they can access more free age-appropriate books for their babies. Some parents also appeared to be reluctant to borrow books for their babies expressing concerns that their babies may damage library books. There still appears to be a need for libraries to promote to families with young children that they will not be penalised or fined for *“reasonable wear and tear”* on board books and picture books in order to encourage library membership and borrowing.

Some creative thinking around ways to meet these small but relevant book-resource challenges could prove worthwhile.

### **Enhanced use of electronic devices/technology/ social media**

The feedback relating to digital technologies was interesting and diverse; with some parents seeking more online resources and information, and others expressing some concerns about the use of technology with their babies.

Prior to engaging with the *Birth to Three* program most families restricted their babies contact with electronic devices:

- A minimum of 12% (n=12, 12%) and a maximum of 15% (n=15) of the babies in the survey were given no access to TV, iPad or computer screens on any given day; and
- Between 62% (n=64, 62%) and 66% (n=65, 66%) of the babies watched screens for less than 10 minutes per day.

A few parents were concerned about appropriate screen time and mixed messages with the inclusion of the DVD in the Reading Pack. Some parents were confused about whether or not the DVD should be viewed with their baby:

*The DVD sends mixed messages about screen-time, I understand the use of educational TV but this age is too young – does not align with health guidelines.*

The post-program surveys suggested that more than 50% of parents used technology, which may be related to their increasing ages, however very few used borrowed e-library resources from the library:

- 57% (n=28 of 49) of families used an electronic device to help them read or sing rhymes to their baby (NPC ,45%, n=9 of 20; RTC, 66%, n=19 of 29); and
- 6% (n=4 of 69) said they borrowed e-resources from the library (NCP 10% 2 of 20; RTC 4%, n=2 of 49).

When providing feedback on improvements to the program, some parents suggested improvements to the *It’s Rhyme Time* DVD or replacing it with either a CD they could use in the car or an app for an iPad or smart phone, or providing a link to a website or You Tube where nursery rhymes words, tunes and actions are demonstrated:

*[I would like] an app – nursery rhymes and songs; it would be good to have an app with songs, tunes for nursery rhymes.*

*These [DVDs] aren’t really used these days... good to have an app with songs, tunes for nursery rhymes... People don’t have DVD players any more. Need link to go to or YouTube information.*

*It’s Baby Rhyme Time DVD is good but after repeated viewings, want to bypass the tips/info and go straight to rhymes.*

*[I would like] more books, DVD or music CDs or an online book subscription for children with animated or author read stories; Na App – nursery rhymes and songs; it would be good to have an app with songs, tunes for nursery rhymes.*

*The DVD is useless. People don't have DVD players any more. You need a link to go to to YouTube information.*

*[Better Beginnings should] link into popular app like 'Wonderweek' developmental leaps and growth leaps, daily/weekly/monthly; Don't make a new app, tap into existing ones like 'Wonderweek' that lots of mums use; was recommended by other mums; promoted on Facebook and parenting blogs.*

The feedback suggests there are opportunities for *Better Beginnings* to consider the clarity of information given to parents about use of technology with babies, but also explore better ways to exploit digital media to educate and support parents.

### **Offering more explicit but timely guidance**

While most families found the information and advice they were given really helpful, a few parents said it could be improved. Some suggested they would have benefited further from receiving the Reading Pack if the CCHN had spent time on each item, relating the Reading Pack contents to the ages and stages of development:

*I would have liked the nurse to go through the bag and talk to me about Baby Rhyme Time, book, DVD, bits on paper rather than just give me bag.*

*I needed more guidance at the time of delivery – it's good to know more about each item.*

*When the pack is given perhaps they (nurses) can give us simple tips.*

*[It would be helpful] going through pack at a mother's group session in more detail.*

Although most families found that their confidence grew through their experience of the *Birth to Three* program, a few felt overloaded by information, or found that the timing was not conducive to learning:

*Some of the information I read made me feel a bit worried that I wasn't reading enough and doing things properly.*

*A lot of information at once; over-whelming amount of information; too many leaflets, need to make one booklet.*

*A lot of information given all at once; Maybe information overload at time of receiving pack.*

*Everything about pack was good; might be good to get it at a later visit when you can see how baby enjoys playing with books.*

*The timing [is a bit difficult]... a difficult time for parents, sleep-deprived and we may not take in all info at 6-8 week check; [it] may be better delivered later, at the next appointment but then I also realise that is much later to get parents to start reading at early age.*

Maintaining flexibility to meet individual family's needs is a challenge for busy health and library professionals, but may be important in achieving the desired outcomes, particularly with families who have special needs, or are experiencing difficulties or stresses. These are likely to be the most vulnerable families, the ones most in need of support, and therefore the ones where positive outcomes would be most significant.

