

Growing Better Beginnings

Evaluation of the
Kindergarten Better Beginnings
Family Literacy Program
2018



School of Education
Early Childhood Research Group
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RioTinto



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Principals, teachers, and school librarians from across the State have welcomed us into their schools sharing their own experiences and understandings of the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program in an open and honest way. They provided a link to families and their children and enabled us to have extended conversations about the program. We thank them for their time, support and insights.

This evaluation has drawn on the contributions of almost 200 parents and carers who have taken part in the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program. The inclusion of New Cohort Parents representing 2016/7 participants, along with Established Cohort Parents reflecting on their experiences across several years has given us a valuable opportunity to investigate the program over time. For the first time, the voices and perceptions of children have been included in the study, and the support of parents and caregivers in allowing us to talk with children about the program is greatly appreciated.

We would also like to thank the children who talked to us enthusiastically and at length about their views and memories of the *Kindergarten* program, often in their recess time. Their comments were insightful, detailed and often filled with humour and passion.

We would like to make special mention of the public librarians who agreed to be observed leading *Better Beginnings* sessions, and parents who permitted us to make videotape recordings of their interactions with their child engaging with books. This highly personal material has provided significant insights and enriched the research with a depth and richness that is rare in evaluation studies.

We have benefitted from the advice of our Advisory Committee and would like to thank them for their encouragement and support.

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Executive Summary

The *Kindergarten* program is one of a suite of *Better Beginnings* family literacy programs developed by the State Library of Western Australia (SLWA). It was designed to ensure every child has the best opportunity to enjoy the kinds of resources and experiences recognised world-wide as promoting early literacy learning. The *Kindergarten* program focuses attention on the specific needs of children aged four to five years, in the year prior to enrolment in pre-primary classes in school. It builds upon learning opportunities provided through the *Birth to Three* program, maintaining a coherent philosophy and approach that ensures all children have access to developmentally appropriate books and language activities, that parents¹ are supported as their child's first teachers, and that encourages strong links between families, schools and local libraries.

This report is one of a series that describes and evaluates the implementation of the *Better Beginnings* programs². It provides information and insights about the experiences of a New Cohort of families participating in 2017, as well as longitudinal perceptions based on an Established Cohort whose children were included in the 2011/2 and 2013/4 research. The evaluation incorporates both qualitative and quantitative data collected from librarians, teachers and parents through interviews, surveys, video recordings, and observations. The current evaluation is innovative in including, for the first time, the voices and perceptions of children who have been recipients of the program.



Kindy Pack - Scary Night

1. Throughout this document the term parent is used to encompass many different carer roles, including mothers, fathers, grandparents, extended family members and custodial parents.
2. Reports with particular relevance to the *Kindergarten* program are available for 2010 (Barratt-Pugh), and 2012 (Barratt-Pugh & Vajda). See <https://www.better-beginnings.com.au/research/research-about-better-beginnings/better-beginnings-making-difference>.



Key findings

Across all participant groups contributing to the evaluation there was an overwhelmingly positive response to the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program. In broad terms the program was perceived as extremely worthwhile. There were many affirmations that the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program was being implemented and sustained in positive and effective ways. The quality of resources was widely applauded and the successful distribution of Reading Packs through the participation of almost every Western Australian school enrolling kindergarten children was particularly noted as a significant achievement. A number of challenges were identified, and some recommendations for improvement were offered.

Implementation of the program

- The SLWA has established a strong set of policies and guidelines to support the implementation of the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program. This includes documentation of well-defined roles and responsibilities for the three main groups collaborating in the implementation of the program: SLWA; public libraries in Western Australia; and the schools and community sites that provide formal care and education for kindergarten students;
- The program has been highly successful in encouraging schools to participate in the distribution of *Kindergarten Reading Packs*. Virtually 100% of WA schools now provide SLWA with the numbers of enrolled kindergarten students, and willingly liaise with public librarians to organise distribution;
- The number of Reading Packs distributed has risen, with over 37,700 kindergarten children reached in 2017;
- There remain challenges in ensuring Reading Packs are consistently delivered to 'hard to reach' families, which would likely include some of the children in the most vulnerable situations;
- Potentially supportive data collection and tracking systems were not available to support library staff in locating families in vulnerable circumstances;
- Some public librarians had explored creative ways to locate and support families outside the school system and were building successful relationships with them;
- Training to support the delivery of *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program has been made available to public librarians and was generally regarded as sufficient and effective. Digital training materials were appreciated, particularly by staff outside the metro area, who could not take up face-to-face training opportunities easily;
- There was some diversity in the implementation of the program across communities in approach, reach and outcomes, but it was largely consistent with SLWA policies and guidelines;
- Reading Packs were identified as the most valuable element of the *Kindergarten* program;
- Librarians reported that they found it difficult to assess the quality of the literacy environment provided in different homes, and therefore supported the current approach of giving every kindergarten child a Reading Pack, as the most reliable way to ensure good outcomes;
- Libraries faced different challenges in implementation. Those in remote locations or with small staffing levels did not always have highly qualified staff with expertise in family literacy, they could not always access training easily, and tended to experience rapid staff turnover. Libraries in places with rapidly growing populations found that staffing was stretched, and there were not always enough staff with sufficient hours to commit to the program;
- Liaisons between public libraries and schools were generally productive in organising and managing the distribution of Reading Packs to enrolled kindergarten children. School principals and teaching staff expressed support for the program and confidence in its delivery;

- **Effective integration of the *Kindergarten* program** is still to be fully achieved. There was little evidence of significant collaborative professional engagement and dialogue between librarians and kindergarten teachers. The *Kindergarten* program was largely regarded as being in the ownership of libraries, with schools as supportive associates rather than mutual partners. The SLWA has produced teacher's guides and web-based materials linking teaching activities to the *Kindergarten* program resources, but these were rarely used by teachers, indicating limited educational integration between school and library; and
- **Most public librarians participating in the evaluation** felt confident about their ability to communicate information about the *Kindergarten* program and present *Better Beginnings* family literacy initiatives to parents, children and other professionals. Researchers' observations of public librarians working with children and parents revealed many examples of effective professional practice.

Stakeholders' and participants' perceptions of the design and implementation of the program

- *Kindergarten* program resources including the Reading Pack, were well regarded for their quality and were seen to address diversity positively. However, acknowledgement was also made that there was still potential for making improvements, particularly in ensuring families can consistently access at least some resources that reflect their own cultural heritage and context;
- Whilst many parents responded positively to most of the materials in the Reading Pack, **there was little enthusiasm or interest shown for the digital resources;**
- **Librarians demonstrated a high level of engagement** in the delivery of Reading Packs to children and families in some schools and communicated messages about family literacy effectively in contact sessions;
- **Discovery Packs** are well regarded as valuable additional age-appropriate resources. They are well integrated into the normal operations of most libraries, however, some libraries experienced challenges in meeting the demand for Discovery Packs; and
- **Read Aloud Book Sets** have been phased out and are no longer included in *Better Beginnings* resources.

Outcomes of the *Kindergarten* program for stakeholders and participants

- New Cohort parents identified positive outcomes arising from the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program. The data indicates an increase in:
 - the number of times kindergarten children are being read to;
 - the interest kindergarten children are showing in initiating book sharing; and,
 - book-sharing with other children in the family;
- Established Cohort parents remembered receiving the Reading Pack and the name of the book and still had some or all of the resources. They were overwhelmingly positive about the contribution of the program to continuing literacy learning;
- Overall, evidence from several sources affirms that the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program is helping parents to understand and apply key messages about ways they can support early literacy development in their children;
- The *Kindergarten* children indicated that they liked the Reading Pack, enjoyed the books and games, and often kept them in a 'special' place;
- The year three and five children indicated that they still had the book and resources were appreciated and were appropriate to their interests and still shared with parents, siblings, cousins and in some cases neighbours; and
- The *Kindergarten* program appears to have had a positive influence in further enhancing children's enjoyment of and access to recommended books.



Impacts of the program on library membership participation and library practices

- A small, but positive impact was observed in the number of New Cohort families holding memberships of a local library;
- Subsequent to receiving a Reading Pack **some families have increased their regular weekly visits to the library**, and others moved from attending once a month or fortnightly to attending weekly;
- **Some challenges exist in sustaining and enhancing book access and reading activities effectively, through transition into school; and**
- The evidence suggests that *Better Beginnings* sessions and other child-friendly activities that local libraries offer, can act as attractants for drawing families into the library.

Relationships between *Better Beginnings* programs and other early literacy initiatives

- Librarians have confidence in the three Reading Packs providing support across all pre-school age-groups;
- Parents rarely distinguish between the different elements of *Better Beginnings* programs, and do not appear to be confused about the (re) naming of some *Better Beginnings* programs;
- It was unclear if or how public libraries managed relationships across different agencies; improved **clarity around intentions and strategies for inter-sector communications and collaboration might be beneficial**;
- Liaisons between schools, *Better Beginnings* and other early literacy initiatives are somewhat ad hoc, and this may be limiting the achievement of the best possible outcomes;
- Parents do not appear well informed about the full range of literacy and learning opportunities available to their families.

Changes in existing data sets in communities and schools

- Australia has published a significant collection of standardised data about communities, socio-educational advantage and disadvantage, and children's academic performance in formal schooling through *The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)*, *The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)*, and the *Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)*;
- The data sets show Western Australia does not yet match National standards; and
- The data sets highlight some positive trends, but point to persistent socio-educational inequities in access and outcomes.
- However, between 2009 and 2015 AEDC measures for the communities involved in the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program, some quite dramatic achievements in **language and cognitive skills** were evident:
 - All six communities achieved significant increases in the percentage of children assessed as 'on track', with scores improving by between 11.80% and 31.20%;
 - All six communities achieved significant decreases in the percentage of children assessed as 'at risk', with decreases between 9% and 33.60%; and
 - Three of the six communities achieved decreases in the percentage of children assessed as 'vulnerable', with decreases between 4.10% and 9.10%; with the other three showing no significant change.

Introduction to the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program

Better Beginnings is an initiative of the State Library of Western Australia (SLWA) providing leadership, support and resources to families, with the aim of promoting the early literacy learning. The initiative began in 2004, with a small trial providing books and information to just over 1000 families of new-born children, in six locations: Gosnells, Mandurah, Midland, Carnarvon, Halls Creek and Kalgoorlie. It has developed over the last 13 years into a suite of five award-winning family literacy programs that work together to provide resources and services to over 550,000 families throughout all Western Australia. The five programs are designed to integrate and overlap, providing a coherent and seamless service for pre-school children from birth to school enrolment:

- ***Birth to Three:*** Providing an introduction to books and literacy for babies;
- ***Sing with Me:*** Integrating singing and reading aloud activities with a focus on 2-3 year olds;
- ***Kindergarten:*** Concentrating on children in the year prior to school enrolment;
- ***Read to me, I love it!:*** Ensuring the specific needs of families in remote Aboriginal³ communities are met; and
- ***Books to Go:*** Working with communities and children to create books that capture their own family and community stories.

The *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program focuses of the specific needs and interests of children aged four and five, in the year prior to their enrolment in pre-primary. The current program was developed from *Better Beginnings Plus* (elsewhere known as *Growing Better Beginnings*), a project launched in 2009

responding to recommendations from the original *Birth to Three* program, which identified a need to sustain family literacy support across all five pre-school years. Whereas the *Better Beginnings Plus* program provided Reading Packs to kindergarten children and pre-primary children, the 2017 *Kindergarten* program focuses only on kindergarten-aged children. A particular feature of the *Kindergarten* program is the attention paid to encouraging collaboration between libraries, and schools.

The 2017 *Kindergarten* program has continued to promote *Better Beginnings* core values, principles and practices, but has been adapted to meet the changing school enrolment age of children in Western Australia; and respond to on-going evaluation and feedback. It comprises a number of integrated resources and support activities, made available to all West Australian families free of charge. It is delivered through public libraries and kindergartens in metropolitan, regional, and remote communities. In addition, the program provides libraries and schools with appropriate training, information and support to assist them in collaborating effectively through their various roles and responsibilities.

The 2017 *Kindergarten* program includes:

- A **Kindergarten Reading Pack** with “age-appropriate picture books and supporting materials to encourage emergent literacy skills,” for every child aged three to five in Western Australia;
- **Discovery Backpacks** with picture books, audio-books, puppets, literacy skill development games, and information for families to borrow from libraries;

3. In this study, 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 Social Justice and Race Discrimination Commissioner (in consultation with key Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups) to use the term Aboriginal rather than Indigenous. The term Indigenous is used when using federal and state government data.



- **Read Aloud Book Sets** available at libraries and schools to support joint reading initiatives and promote shared parent and child reading;
- A *Better Beginnings* website with free and open access to **online activities and information for parents**⁴ linked to Reading Packs, Discovery Backpacks, training sessions and parent information workshops;
- A **Professional Portal** for public librarians and teachers to register for the program and access online resources;
- **Resources and training to support public libraries** in understanding the *Better Beginnings* Kindergarten program and delivering it effectively at the local level; and
- **Forums to facilitate feedback and sharing of information** about the Program.

Methodology

An interpretive paradigm was used as a way of identifying and understanding the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program through the perceptions and experiences of the participants. Drawing on sociocultural theory, which suggest that realities are multiple and socially constructed, the evaluation used a mixed method approach, informed by our previous evaluation model, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data. Our 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 outcomes. The use of multiple sources of data contributed to the internal validity of the overall study and allowed for

a level of checking and triangulation of findings. It also allowed us to make robust comparisons with our previous evaluation and identify new findings, complemented by the addition of comparative information from established data sets related to communities and schools. However, it is recognised that ultimately, interpretation of data is always the result of researchers' perceptions and world view and their findings may not necessarily reflect those of the participants.

Research questions

This research builds on previous evaluations of *Better Beginnings* programs, including previous iterations of the Kindergarten program. Six central research questions emerged from previous research and underpin the 2017 evaluation:

1. How has the *Kindergarten* program been implemented and sustained?
2. What are the participants' and stakeholders' perceptions of the design and implementation for the *Kindergarten* program?
3. What are the outcomes of the *Kindergarten* program for stakeholders and participants?
4. What has been the impact of the *Kindergarten* program on library membership, participation and library practices?
5. What is the relationship between the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program and other early literacy initiatives?
6. Have there been any changes in the existing data sets in the communities involved in the evaluation?

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

Research ethics

The evaluation was conducted with appropriate concern for the highest standards of ethics in research methodology. The research team adhered to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research 2007 (updated May 2015), 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 schools was obtained from the WA Department of Education.

locations and socio-economic circumstances (*Table 1*). The branch library in each community was included in the evaluation study along with one or more local primary schools.

Schools

Seven schools⁶ (including one with two campuses) located across the six communities were the focus of the evaluation, representing at least some of the variation within the communities (*Table 2*). Diversity features between the schools included: sector and type; Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) values; total enrolments; % Indigenous and Language Background other than English (LBOE).

Communities and schools

Communities

Although valuable state-wide information was included in the evaluation, the main focus was on six Western Australia communities⁵. These communities were selected to ensure diversity across different

Participants

In seeking to capture the diverse experiences and perceptions of individuals and groups involved in the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program, data were collected from: parents and children; school principals, teachers, and school librarians; local and state librarians and managers and stakeholders.

Table 1: Diversity of communities selected for evaluation

Communities (number of schools)	Location	AEDC Vulnerability 1*	AEDC Vulnerability 2*
Avoca (1)	Rural/outer metro-town (Perth)	30.90% in 2009; 20.80% in 2015	17.00% in 2009; 11.60% in 2015
Compsey (1)	Remote town (North)	23.50% in 2009; 30.00% in 2015	17.60% in 2009; 17.50% in 2015
Fletcher Park (1)	Metro/city (Perth)	16.40% in 2009; 17.50% in 2015	6.90% in 2009; 5.90% in 2015
Birdwood (1-2 campuses)	Metro/city (Perth)	16.10% in 2009; 15.30% in 2015	6.90% in 2009; 6.20% in 2015
Newton (1)	Outer regional town (South)	33.30% in 2009; 27.60% in 2015	19.70% in 2009; 9.20% in 2015
Mascot (2)	Metro/city (Perth)	26.10% in 2009; 23.50% in 2015	13.70% in 2009; 11.40% in 2015

*AEDC provides measures of disadvantage for young children. Vulnerability 1, is the % of children in the most disadvantaged group on one indicator; Vulnerability 2, is the % of children in the most disadvantaged group on two or more indicators.

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

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



Table 2: Diversity of schools selected for evaluation

School (community)	School sector /type/year range	School location	ICSEA value*	Total enrolments (Full time equivalent)	Indigenous students	LBOE
Henson	Government/Primary/K-6	Major city	1,012	173 (164.6)	20%	8%
Cabury	Government/Primary/K-6	Major city	943	880 (820.8)	14%	20%
Gopbourn	Government/Primary/K-6	Inner regional	1,019	233 (223.8)	2%	3%
Sudbury	Government/Primary/K-6	Major city	928	348 (330.4)	19%	15%
Compsey	Government/Combined/K-6	Remote	743	504 (490.4)	71%	5%
Newton	Government/Primary/K-6	Outer regional	933	304 (289.2)	22%	3%
St Theresa	Non-Gov/Primary/pp-6	Major city	1,127	662 (662)	0%	15%

*ICSEA value: The ICSEA scale provides an indication of the socio-educational backgrounds of students. The average is set at 1,000. Higher values indicate higher educational advantage; lower values indicate lower educational advantage (http://docs.acara.edu.au/resources/20160418_ACARA_ICSEA.pdf).

Table compiled from: My School Website: <https://myschool.edu.au/>

Parents

- A **New Cohort (NC)**: Families with a child(ren) engaged in the 2016/7 *Kindergarten* program;
- An **Established Cohort (EC)**: Families with children engaged in previous iterations of the *Kindergarten* Program in either 2011/12 or 2013/14. These children were in years 3 or 5 at Primary School during data collection for this evaluation.

Regardless of the cohort, parents often had wider experience to draw upon in responding to evaluation questions. For example, most parents in the *Kindergarten* program had one or more child who had also been in the *Birth to Three* program or the *Sing with Me* program, and often they reported attending library activities in mixed aged family groups associated different *Better Beginnings* programs.

Children

- A **New Cohort (NC)**: This involved children who were engaged in the *Kindergarten* program at their kindergarten.
- An **Established Cohort (EC)**: This involved children in Year three and five who had been engaged in the *Kindergarten* program in kindergarten or pre-primary.

State, branch, community and school librarians, kindergarten teachers, Year three and five teachers and school principals

These participants were selected on the basis of their specific knowledge of and /or involvement in the 2017 *Kindergarten* program. However, in all cases, these participants had histories of involvement across one or more years of the *Kindergarten* program, and had often engaged with other aspects of *Better Beginnings*, so were able to reflect back across time, as well as consider their current experience and involvement.

Data collection

Surveys

Parents in the New Cohort were asked about demographics, language/s spoken at home and country of origin. They were also asked about the delivery, content and use of the program, practices, confidence and book buying/borrowing.

Parents in the Established Cohort were asked about the ongoing impact of *Better Beginnings*. It included questions about the retention and on-going impact of the *Better Beginnings* message, Reading Pack resources, literacy practices and library membership and use, as well as new developments, such as links with other programs.

Interviews

Case study parents in the New Cohort were asked to elaborate on their perceptions of the Reading Pack, how this has influenced their family literacy practices and library membership and use.

Case study parents in the Established Cohort from the longitudinal evaluation were asked to elaborate on if and how the *Better Beginnings* program has influenced their family literacy practices.

Public librarians were asked about how the program has been implemented, the number of schools involved and how the school is making links with the local library and parents through the program.

Kindergarten teachers were asked about the decision-making processes, who was involved and how the program was introduced and integrated into classroom practices and their perceptions and use of the resources. In addition they were asked to describe their collaboration with the local librarian.

School librarians were asked about their role in the *Kindergarten* program, perceptions of the resources and outcomes and liaison between the school and public library.

Principals were asked about their perceptions of the program resources, delivery, outcomes and sustainability.

Stakeholders were asked about the nature and rationale of their involvement in the program. Information was sought about how the program is implemented, who is involved, and the perceptions of the value and outcomes of the program from different perspectives.

Focus groups

Kindergarten children and year 3/5 children were asked about their perceptions of resources and if and how they have used the resources. They were encouraged to describe library membership and participation in any library activities.

Year three and five teachers were asked about their knowledge of the Kindergarten program and its underlying message and long-term impact and outcomes.

SLWA team were asked to provide information about the program and identification of key issues, future development and sustainability of the program, especially in relation to the incorporation of the *Better Beginnings* program in a broader portfolio.

Observations

Public librarians were observed delivering the *Kindergarten* program and library activities to provide information about the range and efficacy of delivery methods in different school contexts and the interaction engendered through the library activities.



Videos

Case study parents in the New Cohort were videoed sharing a book with their kindergarten aged child, to elicit information about the incorporation of the *Better Beginnings* key message and the strategies that parents use in relation to the information in the *Kindergarten* Reading Pack. This was a new form of data that strengthens the original evaluation framework, providing evidence to link parent reports to parent practices.

Existing data sets

The 2009, 2012 and 2015 AEDC community data and NAPLAN school data were gathered for the schools/communities involved in the evaluation and mapped in relation to the implementation of *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program.

Analysis

Surveys: Statistical analysis of survey data using SPSS Statistics v22 software. Responses were collated and areas of statistical importance identified; common themes and trends of narrative answers were clustered; key quotes reflecting general responses were identified.

Interviews: Iterative comparison, clustering of categories and themes, and systematic use of divergent views to challenge generalisations together with selected material from face to face interviews revealed the perceptions of participants, providers and stakeholders.

Focus groups: Themes in relation to outcomes, enablers and barriers to sustainability of the programs were identified within and across focus groups. Issues identified by the participants as significant were categorised. Selected comments were extracted to illustrate particular themes, bringing 'life' to the data. The children's comments brought an extra dimension to the research as we have not previously talked with them about the *Kindergarten* program.

Observations: Themes were identified within and across observations and linked with interview data. Similarities and differences between the observations and other sources of data were identified. Factors that appeared to hinder or foster the implementation of each program were further explored through analysis of the observations.

Existing data: Comparative analysis was conducted between existing data sets (AEDC and NAPLAN) and the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* communities.

Videos: The videos were coded to identify type and frequency of interaction strategies, which reflect the information in the Reading Pack.

Table 3 outlines the number of participants in each group and the method of data collection they were involved in, as well as their prior experience of *Better Beginnings*.

Parent survey respondents' profiles

Parents were drawn from seven participating schools, in six communities selected for inclusion in the 2016/7 *Kindergarten* evaluation.

One hundred and eighteen (118) New Cohort parents completed a *Kindergarten* program survey (2017), with specific reference to the participation of their child's engagement in the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program during 2016 and into 2017; and

Eighty (80) Established Cohort parents: completed surveys asking them to reflect back upon their long-term experience of the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program. The Established Cohort included 52 parents with children in year three who were engaged in the *Kindergarten* program in 2013 or 14; and 28 parents with children in year five, who had been engaged in the *Kindergarten* program in 2011 or 12.