*It would help me if there was a program I could take all my children to instead of just the one age e.g. rhyme time, story time as prevents me from going. One of my children can't sit down or pay attention and ruins it for all the others.*

## SLWA identification of challenges, barriers and suggestions for improvements

The SLWA leadership team were justly proud of the *Birth to Three* program, but feedback from the focus group showed a keen awareness of challenges and barriers, as well as areas for improvement including:

- The potential for conflicts of interest between the values and priorities of the *Participation and Learning Team* and those of business and governments providing the funding to *Better Beginnings*;
- The vulnerability of the *Better Beginnings* program to any withdrawal of funds not only from sponsor but also from State and local governments; and
- The limited capacity of the program to access state wide statistical evidence about the impact of the program on children's literacy levels, and fully evaluate the contribution the program makes.

The SLWA focus group expressed a real commitment to evaluation and had tried over several years to improve the quality of evidence available to support their decision-making. Whilst the team had access to some statistical data that appeared to have positive *implications for Better Beginnings*, they were also aware of the limitations of the data. For, example, it had been shown that 90% of new mothers and their babies attended community health clinics and presumably received *Birth to Three* Reading Packs, suggesting that most of this population was accessing *Better Beginnings*. Nevertheless, the team was very concerned about the 10% who did not attend the clinics, so most probably would not receive a *Birth to Three* Reading Pack, and most likely would not attend *Baby Rhyme Time* or *Story Time*. They also discussed the limitations of the available research in terms of lack of data on the 90% who reportedly did receive the Reading Packs, in terms of the proportion of these parents who actually used the resource, while acknowledging that the data contained in reports from ECU gave important insights over a period of time from a range of Western Australian communities.

Whilst they expressed their personal belief in the efficacy of the program, the team indicated that, in their view, the continued collection of reliable statistical evidence about the impact of the program on children's literacy levels would help to protect the funding and sustainability of the program.

## Community librarians' identification of challenges, barriers and suggestions for improvements

Interviews with community librarians highlighted some challenges, barriers and suggestions for improvements to the *Birth to Three* program delivery and Reading Pack including:

- Barriers to improving the liaisons between librarians and CCHNs;
- Factors inhibiting the effective distribution of resources and key messages; and
- Factor inhibiting effective delivery of *Baby Rhyme Time* and other early childhood programs.

### Barriers to improving the liaisons between librarians and CCHNs

Community librarians identified three main barriers to improving liaisons with CCHNs:

- Subcontracting to new and different service providers;
- Lack of professional time; and
- Perceived reduction of CCHNs in areas or reduction of services/hours.

The subcontracting of early parenting group programs to new and different service providers, such as Ngala, has increased the number and diversity of agencies librarians needed to work with. Each agency had different ways of working, guidelines, priorities and changing staffing groups. Librarians said it was difficult to sustain high quality relationships and communications across so many organisations. Understandings between the librarians and CCHNs had developed over a long period often, with the same staff working together for over a



decade. Rapid disruptions to these long-standing relationships were seen as a threat to the coherence and commitment that has characterised the *Birth to Three* program previously.

Many community librarians commented on the pressures they experienced on their professional time, which made it difficult for them to do everything they thought was important. They acknowledged that this was true of staff across all agencies and sectors, including the SLWA providing leadership to the *Birth to Three* program. The Community librarians perceived that both these issues were compounded for CCHNs and they believed that there had been a reduction of CCHNs in some areas or services and hours.

### **Factors inhibiting the effective distribution of resources and key messages**

Other factors that limited the impact and effectiveness of the *Birth to Three* program raised by the librarians included:

- A lack of time of professional time for library staff;
- A disconnect between library staff and parents receiving Reading Packs from CCHNs;
- Budgetary constraints placing restrictions on time and resources;
- Insufficient attention to the public promotion of *Better Beginnings*; and
- Limited developments of digital technologies to support the *Birth to Three* program.

Many librarians felt stretched for time, and believed that time constraints impacted across all levels of the library service including the SLWA leadership team:

*We're aware that the State Library has less staff now, less manpower, and I think they're probably doing the same amount of work with a lot less.*

*I guess we could do a lot more ourselves by doing the community events, but I know, as well, that they're on a shoestring. We're on a shoestring, I think they're even more on a shoestring. So ...*

Some librarians reported that a lack of time of professional time that limited their capacity to introduce additional programs within the library such as LETS; or to liaise with other agencies to collaborate in related literacy initiatives. Some librarians found it difficult to either create or maintain meaningful on-going relationships between themselves and the parents receiving Reading Packs from CCHNs: They often worked with large groups in *Baby Rhyme Time* so had little time to talk with individuals; they had no easy means of tracking families and following up on them; when they presented to early parenting groups this tended to be a one-off, with no on-going relationship with the families.