Table 3: Participant selection information

Participant Groups	Participant numbers	Research involvement	Prior experience of <i>Better Beginnings</i> where known
School principals	6	Interviews	All principals knew of, or had been actively engaged previously
Early years teachers	13	Focus Groups	All teachers knew of, or had been actively engaged previously
Kindergarten teachers	8	Interviews	All teachers knew of, or had been actively engaged previously
School librarians	3	Interviews	All school librarians knew of, or had been actively engaged previously
New Cohort Families (2017)	118 parents	Survey	63.43% (85) remembered involvement in the <i>Birth to Three</i> program
	10 case study from 118	Interviews	
	3 case study from 118	Video	
Established Cohort families (2010-12)	80 parents <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 52 with year 3 children • 28 with year 5 children 	Survey	All respondents had been involved in prior programs, including some in the <i>Birth to Three</i> program
	3 year three case studies form 80	Interviews	
New Cohort children (2010-12)	63 kindergarten children (6 schools)	Focus groups	All child respondents had been involved in the <i>Kindergarten</i> program. Some also in the <i>Birth to Three</i> program
Established Cohort children (2010-12)	39 year three children (7 Schools) 17 year five children (5 Schools)	Focus Groups	All child respondents had been involved in the <i>Kindergarten</i> program. Some also in the <i>Birth to Three</i> program
Public Librarians	7 librarians responsible for the delivery of the <i>Better Beginnings Kindergarten</i> program, (7 public libraries) 11 observations of sessions in school; 8 observations of sessions at library	Interviews Guided observations	All respondents had been involved in delivering the 2017 <i>Kindergarten</i> program. Some were also involved in other strands
State Library staff	1 SLWA <i>Better Beginnings Kindergarten</i> Co-ordinator 6 State Library Team Staff 7 Branch Library Team Staff	Interviews & Focus Groups	
Other Stakeholders	1 representative from Rio Tinto, a long-term funding sponsor of the <i>Better Beginnings</i> program 1 regional librarian without direct involvement in the <i>Better Beginnings</i> program	Interview	



The two groups were drawn from across the same six communities and the seven participating schools. Personal details and family information was collected from **New Cohort** parents and from the **Established Cohort**, the profiles for each group, unsurprisingly, include many similarities.

Gender of kindergarten children in participant families

There were slightly more female than male kindergarten children represented in the New Cohort and more than double the number of girls in the Established Cohort (*Table 4*). The evaluation did not investigate this difference but it remains curious, especially given the slightly higher number of males born in Australia in 2010-16 (<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3301.0>).

Number of children in participant families

Most of the New Cohort kindergarten children had one or more siblings (*Table 5*)⁷.

Educational levels of participant families

The educational levels of participant parents who completed surveys was high (*Table 6*). This suggests that participant families were not representative of the wider community, but rather reflective of families with a high level of interest in literacy and confidence about contributing to research projects. Almost all participating parents had completed at least school years 11 or 12, and most had some post-school education.

Table 4: Gender of kindergarten children in New Cohort families; and Established Cohort families

Gender of target child	Count (%) New Cohort		Count (%) Established Cohort	
Boy	49	(41.53%)	24	(30.00%)
Girl	69	(58.47%)	56	(70.00%)
Total	118	(100%)	80	(100%)

Table 5: Number of children in New Cohort families, and Established Cohort families

Number of children in target Families	% New Cohort	Count New Cohort	% Established Cohort	Count Established Cohort
1	14.41%	17	7.50%	6
2	41.53%	49	46.25%	37
3	33.05%	39	32.50%	26
4	6.78%	8	11.25%	9
5 or more	4.24%	5	2.50%	2
Total	100%	118	100%	80

7. NB: The survey statistics reported throughout this evaluation represents active responses from participants. In some instances respondents either neglected to complete questions or provided more than one response, thus the total number of survey responses does vary across survey items, and is not always equal to the number in the cohort.

Aboriginal representation in participant families

Although four school communities had Aboriginal enrolments (14-22%, and one up to 71%) there were very small numbers of kindergarten children in the evaluation families who were identified as Aboriginal:

- In the New Cohort there was only one child who identified as Aboriginal; 114 of 115 did not (99.13%); and
- Six respondents (6 of 79, 92.41%) in the Established Cohort identified as Aboriginal.

Home language of participant families

New Cohort families reported diverse family heritages, however, almost two thirds of these respondents, (54 of 85, 64%) named Australia as their country of origin. Eight named UK, Ireland or England, four Indonesia, two India, two Philippines,

two Myanmar, three New Zealand, three South African and one each from Argentina, Burma, Brazil, Brunei, France, Kurdistan–Iraq and Sri Lanka. The languages spoken at home reflected the country of origin, with the addition of Spanish.

Similarly, about three quarters of Established Cohort respondents were born in Australia (61 of 80, 76.25%). Six named the UK, Ireland or England, three New Zealand, two Germany and one each from Ghana, Portugal, Iraq, Netherlands, India, South Africa USA and Argentina as their country of origin. Again, the language spoken at home in addition to English reflected country of origin.

Table 6: Highest educational achievements of participant parents

Highest Educational Achievement	Count (%) New Cohort Respondents	Count (%) Established Cohort Respondents
Primary /Year 8 or 9	1 (0.85%)	1 (1.27%)
Year 10	6 (5.08%)	5 (6.33%)
Year 11 or 12	14 (11.86%)	9 (11.39%)
TAFE (Plus apprenticeships)	37 (31.36%)	11 (13.92%)
University (Undergraduate)	34 (28.01%)	17 (21.52%)
University (Post graduate)	25 (21.89%)	25 (31.65%)
Not sure / not applicable	1 (0.85%)	2 (2.53%)
Total	118 (100%)	79 (100%)

Table 7: Language spoken at homes New Cohort families and Established Cohort families

Language spoken at home	Count (%) New Cohort Respondents	Count (%) Established Cohort Respondents
English	95 (80.51%)	74 (93.67%)
Other	23 (19.49%)	5 (6.33%)
Total	118 (100%)	79 (100%)



The Implementation of the *Kindergarten* program

Policy framework

The specific aims, resources, and approaches that underpin the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program are outlined in a series of formally endorsed agreements that include:

- Partnership agreements with funding bodies (formerly the Department of Regional Development for Royalties for Regions and currently with Rio Tinto);
- Individual partnership agreements with all WA local governments for the delivery of *Better Beginnings* through public libraries;
- Joint Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Community and Adolescent Health Service and the Western Australian Country Health Service; and
- MOUs with not-for-profit organisations who support/are involved with the delivery of the program (A Smart Start Initiative in the Great Southern region; Department of Education through the Child and Parent Centres).

Since the introduction of *Better Beginnings Plus* (elsewhere known as *Growing Better Beginnings* in 2009/10), the design and delivery of the family literacy provisions for pre-school children in Western Australia (WA) has undergone development and change. A change of name, to the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program, marked the consolidation of resources to concentrate fully on pre-school children, and this iteration of the program is the focus of attention for this evaluation. The state library staff who contributed to this evaluation provided a very clear outline of the 2016/17 delivery model and the responsibilities of the three main groups collaborating in the implementation of the program: SLWA; WA public libraries; and the schools and community sites that provide formal care and education for kindergarten children.

Responsibilities of the State Library of Western Australia

In 2016/7 the SLWA had overall responsibility for leadership and oversight of the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program. It provided the resources, information and services to support and encourage public libraries, schools and families to work together to encourage positive attitudes and early literacy skills in all West Australian kindergarten children (ages four and five).

Responsibilities of public libraries

Public libraries in 2016/7 were responsible for delivering the *Kindergarten* program effectively at the local level. This included managing local library resources, and running information and activity sessions for families with kindergarten-age children. Librarians also organised the distribution of *Kindergarten* Reading Packs, in whatever ways they deem appropriate and effective in their individual context, but normally using one or more of several recommended models:

- Making *Kindergarten* Reading Packs available for schools to deliver to kindergarten students in their own ways;
- Negotiating with schools for the public librarians to be actively involved in presenting the *Kindergarten* Reading Packs to children and/or families at school;
- Inviting the schools to bring their kindergarten children to the local library to an activity session where children and/or families can receive their *Kindergarten* Reading Packs and information about the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program;

- Providing *Kindergarten* Reading Packs to children and/or families through alternative community education, health and care organisations and groups relevant to the local context; and
- Making *Kindergarten* Reading Packs available to children and/or families at the local public library itself, either through self-collection or through activities run by the library.

Whichever model the public librarians chose, their primary responsibilities were described consistently as:

- Ensuring all kindergarten children receive a *Kindergarten* Reading Pack;
- Building productive relationships between library services, families and education and care services; and
- Ensuring that the core messages of *Better Beginnings* are communicated effectively throughout the local community, particularly to schools and parents.

Responsibilities of schools and community care facilities

The participation of schools and community care facilities was subject to the agreement of relevant authorities and governing bodies, but their responsibilities were defined in 2016/7 as including:

- Nominating staff as key contacts;
- Providing kindergarten enrolment numbers that guide the SLWA in the provision of resources, particularly individual Reading Packs;
- Liaising with public librarians to agree on effective delivery strategies; and collaborating in implementing the program; and
- Developing school-based strategies to encourage, support and promote the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program to their communities.

Effectiveness of program delivery by WA Libraries

Evaluation interviews and focus groups with the **SLWA *Better Beginnings* Leadership Team** provided **convincing evidence of their absolute commitment to the program**. The team were totally confident that the program was making a significant contribution to early years literacy learning in WA and should be regarded as a top priority.

All SLWA participants were very clear and articulate about their roles (*Table 8*), and talked about them with a strong sense of loyalty and passion. In 2017, the leadership team included eight staff. Some were part-time, most had responsibilities across more than one *Better Beginnings* program, and none were exclusively working on the *Kindergarten* program.





Table 8: Roles and responsibilities of the SLWA Better Beginnings Leadership Team

Position	Roles and responsibilities in relation to the Kindergarten Program
Manager, Participation & Learning	Provides overarching management for the program – budget management; HR management; manages the relationships with key stakeholders funding partners; steers the strategic direction of the program.
Coordinator <i>Better Beginnings</i>	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	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.
Public Liaison Librarian x 2	Implements the communications plan; provides input into the development of resources from a library perspective; develops and delivers training to public library staff.
Education Officer x 2	Development of teachers' guide resources; provides input into the development of resources from an education and early childhood perspective; develops training.
Administration Officer	Logistics support – ordering stock, scheduling deliveries to be sent to libraries, etc.

The SLWA Leadership Team presented as a very unified team, with a common vision, who were well used to working collaboratively, often sharing tasks across the team, for example, the production of resources:

So, we produce the reading packs, which means... this is a shared responsibility between everybody. 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.

Evidence from the SLWA Leadership Team confirms **there is a well-established policy framework for the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program, with agreed roles and easily accessed guidelines to support implementation.**

Availability, access and distribution of Reading Packs through schools

In collaboration with public libraries and the WA school governing authorities, the SLWA has contacted all state and independent schools and registered kindergarten centres on an annual basis, and invited them to participate in the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program. Statistical data from the SLWA affirms that **the number of schools actively participating in the distribution of *Better Beginnings* Reading Packs has steadily increased: "2017 was our biggest year, reaching 963 out of 965 schools (98%)."**

With regard to childcare centres and additional packs sent to libraries for home-schooled children, the number of distribution sites rose from 739 in 2013, to 981 in 2017.

Significantly, the only two schools not participating in 2017 were actively followed up. They were independent schools with a very particular approach to literacy. They preferred to focus on story-telling and sharing, with little or no attention to print in the early

years. The SLWA adapted their resources in ways that aligned with this philosophy to facilitate the future distribution of packs to kindergarten-aged children in these two schools. Potentially, this means that the **SLWA will succeed in engaging 100% of WA schools in the distribution of Reading Pack in 2018.**

The SLWA *Better Beginnings* Leadership Team reported that the number of packs requested by schools for distribution increased from 34,547 in 2015, to 37,648 in 2017⁸.

In 2017, we reached 98.8% of schools = 37,715⁹ reading packs distributed. If we had reached 100% of Kindergartens we expect we would have reached 37,790 students.

So, I think, in terms of which communities are involved, pretty much everyone has access... we've already reached that point now where everyone has access. Now what we're trying to do is deepen the level of engagement and the quality of engagement.

The success of forging relationships with schools to identify kindergarten children and distribute Reading Packs to them is impressive. However, the SLWA Leadership Team noted a difficulty in locating and tracking children who were not enrolled in kindergarten school classes or care centres. Whilst distribution through schools is the preferred strategy, public librarians can request extra packs to distribute through their own libraries and other networks. This increases the access and availability of Reading Packs to families outside the school system or to those simply absent on the distribution day. One of the SLWA Leadership Team commented that, "...it would not be uncommon for families to receive more than one birth and kindy pack over time," but such repeat packs create only a small resource demand, while being effective in increasing access, often for the families in the most vulnerable circumstances.

The SLWA team were very aware of the need to continually review what was happening, and re-develop approaches to solve problems:

...you know, we can say from our end we might be reaching 100%, 90%... 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.

Sometimes branch librarians reported they had difficulty obtaining enough extra packs (beyond numbers ordered by schools) to meet the demand coming from other sources:

Another thing I was thinking about is the limitations of some of these things. Like the kindy packs, we put our figures in on the Better Beginnings website, when we work out how many schools, are going to need so many packs. I find we put in for all the schools, and they get all their bags, but then there is nothing left over to actually distribute at our library.

Public librarians reported trying different strategies to connect with families not in the school system, often working through other *Better Beginnings* programs and networks they had established locally:

... So we put on afternoon tea, or morning tea, depending on when we do it, and we talk ... whatever we would normally do in a mother's group talk in the centre, we do in the library as well, so parents that have missed out on the Better Beginnings bags, we can give them to them. I guess, because we are looking at advertising the library as well, we are getting parents that come into the library who may have missed out on a Better Beginnings bag somewhere along the line, so, we are getting those as well.

8. Reading Packs were initially distributed to children enrolled in kindergarten classes and pre-primary classes; from 2014 distribution was limited to kindergarten children.

9. Note, the small discrepancy in numbers reflects the Reading Packs that were distributed to kindergarten children although not requested by schools.



The SLWA team acknowledged that **there were still individual families and some communities that missed out, and they expressed concern that these “hard to reach” families, would likely include some of the most vulnerable children.** Most of the team had contributed to the development of programs such as the *Better Beginnings Read with Me, I Love It!* program for remote Aboriginal communities. However, they were also keen to point out that it was not always possible to predict which children might miss out:

...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.

SLWA training and development for public libraries

The SLWA considers the training of public librarians to be a critically important element in ensuring effective delivery of *Better Beginnings* programs. Since the *Kindergarten* program was established in 2009/10, the SLWA staff have included it in an ongoing program of training and development that includes:

- Face to face training workshops held annually at the SLWA; and for country libraries when possible at regional meetings, or on request;
- A Library Guide: *On Board with Better Beginnings for Kindergarten and Pre-primary Children* (www.better-beginnings.com.au);
- A library handbook: www.better-beginnings.com.au/books-more/better-beginnings-kindergarten-library-handbook-and-guide; and

- A training video provided to each library in DVD format and also available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KxHQLxUaLkM&feature=youtu.be> <http://www.better-beginnings.com.au/training-videos>.

The SLWA team articulated broad **confidence in the expertise of public librarians delivering *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program.** In 2016/7, every metropolitan library had a designated *Better Beginnings* contact, although, in some of the larger multi-branch libraries there was sometimes one dedicated contact who coordinated *Better Beginnings* across their whole local government area (and across multiple branches) rather than each individual library. Most of the larger country libraries also had a designated *Better Beginnings* contact. 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, so felt it was sufficient for them to seek one-on-one support when required rather than attend additional training for the *Kindergarten* program.

In small country towns responsibility for the delivery of the *Kindergarten* program locally is often assumed by shire administrative staff in their capacity as library officers. In these circumstances the level of service delivery depended on staff capacity or personal interest.

In country libraries, staff turnover can be higher than in metropolitan libraries, and this is compounded with fewer professional staff in dedicated library roles. The training required in country towns was seen to be more operational in nature, rather than building on the professional knowledge of staff. In addition to guidance provided online, the SLWA team also offered consultations (over the phone or by email, for example) to provide, “*on the go*” and “*just in time*,” support and advice.

SLWA data confirms numbers of public library staff attending formal training in person, between 2011 and 2017: 156 staff attended face to face training, of these 107 came from metro libraries and 49 from regional libraries (Table 9).

The SLWA Leadership Team were alert to regional issues, in regards to resources and training in remote locations and towns with small populations, providing practical face to face support, where possible, and targeted training resources:

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 ...

... 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.

WA branch librarians' perspectives on the usefulness of Kindergarten program training and support resources

Branch librarians who contributed to a focus group meeting were extremely positive about their training experiences, and thought that it had improved, they said:

There's more training available, which is wonderful.

...There's increased sessions available... early parenting sessions, you can get training for that ...for planning Story-time, and delivering Story-time, and Rhyme-time more frequent, and open to a lot more staff, I think.

...[There] was the actual delivery of packs to schools, so providing the session for that. There is now training for that, where there wasn't, before.

Branch library staff also acknowledged efforts on the part of the SLWA team to consider the organisation and planning of training in ways that helped them to attend:

I think [training] is better because they publish [the program] for a whole year, so we can actually put it into our training schedule, and so then we can see if the staff miss the first one, in January, for example, we can send them in August.

Table 9: Public library staff attending training face to face

Year	Staff from Metro libraries	Staff from Regional libraries	Total staff attendances
2017	16	1	17
2016	8	0	8
2015	6	7	13
2014	10	5	15
2013	21	16	37
2012	27	12	39
2011	19	8	27
Totals	107	49	156



Branch library staff described some of the challenges they faced in accessing training and meeting the needs of changing communities. Staffing numbers tend to be small in rural and remote libraries creating difficulties in terms of finding cover, and funding of travel.

Staffing was also described as complex in areas of rapid population growth, where the numbers of families, kindergarten-aged children, schools and early years care services place additional unexpected pressure on the libraries:

... It is amazing, you know... increase in population in the City of X as well, so there are always new schools popping up. You want to give a good service, just because it's a busy school, you don't want to have less quality of service, or experience.

Whilst librarians themselves expressed a commitment to flexible working that allowed them to meet the needs of changing communities, staffing levels are not so easily managed. Public librarians noted that it would be helpful if more branch managers attended *Better Beginnings* training, so that they would be in a better position to support the program and understand how complex staffing needs can be for the program:

I tried to get some managers to go, just so that they have a concept of what it is all about. Especially once you get into the kindy program when I allocate a branch, "Right, you have got four kindys, you must look after." ... in one school, you may have four kindergartens, and so you must go in there four times. Just so that they understand, from a staffing point of view, why this person is out of the branch. I haven't been successful with any managers, just yet, but I am working away.

Public librarians' perceptions of the usefulness of Kindergarten program training and support resources

All the librarians interviewed from the evaluation communities (seven, representing seven public libraries) had received some training and support. They reported quite diverse learning and development experiences. These included:

- General awareness and specific program training for *Better Beginnings*, which was run at the SLWA in Perth or through local and regional meetings;
- Learning 'on the job' from colleagues and through experience; and
- Using support materials and resources provided online, and acquired through personal research.

Several of the public librarians had teaching qualifications and experience which they thought very beneficial. Several of those without teaching experience reported taking up opportunities to develop their broader understandings about literacy



and learning, and about the connections between *Better Beginnings* and the Early Years Learning Framework, and they found this very helpful. The public librarians sought to continually develop their expertise in presenting and delivering sessions to parents and children, for example through *Baby Rhyme-time*, *Story-time*, and community talks about literacy and books. They reported that worthwhile training opportunities arose from many sources, and learning was often helpful across different *Better Beginnings* programs.

The *Better Beginnings* website includes:

- A set of three *Kindergarten* presentation guides, with sample scripts for school-based presentations for children and parents (<https://www.better-beginnings.com.au/books-more/kindy-program-presentation-guides>);
- Two training videos (<https://www.better-beginnings.com.au/training-videos>) with information about the *Kindergarten* program its purpose, messages, resources and role of local libraries in supporting the program, including communication, delivery and presentation strategies; and
- A training schedule listing formal training opportunities for librarians (<https://www.better-beginnings.com.au/events/better-beginnings-training-schedule>).

Overall, the public librarians found the SLWA information resources, support and training they received to be both sufficient and 'Very Useful':

[I feel] very well supported, great team at the State Library who are helpful, approachable. [The training and resources] helps expand what you're already doing.

Gives you a few more ideas and more confidence. Get to talk to other colleagues who are delivering similar programs, so the networking's really good.

The SLWA team had made a consistent effort to embed training through the inclusion of educational content in *Better Beginnings* family packages. This provided perfectly timed and contextualised support, and it was greatly appreciated:

... I sort of look at that as training in a box as well, because there are Story Times and Rhyme Times all developed for regional libraries to borrow. Everything is in there, but we've also got information on how we put it together, and how we suggest it. I mean, we can't guarantee it's going to be delivered the way we would but we have given them the model structure, and actually shown them how it can be put into place, and it's all ready for them to just present. So... you're not actually face-to-face but sometimes you've just got these different methods of delivering the training, which I think has really made a difference.

... The feedback that we've had from them [families] regarding the videos and the amounts on the Story Time Suitcases has been hugely, hugely positive, so I think it has had the impact that was desired.

Most of the librarians from the communities expressed a desire for more training. In particular, to allow them to see how others worked, and to ensure they kept in touch with new ways of doing things. DVDs and networking were seen as useful for learning as well as more formal training sessions.

They also emphasised the need for a high priority to be maintained on support, particularly for new staff or those without an educational background:

I feel comfortable with it. Someone who is not familiar with it, probably not. Anyone not coming from a background of early education would find it a little bit daunting.



Better Beginnings Kindergarten program training and support resources for school teachers

Public librarians have the primary responsibility for liaising with schools, and those contributing to the evaluation typically considered they had a leadership role to play in helping schools understand and contribute to the *Kindergarten* program effectively. All librarians from the evaluation communities said they shared information and insights with schools and teachers through informal communications. This was usually done when liaising with schools about the distribution of *Kindergarten* Reading Packs to children; or through contacts made during the sessions librarians ran for kindergarten children or parents at the school. Some local librarians had also tried to provide structured support to schools, for example, through regional meetings for teachers and principals, but there was not much evidence of them being particularly successful:

We have, in the past, had principals meetings, ...[where we have] talked about all the programs that we do for children..... but that hasn't happened in the last couple of years.

...we also tried a PD session, which had to be cancelled, because none of the teachers [attended]... I think because it was early in the year, teachers are quite time poor, with their parent info sessions, but that's in the to do basket, I think, for us.

School principals acknowledged the importance of the *Kindergarten* program and indeed praised it highly, but they **rarely became professionally involved in communicating with library staff, or leading professional discussions about it with their staff:**

I don't have a lot of involvement. I love the program, and I love that the children get books, but as you can imagine, principals are pretty busy so the delegation to my kindergarten teachers is where it's at. But I've known of Better

Beginnings for years, and always appreciated it in any school that I've been in.

The SLWA team designed a *Kindergarten* Teacher's Guide with activities relevant to the books provided in the *Kindergarten* Reading Packs and the Discovery Backpacks. The activities had been made freely available to all teachers online. Feedback from kindergarten and early years teachers in evaluation schools, however, suggests that **despite the potential usefulness of these resources, they are rarely accessed or used.** Teachers' explanations for the lack of interest in them included:

- *Kindergarten* and early years teachers know about early literacy and enough about *Better Beginnings* not to need the help;
- The Resource Pack schools are given and communications with public librarians gave them enough information; and
- Teachers were too busy to follow up *Better Beginnings* activities in the classroom.

Several of the teachers interviewed also commented that they saw *Better Beginnings* as primarily the responsibility of the librarians rather than school.

Usefulness of the Better Beginnings Kindergarten program web-resources

A *Better Beginnings* website was launched in 2012. It provides:

- A free and open public-access information and resources for families and the wider community about literacy and three-four year olds; about the Reading Packs and the Discovery Backpacks; tips on how to select good books and engage three to four year olds with books; links to games and activities relevant to kindergarten-aged children, (<https://www.better-beginnings.com.au/programs/four-five>); and,
- A professional portal with free registration for librarians and teachers.

Online elements specifically for the *Kindergarten* program were introduced in 2014. By 2017, 706 public library staff had opened an account; and 2,695 educators (school and childcare settings) had opened accounts. Access to restricted *Kindergarten* program pages included a registration portal, designed for use by library staff and teachers to manage registering all schools' requirements for Reading Packs (www.better-beginnings.com.au). Schools were required to update their kindergarten enrolment numbers and contact details annually. Public libraries were alerted when schools register, and they used the school information to organise the delivery of the Reading Packs to their library. Since the introduction of the automated, digital system, through to the evaluation (2017/8), the Kindergarten Registration Portal had been accessed on average 5,850 times by 2,500 library and education staff (combined) each school year. **The success of the *Kindergarten* program in involving, almost 100% of WA schools in the distribution of Reading Packs suggests that online registrations have worked effectively.**

Additionally, registered schools could access a teachers' guide, with over fifty complete lesson plans and dozens of activities, black lines masters and templates linked to the WA Syllabus, the Early Years Learning Framework and the Australian Curriculum (<https://www.better-beginnings.com.au/books-more/teachers-guide>). Prior to being available for download, every school had been mailed a hard-copy, however, this practice had become unsustainable and ended in 2016. The *Kindergarten* Teachers' Guide has been accessed 2,479 times since it was made available online in January 2016, which is curious given the feedback from schools that they have rarely used the guides.

Initially the SLWA, maintained a news page as part of the site: <https://www.better-beginnings.com.au/news>. It required a significant investment of team time to maintain up to date content and records showed that there were few visits to the page and little interest or traction with the content. Consequently, a decision has been made to discontinue the page.

Success of delivery by public libraries

...The teachers absolutely love the program, because I go in and I deliver it. The children get a story, they get their packs, they are really inspired. They bring their families into the library, quite often within a few days, and it works really well. (Librarian, Public Library)

Testimonies provided through survey responses, interviews and focus groups suggest that public librarians actively sought to implement the approaches laid out by the SLWA. The context for each local library was different and adaptations and innovations were often made to:

- Meet the particular priorities, resources, needs and understandings of local families and partner organisations;
- Manage personal, professional or locational challenges; and
- Achieve desired improvements.

Almost half of the public librarians made specific mention of changes they had observed since the launch of the *Better Beginnings* program, although the other half reported consistency and stability:

- Three of six librarians stated that the implementation of the program had changed;
- Two of five said the set-up had changed;
- Two of five reported their role had changed;
- Three of six told researchers that the person giving out packs changed;
- Three of six noted changes in the way Reading Packs were introduced to each family/child; and
- Three of six said the way they explained materials in the Reading Packs to families, children and school personnel changed.

The balance between stability and flexibility was important to many librarians. They regarded the freedom to adapt to local contexts very highly.



Preparation of Reading Packs

The way the packs were compiled and distributed varied. In some cases, the SLWA compiled the packs and provided them to the local libraries 'ready to go'; in other cases, libraries received resources in bulk and were responsible for making up their own packs. Differences were explained as appropriate responses to the availability of library staff, and to the wishes or preferences of the school.

Most of the public librarians (6 of 7) in the evaluation reported adding extra materials to the Reading Packs, which they thought would improve connection and communication with their local community. For example, some included membership forms, activities flyers, public library information such as opening hours, and letters from the library.

Involvement in the preparation of Reading Packs encouraged some librarians to develop their own community specific resources. One said she was working on an e-resources flyer, and another had created a laminated sheet to go in the Discovery Backpack that explained the online resources.

Whilst a nominated *Better Beginnings* librarian normally took responsibility for any interactions with school staff, parents or community members, other library staff assisted in the distribution process by managing and overseeing the delivery, cataloguing, compilation or promotion of the Reading Packs through other library events and advertisements. The size of the library, its staffing allocation, and the numbers of schools and children the library serviced, made a significant difference to the particular approach chosen. There were significant differences



of scale and character between the libraries in the seven communities, including, for example, one that expected to deliver 1554 bags across 24 schools, as compared with another that distributed to four schools, including a school of the air. **Public libraries placed a very high value on being given freedom to be flexible, and, “... just do what seems to work best for all parties.”**

Ensuring Reading Packs reach every kindergarten child in the local community

All the public librarians participating (7 of 7), indicated that they understood and fully supported the goal of ensuring every kindergarten child in the local community received a Reading Pack. They identified four primary strategies for delivery which were consistent with the SLWA guidelines: through local schools and early childhood care facilities; through family-focussed activities provided at the library; through local networks; and, by making the Reading Pack available on request from the library. All the public librarians interviewed considered the most significant delivery strategy to be through contact with kindergarten classes, and confirmed that in 2016/7, Reading Packs had been distributed through local schools. However, other strategies had been used at different times. One library (Avoca Library) had distributed Reading Packs through 24 different sites including schools, a childcare centre with a four-year old program, a childcare centre that was trialling the *Sing with Me* program with a group of two year olds and had contact with interested families, and a family day care centre. Each of the seven evaluation libraries also offered *Better Beginnings* information and Reading Packs on request.

The focus group of WA branch librarians provided additional illustrations of alternative, and often creative, ways to engage *hard to reach families*, for example:

- Through prison programs:

... My colleague does that with the men's prison. She has been doing that for the last 18 months, [and there is a]... women's prison, but I don't have the access, and a lot of them are Indigenous, so I am actually going to an Indigenous parent, who has actually already tied up the service with them. So, I supplied the Better Beginnings bag to [the service] and they deliver it to the prison.

- Through alternative school programs and special educational units, often with the help of volunteers:

[Volunteer] goes out to... a school... and it's for people who mainstream doesn't work for them, and they have... a young mum's program there, as they have a kindy in the high school, and she goes in, and... hands out packs, and does Better Beginnings with them there, so, we are finding new and wonderful people to hand packs out...

- Through Migrant Resource Centres:

I mean the Migrant Resource Centre for the newcomer. They are mainly like refugees from different countries, so they are like new to the country, and you know, we hand out Reading Packs while we are there.

Distributing Reading Packs through family and friendship networks, takes a lot of effort on the part of the librarian, but often has the significant advantage of influencing the wider community, as one New Cohort parent explained:

Great program. I was introduced to it prior to Kindergarten through friends, older sibling, playgroup, library and hence already know how fabulous books and literacy are... it's a great resource and I tell other parents about it.



Although the SLWA keeps data on the number of Reading Packs distributed to public libraries, accurate and detailed record keeping about the numbers of packs received and distributed at the local level was rare. None of the libraries had secure processes to enable them to track which children had received packs, which families had attended information sessions, or to follow up on families that might “slip through the net.” Monitoring of distribution also raised issues of privacy for some librarians, who foresaw problems in documenting and sharing family library interactions.

It was also unusual for public librarians to undertake any follow-up activities with the families and children after they received a Reading Pack. Public librarians reported that this was usually due to lack of time, the sheer number of schools and children, or the feeling that the schools would rather the librarians not be there.

Approaches to the distribution of Reading Packs in schools

In most cases, the public librarians surveyed in the evaluation liaised directly with school staff about the most appropriate times, places and ways to present the program and the packages to kindergarten children and their families. They typically negotiated with the school about who should present the Reading Packs, the style of presentation, as well as the audience for the presentation. Sometimes the delivery took place in class time at school, or at a special event, such as a school assembly or parents’ meeting. On other occasions the kindergarten children were brought to the local library by school staff to receive their Reading Packs. One school principal expressed a strong preference for this method, as he saw a great advantage in encouraging the families to go to the local library, sometimes for the first time:

...We did take the kids to the library for two years in a row, that went from just a really small session to then them reading a story, the kids getting involved in an activity, having a parent morning tea so the parents were invited and morning tea was provided in the library. They did a walk around the library so all the kids and parents could see what it was like, they did the enrolment form to sort of get kids to enrol into the library with the kids there and the parents there, “Yes, I want to Mum ...” So that ran really well, I thought, and it was the first time for a lot of these kids to even have some books in the home or even being exposed to the library at all, and because they’ve opened up that art gallery... they were just like, a whole new world for them. So that’s where I’ve seen it and really got involved.

Six of the seven public librarians interviewed, reported that they usually delivered Reading Packs themselves to schools for distribution to the kindergarten children. This created the opportunity for the librarian to develop a relationship with staff and was a preferred strategy. However, this did not always happen. Some schools preferred to give out the packs themselves without involvement from the librarian beyond delivery of resources: “Schools were requesting a drop off.” And occasionally library resources were too stretched to spend time at the school, “Unfortunately last year we had to leave the packs at the office **because we didn’t have enough people** (the main librarian left).” The pressures of time and strained staffing levels were considered a barrier to effectiveness from the perspectives of both librarians and school staff.

The presentation of Reading Packs to kindergarten children and families

Once the details of time, numbers and locations for the distribution was decided, schools mostly left the librarians to plan the interaction themselves. The teachers cooperated by managing communications

with the parents, sending notes and reminders home about it, and sometimes organising tea and biscuits for parents as a welcoming incentive. Teachers usually brought the children along to the sessions, settled them down and introduced the librarian, but they seemed happy to hand the lead role over to the librarian for the actual presentation. In part, this was a sign of the confidence they had in the librarian's capabilities, but it also reflected a view amongst some teachers that the *Better Beginnings* program was a library initiative, and it was the librarian's job to conduct the sessions rather than a school responsibility. One kindergarten teacher referred to the presentation as *"not our session, it's the librarian's"*.

Most of the evaluation public librarians were well trained and experienced, and felt very confident about their presentation skills, although two recalled receiving feedback from the teachers intended to help them work more effectively with the class, which they found supportive. For example:

The last one was more directed to parents with PowerPoint. But school feedback said focus on children. The school suggested it [PowerPoint] was not suitable for kids – so I changed. Now, I'm fairly informal, I'll sit cross-legged and just talk.

Introducing families to the *Better Beginnings* website and online information literacy package

Since the launch of a dedicated *Better Beginnings* website in 2012, the SLWA has made a concerted effort to build online resources to support families across the different programs. Four of the seven local public librarians interviewed said that they introduced families and children to the *Better Beginnings* website and online information literacy package. Three librarians do not do this, although one planned on doing this in the future. **Poor access to computers and iPads for librarians, families and teachers was mentioned as a barrier to greater interest in promoting e-resources.**

Integration of the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program in schools

In the 2012 *Better Beginnings* evaluation (Barratt-Pugh & Vajda, 2012), some teachers expressed a lack of understanding about the *Kindergarten* program. This evaluation has found clear evidence that **in 2016/17 schools are working effectively as partners in identifying the numbers of children needing a Reading Pack, and cooperating in organising and managing their distribution.** Interviews with school staff affirms very positive support for the program and confidence in the library staff to deliver the program, but **collaboration at a deeper educational level of shared professional critical debate and active planning and follow up was not evidenced prominently.**

The role of school principals in implementation

Six principals representing seven of the schools in the evaluation study were interviewed. The **principals all expressed enthusiasm and full support for the aims and intentions of the program, and confidence in the overall approach and the delivery strategies employed.**

In all seven schools, principals had delegated the major responsibility for the *Kindergarten* program to a school deputy, school librarian or an early years teacher. Principals saw their own role as one of support, monitoring, and maintaining communications with significant related networks such as the Early Years Learning Network and KindiLink. Principals appeared to place a high level of trust in their staff to organise, maintain and sustain the program:

I've got two very competent staff members who have taken the program and are running with it. So, I just touch base with them and see how it's going and get some feedback that way.

Principals are pretty busy, so the delegation to my Kindergarten teachers is where it's at.



Some recognised that the potential of the *Kindergarten* program was not fully exploited, and implied that schools could do more to both support and build upon the opportunities *Better Beginnings* offered:

I think the impact of the program can be improved with the schools, more engagement and involvement with it [would be good] now its just a launch day and that's it.

Several principals said that being involved in the evaluation had caused them to reflect on their role, and they felt that they should be more involved and could provide better leadership to sustain and strengthen the program:

I suppose having this conversation has made me realise I still don't know much about it. And that would be an improvement for me to know a little bit more about it and to get more information.

One principal had a specific action plan in place to develop the program:

I haven't done enough, I haven't done it justice at all... I've never promoted it in the school newsletter. I should have been sending out broadsheets. I should have been talking about it to parent groups... So, I'm about to change my tune on that one, absolutely and completely, and in fact, tomorrow I have my first, in a series of parent engagement protocols, "coffee and chat with the principal," and I thought what I might do is get them into the lab, and get them [parents] onto the websites so that they can do a little bit of surfing themselves, and have a look at the [Better Beginnings] programs and find out about the resources that are on offer.

All the principals saw the value in the *Kindergarten* program and wanted their schools to participate more fully, but amid many priorities, it was often overlooked. One wondered if more assertive, but timely interventions from the public librarians would be effective in encourage principals to engage more fully with the opportunities of *Better Beginnings*:

... I guess one of the things is the busyness of life, so what you want is a flyer that gets up off the email, smacks you between the eyes, and says, "Principal, this is Better Beginnings, tap in, here's a phone number, here's a name." That's what I like, so in those little quiet moments, every now and again, just, "it's [the Principal] here, I want someone to come out and talk to the staff so we can support you more." I'd have them at a staff meeting, I'd try to get them out to have, like, the parents' coffee and chat thing that we have on the last Tuesday of every month. Yes, I would do that.

Teachers' and school librarian roles and perceptions of implementation

A total of 21 teachers and three school librarians provided information and feedback through interviews, surveys and focus groups. There were eight kindergarten teachers whose classes received Reading Packs in 2016/7; and 13 early years teachers teaching children in year three and year five, who had previously received Reading Packs when they were in kindergarten. Although the teachers had been selected to provide feedback on either the 2016/7 implementation (New Cohort), or on the program as implemented in either 2011/12 or 2013/4 (Established Cohort), many of the teachers had been involved in multiple delivery schedules of the program, and indeed in one or more of the other streams of the program. They did not easily distinguish between different implementation cycles, but were able to share commentaries that reflected long-term experience.

The perceptions of kindergarten teachers

The evaluation kindergarten teachers had been introduced to the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program in a variety of ways: some through discussions with school personnel; some through written communications, including information, emails and principal information; and some through liaisons with the local librarian.

Discussion with both school staff and libraries was centred on the organisation of the Reading Pack distribution, and was seen as helpful (8 of 8). All five kindergarten teachers who liaised directly with the local librarian found it was 'very useful', and some gave examples of using information they accessed to deepen their understanding or improve their own planning:

I mailed librarian about the title of the book, and was able to use resources in planning for the week.

The website was already set up when we started, that's really helpful, I can go in and just check again what it's all about, funding and so on.

Access to easily available information was important to *Kindergarten* teachers:

I would like to know which book is being delivered this year... [I would like] a written sheet explaining what the program is, what happens on the day, how long it will take and what it's trying to achieve.

But most of the kindergarten teachers felt they had enough information about the *Kindergarten* program and its resources (5 of 7), although two made suggestions about improvements they would like:

... A promotional poster on wall for parents [would be good].

... Promote it... [the Kindergarten Pack] and let parents know what's about to happen... [the presentation of packs] It just feels like it's a one-off event that occurs suddenly and then it's over. Not enough background knowledge to it perhaps.

Kindergarten teachers thought of contact with the local library as either, 'very important' (7 of 8), or 'quite important' (2 of 8): *"I think any of that community connection with your local library is essential."* However, outside of liaisons to arrange the distribution of Reading Packs, few of the kindergarten teachers were in regular communication with the local public library (6 of 9). Kindergarten teachers felt their school book collections were generally enough for their needs, and they only sought assistance if they were, *"looking for books that might support a particular theme"* [not available in the school library]. The evaluation process caused several kindergarten teachers to reflect on the relationship and they acknowledged that there could be benefits in doing more:

[We]... don't use the service enough and we can be doing a lot more.

Some parents are not aware of the availability of our library resources. The Better Beginnings pack provides that information... But we need to develop some kind of relationship, so the librarian comes to Kindy, and Kindy goes to the library.

The kindergarten teachers spoke very confidently about the aims of the *Kindergarten* program highlighting: early literacy (5 of 8), supporting families with literacy practices (6 of 8), encouraging library membership (6 of 9), and connecting with local library or family (reading to children) (2 of 8). Their comments indicated that they had clearly picked up the main messages about the *Kindergarten* program:

[I think aims are to]... encourage the parents and carers to become involved in reading, literacy. To become familiar with books, using



the library and the resources available. Make them familiar with what's on offer for them.

[I think the Kindergarten program is]... based on family reading and talking with their children. We facilitate it by having it happen at school, promoting it and modelling the practice in every day in the classroom. Children having books out and reading every day – sending that message home to parents about how important it is to read and talk to your children all the time.

[I think aims are to]... encourage parents to read with their children, to join their local library, acknowledging that parents are the first teachers, particularly with reading, and speaking, and listening. So just to get them more involved.

All of the kindergarten teachers (8 of 8) expressed confidence in the program and rated early literacy family programs as 'VERY important'. Their explanations for the significance of family early literacy programs included:

Helping to start the reading journey at home.

Getting children to handle books from a young age.

[The evidence from] early childhood research and encouraging library use and attendance (including Story Time).

Children's brains are developing rapidly. The early years when parents are talking and reading to the children are vital to develop oral language. Vital to set those foundations and love of reading. If parents model it in the home (daily routine), it becomes part of practice and as they go to schools it's just something they do, they read.

All starts at home. It's really important to get parents involved, it instils good habits by encouraging kids to be regularly changing books and reading.

The beliefs articulated were entirely consistent with the values and aims of the *Kindergarten* program, but were generally thought to be attitudes teachers held prior to involvement in the *Kindergarten* program: *"It's something embedded in us as teachers. It's just the same... I already held those attitudes."*

All the kindergarten teachers interviewed had participated in one or more school presentations and describe their roles in ways that closely matched the observations made by researchers. Three teachers gave explanations for their preference that librarians 'fronted' the presentation sessions:

Always the librarian who presents it as something very special.

I prefer it to be the librarian, it's better for the children to see a familiar face, to make that connection when they go to the library.

I didn't get to see the contents of the pack before the session, so I wasn't really confident to do it. It's not our session, it's the librarian's.

Although most teachers preferred the librarian to take the lead in the presentation, several indicated that they did try to complement the positive messages given:

I remind them, show the game and little book you can read with your family... Usually reinforce it again.

I encourage the children to value the pack and its contents... We show them the book, they see the library bag, we usually put their name on it, the zipped reading folder.

Only one of the kindergarten teachers said she had followed up on the session with parents. She sent out a note and newsletter to parents describing the *Kindergarten* program website and online e-resources to them. Interestingly, a second teacher commented that she would have supported the promotion of the digital resources, *"If we knew this was something she [librarian] wanted to promote, we could've have a whiteboard ready. She could explain it's really easy to find, this is what's available."*

This suggests that the teacher felt the responsibility lay with the librarian to define the sessions rather than the school. It positions the school as a supporting agency rather than an equal partner.

Coherence between the values and practices of schools and the Kindergarten program

All eight kindergarten teachers, identified the Reading Pack as the, “most valuable feature of the kindergarten program,” because of the children’s positive responses, the way it linked to early literacy promotion and the public library, and its impact in connecting school years together. They valued its alignment philosophically, particularly the involvement with parents and acknowledging their role as crucial. One teacher described the similarity of the school’s own home reading program to the *Kindergarten* program, and saw the consistency of approach as a positive:

Every Friday the children get to take home a reading book, a book that the parent get to read with their children together, so it sort of links to Better Beginnings. Called “home reading” in Term 4.

Five of the teachers identified ways in which the *Kindergarten* program supported other aspects of child development that were relevant to school learning including: brain development, numeracy, physical and outdoor activity, creative ideas, developing social responsible for belongings, caring for books, community involvement, and socio-emotional learning such as, “...just sitting down and reading.”

The SLWA team developed a Teacher’s Guide, available on the *Better Beginnings*’ website with digital resources to provide professional support for schools in linking teaching activities to *Kindergarten* program resources. Several of the teachers (4) were positive about the usefulness of the teaching resources they knew about:

I used the website for its lesson plans and easy to download visual aids, as well as games for relief teachers... It was good for picking and

choosing what you want to read... and would be really good for beginners.

However, none of the available resources had been used extensively:

- More than half of the kindergarten teachers surveyed had not used the online Teacher’s Guide;
- All the teachers who used online lesson plans (4), thought they were ‘very useful’ (2) or ‘quite useful’ (2);
- Three teachers said they found the expandable table of activities either ‘very useful’, (2 out of 4) or ‘quite useful’ (1 of 4); but one found it ‘not at all useful’;
- Four teachers found the related Blackline Masters and templates to be either ‘very useful’ (2 of 4); or ‘quite useful’ (2 of 4).

All the kindergarten teachers believed the impact of the *Kindergarten* program in the home to be positive, and they were optimistic about the outcomes that might come from engagement in the program:

Hopefully they [the parents] will understand the importance of early literacy and its impact on children’s learning.

There’s hope that it’s having a big impact and the parents are using the resources.

I hope it instills that sense of learning to read and wanting to look at a book.

Limited amount of resources, goals to have kids learn to properly take care of the books.

Two kindergarten teachers felt confident agreeing that the parents of their classes had responded really well:

They were absolutely amazed, “Wow, we get to keep these folders, like the books are ours to keep?”

Generally [the response is] good, but they have busy lives. We are trying to think of ways to really motivate them to get there and explain to them the importance of a program like this.



The interest in reading with their children and preparedness for them to read every day to the children has probably picked up over the years.

But others were either unsure of parental responses, or somewhat sceptical:

I think they appreciate the books as a resource but I'm not sure that they follow up and join the library.

Depends on whether that book is being promoted at home too or whether it's just popped away or left in a bag.

There has been no real response or appreciation... but they are not good at expressing their ideas.

The lack of insight into family responses suggests that although the *Kindergarten* program is highly valued by the teachers, it is not regarded as an integral element of the school's provisions, and its impact and effectiveness is not a priority for critical evaluation and discussion in the school community.

Perceptions of the impact of involvement in the Kindergarten program on teachers' work

Seven of the eight kindergarten teachers interviewed had previous experience of the *Kindergarten* program. One teacher was able to articulate ways involvement had influenced her work, but the impact was limited to helping her understand how distribution of the Reading Packs would best fit in her particular school, and encouraging her to stimulate parents interest, creating a, "little bit of anticipation by sending out invitations."

Although the kindergarten teachers said they really valued the program, less than half of them felt it had impacted significantly on their professional work or expertise. Rather it reinforced and re-energised some of their pre-existing ideas and practices, for example:

- Three said it improved their relationship with the library: "...it encouraged me to go to library and liaise more with library"; and

- One thought it had encouraged them in their commitment to working with parents: "Getting the message out to parents that they need to read with their children every day. Find a special moment every day to read."

The perceptions of early years teachers

The perceptions of 13 early years teachers were canvassed through eight focus groups, with representatives from four schools. Most of these teachers knew about the program, and a few remembered being involved in previous years or in other schools.

Several early years teachers commented that children in their classes still had *Better Beginnings* books, and used their *Kindergarten* program library bags, and had joined the library:

Yes, I have got some kids that use that bag as their library bag, so they have obviously had it given to them.

I still have the library bags in year one, we are still seeing the library bags.

And I guess for the pre-primaries, at the beginning of the year, they will bring their bags in, and they say, "At kindy last year we got a book," and then they know that's going to be their library bag. So, they do refer to it at the beginning of the year.

Yes, when it first happened they talk about it for a little while. For quite a few weeks after. The students who link into the library as well, they tend to remember and they keep up the engagement of their program.

The early years teachers had not all participated in *Kindergarten* program activities or attended Reading Pack presentations, however, they seemed to understand its core purpose, and were able to recall at least some of the program's key messages:

From what I read it was getting adults reading to children. Just normalising reading in everyday routine.

Just encouraging reading with your child, language development, the enjoyment of stories, the sort of relationship of reading with your child as well. I remember ...being ... encouraged to get them started early.

To encourage parents to read to children and get the children interested in reading books early in the age.

Literacy, reading, having one-on-one time with parents, reading a book in my head... It's to encourage parents to read stories with their kids, and to use the local library, that's my understanding. You know, just to encourage parents, give them some good ideas of how to talk with kids about the books that they are reading, and get the language from the kids. They are mostly Aussie books, which is really good. And even if the kids are not reading, the pictures are so vibrant.

Some of the early years teachers had seen or used *Kindergarten* program resources and were able to remember items including:

... The book, the library bag, the little backpacks over at the library. There is a lot of good resources online, on the Better Beginnings website.

... The Discovery Backpacks, the Read Aloud Pack.

... The nursery rhyme leaflet, a book or two, a game within the pack, a membership form.