Budgetary constraints restricted the librarians' ability to give as much time as they wished to the *Birth to Three* program; and limited their ability to respond to special needs through additional resources:

*I think all sections of it are vulnerable, but the Better Beginnings, I think, is such an important program, and it stands on its own merits, so there's nothing actually wrong with the program itself, it's fantastic. So, to see that fail because of cutting funding, I think, would be incredibly sad.*

The difficulty of supporting rapidly changing populations was particularly highlighted as problematic by some community librarians. Challenges to capacity arose from changing population numbers, cultures, and movement of families in and out of communities:

*[Manglis] is a bit unique as in that we got a lot of newcomers. Their child may not have gone to... may not visit the CCHN when they are little, then they miss this yellow bag, you know? It's hard to keep up.*

In some libraries, increased numbers of families arising either from changes in the community population or success in encouraging families to come to the library resulted in difficulties in managing the size of groups at *Baby Rhyme Time* and *Story Time*:

*Yeah, some of the libraries, we almost have safety issues, in that we're worried that there's too many people in the library if there was an emergency, and prams are cluttering...*

*We've discussed having... and I know other libraries have done two sessions. They have two sessions. I think we've even talked about not having the preschool Story Time and running two sessions. I think we'd have an issue with staffing, but I think after a lot of discussion, we've sort of worked out that if we had two sessions, I think we'd just get the same problem. You'll get those families that come to the Tuesday...*

Most community libraries did not think the *Birth to Three* program was likely to have its direct funding cut. However, one librarian mentioned the potential impact of the termination of the SLWA Van service and its replacement by a *Better Beginnings* courier. In reality, for some libraries *Better Beginnings* delivery was limited by the Van Service because of the number of boxes that could be sent each day. This impacted on flexibility to meet library demands. The courier service provided greater flexibility and made very little difference to the budget.

Despite confidence in the success of the *Birth to Three* program, librarians still observed that not everyone in their community was familiar with the program, and several commented that they thought a more sustained effort to promote *Better Beginnings* was needed to keep it on the public agenda:

*It's being sustained for people that know about it. It's definitely being sustained for them, but I think everyone should know about it... But it's been going for over 10 years now, and you're*

*starting to see the kids that have come through that are 10 plus years old now. I would have thought that a lot more families would know about the yellow bags. Not just yellow bags, but Better Beginnings, and I think one of the things that Better Beginnings has to do is to sustain itself, as well, it's to get that promotion right.*

*I just think it needs promotion as a whole, or an umbrella term.*

The effective use of digital technologies to support the *Birth to Three* program was mentioned as a challenge by quite a few participants, including the community librarians. According to the librarians surveyed, the *Better Beginnings* website's usefulness has grown significantly over time. For librarians, the website and portal were considered to be the first point of call for program delivery, and a source of practical information and literacy activities such as the monthly Literacy Calendar to be recommend to parents. Some librarians commented on gleaning useful tips and advice from the website that they could apply to their own *Baby Rhyme Time* sessions. Library staff also accessed the website for LETS Training material and early literacy research data.

Interviews with community librarians also demonstrated that much as they were aware of challenges and barriers, they also had many ideas for solutions and improvements. Examples of their recommendations for improvement included:

- Reviewing the delivery by CCHNs to make stronger links with libraries;
- More explicit promotion of joining the library in materials in Reading Packs;
- Introducing a Reading Pack for two and three year olds (from a library not involved in *Sing With Me* pilot);
- Library memberships in the Reading Pack; and
- Working together with other literacy initiatives such as Paint the Town REaD.

The positive improvement suggestions affirm community librarians have a valuable role to play in on-going evaluation processes and are able to make important contributions to wider professional discussions about how to sustain the *Birth to Three* program effectively. It supports the SLWA intentions and support strategies for listening to the experience and expertise of community librarians and actively including them in improvement processes.

### **CCHNs' identification of challenges, barriers and suggestions for improvements**

CCHNs whilst fully supportive of the program, also had plenty of suggestions for improving *Better Beginnings* implementation and outcomes. Their comments reflected many of the ideas proposed by librarians and parents, suggesting that there was quite a lot of common ground between different groups of participants about changes that might contribute to further improvement. Their comments focused mainly on:

- Developing more resources and extending the target age-group programs to fully cover all pre-school children;
- Improving CCHN liaisons with libraries;
- Improving liaisons with other early years programs; and
- Engaging families from culturally and linguistically diverse families more effectively.

CCHNs working in communities that were not part of the *Sing with Me* pilot, felt that it was important to repeat the early literacy messaging through the delivery of another Reading Pack delivered between 18 months and 3 years to build a consistent and coherent program that works from birth through to school-age:

*I'd like to revisit the importance of parents as the child's first teacher in the second year of life when we do an 18-month check, and actually add something from Better Beginnings and bring in Story Time with that.*

*The Better Beginnings bag [is] given at the 6 to 8 week, and then they don't get it then 'til they go to kindy, and I think there's that gap, and I think people probably start thinking about it again, not 'til their kid's behind in speech, or they're looking at, "Oh, my goodness, my kids go to school next year"... there is that lag in between... and maybe more toddler age.*

With regard to raising awareness of the program's key messages, one CCHN suggested further connections between programs within childcare, health and education needed to be developed. She suggested that the State Library approach the Health Department about including information about *Better Beginnings* in the *Welcome to Your New Baby*<sup>16</sup> magazine given to families with newborns.

Some CCHNs expressed an interest in strengthening library liaisons by inviting library staff to meetings or exchanging emails to keep in touch about any changes in the program e.g. changes to the Reading Pack contents.

*Even us being invited down, or to see what happens at the library. And I think having someone from Better Beginnings presenting the program to us at one of our community nurses' meetings, so that us as a whole understands... what the ethos of the Better Beginnings program is, would be of great benefit.*

The majority of CCHNs were either unaware of, or were aware but did not access information on the *Better Beginnings* website or other e-resources. Time constraints and other priorities were cited as reasons for not taking up these opportunities.

Liaison with other groups varied considerably and was dependent on local circumstances from CCHNs working from Child and Parent Centres to those who proactively visit local libraries and schools, to those who rely on email communication on relevant services or programs to promote to parents. Some

16. See: [http://www2.health.wa.gov.au/~media/Files/Corporate/general%20documents/CACH/CAH-002850\\_Welcome\\_to\\_your\\_New\\_Baby.pdf](http://www2.health.wa.gov.au/~media/Files/Corporate/general%20documents/CACH/CAH-002850_Welcome_to_your_New_Baby.pdf)

suggested that libraries liaise with the Child and Parent Centres to provide information on story times, rhyme times and other activities that could be included on the CPC's free downloadable app which is available to all clients.

There were varying schools of thought regarding ways that the program could more effectively engage parents with English as an Additional Language and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Some CCHNs working in diverse communities did not see value in producing additional resources in languages other than English because many of the languages had an oral rather than written tradition. Others highlighted a specific resource in the pack (*It's Baby Rhyme Time*) and reiterated the importance of promoting the library and services such as *Baby Rhyme Time* to socially isolated families:

*And I do like how in the [It's Baby Rhyme time Book and DVD] you've included some other languages.... And I think that might possibly be something that you could improve on. Even just if you had a few greetings or something of another language... I think it would be a great way to really connect those women. They're just at home and... once they get to the library that's a good start, they can see other people, other children, they can see the resources that the library has to offer them, and there's IT services as well... They could access that if they didn't have it at home.*

*Well, I think it's fantastic, but I guess the thing that is really standing out is the cultural sensitivity, so I guess perhaps there could be more culturally sensitive bags for particular cultural groups in the community. I guess that would be something that we could work on together identifying those groups.*

Observations of the CCHNs in action provided additional evidence of supports and barriers.

#### Supports included:

- **Close liaison between two Western Australian government departments – Health and the State Library.** The Reading Packs are prepared and delivered to the health centres by State library personnel and presented, explained and demonstrated to the mother and baby by a CCHN, who also provides information about library-based early childhood resources for young children;
- **Presentation of the Reading Pack at the mother and baby 6-8 week health check.** This signifies the importance of the Reading Pack in terms of child health and development and is an efficient means of delivering the pack that includes the book as a 'present' for the baby; and
- **The knowledge, understanding and attitudes of the CCHNs.** Most demonstrated knowledge and understanding of child development and early language and literacy (in one case including bilingualism), in addition to enthusiasm in sharing this knowledge with the mothers, and in some cases, other family members who were present.

#### Barriers included:

- **The timing of the book pack presentation after the health check.** Overall this appeared to be a highly supportive factor, but in one case the baby was so distressed that the CHN shortened the presentation, thus limiting the information that could be provided; and
- **A lack of choice of the picture book in the pack.** This seemed to be a limitation for mothers who have already received the pack for a previous baby.



## Changes in existing data sets in the communities involved in the evaluation

*The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)* is a nationwide government census that evaluates the well-being and development of young children in Australia. The assessments are conducted as children begin their first year of full-time school. AEDC results are collated and published at the level of specified government communities, with scores on five early childhood developmental domains: Physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge. Reports note the percentage of children who are considered developmentally:

- 'On track': Scoring above the 25th percentile (in the top 75%);
- 'At risk': Scoring between the 10th and 25th percentile; or,
- 'Vulnerable': Scoring below the 10th percentile.

The three-year data collection cycle is intended to enable communities to have a snapshot of how their children are developing compared to other communities; and to provide one way of measuring and comparing the influence and outcomes of early childhood development programs, interventions and services more effectively over time

(Source: <https://www.mychild.gov.au/agenda/aedc>).

AEDC data is now available for the years 2009, 2012 and 2015. Public reports provide data at National, and State levels, as well as for each of the five communities included in this evaluation. The babies who are the focus of this report were born in 2016/17, well after the most recent data cycle, so are not represented in any of the assessments. However, the *Birth to Three* program has been running since 2004/5, and therefore the AEDC data is relevant to

any consideration of broad changes within families in those communities across the lifetime of *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* program. AEDC data cannot provide any direct evidence for the impact of the *Better Beginnings* program or any of the individual components that comprise the program, but it does provide contextual background information that is worthy of attention and some comment.

### National AEDC trends 2009-2015

At a national level some significant trends have emerged across the three cycles (2009-2015). The percentage of children who were assessed as developmentally 'Vulnerable', has increased in two domains:

- Social competence domain: increased nationally from 9.5% in 2009 to 9.9 % in 2015; and
- Physical health & wellbeing: increased nationally from 9.3% in 2009 to 9.7% in 2015.