And a couple of the early years teachers still had books from the *Kindergarten* program collections in their classrooms:

I have the books. I've got Isabella's Garden from a few years back. Use them with my pre-primaries.

Some early years teachers also reported a perception that families were using the local library more regularly, although none had evidence to back their impressions:

I know there's quite a few families in the kindy and pre-primary that use the library.

I see year ones from the other class being taken to the library a lot by their parents.

There's at least a couple in the year one class that would definitely and maybe three families from my class that I could say would be doing all of this stuff.

Some of the early years teachers had noticed improvements in the literacy skills and attitudes of children in their classes, and whilst some thought that the *Kindergarten* program might have helped, they were not confident that the *Kindergarten* program was the cause:

I've definitely seen an improvement in parent understanding maybe over the last few years but I don't know whether I can attribute it to that. It might be from that but parents' involvement is a huge, huge part of this community and the start of school, so the more information that we can get out to them on the importance of reading, importance of coming to school and socialising in pre-kindy, then it collectively is making a difference. We do have kids rocking up now with shoes and lunchboxes and having been read to. Maybe not as much as we would like but, there is some shift happening over the seven years that I've been here.



None of the early years teachers reported investigating improvements in parental understanding about literacy. There was no evidence presented that suggested the schools had systematic ways of collecting and analysing evidence about the impact of family literacy, or that it was a topic of professional debate in the school.

Evidence from the early years teachers is anecdotal, however, it does suggest some **longevity in the Kindergarten program, with children keeping library bags and books across the transition from kindergarten into formal education.** Although the early years teachers knew about the program, there was **little evidence that they built upon the positive foundations in any particular way, but rather saw the program as a very good but separate initiative.**

The perceptions of school librarians

Three school librarians based in the schools were interviewed. One knew about the *Kindergarten* program from previous experience as a pre-primary teacher, and the other two knew about it through liaisons with the local librarians, the SLWA or within school discussions. All of them took a positive and supportive stance about the program. They accorded a high value to the program, as a result of the seeing benefits in terms of the children's interest in the public library and communications around the use of packs and procedures: *"It's been so successful and a fantastic program for children who might not otherwise [have much literacy support]"*

All three school librarians felt that liaison between the school and local public library was 'very important'. However, only two of the three stated that they did, in practice, liaise with the local public library, and none described a particularly close relationship:

I do when we have a visiting author or storyteller, but that's the only really contact. And they send out flyers every now and again if there's something on at the town library. I get them and we put them in this office window. But that's about all the contact.

Although they were aware of the *Kindergarten* program and thought it was worthwhile, none of the three school librarians interviewed had any involvement with the *Kindergarten* program as related to their school. They each reported that they had:

- No involvement in the promotion of the *Kindergarten* program and did not have information or posters in school library about the *Kindergarten* program;
- No contact with SLWA about the *Kindergarten* program;
- No awareness of *Kindergarten* program website;
- No awareness of the Teacher's Resource Pack; and
- No contact with parents about the *Kindergarten* program.

Although the three school librarians may not be representative of others, the evidence from their interviews suggests that **there may be a place for reviewing and re-considering the potential mutual benefits of building stronger and more active relationships between the SLWA, Kindergarten program and school librarians.**

Perceptions of the *Kindergarten* program design and implementation

I think the Better Beginnings program is fantastic. I have many children through my library who don't have access to books at home. From a young age like that, having picture books, that's where it begins; you need to be developing a love of reading from the very beginning. You can't teach that to someone later on in life if they haven't developed that at the beginning, so I think it's really important to get these kids at the beginning, get them reading and introduce them to books and get them loving and getting excited about books and literacy.

(School Librarian, Interview)

Interviews, focus groups and surveys gave participants an opportunity to share their perceptions about the design and implementation of the *Kindergarten* program, with specific reference to:

- The quality, usefulness and appropriateness of the *Kindergarten* program resources;
- The effectiveness of the *Kindergarten* program in demonstrating the contents of the Reading Pack; and
- The effectiveness of the *Kindergarten* program in conveying key messages to families.

The quality, usefulness and appropriateness of the *Kindergarten* resources

Library perceptions

The SLWA *Better Beginnings* team have overall responsibility for the selection and provision of resources across all the programs: *Birth to Three*; *Sing with Me*; *Kindergarten* (formerly *Four to Five*); *Read to Me* (Aboriginal); *Books to Go* (Creating Books

in Communities). Members of the SLWA *Better Beginnings* focus group were clear and articulate about their intention to provide resources that align with *Better Beginnings* goals and values:

... Like everyone in this room [I] contribute to making sure that Better Beginnings is providing relevant and high-quality resources that constantly maintain focus on achieving our objectives.

They voiced 100% agreement (7), about their on-going efforts to review and update resources, and to ensure that all the *Better Beginnings* programs worked well together across different age-groups:

I think there's now a really clear, I guess, structure to the programs and very clear linking between our resources with those messages reinforced along the way. And I think that's been a huge improvement. I think of it as a kind of tiered set of resources for families, I think they're outstanding. I really do.

The SLWA team expressed a strong commitment to trying to identify and meet the needs of diverse communities and develop resources relevant to them. For example, one team member stated:

My role is to support regional libraries, regional families, and Aboriginal families, to access, and engage with Better Beginnings. Also, to make sure that what we develop and produce responds to their needs, which are quite unique and the contexts are also unique for regional libraries, families, and Aboriginal communities and families. Also, like everyone in this room to contribute to making sure that Better Beginnings is providing relevant and high-quality resources that constantly maintain focus on achieving our objectives.



All of the **branch** librarians made positive statements about range, diversity and appropriateness of *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* resources. They stated that in their experience of working with school staff, the resources for teachers were very well received:

We had a really good response from [teachers at a training event], and I took them through the website, and showed them the resources, and they thought it was amazing.

This participant group did raise interesting questions about the distinction of resources for particular age groups and whilst supporting the appropriateness of current *Kindergarten* Reading Packs, they noted the potential for 'gaps' in provisions either side of this target age. Resources in the *Sing with Me* program for two to three year olds (Orange Reading Pack) currently being trialled in selected libraries were given to families with children about to start kindergarten:

So, at X library, too, one of the schools approached the librarian to do a pre-kindergarten getting ready for the school program, so the Sing with Me packs tie in with that... The Sing with Me packs tie in really well with that as far as a Better Beginnings resource.

Several branch librarians commented on the packaging of kindergarten resources which were described as, "appealing." But more significantly, branch librarians thought the adoption of a common design for each program, with each distinguished by colour (Yellow for *Birth-Three*; Orange for *Sing with Me*; Green for *Kindergarten*) helped to build understanding about the relationship between the different parts of the *Better Beginnings* program, and an expectation and hope in families that they would participate in a long-term program:

...Then there is another pack and then they start thinking, "Oh yeah, that's right this is a really good," and then they get the kindy pack as well. So, I think, it's just good to have that follow-on effect all the way through.

Several of the target public librarians interviewed made reference to positive feedback they had received from parents and children about the *Kindergarten* program resources:

Children like the books... Great resources especially backpacks... love backpacks and reading bags... Like the fact they're free.

The only negative feedback they had heard from families was about cases where siblings received identical packs, when they would have preferred different ones. One librarian suggested that the issue could easily be solved by having a free trading scheme, where families could be offered options to swap duplicate packs with other families.

The SLWA compiled Discovery Packs that were age-targeted to help families select appropriate materials for their kindergarten child. Evaluation feedback on the quality of Discovery Backpacks from schools was generally quite positive:

- Six of the eight kindergarten teachers were aware of the Discovery Backpacks, and thought they were a successful resource that they tried to promote to their classes:

[The local librarian] brings those to show. I've borrowed a few from the local library now and again with puppets and instruments, just to have in class. We usually show some to parents and encourage them to ask for backpacks.

I reinforce the librarian's statements [about Discovery Backpacks]... "you can borrow this pack free of charge."

[I have] seen lots of parents borrowing those, so I know they're very successful.

Public librarians found that the Discovery Backpacks were very popular, particularly since parents found they catered for a wider age-range than *Kindergarten* Reading

Packs and so suited family use well. The popularity meant that sometimes there were not sufficient to meet the demand coming from local families:

We can't seem to get enough... we call them beginner readers... but they just get wiped out, lately... which is great, but we have a limit of 50 on each card, which probably contributes to that a bit if they do come to the library, they can take the whole lot.

Effectiveness of resources and delivery approaches for diversity including ESL families

Public librarians from the communities expressed a great deal of confidence in the capability of the *Kindergarten* program to accommodate family diversity and families who have English as an additional language. All seven (100%) described ways they believed they addressed diversity positively, within the *Kindergarten* program and across the whole suite of *Better Beginnings* programs. Examples of practice included:

- Resources that were inclusive: ...[we have] *Deadly Backpacks* and *Rhyme Time* suited to multicultural families. Have "X Centre" next door to the ... library;
- *Books-to-Go*: which encouraged children and families to engage with books and stories by creating their own;
- Linking the distribution of Reading Packs to NAIDOC week;
- Facilitating the Noongar institute in using the library one day a week with families and elders;
- Addressing cultural diversity through conversation by learning names, including culturally familiar songs and rhymes and craft activities;
- Always including an Aboriginal resource in a rhyme or story;
- Providing a bilingual *Better Beginnings* session every two months;
- Including *Learn English Through Story-time* (LETS) programs; and
- Connecting one on one books in other languages.

The SLWA has purposefully featured people of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds on the *Better Beginnings* website, and Reading Packs and Discovery Backpacks include texts selected to represent diversity through themes, authors and illustrations.

Branch and public librarians typically saw the *Kindergarten* program resources as being appropriately sensitive culturally; a perspective also generally shared by the school librarians interviewed. Two of the three school librarians who commented felt that the *Better Beginnings* resources and activities were appropriate for Aboriginal families and families from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. *Better Beginnings* recognises the particular need for resources that reflect the experiences of Aboriginal families through the *Read to Me, I love it!* program which includes reading resources developed to support the early literacy of children living in remote communities and Socially and Culturally Isolated (SaCI) communities. One of the public librarians commented that she would appreciate there being some way she could access *Read to Me, I love it!* Reading Packs to enhance her public library collection for local Aboriginal families who lived locally in a metropolitan suburb.

Currently, *Kindergarten* Reading Packs are compiled from SLWA prescribed collections, with only limited flexibility for adaption by local library staff, and typically they are issued to whole groups without any intention to match particular books to particular children. One of school librarians interviewed was quite critical of the lack of match between the resources in the packs and the lived experience of particular families in her community:

They [families] need to have books that are relevant to them. Sudanese refugees need to know that they have an all-black family in that book. You're talking about 10 Fingers, 10 Toes by Mem Fox, it's all white with a beautiful, pristine white baby. That child has no connection to that book at all because who are these people, they're not my family. My family are all black. My family wear different clothes. We need to look



at the demographic and say, look, this is what is needed. We haven't just got all white people. And the Indigenous kids, there are so many great Australian authors or Indigenous authors, that we could use that would be relevant to them.

Again, a relatively simple book-swap system as suggested by one public librarian would improve libraries' abilities to be more responsive to the needs of individual children and their families.

School perceptions on program resources

School principals did not comment explicitly about the quality of resources but implied their positive evaluation through statements about the effectiveness of the children's experience of books in the Reading Pack:

... It is wonderful for children who don't have reading books at home to begin to appreciate books, pictures, and words. The fact that it's like a big present puts a very positive spin on reading, and that they can share it with their parents. So, it's like a present they take home to their parents and they all read them.

But giving a lot of the children a library bag, so they can actually take books... And you can see that those kids remember those packs, so it had some impact, even now, that they remember going to special event and they got this green bag and it was full of stuff.

It was equally rare for the kindergarten teachers (8) interviewed to offer comment on the quality of resources for families, but rather there was a generalised assumption that they were an integral part of a program that was good. All of the kindergarten teachers who contributed to the evaluation rated the program as 'very important'.

All of the kindergarten teachers who were familiar with the Reading Pack (7) rated it as 'very useful'. They described its value as being that: *"The kids love getting the pack...The Reading Pack links to everything... The book [itself] and positive promotion of early literacy... [It means] the public library and schools are linking up."*

They identified the children's book (5)¹⁰, the library bag (4), and the book activities (frieze and dominoes) (4) as **most valuable features** of the Reading Pack. Two teachers also identified the library membership form as being 'most valuable'.

Whilst not all the kindergarten teachers had a clear memory of specific resources in the Read Aloud Book sets and the Discovery Backpacks, or on the web-site, they generally found resources to be, 'useful' or, 'quite useful', if they knew about them or had used them:

- **The Read Aloud Book Sets:** Although Read Aloud Sets are no longer issued one teacher commented that they were 'very useful'; two teachers thought they were 'quite useful'; one said they were 'not very useful'. Another two reported they were unaware of them or had not used them;
- **The Discovery Backpacks:** Five teachers said they found Discovery Packs to be either 'very useful' or 'quite useful'. Two teachers reported that they were either unaware of them or had not seen them except for online;
- **Better Beginnings website:** Four teachers said the website was either 'very useful' or 'quite useful'. The others reported they were either unaware of it or had not used it or made no comment on the resource;
- **Online Resources:** One teacher responded saying the online e-resources were quite useful for families, however most of the responses offered suggested that the teachers were unaware of the e-resources.

10. The kindergarten teachers sometimes gave multiple responses to questions and sometimes did not respond to questions. So, whilst eight kindergarten teachers contributed, the total number of responses provided varied. The evaluation data reflects the responses as they were provided, i.e. the number of responses in any category, and the percentage as related to the total number of responses. The number of responses is not always equal to the number of respondents.

More than half of kindergarten teachers surveyed (5 of 8) thought that the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* texts were relevant to their teaching and learning program, and were therefore both useful and appropriate to the school curriculum:

The books provided do have relevance to Kindy children – they are age appropriate.

[They] promote reading every day with children. The books have got number concepts – linking to maths. We have a very structured literacy program based on phonological awareness. So, these books just complement our school program.

Age appropriateness was typically assumed to be good, although one teacher commented that:

“Crash of Rhinos was a little complicated, bit tricky for them [children] to understand.” And a second teacher considered one book choice was not appropriate for early term one, as it was quite a dark story. And she thought, *“...the kids are quite anxious in term one. A fun, colourful rhyming book would be better.”*

The majority of kindergarten teachers shared the public librarians’ perspective that *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* resources are appropriate for Aboriginal families and different ethnic background families.

... Some books we’ve had have been by Indigenous writers or illustrators, so the artwork has reflected that as well. e.g. Possum and Wattle... Australian authors are reflecting something multicultural in the books.

The books are diverse and culturally appropriate.

Books in past had reference to Dreamtime.

Only one kindergarten teacher did not feel this way. This was due to particular aspects of the resources not being suitable for Jehovah’s Witnesses’ families, for example, the theme of birthdays.

The kindergarten teachers generally showed limited knowledge of the response of parents and carers to the resources, although two teachers said that parents respond really well:

Very well, parents love to get some resources for all sorts of things.

They were absolutely amazed, “Wow, we get to keep these folders, like the books are ours to keep?”

Others said that they are unsure of the responses or that parents don’t respond, often due to time constraints when delivering and/or collecting their child.

The early years teachers (13) interviewed did not always have precise memories about *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* resources, however, some did remember them quite clearly:

[I] definitely remember the nursery rhyme leaflet, a book or two, a game within the pack, a membership form.

The book, the library bag, the little backpacks over at the library. There is a lot of good resources online, on the Better Beginnings website.

Yes, discovery backpacks Good interactive, lots of information, interesting, kids like them, the parents like them.

Several teachers commented on the high quality of the books, and they appreciated the focus on Australian texts:

They are mostly Aussie books, which is really good. And even if the kids are not reading, the pictures are so vibrant and beautiful, they can tell the story from the pictures, so it’s a really good beginning.

And at least three had acquired and kept Reading Packs and continued to use books from them with their classes:

... We usually keep one of those packs ourselves and we read the books to the children.

The kindergarten has the Read Aloud resources.

We keep one of those packs so we’ve got one of the books here to read to the children.



New Cohort parents' perceptions of program resources

The survey of New Cohort parents indicated that almost all of them (106 of 108, 98.15%)¹¹ recalled their child receiving the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten Reading Pack*, and many (95) could name books from the pack:

- Thirty parents recalled the title *Scary Night* exactly with three mentioning the word 'Scary' to be in the title;
- Sixteen parents recalled the title *All Monkeys Love Bananas*, with another five mentioning monkey for the title;
- Eight parents listed a title approximations about a sailor and the sea (for example: *Old Man and the Sea*, *The Sailor who Swallowed*, *The Sailor*, *There was an Old Sailor* and *The Hungry Sailor*);

- Other titles mentioned were: *Go Baby Go! Babies*, *Isabella's Garden*, *Tom Goes to Kindergarten*, *Hairy Maclary's Caterwaul Caper*, *Possum and Wattle*, *Strawberry Shortcake*, and *Rhymetime*; and
- Fourteen parents said they could not remember the name of the book.

New Cohort parents were overwhelmingly positive about the usefulness of the resources in the Reading Pack:

- Over ninety eight percent of New Cohort parents felt the children's book was either 'very useful' or 'quite useful' (102 of 104);
- Just over eighty seven percent of respondents felt the talk from the librarian who gave out the *Better Beginnings* reading pack was 'very useful' or 'quite useful' (67 of 77, 87.01%);

11. One hundred and eighteen NC parents were surveyed, but not all of them offered responses to all questions, whilst others offered multiple responses. The data presented represents the number of responses given; and percentages are related to the total number of responses, not the total number of parents.



- Over eighty two percent of them felt the 'Read with Me' parent booklet was 'very useful' or 'quite useful' (83 of 101, 82.18%);
- Almost eighty percent of parents felt the book activity (frieze, dominoes) was 'very useful' or 'quite useful' (75 of 99, 79.78%);
- Seventy nine percent of parents felt the zipped reading bag was 'very useful' or 'quite useful' (79 of 100, 79%);
- More than eighty six percent of parents felt the library bag was 'very useful' or 'quite useful' (87 of 101, 86.14%); and,
- Over three quarters of parents had actually used the library bag (76 of 101, 75.25%).

The New Cohort parent survey also shows:

- More than ninety percent of parents read the *Read with Me* Parent Booklet (90%, 95 of 105 responses); and;
- All but one of the parents who read the booklet considered it either, 'easy' or, 'very easy' to understand (94 of 95, 98.98%), "[I thought it was] *very comprehensive... Happy to use it*". The parent who found it difficult had English as a second language, and although she found the text difficult she still thought that the pictures of books were helpful;
- About a quarter of the parents (24 of 95, 25.26%) were stimulated to either buy or borrow books recommended in the *Read with Me* booklets; and over thirty percent reported that they already owned the book (30 of 95, 31.58%).

A few New Cohort parents provided some feedback on ways that the Reading Pack could be improved, although none of the suggestions were made were presented as critical to the overall usefulness of the packs, for example:

I guess adding items e.g. flash cards

Perhaps more choices of books

Less information and hand outs and include another book

Maybe more variety in books as received the same book twice or a 1st child, 2nd child etc bag, so different variety in resource information/ activities

I would have preferred an activity she could have done on her own that didn't require supervision such as cutting, like a colouring sheet.

Whilst many parents responded positively to most of the materials in the Reading Pack, **there was little enthusiasm or interest shown for the digital resources**: Only 13 families reported visiting the website (12.38%, 13 of 105). This is perhaps a surprising finding, given the presumed ubiquitousness of the online world, and one that needs to be noted. It would seem that **currently the hardcopy resources provided are far more likely to influence families with pre-school children than those offered on the *Better Beginnings* website.**

Established Cohort parents' perceptions of program resources

Survey data from Established Cohort parents demonstrates that the Reading Packs are memorable:

- Almost all of the respondents (76 of 80, 95%) remembered getting a Reading Pack for their child in kindergarten or pre-primary;
- 47 of this survey group could recall the name of a book in the pack.

Established Cohort parents were very positive about the books included in the Reading Packs:

- Most parents (63 of 72, 87.5% responses) said they liked the book themselves;
- Almost all of the families had read the book to their child (64 of 72, 88.89%);
- Almost all parents (67 of 71, 94.37%) reported that their child liked the book; and
- Most families (55 of 74, 74.32%) still had the books they had received.



Some parents were able to recall other resources in the pack, and many had found items to be useful (Table 10):

- Most parents (64 of 72, 88.89%) said they found the **children's book**, either 'quite useful', or 'very useful';
- More than half (38 of 72, 52.78%) said the **counting frieze** or colour poster or search poster was either 'quite useful', or 'very useful';
- Over a third (28 of 71, 39.44%) described the **My Discovery Book** folder, as either 'quite useful', or 'very useful';
- Most parents (63 of 74, 85.13%) described the **library bag**, as either 'quite useful', or 'very useful';
- Almost two thirds of parents (45 of 73, 61.65%) thought the **Enjoying Reading Together** leaflet with book list and tips for reading with your child, was either 'quite useful', or 'very useful'; and
- Nearly half of the parents (34 of 71, 47.89%) described the **Enjoy Reading** parent ideas information sheet for Possum & Wattle, Crash of Rhinos or Isabella's Garden, as either 'quite useful', or 'very useful'.

Three quarters of Established Cohort parents (57 of 76, 75%,) also said that they had found items sufficiently useful to keep four or more years. The books and the book bags were the most popular items retained over time, whilst other resources appeared to have more limited lifespans in the families:

- Forty nine families (49 of 115, 42.6%) still had the children's book:

Think it's a fantastic idea. My child highly prized her own special book – and loved (and still does) love it dearly.

My son is in year 3 and he had Possum & Wattle. We kept both books for years until we handed them down to their younger cousins.

- Forty five (45 of 115, 39.13%) still had the book bag;
- Eleven (11 of 115, 9.57%) still had the counting frieze;
- Five families (5 of 115, 4.35%) still had the *My Discovery Book* Folder;
- Three (3 of 115, 2.61%) still had the book list; and,
- Two (2 of 115, 1.74%) still had the parent ideas information.

Table 10: Established Cohort parents' perspective of the usefulness of Kindergarten Reading Pack resources

	Very useful	Quite useful	Not very useful	Not at all useful	Can't remember it	Total
The children's book	41.67% (N=30)	47.22% (N=34)	6.94% (N=5)	0.00% (N=0)	4.17% (N=3)	72
The counting frieze OR colour poster OR search poster	11.11% (N=8)	41.67% (N=30)	19.44% (N=14)	5.56% (N=4)	22.22% (N=16)	72
The <i>My Discovery Book</i> folder	11.27% (N=8)	28.17% (N=20)	25.35% (N=18)	7.04% (N=5)	28.17% (N=20)	71
The library bag	33.78% (N=25)	51.35% (N=38)	8.11% (N=6)	2.70% (N=2)	4.05% (N=3)	74
The <i>Enjoy Reading Together</i> leaflet with book list and tips for reading with your child	16.44% (N=12)	45.21% (N=33)	16.44% (N=12)	2.74% (N=2)	19.18% (N=14)	73
The <i>Enjoy Reading</i> Possum & Wattle OR A Crash of Rhinos OR Isabella's Garden parent ideas information sheet	11.27% (N=8)	36.62% (N=26)	16.90% (N=12)	4.23% (N=3)	30.99% (N=22)	71

One of the case study Established Cohort parents said they definitely still had items from the Kindergarten Pack and thought their child had responded positively: *He read it [again] about a year ago. He pulled it out and he goes, "this is the one that we got." He remembered it as well.*

Established Cohort parents were overwhelmingly positive about the quality of the resources. Three quarters (52 of 70, 75.29%) of survey respondents could not think of any way the Reading Pack could be improved. Many comments from the survey highlighted the appeal of Reading Pack items to their children, for example:

[My daughter] loves Isabella's Garden and I'm sure she would treasure any other books given out by the education department... I think it is a great idea, the children feel like the book is a present and my daughter has read this book over and over.

I think it is a wonderful way to introduce kids to the library, I remember the excitement of the kids when they got their packs.

My daughter remembers receiving the book and the green bag. She has read this book more than 20 times – especially when she was younger.

Although suggestions for improvements offered interesting feedback for consideration by the SLWA resources selection team, as with the New Cohort suggestions were not highly critical. Nevertheless, about a quarter (18 of 70, 25.71 %) of the Established Cohort survey group thought there was room for improvement:

The frieze and booklet are probably not needed. Another book would be more useful. A waterproof library bag would also be great as water is our library books greatest threat!

A few parents (5) wanted more resources to be included in the Reading Packs, for example:

Maybe provide a pack each year as this could be a further incentive for children to read. Or allow children to choose the book.

Two types of books not one book.

Activities/colouring sheets for the book.

Audio book/E book version.

More visuals.

You could include two more small books.

Perhaps an easy to read, catchy flyer in the pack with some stats/statement about the difference that reading makes to children longer term.

A small number of parents (5) suggested they did not like the book resources they received, for example:

I'd like to see more interesting and engaging books if possible.

Book with words relevant to a new reader that they can attempt to read.

The book choice was quite unusual and the 'Crash of the Rhinos' was too (I received through my older child), so the kids weren't interested in reading the books more than a few times, Isabella's Garden is more interesting for them.

It is more a picture book than a reading aid. We prefer story telling.

Disagreements about the kinds of books families and their children might respond positively too, could be addressed by a book-swap program.

There were a few interesting comments suggesting some families believed that they were already very book conscious, and didn't need to receive a Reading Pack. Others wondered if perhaps the resources ought to be targeted to families who did not have many resources:

I think the Better Beginnings packs are great - while my children have several books and are read to daily – I know the book other children received may have been the only new book they have ever owned.



It suits a purpose, but I am a teacher so already knew the information in it. I think it would be good for other families. For me it was a free book, but we have lots of books so money could have probably been spent elsewhere.

A wonderful initiative although I have always valued books and reading. I would like to think that the program gave opportunities to families and children who otherwise would not feel the same. Thank you.

We already had a strong belief in reading and a good collection of books - I don't feel this program is beneficial to families similar to ours.

Amongst the Established Cohort there were also 'book-friendly families', who were highly engaged with books and reading, but nevertheless appreciated the on-going reminders to sustain their efforts

We read every night to our children and place reading as a high priority in our house. Especially when the children were kindy - pre-primary.

Obviously now our youngest is in year 3 and he reads himself every night.

The reading pack just cemented the fact that reading should be promoted as a must in every household. Thank you.

New Cohort children's perceptions of resources

New Cohort children in the focus groups had a good recall of the Reading Pack they had received and could name and describe books and games from the packs. They generally responded positively to the resources in the Reading Pack. It was common for them to either state or affirm (through verbal confirmation of others, head nodding and smiling) that they liked the packs, enjoyed the books and the games, had kept them and also knew where they were: "A special place where I keep books, in our crate in our bedroom"; "Probably in my toy room where I keep most of my old books"; "On my bookshelf"; "Up high, in my bunk bed".

Established Cohort children's perceptions of resources

Children in the Established Cohort focus groups, who had received the Reading Pack in previous years (2011/12 or 2013/4, now in years 3 and 5) frequently remembered getting the Reading Pack. They often recalled the names of books and remembered the stories:

She's a grey little bird and wants to be more looked at. She goes to Zelda, which is the bird that sells feathers, and she's all bright and colourful and gets lots of attention. She can't fly, she climbs to the top of the tree and does a little dance and slips and then her crest and all the rest fell off. Then she landed on another little grey bird and they started talking about how to get noticed.

A book – a book about a caterpillar. He eats lots of food, its called "The Very Hungry Caterpillar."

A picture book, Possum something, and little wallet thing, a bag thing that folds.

Many of the children talked about sharing the Reading Pack resources within their families with parents, siblings, cousins and also with neighbours. They described using the activities, stickers and games that came in the Pack: The children often said they still owned the books, bags, and one or more items from the pack, and usually regarded them positively: "I didn't have many books at the time, so it was very special to me." This feedback implied that from the children's perspective the resources were appreciated and were appropriate to their interests.

The effectiveness of delivery in demonstrating the contents of a Reading Pack

From a school perspective the delivery of Reading Packs by public librarians was seen as highly effective. Schools were very confident about the ability of public librarians to work with parents and children and generally were quite happy to trust them to plan and implement effective delivery sessions.

One school principal commented on a presentation he had witnessed that he thought was particularly impressive. The session had been conducted in the local library rather than the school, which he thought was an effective strategy, especially to encourage families who might not be comfortable to come into a library. He praised the library for creating an inviting and stimulating environment for families:

But it could also be a little bit intimidating for... I mean, a lot of our parents can't read, so it could also be, "Wow, I don't want to in there, that's going to show up that I can't read... And that's what was good about the session because we had a walk around, they saw, like, the sections of the real quite easier books to do, and then they did activities, hands-on activities...they made a mother's day thing for their mums, in the library,... there was tea, there was coffee, there's couches there, they just sat down, they chatted... I was thinking because I myself was surprised, well, you'd walk out of there thinking, wow, it's actually not as intimidating or... because, you know, brand-new building as well, when you first walk into those you go, ooh, this is [remote town], this doesn't seem to belong here!

Whilst sharing the view that librarians were very competent in the delivery of Reading Packs and the messages about family literacy in contact sessions, kindergarten teachers were able to point to a number of factors that from their perspective either supported or hindered the effectiveness of distribution and communication of clear messages.

Factors kindergarten teachers identified that supported distribution included:

- Efficient and effective planning by the librarians:

It's good when the librarian is prepared to come, and packs are ready to give out. Prior knowledge, research of child development, the on-going program, parent involvement, and the organisation and preparation from the local library.

- Building long term relationships with the library and librarians:

It works best when it's an on-going program, not just a one-off program. It's established now as part of school and library, we have built a real relationship with [librarian] at the library.

- Having separate sessions for children and adults:

Librarian talks to children and then goes to speak to adults, so they know what they're doing at home.

Factors kindergarten teachers identified that hindered distribution included:

- Trying to find timings that worked for everyone:

"Just trying to find a time and room that's good. Try to get all the parents to come. Try to do it on DOTT (Duties Other Than Teaching) days, so there's teachers in the room chaperoning the parents to the venue;

Coordinating the time and day for the visit to get me and the kindys and the librarian on site."

- Gaining the support of parents:

"Parent support is difficult, that's not anything that the program's doing – local issues."

- A lack of information and established plans and procedures relevant to the particular school:

"Lack of information and booking procedure. Having KindiLink (for three years and under) means those children come next year and it's [Kindergarten Reading Pack] not new anymore, maybe have a separate program for KindiLink [children]?"

School librarians commented that time, a lack of knowledge and a lack of promotion were limiting factors.

Observations of Kindergarten program delivery sessions

Evidence for the effective demonstration of the contents of the Reading pack, and the delivery of key messages, came from a variety of sources but was particularly well described in notes from the observations of delivery sessions in schools.



Independent researchers using schedules, observed librarians conducting 11 *Kindergarten* program sessions with children and parents, in eight different schools. The structure and style of presentation sessions observed in schools were varied, but tended to reflect school class 'lessons' that were quite different to family story-times held at the library for kindergarten children.

School sessions were all conducted in the morning with the majority held at 9.00 or 9.15 am. Early mornings were explained as a good time to catch parents as they 'dropped off' their children. The kindergarten-aged children were the focus of all the school-based sessions and typically attended in class groups of approximately 20 children, or in larger groups of two or three classes (30 to 60 children). In nine of the 11 sessions, teaching staff were present and participated through organising and managing the children, providing introductions or supporting the librarian with the distribution of Packs. Educational assistants were only observed attending one of the 11 sessions.

Parents were less likely to accompany children than in a StoryTime library setting. Across the observed sessions there were 433 children and 152 parents (26% of session attendees were adults), but numbers varied significantly according to the individual school. In two of the 11 schools there were no parents present; in three of the 11 sessions parents were separated from the children and given an adult-focused presentation; and in one of these schools 28 parents attended in support of just 30 children.

One session ran for an hour, but more typically the children were engaged for between 15 and 30 minutes. Most teachers took responsibility for organising the children, ensuring that they were engaged, and introducing the librarian, and then handed over to the librarian to take the lead in running the session. Observation of the delivery sessions showed a high compliance with SLWA guidelines for good delivery practice, and consistency with intended key messages:

- In ten of 11 sessions the librarians explained where the Reading Pack came from;
- In nine of 11 sessions the librarian talked about the Green Library Bag, emphasising how the children could come to the library and fill it up with 20 books;

- All 11 sessions the librarian took resources out of a demonstration Reading Pack, showed them to the audience and explained a little about them;
- In eight of 11 sessions the librarian talked about Discovery Packs, and in 2 sessions the librarians also brought a Discovery Pack to show;
- Librarians read a book to the children in all of the sessions, and almost all of them (10 of 11), chose to read a book from the Reading Pack; and
- In most cases (10 of 11) librarians engaged the children through animated presentations of the story, involving them with questions or inviting them to join in with actions or rhymes.

Although the focus was on engaging the children, the librarians also addressed the parents:

- In nine of 11 sessions, the librarian explained the Read with Me parent information booklet; gave information about library membership, and book borrowing opportunities; and mentioned the local or regional library, while one referred specifically to SLWA;
- In seven of 11 sessions, the librarian gave information about library activities such as library storytimes; and
- Six of 11 sessions included information about digital resources with five referring specifically to the *Better Beginnings* website.

In three cases, time was also allocated just for parents (without the children). In one school a decision was made to provide a completely separate information session for parents. In this instance, the information was sharply focussed on information giving about early years literacy (*Figure 1*).

As the presentation concluded, the research observer noticed two kindergarten teachers actively following up on the session, one by requesting a photograph that could go into the school newsletter, and the other by suggesting that when the children went home they should show parents or grandparents the Reading Pack, and ask, "*Can we please go to the library?*"

Figure 1: Research field notes: Librarian Presenting to parents and to children in school

Parent session: Librarian spoke to the parents about the following:

Parent as first teacher; early literacy skill development; research on number of rare words found in children's picture books compared with conversational English, TV; research on children achieving greater comprehension reading hard copy picture books compared with online/eBooks; vocabulary development from two to five years – how reading aloud to children supports this skill; and the importance of early brain development in a baby's first three years.

Other items from the library that the librarian brought: Discovery Backpacks, membership forms, brochures on children's services and activities at the library promoting *Learn English Through Storytime (LETS)*, *Baby Rhyme Time*, *Sing with Me* packs.

Librarian also spoke about free online resources on *Better Beginnings* website and library website.

Librarian invited questions, comments; some parents had attended *Baby Rhyme Time* sessions; some parents nodded with familiarity when shown the Yellow *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* pack; teachers were interested in the *Sing with Me* packs and the Brain Boxes and asked questions about their availability and content; some parents spoke to Librarian individually after the session about the Discovery Backpacks, early reader kits.

Kindergarten Students' Session: Librarian introduced herself, asked children if they were members or had been to the library; Librarian asked children if they had visited named local libraries, if they were members; some children were familiar with the library; showed each item in the pack to the children, made reference to the picture book *All Monkeys Love Bananas* and encouraged children to ask their parents to read the book to them; read aloud pop up version of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. As Librarian read aloud *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, the children were familiar with the book and engaged with the pop-up format; children joined in as the story was read aloud.

Reading Packs were shown to the parents and the children at their respective sessions. Librarian gave Reading Packs to the kindergarten teachers to give to students to take home at the end of the day. (Note: the sessions for parents and children were run at the beginning of the day).

Librarian has been delivering the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program to the same school since 2010 and has built a strong relationship with the early childhood teachers; the teaching staff are clearly appreciative of librarian's efforts to engage the children and parents with the library; librarian's understated and quiet manner set parents at ease; kindergarten teachers were involved and interested as they sat in on the parents' session and their participation reiterated the school's support of the library and the *Better Beginnings* program.

The independent research observer noted that the librarians often showed considerable skill and enterprise in the presentations, making them attractive and enjoyable for the children and informative for the parents. Most librarians were very successful in providing the key messages of the Kindergarten program to the audience. The researcher's field notes reporting on just one observation serves to illustrate the richness of some presentations.

The observations affirm that librarians were able to engage parents and children very effectively through their school-based presentations, sharing information about *Kindergarten* program resources, and library services and activities relevant to families with kindergarten-aged children; and communicating key

messages to parents about the importance of their role in supporting early literacy development in their child.

Observations of Story Time at local libraries

The presentation sessions observed in evaluation schools were designed as one-off events very focused on arousing the children's interest in the *Kindergarten* program resources and gifting them their Reading Packs, as well as providing concise information to the children and to parents. *Story Time* is another key strategy in the *Kindergarten* program, and although it has a different focus, librarians said its purpose was also to share key program messages with parents, and where appropriate it was exploited as another opportunity to provide kindergarten children who are not enrolled in school with a Reading Pack.



Independent researchers observed eight *Storytime* sessions held at the local library.

Most sessions ran for 45 minutes, (5x45 minutes; 1x30 minutes; 1x1 hours 30 minutes, 1x1 hour). Group sizes varied between 8 and 30, but most typically were between 15 and 23 (4 of 8). Storytime groups always included children of mixed ages, and a parent or care-giver always accompanied their kindergarten child. Across the eight sessions observed, there was a total of 148 children, with 117 Parents. Children in family groups ranged in age from seven weeks to ten years and included several children being home-schooled. Of the children attending 25.7 % (38 of 148) were identified as kindergarten children.

In all cases, Story Time was performed as an interactive session where the librarian engaged children and parents with books, role modelling effective ways of working with books and stories that might be expected to enhance early literacy learning. A typical observed session included reading or telling stories, chanting or singing action rhymes and book-related craft activities:

- All the observed sessions included both story-sharing (100%) and book-related craft activities
- Most sessions (7 of 8) included singing; and
- More than half (5 of 8) included nursery rhymes.

There were examples of librarians encouraging children to predict the text or anticipate the plot, explaining narrative elements such as the beginning, middle and end of a story; pointing out features of a book such as title and front cover; and, employing strategies to re-focus children's attention back to the book if they became distracted. Librarians were observed using puppets and toys to act out stories, teaching dances such as *Hokey Pokey*, *Dingle Dangle Scarecrow* and *Teddy-bear Teddy bear*, and organising craft activities such as creating home-made books.

Researcher observations affirmed that in all 8 sessions public librarians presented books in engaging ways and demonstrated how adults can work effectively with children to raise their interest in books and provide literacy-relevant learning

opportunities. In all observed sessions (100%) librarians were successful in engaging parents in actively participating and imitating the modelling. Parents were observed:

- Assisting the children in making books;
- Helping an 18-month old by moving their fingers to accompany the rhyme, *This little piggy*;
- Joining in with songs and rhymes themselves (all sessions); encouraging their children to sing along and join in with the actions;
- Responding to their own children to show what was acceptable and how they were expected to respond; and
- Modelling answers to librarians' questions related to text, for example, a parent made animal noises as a demonstration to the child.

In almost all Story Time sessions (7 of 8), children were observed imitating the actions of librarians, joining in with singing, repeating actions to rhymes, counting on fingers, and following examples of book handling. Research observers noted examples where children followed along picture books being read and turned the pages as prompted by the story; or asked questions about the story; or responded to plot development by calling out, "*Oh no*," when they became aware of the Wolf's evil intentions.

Whilst the significant messages of *Better Beginnings* were clearly enacted during *Story Time* sessions at the local libraries, there were limited observations of explicit references to the *Kindergarten* program – its purpose, services and provisions. However, several libraries had displays which provided information about local book events and literacy activities through posters and booklets, that included the *Better Beginnings* program. There were also displays of *Better Beginnings* books, Discovery Backpacks, and resources for families to browse, and in at least one library, parents were seen using *Better Beginnings* resources. One library used a Book Cubby as the focus for their *Story Time* bookmaking activities with book templates featuring *Better Beginnings* partners' names and logos.

Outcomes of the *Kindergarten* program

I think it's the quality of what's been going out in the last few years, there's just sort of kind of been that almost exponential, my feeling is anyway, my observations from various other things. (Better Beginnings Team, SLWA)

I think the Better Beginnings program is fantastic. I have many children through my library who don't have access to books at home. From a young age like that, having picture books, that's where it begins; you need to be developing a love of reading from the very beginning. You can't teach that to someone later on in life if they haven't developed that at the beginning, so I think it's really important to get these kids at the beginning, get them reading and introduce them to books and get them loving and getting excited about books and literacy. (School Librarian, Interview)

The central focus of the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program is ensuring that all *Kindergarten*-aged children have access to good quality books, and are supported by significant adults to experience positive, caring and literacy-focused interactions with books. This evaluation has therefore probed two key outcomes:

- The number, quality and age appropriateness of books in homes; and
- The quality of interaction and application of sound literacy-focused practices in book-sharing.

Book resources for *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program participants

The *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program has undertaken to enhance book resources in the home through:

- Reading Packs given to kindergarten children to take and keep in the home;

- Discovery Packs with age-appropriate resources that can be borrowed from the local library;
- Read-aloud book sets that can be borrowed by schools and used to support kindergarten children; and
- Encouraging parents to buy or borrow high quality, age-appropriate books for their kindergarten child.

Reading Pack outcomes

As described in the previous section the SLWA has been very successful in distributing significant numbers of *Kindergarten* program Reading Packs to children enrolled in kindergarten classes in WA schools. The impact of these Reading Packs in enhancing book resources in the home is discussed below from the perceptions of New and Established Cohorts.

Discovery Packs outcomes

Discovery Packs are designed to increase the availability of home resources by making available collections of good quality books and supportive parent information, in attractive easy-to-borrow backpacks.

Interviews with librarians from the communities confirmed that all knew about the Discovery Packs and were able to describe the way they were managed and used locally. Each branch had a slightly different approach to promoting the packs. For example:

- Some said that no one specifically gave them out, but rather they were placed on display and could be taken (self-service) "...the public pick up themselves, they are very popular";
- One library had numbered packs to streamline borrowing;
- One reported: *We have some files or folders in the children's area with the contents photographed, so parents or families can refer to those to see, and then go up to the desk and ask;*



- One library kept them at the library in first term, so they could be used for demonstrations during delivery of Reading Packs, or so teachers could borrow them and then made them available to families: *"Once you hit Term Two, there will be a waiting list for them; and*
- One librarian said she would *"... focus on them at story time every now and again and encourage people to take them out."*

The public librarians reported that the Discovery Packs usually came pre-prepared from the State library, and the desk staff would *"... just make sure that they're catalogued... [and put a] checklist of contents on back to check on the way in and out to avoid things going missing."*

This very much suggests that **at the local libraries Discovery Packs are well accepted as part of the normal service of the library.**

Most public librarians (5 of 7) actively promoted the Discovery Backpacks to the schools, and showed them to teachers, parent groups and children at the meetings held to distribute Reading Packs. One reported that she used to do promotions at school, but had *"given up,"* as issues around time and transport made it too difficult. She was however, thinking about another way to re-engage through *"school bound deliveries for teachers,"* which implied she thought the Discovery Packs were important. Certainly, the librarians expressed confidence in the quality of the resources in the Discovery Packs and believed that *"the impact on children is excellent, [they] love backpacks... They have been so popular."*

Although the librarians felt that the Discovery Packs were well received, there were no strategies in use to evaluate or to track their use, or to maintain contact with families who borrowed them. Only one of the six public librarians surveyed was able to provide immediate data on the number of times Discovery Packs had been borrowed: 129 in 2014; 209 in 2015 and 177 in 2016, although others thought numbers

might be available. There was a general feeling that there were too many families and Discovery Packs for them to do more than collect incidental feedback, and that it would breach the confidentiality of borrowing library materials to follow up with the families.

Records maintained by SLWA about the distribution of Discovery Packs were limited, however it was reported that most packs were delivered to local libraries towards the beginning of the program (2010-14). There is no comprehensive data on how many were allocated to each library, however, **since 2014, a total of 1,560 Discovery Backpacks were distributed.** New and additional Discovery Packs are not currently issued but public libraries have helped to keep the Discovery Backpack resources fresh through an 'Amnesty' service whereby SLWA funds the replacement of damaged or missing items.

Read Aloud Book Sets outcomes

The Read Aloud Book Sets were initially trialed in 2010 with the intention of supplying libraries with one set for every school that they worked with. The intention was to encourage schools to take out a 'school membership' with their local library and borrow a set for the term. The 2010 evaluation of the *Kindergarten* program (Barratt-Pugh, December, 2010), noted concern from one public librarian that there were insufficient sets for the number of children and schools her library served. Some teachers in the 2012 evaluation (Barratt-Pugh & Vajda, 2012) thought that the resources in the Read Aloud sets were of a *'very, very high standard'*, but most teachers (71%) had not seen them, and only 7% rated them as *'the most valuable feature of the Better Beginnings program for four to five year olds.'*

Feedback from the kindergarten teachers who participated in this 2017 evaluation, also indicated they did not consider Read Aloud Sets to be an important part of their literacy programs. Just one of the eight teachers, and one school librarian had ever

borrowed a Read Aloud set. The teacher had used it with her class, and thought it was *"a lovely set of beautiful picture books."* She also found the Teachers' Notes to be *"really handy, to stimulate little ideas on what to do."* None of the school librarians, had actually used the sets.

The SLWA *Better Beginnings* team reported that communications with public librarians about Read Aloud Sets had not been entirely successful, even

from the introduction of the initiative. Feedback they received from many libraries indicated that they had been unclear about how these resources were intended to be used, and so they simply gave the book set to the school as a present. As this was an unsustainable practice, a **decision was made to phase out the Read Aloud Book Sets and they are no longer included in *Better Beginnings* Resources.**





New Cohort (2016/17) program outcomes

Evidence for the achievement of intended outcomes for the New Cohort of parents and kindergarten children comes mainly from New Cohort surveys, interviews and case studies.

Book sharing outcomes in New Cohort families

The New Cohort Parent survey shows that someone read to the child in all but two families: 98.13% parents (105 of 107), reported that someone read to their child; and only 1.9% (2 of 107) said no-one read to their child.

Mothers read to children regularly in 104 (88.13%) of the respondents' families; fathers also read quite regularly in 86 of the families (72.88%), followed by extended family including grandparents in 56 of the families (47.45%).

New Cohort parents reported on the number of book reading events they engaged in with their child after their child had received a Reading Pack. The survey shows:

- Almost all of the parents (91.59%, 98 of 107) **had read the book they received in the Reading Pack** to their child and **most** parents (86 of 103, 83.5%) had read the book more than once to their child;
- Just over fifty percent of respondents (51 of 95, 53.68%,) indicated they had **read some of the books included in the 'Read with Me' booklet** recommendations;
- A quarter of New Cohort Parents (24 of 95, 25.26%) said they had **bought or borrowed one or more of the books recommended in the 'Read with Me' booklet**; 31.58% (30 of 95) indicated they already had some of the books; 43.16% (41 of 95) indicated they didn't borrow or buy any of the books; and
- Only nine of 47 (19.15%) New Cohort parents who reported on their use of technology said they read stories to their child using an electronic device.

Perhaps the most significant finding was that **more than a quarter of parents (28 of 107, 26.17%,) felt they read more** to their child since receiving their Reading Pack;

- Nearly three quarters (78 of 107, 72.90%) felt they read the same amount; and
- One family said they did not read to their child, but no families reported a decrease in reading with their child books.

New Cohort parents reported a number of changes in the pattern of book sharing in the home after receiving the Reading Packs, all indicating increased interactions or more positive interactions around book sharing (*Table 11*):

- Almost half (50 of 107, 46.73%) reported changes in how often they read to their child as either 'quite a bit' or 'a great deal';
- More than half (52.83%, 56 of 106) said they noticed changes in how often their child asked for a book to be read to them as either 'quite a bit' or 'a great deal';
- Towards half (46 of 106, 43.4%) observed changes in how often other people (like partners or relatives or baby sitters) read to the kindergarten child as either 'quite a bit' or 'a great deal'; and
- Towards half (47 of 103, 45.63%) said they had changed how often they read to their other children (if they had others) either 'quite a bit' or 'a great deal'.