Consistent linear relationships have also been revealed highlighting correlations between 'Vulnerability' and certain individual and family / community characteristics, for example:

- Social-disadvantage: Communities with high levels of social disadvantage tend to have higher 'Vulnerability' measures;
- Geo-graphical locations: Communities in the most remote locations tend to have higher 'Vulnerability' measures; and
- Gender: The 'Vulnerability' scores of males under 5 years tend to be higher than those of females.

By comparison, the percentage of children who were developmentally 'Vulnerable' in the Language and cognitive skills (school-based) domain, Communication skills and general knowledge domain and Emotional skills domain decreased between 2009 and 2015:

- Language and cognitive skills domain: Decreased nationally from 8.9% in 2009, to 6.5 % in 2015;
- Communication skills and general knowledge domain: Decreased nationally from 9.2% in 2009 to 8.5% in 2015; and
- Emotional skills domain: Decreased nationally from 8.9% in 2009 to 8.40% in 2015.

Linear relationships between vulnerability and social-disadvantage, remote geo-graphical locations and gender have also emerged at a national level in the Language and Communication data. However, the differences are not as pronounced as in other domains, and the overall improvements are more significant across most aspects of disadvantage, with the exception of noticeable performance gaps in 2015 in the Language Domain in the cases of Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) children who were not proficient in English, and Indigenous children:

- LBOTE children who were not proficient in English were nearly eight times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable (38.1 percent) nationally, than LBOTE children who were proficient in English (4.9 percent); and

- Indigenous children in 2015 were nearly four times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable nationally, than non-Indigenous children (20.2 and 5.7 percent respectively).

In 2015 vulnerability in the Communication and General Knowledge Skills domain, was also identified as a particular concern in the cases of children living in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged locations, and children living in 'Very Remote Australia':

- Children living in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged locations were three times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable (14.8%) than those from the least disadvantaged areas (4.7); and
- Children living in 'Very Remote Australia' were 2.6 times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable (21.8%) than children living in Major Cities (8.3%).

Table 18: Changes in % of children *nationally* 'On track', 'At risk', or 'Vulnerable' in each AECD Domain 2009-2015

	Physical	Social	Emotional	Language	Communication
National 'On track' % change 2009-2015	Fell from 77.7% to 77.3%	Fell from 75.4% to 75.2%	Rose from 75.6% to 76.4%	Rose from 77.1% to 84.6%	Rose from 75.0% to 76.3%
National 'At risk' % change 2009-2015	Stable 13.0% to 13.0%	Fell from 15.2% to 15.0%	Fell from 15.5% to 15.3%	Fell from 14.0% to 8.9%	Fell from 15.8% to 15.1%
National 'Vulnerable' % change 2009-2015	Rose from 9.3% to 9.7%	Rose from 9.5% to 9.9%	Fell from 8.9% to 8.4%	Fell from 8.9% to 6.5%	Fell from 9.2% to 8.5%

Source: <https://www.aedc.gov.au/resources/reports>

## Australian Early Development Census trends 2009-2015 in Western Australia

The data for Western Australia, by comparison with National trends, shows increased vulnerability in only one domain (Social maturity) but decreasing vulnerability in all other domains:

- Social competence domain: vulnerability increased in WA from 7.7% in 2009 to 8.4 % in 2015;
- Physical health & wellbeing domain: vulnerability decreased in WA from 10.1% to 9.9% in 2015;
- Emotional maturity domain: vulnerability decreased in WA from 8.8% in 2009 to 8.5% in 2015;
- **Language and cognitive skills domain: vulnerability decreased** from 12.0% in 2009, to 6.6 % in 2015; and
- Communication skills and general knowledge domain: vulnerability decreased from 8.9% in 2009 to 8.0% in 2015.

The comparison between national and WA outcomes in the Language Domain is interesting:

- Nationally, the percentage of children 'On track' rose from 77.1% in 2009 to 84.6% in 2015; and
- In WA the percentage of children 'On track' rose from 67.2% in 2009 to 82.7% in 2015.

As a state, this suggests WA began with a higher percentage of vulnerable children in the Language Domain, but has achieved more significant improvements between 2009 and 2015, has closed the gap between State and National performance, but remains just a little below the national level.

In 2015, an analysis of the AEDC assessments (Commonwealth of Australia and WA Department of Education, 2018), demonstrated that patterns of vulnerability vary across regions of WA, with Perth (20%), the Wheatbelt (20.9%) and Peel (21.3%) regions having the lowest percentage of children who were developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains. Between 2009 and 2015, six regions achieved statistically significant reductions in vulnerability (Perth, Peel, Great Southern, Wheatbelt, Goldfields-Esperance and Mid-Gascoyne), and of these, three regions (Great Southern, Wheatbelt, and Goldfields-Esperance) achieved improvements across all five domains.

By comparison, regions further away from Perth generally had higher rates of vulnerability, for example: Mid-West Gascoyne (27%) and the Kimberley (43.4%). The Pilbara experienced a statistically significant increase in the percentage of children developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains (from 22.5% in 2009 to 26.4% in 2015); this represents about one in four children (n=220 of 850) commencing schools with vulnerabilities.

Table 19: Changes in % of children in WA 'On track', 'At risk', or 'Vulnerable' in each AEDC Domain 2009-2015

WA % change 2009-2015	Physical	Social	Emotional	Language	Communication
'On track' % change 2009-2015	Rose from 77.7% to 78.8%	Rose from 76.2% to 77.1%	Rose from 73.9% to 75.3%	Rose from 67.2% to 82.7%	Rose from 76.9% to 79.4%
'At risk' % change 2009-2015	Fell from 12.2% to 11.3%	Fell from 16.1% to 14.5%	Fell from 17.2% to 16.2%	Fell from 20.7% to 10.6%	Fell from 14.3% to 12.6%
'Vulnerable' % change 2009-2015	Fell from 10.1% to 9.9%	Rose from 7.70% to 8.40%	Fell from 8.8% to 8.5%	Fell from 12.0% to 6.6%	Fell from 8.9% to 8.0%

## Better Beginnings evaluation communities AEDC 2009-2015

With very few exceptions, AEDC assessments of children from the five communities included in this evaluation fit well into the broader WA regional patterns, and point to very positive outcomes across all domains:

- An increasing percentage of children are 'On track';
- A falling percentage of children are 'At risk'; and
- A falling percentage of children are 'Vulnerable'.

Exceptions include:

- Warreup: 'On track' % in the Communication domain **fell** from 73.0% in 2009 to 68.9% in 2015 and also **fell** from 72.8% to 66.6% in the Physical domain; A rise in vulnerability occurred across all domains except Language;

- Manglis: 'At risk' % in Emotional domain **rose** from 17.3% in 2009 to 17.4% in 2015; 'Vulnerable' % in the Social Domain **rose** 7.6% to 7.7%; But positive outcomes sustained in 'On track' % across all domains; and
- Irwin: 'At risk' % in Emotional domain **rose** from 17.2% in 2009 to 17.5% in 2015; 'Vulnerable' % in Social Domain rose from 9.0% to 9.3%.

Significantly, across all five communities, outcomes were positive in the Language Domain, with falling percentages of children in the 'At risk' and 'Vulnerable' categories, and rising percentages of children in the 'On track' category. Further, the extent of improvement in the Language Domain was much greater than in any other domain.

Table 20: Changes in % of children in WA 'On track', 'At risk', or 'vulnerable' in each AEDC Domain 2009-2015

	Physical	Social	Emotional	Language	Communication
Warreup 'On track' % change 2009-2015	Fell from 72.8% to 66.6%	Rose from 73.2% to 73.4%	Rose from 68.2% to 69.6%	Rose from 59.6% to 75.9%	Fell from 73.0% to 68.9%
Warreup 'At risk' % change 2009-2015	Fell from 15.4% to 14.7%	Fell from 18.9% to 17.7%	Fell from 20.5% to 18.2%	Fell from 23.2% to 11.6%	Rose from 16.3% to 17.5%
Warreup 'Vulnerable' % change 2009-2015	Rose from 11.8% to 18.7%	Rose from 7.9% to 8.9%	Rose from 11.4% to 12.2%	Fell from 17.2% to 12.4%	Rose from 10.7% to 13.7%
Kirkenin 'On track' % change 2009-2015	Rose from 69.3% to 77.7%	Rose from 66.0% to 74.6%	Rose from 68.0% to 74.0%	Rose from 64.5% to 80.8%	Rose from 72.3% to 78.9%
Kirkenin 'At risk' % change 2009-2015	Fell from 15.5% to 10.5%	Fell from 22.0% to 14.7%	Fell from 18.5% to 15.0%	Fell from 19.5% to 10.0%	Fell from 17.3% to 12.5%



Table 20: Changes in % of children in WA 'On track', 'At risk', or 'vulnerable' in each AECD Domain 2009-2015  
(Continued)