Survey evidence confirms that New Cohort parents identify **positives outcomes arising from the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program** including:

- **Increases in the number of times kindergarten children are being read to;**
- **Increases in the interest kindergarten children are showing in initiating book sharing; and**
- **Increases in book-sharing with other children in the family; and**
- **Increases in buying, borrowing and reading age-specific recommended books.**

Table 11: Changes in New Cohort reading patterns in the home

Since receiving the Reading Pack has this changed:	Not at all	A little	Quite a bit	A great deal	Not sure	Total
How often you read to your child?	33.64% (36)	18.69% (20)	15.89% (17)	30.84% (33)	0.93% (1)	107
How often your child asks for a book to be read?	23.58% (25)	22.64% (24)	20.75% (22)	32.08% (34)	0.93% (1)	106
How often other people (like partner, babysitters or other relatives) read with your child?	32.08% (34)	22.64% (24)	27.36% (29)	16.04% (17)	2.83% (3)	106
How often you read with your other children? (If you have no other children, please fill the N/A box)	29.13% (30)	16.50% (17)	24.27% (25)	21.36% (22)	8.74% (9)	103

New Cohort parents' attitudes towards book sharing

Although the majority of New Cohort parents thought that sharing books was either 'very important' or 'fairly important', after inclusion in the *Kindergarten* program well over half of the New Cohort parents (56.86%, 102) reported that the Reading Pack had influenced their beliefs about the importance of book sharing, with **96.26% (103 of 107) confirming that they now thought book sharing was, 'very important'**.

Use of Reading Pack resources in New Cohort families

Worldwide research informs us that access to books is critical, but the quality of interaction around them is also important. The Reading Pack includes information and suggested activities intended to guide families in approaches that are known to support the development of early literacy skills.

Following receipt of the Reading Pack, nearly **half of the New Cohort survey respondents (44 of 93, 47.31%, said they had used the book activity from the Reading Pack, and more than a third of (37 of 94, 39.36%) reported that they had used *Read***

with Me activities found in the parent booklet. Their comments indicated that the booklets influenced families in different but positive ways, encouraging some families to:

- Play the recommended games: [we] *used it three or four times a week, dot, bingo game, snap – she makes her own games up too; [we] played counting games with the dice and matching with the book;*
- Share books in new and different ways, for example, one parent said: *I read 'Scary Night' by candle-light; and*
- Talk more with their child: [I use the book to] *explain different things to my child... I ask questions when reading.*

Several New Cohort Post Program respondents also mentioned a range of different contexts in which the games and activities were shared:

- Parents engaged with the activities: [we] *just played [the game] together after reading the book;*
- Children played alone; [he] *played on his own and with me; and*
- Siblings and friends played together: *My son and older sister play with the activity; [my daughter] took it to school and played with friends; the twin boys played together.*



These comments are significant in suggesting how Reading Pack resources were not only impacting on individual children and parents, but also being shared across families and communities. **The embedding of supportive literacy practices across a wider community is a significant outcome for the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* initiative.**

Integration of key messages and reading tips into literacy practices in New Cohort families

The SLWA *Better Beginnings* Team focus group were emphatic about the importance of communicating key messages through the *Kindergarten* program:

I think we're all very concerned with whether our messages are getting across, because we all are well aware that a pack may be doing nothing in the absence of the key messages.

The Reading Pack provides simple but comprehensive information and 'helpful tips' for families, to guide them towards including positive literacy practices in their book-sharing and related activities. Most New Cohort case study parents (10) interviewed after receiving a Reading Pack recalled at least some of the *Better Beginnings* key messages:

It's sort of encouraging reading with your child.

[Better Beginnings information] ...teaches you about rhyming and repeating, going to the library and those sorts of things.

... Go to that library with [your] kids, borrow books and read to them every day. It's really for younger age reading and to read to your children on a daily basis.

To read and to have fun with books, to read regularly and to enjoy that time with your child each day.

Apart from just reading with your child, spend time to read with them.

The earlier that the kids read the better they will be at reading.

Yeah, the education around that helps you, so knowing to repeat things that rhyme and getting them involved in the activity.

Just basically reading, read to them as much as possible and also there are a few questions to go through when you do a book ... making sure they get the picture of what the story's about and getting to understand words and all that.

The group of parents who volunteered to be interviewed tended to be highly literate, well-educated and enthusiastic about books. Whilst they remembered the key messages, most thought they had not changed their practice greatly, as they were already reading a lot to their child. However, there was evidence that for some of the group there was new information, and for others there was encouragement to keep doing the thing they already knew were effective or to commit a little more to positive literacy practices:

She's always been a little bit of a bookworm [but now] I do try and go out there and buy a new book for her so she's got more of a variety.

She's already very competent in what words are, what things mean. The only thing I suppose were some of the activities. It's not just read a story from front page to back, we go through those steps that I think were described in the booklet.

New Cohort parents described how they used book activities from the Reading Pack, often indicating ways they had taken up 'tips':

[I used information]... to encourage my child to be involved in reading.

... To write words, draw a line to match.

... [We] talk through book and write section.

... Pointing at the picture and observing the picture.

Confidence in book-sharing in New Cohort families

The majority of New Cohort families indicated that after receiving the Reading Pack, their confidence in sharing books with their kindergarten child either remained stable or increased:

- About a third (33 of 107, 30.84%) felt their confidence in sharing books with their child had increased;
- Almost three quarters (74 of 107, 69.16%) felt their confidence stayed the same; and significantly,
- Not a single parent reported a loss of confidence (0 of 107, 0%).

One respondent added the insight that the increase in confidence was:

... Not due to the pack itself. My confidence in reading has improved because it's a renewed activity I haven't done in 30 years. We went to story Time a couple of times...

An outcome indicating that **nearly one third of families experienced an increase in confidence levels**, is significant, as it indicates **that the broad approach to Reading Pack distribution ensures the parents who benefit from guidance do receive it**. It also provides some assurance that empowering parents with information and resources, and helping them to understand what they could be doing to further support early literacy, does not appear to cause a loss of confidence.

A further outcome that may be related to the reported increase in family book sharing, and the development of better understandings about ways of interacting positively around books is the **increased enjoyment that was noted in children who had received a Reading Pack**:

- Forty-five parents (45 of 107, 42.06%) reported that their child's enjoyment had changed positively; and

- All parents who commented on their child's enjoyment (43 of 43, 100%,) said their child *'enjoyed reading more'*.

This is again a significant finding that supports an understanding of the **positive influence the *Better Beginnings* Reading Pack may be having on children's early literacy learning**.

The New Cohort case study interviews (10) gave respondents an opportunity to share ways their interactions around book-sharing had changed. These parents were already competent and confident about sharing books, but they still found there were things they thought they had changed a little or at least chosen to emphasise more strongly:

I think it's great because we're always sourcing new books and I think the fact that we were given that is just more encouragement for children. It was exciting for her to get it and I made the big deal of saying we have a new book to read, given to us by the library. It's also instilling the love of reading into her and also the fact that it's come from our local library, which I make a point of always saying how lucky we are to have. I think it's nice that she can see that the community is involved in children reading and it also kind of pushes the fact that it's not just Mum that thinks reading's good.

She's already very competent in what words are, what things mean. The only thing I suppose were some of the activities. It's not just reading a story from front page to back, we go through those steps that I think were described in the booklet.



Outcomes in New Cohort family book sharing evidenced in video case studies

New Cohort interviews and surveys of both children and adults indicate changes in home reading practices on the basis of self-reporting. In this evaluation, video recordings have been used to further investigate the adoption and effective implementation of recommended practices. Three New Cohort parents from one of the participating schools agreed to be videoed sharing a book with their kindergarten child. Evidence from the videos has been captured in the form of an illustrative composite vignette taking examples from across the three recordings.

This composite scenario illustrates the use of several positive literacy strategies recommended in the Reading Pack information booklet for parents:

- Creating a comfortable and relaxed environment;
- Having fun with books;
- Looking at a book together;
- Choosing an engaging book with lots of repetition and rhymes;
- Reading out loud and some pointing to the pictures;
- Asking questions and encouraging the child to join in the story;
- Inviting the child to point to pictures; and
- Pausing and hesitating so the child can offer their own ideas, and try to guess words themselves.

Table 12: Summary of behaviours, identifies the literacy strategies recommended in the Reading Pack information for parents that were observed across all three *Kindergarten* program videos.

Collectively, the evidence from New Cohort parent surveys, interviews and case study video recordings affirms that the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program is helping parents to understand and apply key messages about ways they can support early literacy development in their children.

Box 2: Illustrative composite scenario of New Cohort family book sharing

A mother and daughter sit on chairs beside one another, with the mother holding the book on her lap, tilting it towards her daughter as she reads the title. The mother invites her daughter to shuffle still closer to her, creating a more intimate encounter. The mother points to the title as she read it firstly in English with a French accent, and then in French. They are looking at each other and smiling. Mother reads *There was an Old Sailor* with rhythm and expression. The daughter looks at the pictures as her mother flips the pages, reading each one in an animated voice and pointing to the words as she reads. Occasionally the mother points to a picture of an animal, she names them firstly in English and then in French, and invites her daughter to join in naming them. Her daughter is happy to join the 'naming game', and nods showing interest and engagement. After a few pages, the mother tickles her daughter as she read the words "*wiggled and jiggled*" and the daughter squirms happily, and comments that this book is like, "*the one about the fly*." At the next rhyme, the mother hesitates, giving time for the daughter to fill in the missing word, which she does with another giggle. The mother reads some of the 'Fishy facts' included in the book, and her daughter asks her to read about the whale. For a moment, the child is distracted by the noise of children playing outside but her mother brings her attention back to the book by asking if she enjoyed story. The daughter says it "... *was terribly funny*," and she likes the bit where, "*he ate the shark*." They laugh and agree, "... *it was a good book*."

Table 12: Summary of behaviours witnessed in the Better Beginnings New Cohort case study videos

Better Beginnings behaviour observed	NC Parent (video 05)	NC Parent (video 10)	NC Parent (video 11)
Comfortable, relaxed	✓	✓	✓
Read aloud and pointed to pictures	✓	✓	✓
Asked child to identify/find pictures	✓		
Paused for child to fill missing word	✓	✓	✓
Pointed to text while reading			
Read story with repetition	✓		
Asked questions	✓	✓	
Child identified rhyming words			✓
Child talks about the book		✓	✓
Asked child to predict what will be on next page	✓		
Had fun	✓	✓	✓

Established Cohort program outcomes

Evidence of outcomes for the Established Cohort comes mainly from Established Cohort surveys, and case study interviews with families who were included in the early iterations of the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program in 2013/14 (whose children were in year three at school at the time of the current evaluation) or 2012/11 (whose children were in year five).

Book ownership outcomes in Established Cohort families

The Reading Packs given to the Established Cohort families who participated in the four to five year old program in 2013/14, included a book to be kept in the home. Almost all the respondents (72 of 75, 96%,) in the 2017 Established Cohort survey reported reading that book to their child, and often more than once (64 of 72, 88.89%). Many parents could recall the name of the book or something about it, and about three quarters (55 of 74, 74.32%) said they still owned the book.

The 2017, Established Cohort survey of families who participated in the four to five year old program in 2011/2 shows that the majority of their children (67 of 76, 88.16%) who were in years three or five during the current evaluation, have more than 20 books (Table 13).

Observations of Established Cohort parents on attitudes to book sharing

The survey of Established Cohort families identified examples of positive changes in behaviours or attitudes around book-sharing.

- Many of Established Cohort respondents 31.57% (24 of 76) said that since getting the Reading Pack, their child's enjoyment of reading books had changed and almost **all of these children (22 of 24, 91.67 %) were enjoying reading more;**
- Most of the respondents (62 Of 72, 86%) said that their confidence in sharing books with their child had been sustained since getting the Reading Pack, but a few had gained in confidence (13.89%);
- Half of the respondents (35 of 70, 50%) thought that the Reading Pack influenced their beliefs about the importance of sharing books with their child; and
- Almost all respondents felt that sharing books was either 'very important' (68 of 76, 89.47%), or 'fairly important' (7 of 76, 9.21%).

The survey of Established Cohort families also noted some changes in who read and who instigated reading (Table 14):

- Nearly two thirds of respondents noticed a change in how often they read to the child (47 of 73, 64.38%);



Table 13: Number of books owned by Established cohort families

Number of books	Count	%
0	1	1.32%
Less than 5	1	1.32%
5-10	3	3.95%
10-20	4	5.26%
More than 20	67	88.16%
Total Responses	76	100%

- More than half of the respondents (44 of 73, 60.27%) noticed a change in how often the child asked for a book to be read to them;
- More than half (43 of 71, 60.56%) thought the number of times other people (partner, relatives) read with their child had changed; and
- About half of the respondents (38 of 67, 56.71%) thought the Reading Pack had influenced how often they read with their other children.

The results suggest that many of the Established Cohort families thought the Reading Packs had an influence on their book-sharing, increasing book-sharing overall. Toward forty percent of parents did not think their behaviours had changed, but many of them explained that although the Reading Pack was excellent and well received, they did not think it had changed their reading behaviours, because they read a great deal anyway:

The reading pack didn't change my family's reading behaviour since we were already avid readers.

We have always read frequently with our children since birth so the pack didn't cause a change.

We already had frequent book sharing practices before receiving the pack.

We are already a reading family and my children competent readers from a young age so this program wasn't so important.

Established Cohort families who contributed to case study interviews were also asked to identify changes as a result of the Reading Pack. Almost none of the interviewees felt strongly that anything had changed:

- Has the number of children's books changed in your home?

No, probably not, but in saying that we have a lot of books.

No, we were already a reading family so, no.

No, we have a lot of books anyway.

- Have the interactions with your child changed when sharing books?

Probably did at the beginning, not specifically with child X, but with my older children.

Probably not, he doesn't like reading. I've tried everything. Every now and then he'll go through a phase where for a few weeks he'll love it and then it'll become a chore again.

- Has the Kindergarten program had any impact on other family members?

Not really, I joined all the kids together.

It may be that being a book-positive cohort meant that there was less room for change. **It would be valuable in future evaluations to try to track the changes in families with less developed book sharing practices.**

Table 14: Changes in who read and who instigated reading in Established Cohort families

Has BB K changed:	Not at all	A little	Quite a bit	A great deal	Total
How often you read to your child?	35.14% (26)	31.08% (23)	17.57% (13)	14.86% (11)	73
How often your child asked for a book to be read?	39.19% (29)	22.97% (17)	17.57% (13)	18.92% (14)	73
How often other people (partner, relatives) read with your child?	37.84% (28)	29.73% (22)	24.32% (18)	4.05% (3)	71
How often you read with your other children? (if no other children please mark N/A)	39.19% (29)	18.92% (14)	14.86% (11)	17.57% (13)	67

The impact of the *Kindergarten* program on library membership participation and library practices

I mean, for some of our kids that cannot read or write, they don't have, you know, the literacy or the books or the texts or anything in their house or home, and to come to school, it might be quite overwhelming with all this stuff. To have another place to either go or another place where they can access more books and feel comfortable about it, like, just exposure to the love of reading. (Principal, Interview)

Across all *Better Beginnings* programs, a valued key outcome is family engagement with library resources and literacy-focused library activities aimed at enhancing early literacy knowledge, experiences and practices. While memberships, library attendance and involvement in targeted activities are indicative measures of family library engagement, this data was difficult to access and often incomplete. Findings in this regard must therefore be treated tentatively. *Kindergarten* program data collected from both New Cohort and Established Cohort parents relies upon memory and accurate recall, which cannot easily be verified. Local libraries do not keep accurate, searchable membership or activity records that can be linked to families participating in *Better Beginnings* programs.

Interviews with library staff were the only source of information from a public library perspective. Seven public librarians were interviewed. They offered relevant opinions and insights, but rarely provided hard data to accompany anecdotal evidence. Across all the available information, it was difficult to isolate specific impacts resulting from the *Kindergarten* program as distinct from the influence of other programs, such as the *Birth to Three*. Families frequently had several children who had participated in different *Better Beginnings* offerings, and neither parents nor library staff were able to consistently assess outcomes separately. Nevertheless, by cross-referencing sources, some interesting observations emerge.

Library membership of New Cohort parents and children

A small increase in library membership was noted in the New Cohort parent survey (Table 15). After receiving the Reading Pack there was a small rise of:

- 70.59% (n=96) of them were members of their local library;
- 29.41% (n=40) were not.

Just under half of the kindergarten children had library memberships in their own names, a slightly higher number did not:

- 46.62% (n=62) kindergarten children in New Cohort families had a library membership;
- 53.38% (n=71) did not.

A small increase in library membership was noted. After receiving the Reading Pack there was a rise of:

- 7.48% (n=8 of 107) membership of adults; and
- 11.54% (n=12 of 104) membership of children.

The New Cohort parents who were interviewed after receiving Reading Packs provided supporting insights to the survey results. All the New Cohort parents interviewed were members of their local library. In most cases (8 of 10), their kindergarten child had a membership in their own right as well. In the other two families, the children used the parents' membership for book borrowing. In all cases, the parents' membership preceded receipt of a Reading Pack, however, four of the group commented that their membership had been influenced by involvement with other *Better Beginnings* programs:



Table 15: New Cohort parent and child library memberships pre- & post-program

Library membership	New Cohort Parent respondent % (number)	New Cohort Child's % (number)
Joined the library after receiving the Reading Pack	7.48% (8 of 107)	11.54% (12 of 104)
Didn't join the library after receiving the Reading Pack	20.56% (22 of 107)	26.92% (28 of 104)
Already a member at time of receiving the Reading Pack	71.96% (77 of 107)	61.54% (64 of 104)

We joined when we went to the library with the mother's group when we got the Better Beginnings with the baby pack, there was a session at the library and we joined up then;

We joined when we used to go to Rhyme Time at the library when she was a small baby.

Well originally it would have been probably prompted from older siblings.

In this cohort, many participating families had a high commitment to books and literacy, prior to receiving a Reading Pack. Nevertheless, results from the New Cohort parent surveys and interviews suggest that the *Kindergarten* program was probably having a **small, but positive impact on the number of New Cohort families holding memberships of a local library**. And, for at least some families, there appeared to be **carry-over between different *Better Beginnings* programs that enhanced and sustained library membership**.

Library attendance of New Cohort parents and children

The most significant change in library attendance was a strong increase in regular weekly visits for some parents and children, who moved from attending once a month or fortnightly to attending weekly:

- Parents' weekly attendance rose from 3.26% (3) before receiving the Reading Pack to 18.48% (17) after receiving the Reading Pack;
- Children's weekly attendance increased from 3.13% (2) before receiving the Reading Pack to 17.89% (16) after receiving the Reading Pack.

Perceptions of library attendance from New Cohort parents interviews

Whilst all the New Cohort case study parents who were interviewed after receiving Reading Packs had a library membership, their attendance rates varied. Only half of the parents (5 of 10), said they went to the library often themselves, with one commenting that the Reading Pack had influenced them to attend:

Yes, it has actually made me go to the library more, since getting that pack, it's reminded me.

The other half did not attend the library regularly. Two explained that they had good access to book resources and didn't need the library:

I have to be honest, I haven't gone to the library for a long time now and that I've got an e-reader and books on the iPad and I just buy books myself, so I don't go there as much as what I used to.

We don't go to the library because we've got so many books at home.

All but one parent (9 of 10), reported that their child went to the library, and three parents said their child went one a week or at least fortnightly. However, in most cases visits were not frequent:

At least once a month.

Not a huge amount, probably once a month. It's not around the corner.

Once every four to six weeks.

Not very often, once every couple of months.

Once a month.

Many of the kindergarten children of the New Cohort families gained entry to pre-primary classes by the time the interviews were conducted. Several interviewees implied that their attendance at the local library had dropped off as the child approached school age, or gained access to books through a school library:

He doesn't [go to the library] now that he's at full-time school, but last year my mum would take him on the two days she looked after him.

[She used to go to the local library, but now] ... She goes to the library here at school.

Some parents referred to having attended *Better Beginnings* activities at the library when their child was younger, but this was no longer relevant or possible once the child attended school. This was true of other siblings, as well as the evaluation kindergarten child:

We attend Story Time weekly, my daughter is upset she can't now she is in full-time school, but still loves getting books out. The Reading Pack reinforces how important reading is at this age.

Went to Storytime when she was younger, but now it's just borrowing books.

Not as much obviously because he's at school now. With the kindy child, on the days he's not at school we can access it a bit easier then.

This pattern of change is quite predictable; **however, it would be beneficial for school and library staff to collaborate in considering the extent to which book access and reading activities were sustained and improved effectively, through transition into school.**

Attendance data indicates that the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program appears to have had a positive impact on the number of pre-school children going to a library regularly.

Book borrowing by New Cohort parents and children

More than a quarter of New Cohort parents (24 of 95, 25.26%) reported either buying or borrowing books recommended in the Reading Pack, which implies some influence occurring as a result of involvement in the *Kindergarten* program.

Statistics about library attendance and the numbers of books borrowed, cannot always be regarded as reliable indicators of the interest families have in books or the impact that the *Better Beginnings* programs had on their reading and literacy related behaviours. At least one parent shared concerns about borrowing books for a very young child, possibly reflecting fears about the potential for book damage, yet had developed positive attitudes toward the library:

It was great to learn more about the library and what it has to offer. I think it's a great incentive. I will join the library when my son is a little older – he's three and I don't feel comfortable borrowing books for him.

Some families reported accessing books from alternative sources:

I rarely go to the library. We have an e-reader and I use digital books and buy books for the children (about 20 each year) and I'm a member of the book club. Kids also use scholastic book club.

Several parents also mentioned that older siblings no longer came to the library to borrow books, as they preferred digital media:

[He only comes to the library] ...once every 12 months, he downloads all his books now.

My eldest is on the spectrum and he finds it easier to do e-books. He's 11 so uses an e-book but at the moment he's just got a downloaded book in print on the iPad.



Library activity participation of New Cohort parents and children

Of the parents attending the library after receiving their Reading Pack, nearly three quarters reported joining in with *Better Beginnings* library activities:

- 73.33% (77 of 105) joined in with library activities; and
- 26.67% (28 of 105) did not.

Further information about activities attended was provided by the case study parents who were interviewed (10). In addition to using the library for borrowing books or DVDs, seven parents reported attending *Storytime* or *Baby Rhyme Time*; two (said they had attended library 'events', one parent described some of the activities she knew about in a very positive way:

There's a dress up box and play area. Sometimes I choose a DVD as well as a book while they're there. Most holidays [the] Library will have themed craft activities, I know they do science week as well.

Several parents also referred to activities offered by libraries for older children, and said these encouraged them to come:

The bigger ones like to play chess and sometimes they have a display on a particular theme that the bigger boys will go have a look at as well.

The kids do that (during school holidays), like the cooking things and craft things.

They have something on every day in the holidays down there.

And several parents also suggested that attendance at one *Better Beginnings* session often alerted them to other library offerings:

I know there's an adult book club, a reading club. For the kids, I'm only aware of what's offered through the library Rhyme Time and the Story Time.

One of the school principals, who also had a kindergarten-aged child, highlighted a direct connection between the receipt of a Reading Pack and subsequent library attendance:

In terms of my own experience with my own kids, because they have brought those packs home as well, it was good for me because they had, like, the sticker chart and it encourages you as a parent to sit down and read them because they're so interested with the pack. For some of them it's the first book that they'll probably have in their home. And, I mean, it made me join the library as well.

The data suggests that for at least some parents, ***Better Beginnings* sessions and other child-friendly activities that local libraries offered acted as attractants drawing families into the library.**

Library membership of Established Cohort parents and children

The majority of Established Cohort families showed a **high level of commitment to library membership**, with 83.43% (61 of 74) parents and 78.67% (59 of 75) of children having a current membership:

- Quite a few additional parents (21 of 74, 28.38%), had joined the library since receiving the Reading Pack;
- More than half (40 of 74, 54.05%) were library members prior to receiving the Reading Pack;
- Less than twenty percent of the parents (13 of 74, 17.57%) were not members of the library.
- More than a third of the children (26 of 75, 34.67%) had joined the library since receiving the Reading Pack;
- Nearly half of the children (33 of 75, 44%) were already library members prior to receiving the Reading Pack;
- Less than a quarter of the children (16 of 75, 21.33%) were not library members.

Two Established Cohort case study participants who were interviewed remembered being influenced by receiving the Reading Pack: *"I had a membership but it probably did prompt us to start going a little bit because I got the library bag"; "I already had a membership, but it's definitely helped"*.

A comparison between library memberships of the New Cohort and the Established Cohort is interesting (Table 16). A similar percentage of adults and children in each group had library memberships at the time of data collection. However, the **membership statistics prior to receiving the Reading Pack indicates that fewer parents and children in the Established Cohort were library members in contrast to those parents and children in the New Cohort:**

- 71.96% (77 of 107) New Cohort adults and 61.54% New Cohort children (64 of 104) were members; and
- 54.05% (40 of 74) Established Cohort adults and 44% Established Cohort children (33 of 75) were members.

Neither the surveys nor interviews provided reasons for the difference, but it might possibly suggest that library membership in the community was on the rise, which could be attributed, in part, to the introduction and build-up of influence of *Better Beginning* programs. **This would be a useful focus for further investigation.**

Library attendance of Established Cohort parents and children

Just over half of the parents from Established Cohort families (39 of 73, 53.42%) went to the library once a month, whilst 10.96% (8 of 73) attended fortnightly, 6.85% (5 of 73) went weekly. A further 28.77% (21 of 73) reported that they never went to the library.

Unsurprisingly the pattern of attendance for children from Established Cohort families is very similar to that of the adults. Just over half of the children from Established Cohort families (36 of 67, 53.73%,) went to the library once a month, whilst 7.46% (5 of 67) attended fortnightly, 17.91% (12 of 67) went weekly. A further 20.90% (14 of 67) reported that they never went to the library.

Table 16: Library membership comparison between New and Established Cohorts

	Established Cohort Parent/caregiver respondent % (number)	Established Cohort Child's % (number)	New Cohort Post-Program Parent/caregiver respondent % (number)	New Cohort Post-Program Child's % (number)
Joined the library since receiving the Reading Pack	28.38% (21)	34.67% (26)	7.48% (8)	11.54% (12)
Were library members prior to receiving the Reading Pack	54.05% (40)	44% (33)	71.96% (77)	61.54% (64)
Are not currently library members/Didn't join after receiving the Reading Pack	17.57% (13)	21.33% (16)	20.56% (22)	26.92% (28)
Total Library members	82.43% (61 of 74)	78.67% (59 of 75)	79.45% (85 of 107)	73.08% (76 of 104)



Book borrowing by Established Cohort parents and children

A number of participants from the Established Cohort who were interviewed confirmed that their family pattern of book borrowing changed according to the child's age. They noted school and digital technologies becoming increasing influences on their child's choices:

He uses the school library at the moment. He's still at an age where he can get what he needs through the school so he goes to the school library once a week whereas [daughter] needs the more mature books so that's why she goes to the town library.

We use a Borrow Box which you download through the State Library if you've got a local library membership, so that's on our iPhones and iPads and things. We don't go for the internet apart from research.

They attend the school library... [we] go during the school holidays.

[We]... haven't been for a while. We used to go a lot and hire DVDs and story CDs and things like that for the kids to listen to at night.

Yes, older children have Kobos (an e-book, like a kindle).

Borrow Box – an electronic device to read a book, on the iPad. They do audio books which are good for eight-year-old boys.

Library activity participation of Established Cohort parents and children

Over sixty percent of Established Cohort parents surveyed (47 of 76, 61.84%) said their child took part (currently) in one or more library activities. Although the survey participants did not specify which activities

they joined, a few of the case study interviewees from the Established Cohort commented on their contemporary library activities:

- four of five borrowed books;
- one of five used the internet;
- three of five attended literacy sessions like *Storytime*; and
- one of five attended other library events.

We've attended a couple of things, they had a science week thing and sometimes they have holiday programs. At the moment, they've got a young-readers type thing that I take my one-year-old to.

The evidence from the Established Cohort suggests that **the families who participated in *Better Beginnings* have maintained their commitment to libraries, but their patterns of book borrowing, and engagement with activities offered changed as their child(ren) age. Sustaining interest across time may require further investigation and on-going collaboration between libraries and schools.**

Insights and perspective of library staff on library membership and participation

Public librarians who were interviewed provided a commentary on changes they had observed in library membership, although they did not distinguish impacts for different cohorts or for different programs:

- four of five thought that there had been an increase in families joining their public library;
- three of five reported that they had statistics related to membership but commented: [data is] “difficult to access due to change in computer system”; no data was subsequently made available; and
- all four thought the increase in families joining their public library resulted from the *Better Beginnings* program.

[The increase is]... in part... a result of Better Beginnings – orange forms returned. A lot of people are coming in to join; they wouldn't have come in if they hadn't have received the pack.

Four of five librarians who commented on library attendance, said there had been an increase in the number of families visiting the library, and thought that this was due to *Better Beginnings* or at least in part. All of this group (5 of 5), said they noticed the same families visiting the library more often and four or five tended to credit *Better Beginnings* for this increase: *"Mums are saying their children really want to visit the library with their green bags."*

However, the librarians were not fully confident about their observations: *"[It's] hard to tell... [I] see the regulars, but don't know if they come in more often. [It's just] anecdotal information."*

Some librarians (4 of 6) had noticed an increase in attendance in library programs and activities and four of five felt this change was a result of the *Better Beginnings* program: *"Story Time numbers are increasing... Story Time especially."*

Public librarians reported that much of their work in promoting early literacy and resources, and communicating the core messages of *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program occurred in the context of services they offered at the local library. The public librarians affirmed that the two *Better Beginnings* sessions focused on kindergarten-aged children were offered regularly:

- *Baby Rhyme-time* was offered in all of the evaluation library communities (7 of 7); and,
- *Story-Time* in all but one (6 of 7).

Activities sometimes went beyond *Baby Rhyme Time*, *Sing-with-Me*, and *Story Time*, to include local initiatives such as *Coffee with Books* and parent workshops, all conducted in the spirit of *Better Beginnings*. Public librarians reported that it was common for sessions to attract mixed-age groups.

Parents would often bring a baby and a kindergarten child, or even a school-aged child to the same session. Librarians said they tried to adapt to meet the needs of the people who came to sessions, and were flexible about which *Better Beginnings* messages and resources they focused on. This included, for example, adapting *Baby Rhyme Time* to suit five-year olds. One librarian described adaption as continual process of 'morphing': *"[What we offer] ...changes over time, more like a mother's group. 2016 - Story time. 2017 - Rhyme Time. Rhyme Time kids will morph into Story Time."*

The number and nature of activities varied across public libraries, but typically they offered between one and three literacy activities per week, and these are often done in multiple time slots as illustrated in *Table 17: Beginnings and related activities*.

Interviewees also pointed to a range of further activities which could incorporate aspects of *Better Beginnings*, for example:

Interviewees also pointed to a range of further activities which could incorporate aspects of *Better Beginnings*, for example: *"[There is a]... parenting book group... [and a]... Lego group... [It is a]... safe place for everyone. It's the space that matters."*

Better Beginnings activities were usually held in the public library. However, some were offered in alternative community locations such as toy libraries, community centres or other outreach programs such as *Toddler Jam* or conducted in the park for special occasions.





Table 17: Better Beginnings and related activities offered by the evaluation public Libraries

Public Library	Storytime	Rhyme-time	Other	Average attendance per session
Public Library 1 – Compsey	Every Tuesday and every second Saturday	1 per week, every Wednesday		Varies but 7-8
Public Library 2 – Avoca		1 per week	Parent workshop once a term	15
Public Library 3 – Mascot 1	2 per week	2 per week	Coffee and cuddles (once a week)	<i>Rhyme time:</i> 60 <i>Story time:</i> 30 <i>Coffee:</i> 17
Public Library 4 – Fletcher Park	Pre-school story 1 per week	Was 2 but cutting to 1 per week	Community Child Health nurse (talk to new parents) monthly.	12
Public Library 5 – Birdwood- Delivered across several branches	1 per week (repeated across several branches in the suburb)	1 per week	Once a month – Dads. Twice a month – bilingual story time (Mandarin and English).	Biggest Branch: 50 Smallest Branch: 10
Public Library 6 – Newton	1 per week for preschool children.	1 per week for 5 year olds.	Home-schooling 1 per week	<i>Story time:</i> 8-10 up to 20. <i>Baby Rhyme Time:</i> 1-5 up to 20. <i>Home-schooling:</i> 10 regular (up to 30 children).
Public Library 7 – Mascot 2	1 per week	2 per week		Numbers are growing. <i>Rhyme time:</i> 50-55 (kids and parents). <i>Story Time:</i> 15 (kids and parents).

The relationship between the *Better Beginnings* programs and other early literacy initiatives

Better Beginnings is one of several initiatives in Western Australia designed to improve the educational outcomes of children by enhancing their environments and experiences in the pre-school years.

Better Beginnings is comprised of a suite of related programs that include:

- *Birth to Three*: Encouraging attitudes, behaviours and practices of parents that support early literacy learning with babies and toddlers (the Yellow Pack);
- *Sing with Me*: A pilot initiative encouraging singing and reading aloud aimed at two to three year olds (the Orange Pack);
- *Four to Five: The Kindergarten program* (previously known as *Growing Better Beginnings*) focussed on the literacy needs of children in the year prior to enrolling in formal schooling (the Green Pack);
- *Read to me, I love it*: A collaborative venture designed to deliver resources to families with children up to five years old living in remote Aboriginal communities and socially and culturally isolated (SaCI) communities; and
- *Books-to-Go*: A program that encourages children and families of all ages to engage with books and stories by creating their own.

This evaluation invited participants to share their experiences and perceptions about the interaction between *Better Beginnings* programs, and with other related initiatives.

A member of the SLWA leadership team described with great clarity the way the first three components of the *Better Beginnings* program have been designed to build upon each other, to give the greatest opportunity to have the biggest influence and impact on a child's language and literacy development is within the first five years of life.

Through the yellow pack we are aiming to establish a strong foundation from birth, to inform, encourage and equip parents to share books and rhymes with their child. Resources including the board book Baby Ways were specifically developed to engage babies from birth, and we hope through the program parents will connect with their library and attend free activities such as Baby Rhyme Time to sustain really positive home literacy practices with their baby.

Sing with Me, for parents with a child aged 2 years, builds on this further by emphasising nursery rhymes and simple rhyming picture books to build on language and vocabulary development. Through rhymes the packs are also introducing the literacy skill of print motivation, using rhymes and rhyming texts the resources provide repetition that enables children to predict what comes next in the story, enabling them to participate in the storytelling.

The Kindy program follows this same principle, but moving to a picture book with a larger vocabulary. One of the important messages for parents here is that they are still their child's teacher, even though their child has now started school, and that we want them to continue reading, singing, talking, playing and writing with their child at home.

Branch librarians were very supportive of the goal of providing all children with a, 'seamless flow of resources', transitioning across age-groups. However, they raised questions about the way that packs had been targeted and integrated across the age ranges in the past, and gaps they identified in provisions. They were very happy with the Baby Packs (*Birth to Three*) and the *Kindergarten* Reading Packs (4- 5 years), but had previously been worried



about a gap between them. Fortunately, they saw the *Orange Sing with Me Packs* being trialled in 2017, as a good fit. Many branch librarians had received feedback from families who have come to expect a pack for each age-group, and were actively looking for the next one for their child, or feeling they had missed out in some way:

... There was a massive gap in between where they were ... you know, go to the schools and they'd say, "Well, what about my two or three-year-old"... so it's really nice to be able to have them, and give those ones out last year. So, it will be good when it's back again.

We've got quite a few three-year old kindys around our way as well, and they are always a bit stropky because they couldn't get the green bags, because they were for four-year-old kindys, so the orange ones, were perfect. There's a ready-made audience for them.

Some librarians expressed regret about the loss of Reading Packs previously available to pre-primary children, and thought there would be benefit in extending the Program still further to provide Reading Packs or at least some supporting resources to year one children:

When I first started, we had kindy packs, and pre-primary packs, and the schools were so disappointed to lose those pre-primary packs, and in fact, they were asking me if I could do something for year ones. So, they actually wanted to extend the program into ... upwards, keep kindy, keep pre-primary, and extend it to year one, and it was quite a blow to the schools where I am, that they lost those pre-primary packs.

The State Library reached the end of a four-year funding cycle in 2014, requiring decisions to be made regarding the future of the program. Based on evaluations and feedback from stakeholders, the decision was made to reduce the delivery of the

Kindergarten Reading Packs to just the kindergarten children, where previously pre-primary children also received an age-appropriate Reading Pack. The decision was a strategic one to maintain the focus on supporting literacy development in the early years prior to formal, full-time schooling.

Public librarians placed great value on the support that Reading Packs gave to families in finding age-appropriate books for their children. They thought that the series of Reading Packs provided good examples along with sound recommendations for other suitable reading materials. However, once children entered school, the librarians felt there was little they had to offer as follow on advice for older children:

... Most of the questions parents ask at the end of the kindy sessions, is, "My eight-year-old, what can I have for him to read?" So, the parents want more information for the middle school years.

I would like to see those at least being extended to the older ages, so the little fold out booklists that the Deadly reads, and books to read for year three, that would be great, because they are so great. I mean, even though books do come in and out of publication, you could still have authors to read, or something for the older children, or series, that would be great for the parents, I think.

They don't have a clue, so, [even] having a booklist would be a really good idea, because the it is a reference point for them, and especially for those parents who don't like to ask, because they don't want to feel stupid of anything, so they don't like to ask what they should be, if there was just a resource we could have in the library then that would be a really good resource to have too, I think.

(Public Librarians, Interviews)

Pre-school children are the clear brief for *Better Beginnings*. However, the feedback identifies a gap in provisions that the SLWA might wish to service in other ways.

At a public library level, flexibility across *Better Beginnings* programs was often achieved through the creativity of individual librarians adapting resources and services to suit what they perceived as the needs of the community. Several librarians and indeed other stakeholders noted their keenness to tap into the resources of the different *Better Beginnings* programs for the benefit of particular families and communities. An example, of this was the interest shown in the resource collections developed to support Aboriginal communities thorough the *Read it to Me, I love it!* program. **Investigations into the development of more formal, systematic ways of ensuring flexible use of resources where appropriate and possible would be appreciated.**

Public librarians made little reference to involvement in either alternative or related initiatives, although a passing comment was made by one librarian about joining a network of agencies participating in community literacy promotion campaigns. Links were also highlighted between literacy programs such as *Paint the Town REaD* and *Better Beginnings* and the benefits of delivering Reading Packs during Children's Book Week.

It was not clear if or how local libraries managed relationships across different agencies. Since there are multiple projects and initiatives addressing literacy in the early years in WA, some **clarity around intentions and strategies for inter-sector communications and collaboration might be beneficial.**

School perceptions of Kindergarten program relationships, and interactions with other early literacy initiatives

School principals stated that they often assumed a role of liaising with outside agencies, and in that context, they sometimes had opportunities to talk to others about *Better Beginnings* Programs. The Early Years Network was mentioned by several principals as a source of information:

We had the Early Years [regional] Learning Network, where the librarian told us a lot of the

information for Better Beginnings when it was coming up. Also, they would touch base with things like the story time that ran afterwards which rolls out for a few weeks.

We do have some involvement with the town library, but, also, through the Early Years Network, that we have discussed the Better Beginnings program.

Several schools hosted programs and groups that shared goals that overlapped with the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program, for example through supporting the development of pre-school children, encouraging active family involvement in learning, and preparing young children for pre-primary enrolment. One school had a Parenting and Early Learning Centre; another offered a, "*Kindy for three year olds*." At least two schools had a playgroup and one school ran a story-time program that an educational assistant has started:

Well, we started a three-year-old group here... So we've started that, and I do have... the shire run playgroup on a Friday morning, and also, because the powers that be, built the family centres [elsewhere] we missed out, but because I have very good working relationships with that centre in particular, my parents participate in their programs over there.

So, we have got quite a strong focus, and more involvement with parents. So the actual connectedness with parents, through that. Just recently we have had our second lot of super starters¹². We host a super starters program here, run in conjunction with primary health. On Tuesday... I would estimate we had at least 20 families represented. Which is quite enormous. Not talking about your program, I am talking about connecting with families, and if that's where Better Beginnings can dovetail into, it could be quite good.

12. Super Starters is a WWA Country Health Service initiative, offering a four-week program for preparation for Kindergarten.



KindiLink was mentioned in particular, as a program offering related support Aboriginal families and their pre-school child/ren:

We have got an independent playgroup operating out of our school. We have a Kindergarten for Aboriginal students, three-year olds, or pre-kindy, which is called KindiLink. KindiLink it's more working with parents, to work with their children, but it is sharing... model how to read, how to enjoy a book, how to do some questioning about the story. So, it is not a specific program, other than KindiLink is a program for working with Aboriginal families, to work with their children.

Although, the school principals identified potential connections between these different provisions, it was not clear if anything specific had been done to initiate or develop relationships between these groups or the families they served and the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program. Certainly, none of the principals articulated any formal organising or planning to ensure positive interactions or cooperative working between and across the separate groups.

Over half the kindergarten teachers (5 of 9) interviewed said they liaised with other local groups about early literacy. These liaisons were mostly with other schools and groups such as the Early Years Network, KindiLink and childcare centres (3 of 9), playgroups (1 of 9) and Aboriginal groups (1 of 9).

Early years teachers in the schools were specifically asked to comment on other literacy initiatives they knew about in their communities. One teacher had seen someone reading stories in the fairy corner at the spring festival, another described a storytelling event:

... A lady did some story telling in the library and then she also came to the schools and did storytelling and did these beautiful caricatures. Art exhibitions and other bits and pieces.

One teacher knew about a local Early Years Network:

[The Early Years Network] is run up through the Primary Health, and involves, like, kindy teachers, and principals, and toy library, day care, all that sort of stuff, have been giving out little passport programs, and in the passport programs there's a book for each child. Just as a welcome to Child Health, and everything and trying to engage parents to read with their kids. The library advertises things for holiday programs, and things like that.

Another teacher described a literacy activity conducted within their school, but was unsure if they were part of *Better Beginnings* or something different:

*Yeah, we have some literacy books in our classroom that we get parents to take home with a questionnaire sheet. We have like a little questionnaire sheet and you've got the book and you've got to ask the questions as you're reading the book, after you've read the book. You know, how did that book make you feel, what was the most important part in the book and who was the main character. Yeah, we do have that in the classroom. I'm not sure if that is *Better Beginnings* but we do that. That's in kindy and pre-primary.*

None of the early years teachers had any involvement with other community literacy initiatives, and did not know about links between them and *Better Beginnings*.

Parents perceptions of the relationship between *Better Beginnings* programs and other early literacy initiatives

Neither the New Cohort nor the Established Cohort survey provided much by way of insight into parents' perceptions of the relationships between *Better Beginnings* Programs or other early literacy initiatives. It was, however, noticeable that comments about *Better Beginnings* tended to refer to specific elements of the overall program, for example: *Baby Rhyme Time* or *Story Time*, or the Yellow, Orange or Green Packs, or Discovery Backpacks. Although parents didn't often use the term '*Better Beginnings*', they appeared to conceptualise the program as a holistic entity, rather than a collection of disparate parts. They rarely, if ever, use the name *Kindergarten* program, although they realised that different colour packs were designed for different age groups and were related. Some parents referred to library activities they attended by 'local' names, where it was unclear if the activity fell under the umbrella of *Better Beginnings* or not.

Public librarians were not surprised by the lack of distinction parents made between separate programs and elements of *Better Beginnings*:

We call it Better Beginning Family Literacy Program, so parents didn't actually distinguish between, you know, you are seven years old, or you know, it is a family literacy, it is for my next kid who is six, seven, that kind of thing, you know, resource available, if you see as a family literacy, it's a big picture.

Further, a brief review of the history and evolution of additions made to the suite of offerings over time, and a glance at the website, shows some inconsistency in the way *Better Beginnings* has been segmented and presented, as well as the names programs have been given across time. There was no evidence that such changes led to significant problems for families. So, this may not be an issue of significance, as parents seem to recognise the brand name *Better Beginnings* and what it stands for.

Four of five parents from the Established Cohort who were interviewed remembered one or more of their children receiving a Reading Pack, but none of them knew about any literacy programs other than *Better Beginnings*.

All ten of the New Cohort parents interviewed recalled their child receiving a Reading Pack earlier in the year. Six of the ten remembered receiving a '*Baby Pack*' for a child born since 2012, and five thought they had received a pack for a subsequent kindergarten child. They seemed to think of the pack as all part of the "*same program*," but no-one used either the title *Better Beginnings* or *Kindergarten* program.

One parent talked briefly about encountering some, "*informal stuff through playgroup as far as sharing books and stories*." And another knew about a special library-based Key Word Sign group, similar to Auslan (it is for non-verbal children, only signing every fourth or fifth word). No other parents knew of any literacy programs other than *Better Beginnings*: "*I know there's an adult book club, a reading club. For the kids, I'm only aware of what's offered through the library Rhyme Time and the Story Time*."



Kindy Pack - All Monkeys Love Bananas



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 an 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 *Kindergarten* program.

Rio Tinto has been involved with *Better Beginnings* since its inception. As an industry partner, it has collaborated with the State Government and 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.

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.



Changes in existing data sets in evaluation communities and schools

Across the last decade, Australia has collected and published standardised data about communities, socio-educational advantage and disadvantage, and children's academic performance in formal schooling. The information from three national databases, has particular relevance to this *Better Beginnings* evaluation:

- ***The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)*** was created by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) specifically to enable fair comparisons of National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) test achievement by students in schools across Australia. It provides a numeric scale that represents the level of educational advantage associated with individual schools. It is based upon key factors in students' family backgrounds such as parents' occupations and their educational experience and outcomes. It also acknowledges influential school factors, such as geographical location and the proportion of Aboriginal students. An ICSEA value is not a rating of a school, nor does it measure or rate its staff performance, quality of teaching programs or nature of facilities. ICSEA is not a measure of student academic performance and does not measure school wealth. (Source: http://docs.acara.edu.au/resources/About_icsea_2014.pdf)
- ***The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)*** is nationwide government census that shows the developmental levels of young children in Australia, as measured when they start their first year of full-time school. The AEDC three-year data collection cycle is intended to enable communities to measure and compare childhood development programs and services more effectively over time. (Source: <https://www.mychild.gov.au/agenda/aedc>)

- ***The National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)*** provides an assessment of the literacy and numeracy skills of students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9. It reports on national, state and territory levels of achievements in literacy and numeracy, as well as providing accurate and reliable measures of student and school performance. (Source: http://docs.acara.edu.au/resources/Reliability_and_validity_of_NAPLAN_file.pdf)

The available data cannot provide direct evidence for the impact of *Better Beginnings* program or any of the individual components that comprise the program. However, some emergent patterns at national and state levels, and for the six communities and seven schools included in this evaluation are worthy of attention and comment.

AEDC community development indicators for language and communications over time

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) notes the percentage of children at the start of their first full time year in school, 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.

AEDC assessment 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. The *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program is designed to make a particular contribution to children's language

and communication development, with a keen interest also in the social development of children through enhanced, positive family interactions.