	Physical	Social	Emotional	Language	Communication
Kirkenin 'Vulnerable' % change 2009-2015	Fell from 15.3% to 11.8%	Fell from 12.0% to 10.7%	Fell from 13.5% to 10.9%	Fell from 16.0% to 9.3%	Fell from 10.5% to 8.5%
Tawbury 'On track' % change 2009-2015	Rose from 61.5% to 79.5%	Rose from 63.5% to 74.5%	Rose from 59.0% to 74.5%	Rose from 59.6% to 78.9%	Rose from 67.9% to 78.3%
Tawbury 'At risk' % change 2009-2015	Fell from 13.5% to 9.3%	Fell from 23.1% to 15.5%	Fell from 26.9% to 13.7%	Fell from 19.9% to 11.8%	Fell from 17.3% to 11.2%
Tawbury 'Vulnerable' % change 2009-2015	Fell from 25.0% to 11.2%	Fell from 13.5% to 9.9%	Fell from 14.1% to 11.8%	Fell from 20.5% to 9.3%	Fell from 14.7% to 10.6%
Manglis 'On track' % change 2009-2015	Rose from 79.3% to 81.6%	Rose from 76.3% to 78.5%	Rose from 73.9% to 74.4%	Rose from 66.4% to 84.5%	Rose from 76.1% to 81.2%
Manglis 'At risk' % change 2009-2015	Fell from 11.9% to 10.3%	Fell from 16.1% to 13.8%	Rose from 17.3% to 17.4%	Fell from 20.8% to 9.7%	Fell from 14.0% to 10.9%
Manglis 'Vulnerable' % change 2009-2015	Fell from 8.8% to 8.1%	Rose from 7.6% to 7.7%	Fell from 8.9% to 8.2%	Fell from 12.8% to 5.8%	Fell from 9.9% to 7.9%
Irvine 'On track' % change 2009-2015	Rose from 72.3% to 77.0%	Rose from 74.4% to 76.1%	Fell from 75.0% to 74.8%	Rose from 66.4% to 82.5%	Rose from 69.3% to 75.2%
Irvine 'At risk' % change 2009-2015	Fell from 16.9% to 12.7%	Fell from 16.6% to 14.6%	Rose from 17.2% to 17.5%	Fell from 21.7% to 10.7%	Fell from 19.8% to 14.4%
Irvine 'Vulnerable' % change 2009-2015	Fell from 10.8% to 10.3%	Rose from 9.0% to 9.3%	Fell from 7.8% to 7.6%	Fell from 11.9% to 6.7%	Fell from 10.9% to 10.4%

## AEDC Vulnerability Categories 1 and 2

The AEDC data also identifies the percentage of children in each community classified as either *Vulnerable 1* (children assessed as demonstrating 1 category of vulnerability) or *Vulnerable 2* (children assessed as demonstrating 2 or more categories of vulnerability). Key findings at both national and state (WA) levels, note some improvements in Category 1 and 2 Vulnerability measures:

- Percentage of children in Vulnerability Category 1 fell nationally from 23.6% in 2009 to 22.0% in 2015; and in WA it fell from 24.7% to 21.3%; and
- Percentage of children in Vulnerability Category 2 fell nationally from 11.8% in 2009 to 11.1% in 2015; and in WA it fell from 12.2% to 10.5%.

However, the 2015 Report also raises concerns nationally about the lack of progress for the most 'Vulnerable' of children:

- Percentage of children from 'Very Remote' locations in Vulnerability Category 2 rose nationally from 27.7% in 2009 to 31.8% in 2015; and
- Percentage of children from LBOTE - Not proficient in English in Vulnerability Category 2 rose nationally from 59.0% in 2009 to 59.2% in 2015.

Similar trends are also evident in an analysis of the WA data which identifies particular groups of children, and regions where little progress or even decline is evident, for example:

- In the Pilbara, developmental vulnerability on one or more domains **increased** from 22.5% in 2009 to 26.4% in 2015; and the percentage of vulnerable children from LBOTE (Proficient in English) backgrounds **rose** from 15.5% to 18.8%; vulnerability in boys **rose** from 26.6% in 2009 to 33.7% in 2015; vulnerability amongst Aboriginal children **rose** from 52.6% in 2009 to 59.0% in 2015; and
- In the Kimberley, developmental vulnerability on one or more domains **increased** from 41.3% in 2009 to 43.4% in 2015; vulnerability rose for females from 33.6% in 2009 to 41.5% in 2015; and the percentage of vulnerable children from all LBOTE backgrounds rose from 58.5% to 67.2%.

AEDC data for the five communities included in this evaluation identified positive improvements, with only one instance of an increase in Vulnerability: In just one community, Category 2 rose from 15.00% in 2009 to 15.90% in 2015.

Table 21: Changes in % of children assessed as AEDC Category 1 or 2 for overall Vulnerability 2009-2015

	Change in % Children Vulnerability Category 1 2009-2015	Change in % Children Vulnerability Category 2 2009-2015
*National %	Fell from 23.6% to 22.0%	Fell from 11.8% to 11.1%
WA %	Fell from 24.7% to 21.3%	Fell from 12.2% to 10.5%
Warreup	Fell from 33.1% to 31.9%	Rose from 15.0% to 15.9%
Kirkenin	Fell from 32.5% to 24.6%	Fell from 18.3% to 11.8%
Tawbury	Fell from 39.7% to 23.6%	Fell from 22.4% to 13.7%
Manglis	Fell from 25.6% to 20.0%	Fell from 12.5% to 9.9%
Irwine	Fell from 26.1% to 23.5%	Fell from 13.7% to 11.4%

\* Source 2015 AEDC National Report\_Accessible version: Table 8.2 *National emerging trends by summary indicator* pg22

As shown above, AEDC data can describe what has happened nationally, within States and for specified communities across five early childhood development domains. However, care needs to be taken in drawing inferences from the evidence. Many individuals, families and sub-groups exist within AEDC communities that may have quite different circumstances, experiences and outcomes. Multiple factors, often unknown, can impact what happens within communities, and the data does not reveal underlying reasons for changes. In Western Australia, a strong commitment to achieving change has led to number of significant initiatives running concurrently including, for example, the introduction of the Early Years Learning Framework, and the National Quality Standards. The overall goal of the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* program is to contribute to early childhood development improvements, particularly in language and literacy. Global research would suggest that the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* program has been designed in a way that might be expected to 'make a difference' however, a specific contribution cannot be inferred from AEDC data.

Nevertheless, additional research is being done using AEDC data to explore some of the more significant differences found between national, state and community outcomes. Gregory, Kinnell, Harman-Smith, Waugh, & Brinkman, (2016), report that:

*As expected, the analyses did not identify a single answer to explain the improvement in results. The contexts of communities across Australia are incredibly varied, present diverse challenges, and require tailored responses. The analyses have demonstrated this in the diversity of resources, services and supports captured. (p42).*

Parents, librarians and CCHNs who contributed to the 2017 *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* Evaluation have frequently noted the diversity of their circumstances. Participants have highlighted a variety of factors they believe have been important and pointed to **importance of the flexible approaches of *Better***

### ***Beginnings* as critical in its success and longevity.**

This suggests some support for the current policy of SLWA empowering libraries at a local level to adapt and interact with their communities in ways that work best, as suggested in the SLWA Interview.

Gregory et al (2016) also found that improvements that could not be explained statistically by demographic, socio-economic or school participation changes, were often associated with communities where:

- Strong links and relationships between organisations, schools, childcare services, family health services and other community resources were demonstrated;
- Services were in close communication and contact with each other;
- People had a strong sense of ownership, belonging and responsibility for their children; and
- People in a community had worked collaboratively to implement initiatives.

The *Birth to Three* program is a community development venture which seeks to operate with these principles in mind. Its core objectives are perfectly aligned in seeking to connect book-sharing and good literacy practices through library, health, education and child-care community services with families. Many interviewees raised effective cross service collaboration as a critical factor in the perceived effectiveness of the *Birth to Three* program.

Further, the effective and full implementation of *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* has incorporated many practices that might be expected to support development across domains other than Language. For example, *Baby Rhyme Time* activities bring parents and babies together in ways that can potentially support the development of social networks, enhancing opportunities for strengthening family and community relationships and the emotional and social development of children. The wider potential of *Better Beginnings* to actively reduce vulnerability in AEDC social and emotion domains was not explored in depth in this evaluation but could usefully be included in future studies.

The findings presented in the paper (Gregory et al, 2016) can be interpreted as supporting a notion that *Better Beginnings*, and similar programs, could well be contributing to improvements seen in AEDC data, and where they are working effectively might well be expected to support improvements. The paper also encourages systematic policy changes at government and organisation level:

*... community led initiatives need to be combined with systemic policy level changes that extend the reach of services, supports good information to families in their children's earliest years, to achieve widespread improvements for children across all Australian communities. (p44)*

This finding provides encouragement for policy leaders at SLWA to continue to pursue strong relationships with government in maintaining, adapting, sustaining and developing the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* program.

Gregory et al (2016) also highlight the importance of using AEDC as evidence in evaluating programs:

*... [helping] communities become better equipped to utilise data for identifying issues and informing planning to ensure that all families have access to appropriate services and supports. In the meantime, it is important to ensure initiatives are rigorously evaluated. Such evaluations should measure how well initiatives were implemented, how initiatives were received in the community, who accessed services and the impact on those who received the service. Rigorous evaluation of community-based initiatives will help us form an evidence base about what works, in what context and for whom. (p62)*

The importance of maintaining a schedule of rigorous evaluation alongside the implementation of the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* program can be noted, along with strong encouragement for practitioners within the program to engage in the collection and interrogation of both internal and external data which may provide insight into what works and why. Whilst this Report is part of a longitudinal research project that contributes to an important evaluation of *Better Beginnings*, some commentary from both SLWA and community library staff suggests that there is room for improvement in data collection and analysis, and in internal and cross-sector collaboration in developing shared understandings about effective resources and practices.

AEDC data has highlighted some significant differences across regions and sub-groups, which might be used to support decision-making and priority setting at all levels, and across all sectors, particularly where additional information from the library, community and other services can be brought together to compare and contrast patterns of change, explore underlying causes and influences, and make sense of the trends. Future evaluations could usefully contribute by further investigating and reporting on the West Australian library capability, mechanisms and use of AEDC data for improvement.

In summary, the AEDC data does not, and cannot, provide evidence about the effectiveness of the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* program, however, it demonstrates positive achievements in reducing the vulnerability of children in WA in many domains, but particularly in the domain of Language. Such improvements are consistent with the expectations implicit in the design of the program. The availability of AEDC data provides a valuable resource, that could, if well used, support policy and decision-making relevant to the future evaluation and development of the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* program.



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