The 2015 AEDC National Report identified Australia-wide trends from three data collection cycles (2009, 2012, 2015), a period that is consistent with the introduction of the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program. The AEDC key national findings with a particular relevance to *Better Beginnings* included:

The strongest emerging trend over the period 2009 to 2015 was in the language and cognitive skills (school-based) domain, with the proportion of children developmentally on track increasing from 77.1 per cent in 2009 to 84.6 per cent in 2015;

There was also a positive trend in the communication skills and general knowledge domain, with the proportion of developmentally vulnerable children decreasing from 9.2 per cent in 2009 to 8.5 per cent in 2015;

For the social competence domain, the overall proportion of children developmentally on track in 2015 (75.2 per cent) is a small decrease from 2009 (75.4 per cent);

Following a decrease in the proportion of children developmentally 'vulnerable' on one or more domain(s) from 23.6 per cent in 2009 to 22.0 per cent in 2012, there was no change in 2015 (22.0 per cent);

The proportion of children developmentally vulnerable on two or more domains decreased from 11.8 per cent in 2009 to 10.8 per cent in 2012, followed by a small increase in 2015 to 11.1 per cent;

Over the period 2009 to 2015, the gap between the proportion of developmentally vulnerable children in the most disadvantaged areas, relative to the least disadvantaged areas, widened across all five domains;

Focusing on the 8.7 per cent of Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) children

who were vulnerable on this domain, those who were not proficient in English were nearly eight times more likely to be developmentally vulnerable (38.1 per cent) than LBOTE children who were proficient in English (4.9 per cent);

A widening gap is also apparent for children in very remote Australia, relative to children in major cities; and

The gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children is starting to close for some AEDC measures. For example, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children on the language and cognitive skills (school-based) domain fell from 20.7 percentage points in 2009 to 14.5 percentage points in 2015.

(Australian Early Development Census National Report 2015, A snapshot of Early Childhood Development in Australia (2015). Canberra: Australian Government Department of Education and Training)

The 2015 AEDC Report also documents emerging trends on a state-by-state basis. Data for Western Australia provided some optimism that improvements were being achieved by 2015. Positive results were demonstrated across all domains with the one exception of an increase in the percentage of 'vulnerable' children in the social competence domain. Further, in the domain of language and cognitive skills, the improvements were particularly strong which is the target area of the *Better Beginnings* programs across the same period.

In **language and cognitive skills** (school-based), between 2009 and 2015 the percentage of children:

- 'On track' rose from 67.2% to 82.7%;
- 'At risk' fell from 20.7% to 10.6%; and
- 'Vulnerable' fell from 12% to 6.6%.

In **communication skills and general knowledge**, between 2009 and 2015 the percentage of children:

- 'On track' rose from 76.9% to 79.4%;
- 'At risk' fell from 14.3% to 12.6%; and
- 'Vulnerable' fell from 8.9% to 8.0%.



In **social competence**, between 2009 and 2015 the percentage of children:

- 'On track' rose from 76.2% to 77.1%;
- 'At risk' fell from 16.1% to 12.2%; and
- 'Vulnerable' increased from 7.7% to 8.4%.

(For full details see AEDC National Report Table 23.1: Western Australia emerging trends by domain and development category – 2009, 2012, 2015)

AEDC data is also available at a community level. Between 2009 and 2015 AEDC measures for the communities in this *Better Beginnings* evaluation typically mirror state improvements (*Table 18*). However, some quite dramatic achievements in **language and cognitive skills** were evident:

- All six communities achieved significant increases in the percentage of children assessed as 'on track', with scores improving by between 11.80% and 31.20%;
- All six communities achieved significant decreases in the percentage of children assessed as 'at risk', with decreases between 9% and 33.60%; and
- Three of the six communities achieved decreases in the percentage of children assessed as 'vulnerable', with decreases between 4.10% and 9.10%; with the other three showing no significant change.

The AEDC measures (2009-2015) in **Communication skills and General knowledge**, show less dramatic, but still quite positive changes:

- Four of the six communities achieved significant increases in the percentage of children assessed as 'on track', with scores improving by between 4.60% and 15.90%;
- Three of the six communities achieved significant decreases in the percentage of children assessed as 'at risk', with decreases between 5.20% and 13.20%; with the other three showing no significant change; and
- One of the six communities achieved a decrease of 3.70% in children assessed as 'vulnerable', with the other five showing no significant change.

The AEDC **Social** measures (2009-2015) also demonstrated some positive changes:

- Four of the six communities achieved significant increases in the percentage of children assessed as 'on track', with scores improving by between 1.70% and 20.70%;
- Three of the six communities achieved significant decreases in the percentage of children assessed as 'at risk', with decreases between 2.0% and 19.0%; with the other three showing no significant change; and
- One of the six communities achieved a decrease of 8.0% in children assessed as 'vulnerable', with the other five showing no significant change.

Changes in levels of developmental vulnerability

The AEDC data identifies the percentage of children in each community classified as either *Vulnerable 1* (demonstrating vulnerability in one domain), or *Vulnerable 2* (demonstrating vulnerability in 2 or more domains). Key findings at a national level note some improvements but raise concerns about the lack of progress for the most 'vulnerable' of children. Outcomes were more positive in the *Better Beginnings* communities: Between 2009 and 2012 there was only one community identified as having a significant increase in vulnerability, significantly this was the community also categorised as 'remote'. All other communities either reduced vulnerability or sustained no significant change (*Table 19*).

Between 2009 and 2015 every one of the *Better Beginnings* communities had either reduced vulnerability or sustained no significant change.

- Two of six communities reduced the percentage of **Vulnerable 1** children; the other four showed no significant change;
- Two of six communities reduced the percentage of **Vulnerable 2** children; the other four showed no significant change.

It can be noted that the improvements leading to less children appearing in the *vulnerable* categories, occurred in schools with ICSE scores below 1,000.

Table 18: Percentages of 'on track', 'at risk', and 'vulnerable' children in Better Beginnings Communities (2009-2015)

Better Beginnings Communities	Language			Communication			Social		
	OnTrack	At Risk	Vulnerable	OnTrack	At Risk	Vulnerable	OnTrack	At Risk	Vulnerable
Avoca	SI +17.80%	SD -8.70%	SD -9.10%	SI +4.60%	NSC -0.90	SD -3.70%	SI +8.80%	SD -10.00%	NSC -1.20%
Compsey	SI +31.20%	SD -33.60%	NSC +2.5%	SD -8.4%	NSC +2.90	NSC +5.60%	SI +20.70%	SD -19%	NSC -1.80%
Fletcher Park	SI +11.80%	SD -10.40%	NSC -1.40%	SI +7.00%	SD -5.20%	NSC -1.80%	NSC +2.10%	NSC -1.50%	NSC -0.70%
Birdwood	SI +13.10%	SD -9.0%	SD -4.10%	NSC -1.80%	NSC -1.50%	NSC -0.30%	NSC -1.20%	NSC -1.90%	NSC -0.70%
Newton	SI +17.20%	SD -12.60%	NSC -4.70%	SI +14.60%	SD -13.20%	NSC -1.40%	SI +11.40%	NSC -3.40%	SD -8.00%
Mascot	SI +16.10%	SD -11.00%	SD -5.20%	SI +15.90%	SD -5.40%	NSC -0.50%	SI +1.70%	SD -2.00%	NSC -0.30%

Key	
SI +	Significant % increase 2009-2015
NSC	No significant % change 2009-2015
SD -	Significant % decrease 2009-2015

Source: Australian Early Development Census, Data Explorer: <https://www.aedc.gov.au/data/data-explorer>. Accessed February 2018

Table 19: Comparison of the changing percentages of children in Better Beginnings communities classified as Vulnerable category 1 and 2 (2009-2012; 2012-2015; and 2009-2015)

Better Beginnings Communities	2009 and 2012		2012 and 2015		2009 and 2015	
	Vulnerable 1	Vulnerable 2	Vulnerable 1	Vulnerable 2	Vulnerable 1	Vulnerable 2
Avoca	SD -2.90%	SD -4.40%	SD -7.20%	NSC -1.0%	SD -10.10%	SD -5.40%
Compsey	SI +17.20%	SI +6.80%	SD -10.70%	NSC -6.90%	NSC +6.50%	NSC -0.10%
Fletcher Park	NSC -1.50%	NSC -2.80%	NSC -0.40%	SD -53.80%	NSC -1.10%	NSC -1.00%
Birdwood	NSC +0.60%	NSC +0.20%	NSC -1.40%	NSC -0.90%	NSC -0.80%	NSC -0.70%
Newton	NSC -4.40%	SD -6.60%	NSC -1.30%	NSC -3.90%	NSC -5.70%	SD -10.50%
Mascot	SD -3.50%	SD -2.80%	NSC +0.90%	NSC +0.50%	SD -2.60%	NSC -2.30%

Key	
SI +	Significant % increase
NSC	No significant % change
SD -	Significant % decrease

Source: Australian Early Development Census, Data Explorer: <https://www.aedc.gov.au/data/data-explorer>. Accessed February 2018



Year 3 and Year 5 NAPLAN (Language & Literacy) results

Whereas ICSEA provides insights into the socio-educational contexts of schools, and AEDC provided information about children's developmental levels as they entered formal education, NAPLAN assessed the individual academic achievements of children. NAPLAN results are reported as a mean for individual school cohorts, and though reasonable confidence is claimed for the reliability of NAPLAN testing within year groups, there has been less confidence about reliability between year groups¹³. So, it is important to remain tentative about observations across time.

National and Western Australian NAPLAN reading scores (2016)

The NAPLAN year three mean reading scores for 'all Australian schools' have been reasonably stable, but with an upward trend. Reading scores in Western Australia, have been consistently below the national means, but follow a similar upward trend (*Table 20*)¹⁴:

- Australia-wide year three reading mean scores results rose from 414.3 in 2010, to 418.3 in 2014; to the highest scores yet in 2015 (425.5) and 2016 (425.6); and
- WA results rose from 398.7 in 2010, to 406.3.3 in 2014; and with the highest scores in 2015 (412.5) and 2016 (425.9).

The pattern for Year Five results is very similar:

- The Australia-wide year five mean in reading increased from 487.4 in 2010; to 501.5 in 2016; and
- The WA year five reading mean rose from 477.5 in 2010; to 493.7 in 2016;

(Source: <http://reports.acara.edu.au/Home/Results#results>)

Socio-educational inequality reflected in NAPLAN scores

The NAPLAN data clearly highlights significant and persistent patterns of socio-educational inequality Australia-wide. Certain factors consistently correlate with reading outcomes. For example, 2016 National NAPLAN data for year three and year five reading highlights:

- **Children who live in metro areas tend to achieve higher reading scores** than those living in regional areas. Those living in remote and particularly very remote areas have significantly lower reading scores. For example, in 2016, National year three and year five reading scores shows:
 - 2.2% year three and 3.7% year five children who live in Major Cities, did not reach National Minimum Standards (NMS);
 - 3.3% year three and 5.6% year five children who live in Inner Regional areas, did not reach NMS;
 - 5.2% year three and 8.8% year five children who live in Outer Regional areas did not reach NMS;
 - 11.6 % year three and 16.9% year five children who live in Remote areas did not reach NMS;
 - **35.9% year three children and 52.8% year five children who live in Very Remote areas** did not reach NMS.
- **Children from English speaking backgrounds, tend to achieve slightly higher reading scores** than those from Language Backgrounds Other Than English (LBOTE). For example, in 2016, National year three and year five reading scores show:
 - 3.4% year three and 6.4% year five children from LBOTE did not reach NMS; compared to
 - 2.9% year three and 4.6% year five children from non-LBOTE did not reach NMS.

13. See for example, <http://theconversation.com/naplan-data-is-not-comparable-across-school-years-63703>.

14. All NAPLAN data reproduced in this report has been extracted from the National Assessment Program, My School website: <http://reports.acara.edu.au/Home/Results#results>.

Table 20: NAPLAN mean scores (SD) year three & year five WA & Australia (NB: Public school student data)

	Year 3 WA Mean score (SD)	Year 3 Australia Mean score (SD)	Year 5 WA Mean score (SD)	Year 5 Australia Mean score (SD)
2010	398.7 (86.1)	414.3 (83.3)	477.5 (78.1)	487.4 (76.1)
2011	400.3 (87.4)	415.7 (87.5)	480.2 (77.5)	488.1 (76.3)
2012	407.6 (90.7)	419.6 (87.9)	482.6 (78.6)	493.6 (77.6)
2013	406.1 (81.6)	419.1 (80.6)	495.4 (64.9)	502.3 (64.7)
2014	406.3 (89.5)	418.3 (86.2)	491.7 (80.5)	500.6 (78.0)
2015	412.5 (90.1)	425.5 (86.8)	491.7 (80.5)	500.6 (78.0)
2016	415.9 (88.1)	425.6 (85.6)	493.7 (80.5)	501.5 (77.1)

(Source: Parents, New Cohort Pre-Program Survey and Parents, New Cohort Post-Program Survey)

- **Boys** consistently score at a lower level than girls nationally. In 2016:
 - 4.1% year three and 6.5% of year five boys did not reach NMS; compared to
 - 2.1% year three and 3.8% year five girls did not reach NMS.
- **Children who identify as Aboriginal** tend to achieve significantly lower reading scores than those from non-Aboriginal backgrounds. Nationally, in 2016:
 - 16.5% year three and 26.5% year five children who identify as Aboriginal did not meet NMS; compared to
 - 2.3% year three and 3.9% year five non-Aboriginal children did not meet NMS.

Statistical patterns at national level are mirrored in Western Australia, except that in all categories the percentage of children who do not meet National Minimum Standards (NMS) is greater (Table 21). The difference can be explained by the high number of WA communities in 'Remote' and 'Very remote' locations.

And across all categories, children who belong to multiple low scoring groups tend to have the lowest outcomes of all. Thus, reading outcomes for Aboriginal children living in *Remote* and *Very Remote* locations are dramatically over-represented amongst those who fail to reach National Minimum Standards (NMS) in reading.

In 2016 in WA, year three reading scores did not reach NMS for:

- 15.6% Aboriginal children who live in *Major Cities*;
- 17.6 % Aboriginal children who live in *Inner Regional areas*;
- 22.2 % Aboriginal children who live in *Outer Regional areas*;
- **35.7 % Aboriginal children who live in *Remote areas*;**
- **51.2% Aboriginal children who live in *Very Remote areas*.**

In 2016 in WA, year five reading scores did not reach NMS for:

- 28.1% Aboriginal children who live in *Major Cities*;
- 28.1 % Aboriginal children who live in *Inner Regional areas*;
- 35.3 % Aboriginal children who live in *Outer Regional areas*;
- **47.2 % Aboriginal children who live in *Remote areas*;**
- **74.8% Aboriginal children who live in *Very Remote areas*.**



Not only is the disadvantage extreme for Aboriginal children in ‘Remote’ and ‘Very remote’ locations, but across all locations the year five results are lower than the year three results, indicating that they do not catch up with time, but exhibit worse outcomes in reading with time.

Achievement gaps between groups have been recognised for decades as an issue of serious concern.

NAPLAN has demonstrated limited improvements in closing the gaps, and underachievement remains a reality for many children and communities. The persistence of ‘the gaps’ is quite clearly illustrated in the four tables below (*Tables 21, 22, 23 & 24*) showing the percentages of children in particular groups, who did not meet NMS in year three and year five reading assessments 2011-2016.

Table 21: Percentage % year three students who did not meet NMS in reading, by Language Background Other than English (LBOE), and location (Metro/city, Remote or Very Remote)

	Aust LBOE	Aust Non-LBOE	WA LBOE	WA Non-LBOE	Aust Remote (Very Remote)	Aust City/Metro	WA Remote (Very Remote)	WA City/metro
2011	5.0	3.9	6.3	6.0	13.0 (38.1)	3.2	13.4 (26.1)	5.0
2012	5.0	4.1	6.6	6.0	14.4 (41.2)	3.2	15.6 (32.3)	4.8
2013*	3.3	2.5	4.7	4.0	10.1 (31.6)	2.0	9.3 (25.0)	3.1
2014	5.1	4.1	7.3	5.8	14.4 (43.6)	3.3	17.1 (35.3)	4.7
2015	4.1	3.2	6.1	5.2	12.4 (36.4)	2.6	13.5 (31.2)	4.0
2016	3.4	2.9	4.8	4.4	11.6 (35.9)	2.2	13.0 (31.4)	3.2

*NB: There was an adjustment in the statistical measures used in 2013 for all NAPLAN scores.

Table 22: Percentage % year three students who did not meet NMS in reading, by sex, Indigenous status and State 2011-2016

	All Aust	All WA	Aust Male	Aust Female	WA Male	WA Female	Aust Aboriginal	Aust Non-Aboriginal	WA Aboriginal	WA Non-Aboriginal
2011	4.3	6.6	5.4	3.1	8.1	5.0	21.3	3.3	28.5	4.8
2012	4.4	6.8	5.5	3.3	8.2	5.3	23.0	3.4	34.6	4.8
2013	2.8	4.5	3.5	2.0	5.5	3.5	15.8	2.0	23.2	3.1
2014	4.5	6.9	5.5	3.5	8.3	5.5	22.8	3.5	35.8	4.7
2015	3.6	5.8	4.5	2.5	7.4	4.1	18.6	2.6	32.2	3.7
2016	3.1	4.8	4.1	2.1	6.1	3.4	16.5	2.3	27.2	3.1

Table 23: Percentage % year five students who did not meet NMS in reading, by Language Background Other than English (LBOE), and location (Metro/city, Remote or Very Remote)

	Aust LBOE	Aust Non-LBOE	WA LBOE	WA Non-LBOE	Aust Remote (Very Remote)	Aus City/Metro	WA Remote (Very Remote)	WA City/metro
2011	8.3	6.1	11.0	7.8	18.8 (52.2)	5.3	17.8 (43.1)	6.6
2012	8.2	5.7	10.5	8.0	18.9 (57.1)	4.9	18.3 (46.5)	6.5
2013	3.0	1.6	3.4	2.2	7.2 (34.1)	1.3	8.5 (23.3)	1.7
2014	6.7	4.4	8.9	6.1	15.1 (49.7)	3.9	17.1 (40.3)	5.2
2015	6.2	4.3	8.0	6.1	14.3 (44.8)	3.7	15.1 (38.3)	5.0
2016	6.4	4.6	9.0	6.0	16.9 (52.8)	3.7	17.1 (48.7)	5.1

Table 24: Percentage % year five students who did not meet NMS in reading, by sex, Indigenous status and State 2011-2016

	All Aust	All WA	Aust Male	Aust Female	WA Male	WA Female	Aust Aboriginal	Aust Non-Aboriginal	WA Aboriginal	WA Non-Aboriginal
2011	6.7	9.1	8.1	5.2	11.0	7.0	31.1	5.4	43.7	6.5
2012	6.4	9.0	7.9	4.7	10.9	7.0	32.4	5.0	44.9	6.3
2013	2.0	2.8	2.5	1.4	3.5	2.1	14.0	1.3	19.8	1.5
2014	5.1	7.5	6.2	4.0	9.1	5.9	26.7	3.9	39.5	5.2
2015	4.9	6.9	5.9	3.8	8.3	5.5	23.4	3.7	34.9	4.7
2016	5.2	7.4	6.5	3.8	9.0	5.7	26.5	3.9	41.8	4.7

The educational level of parents' also correlates significantly with children's NAPLAN Reading achievements (Table 25). This can be clearly seen in the differences between the scores of children with parents who completed year twelve and above, and those who did not. The difference is dramatic, for example, in 2016 in WA, where parents did not complete year twelve¹⁵:

- 14.7% of year three children did not achieve the NMS;
- 21.1% of year five children did not achieve the NMS.

Where parents complete a Bachelor degree or above (WA, 2016):

- Only 1.0% of year three children did not achieve the NMS;
- Only 1.5% of year five children did not achieve the NMS.

In addition, whilst the difference between year three and five scores was the same for children of high achieving parents; the difference actually increased with time for children of parents who did not complete year twelve. This strongly suggests that the children with early disadvantage and outcomes were not catching up with their more advantaged peers through formal schooling.

15. This data should be treated tentatively since there was a particularly high rate of 'missing data' impacting on the results in 2013.



Table 25: Percentage of WA year three (year five) children scoring below NMS in Reading by Parental Education

	Bachelor or above Yr3 (Yr5)	Advanced diploma/ Diploma Yr3 (Yr5)	Certificate 1 to 1VYr3 (Yr5)	Year 12 or equivalent Yr3 (Yr5)	Year 11 equivalent or below Yr3 (Yr5)	Not stated (10%) Yr3 (Yr5)
2011	1.6 (1.5)	3.9 (4.9)	6.4 (8.2)	6.5 (8.8)	14.8 (21.5)	11.1 (16.1)
2012	1.5 (1.9)	3.7 (4.6)	6.7 (8.5)	6.7 (8.7)	16.3 (21.0)	13.0 (16.4)
2013*	1.0 (0.3)	2.4 (0.8)	4.4 (2.3)	4.3 (2.4)	10.3 (6.8)	9.4 (7.1)
2014	1.5 (1.5)	4.4 (4.3)	7.0 (7.3)	6.3 (8.4)	17.9 (18.0)	14.7 (15.7)
2015	1.4 (1.6)	3.7 (4.0)	5.5 (7.2)	6.7 (7.7)	16.4 (17.4)	12.3 (14.1)
2016	1.0 (1.5)	3.0 (4.3)	5.0 (7.5)	5.7 (7.7)	14.7 (21.1)	10.2 (16.3)

NB: Not stated = No data was provided for parental education at the time of student enrolment. The higher the percentage of missing data, the less informative the results for the other categories.

*NB: There was an adjustment in the statistical measures used in 2013 for all NAPLAN scores.

Better Beginnings' evaluation schools' year three NAPLAN reading scores (2016)

Variation at the level of individual schools can be expected to be greater statistically than for all schools, and indeed, several of the *Better Beginnings* schools showed much greater variance. However, there was a discernible **trend towards positive improvement in year three reading mean scores** (Table 26)¹⁶. Three of seven schools had their highest mean year three scores in 2016:

- School 1* lowest raw average score was 346 in 2012, while its highest was 446 in 2016;
- School 2 moved from its lowest mean raw average of 316 in 2011, to its highest of 394 in 2016;
- School 3 moved from its lowest raw average score of 382 in 2011, to its highest of 431 in 2016.

The patterns were more variable in the other four schools, however: **6 of 7 schools had highest or second highest year three average raw scores in 2016.**

Better Beginnings' evaluation schools' year five NAPLAN reading scores (2016)

The *Better Beginnings* evaluation schools also reflect positive upward trends in the NAPLAN year five reading scores (Table 27). However, only one of the seven schools (school 7) outscored national year five reading means every year 2011-16, and this school did not match the scores of 'similar' schools in any of the years. One further school (school 3) outscored the national mean in three years (2013, 14 & 15), and also outscored 'similar' schools three times. Both these schools had low percentages of 'at risk' and 'vulnerable' children on the AEDC Index. Five schools matched or outscored other similar schools in one or more years, suggesting good outcomes compared to their socio-educational environments.

National and state patterns of inequity were clearly visible in comparisons between indicators and results for *Better Beginnings* evaluation schools. Table 28 aligns schools against their community student intake characteristics, ICSE values, AEDC

16. All data for the NAPLAN reading scores comparing national scores with the *Better Beginnings* schools and similar schools was extracted from the My School website (<https://www.myschool.edu.au>) and represented in an unpublished manuscript (McClean, 2018)

Table 26: Comparison of raw scores of year three reading scores in Better Beginnings (BB) evaluation schools compared with 'All Australian' school scores, and similar (sim) schools scores 2011-2016.

	2011 Target	2011 Similar	2012 Target	2012 Similar	2013 Target	2013 Similar	2014 Target	2014 Similar	2015 Target	2015 Similar	2016 Target	2016 Similar
All schools	416		420		419		418		426		426	
School 1: Henson*	376	338	346	361	383	387	462	398	368	390	446	424
School 2: Cabury	316	375	354	380	355	382	349	379	374	390	394	393
School 3: Gopbourn	382	403	428	409	447	422	409	417	403	425	431	418
School 4: Sudbury	340	377	380	380	377	388	352	380	332	388	377	388
School 5: Compsey	No Results	No Results	No Results	No Results	306	326	248	296	297	320	303	317
School 6: Newton	405	387	366	392	395	387	359	372	368	373	377	382
School 7: St Theresa	455	463	457	462	457	467	453	470	454	468	461	469

Key

Schools outscoring national means in year three reading

Additional Schools matching or outscoring means of 'Similar' schools in year three reading

* Fluctuations in scores in this school were likely due to the very low year three enrolments prior to 2016 (11); enrolments in 2016 rose to 21.

Table 27*: Comparison of NAPLAN raw scores of year five reading scores in schools compared with 'All Australian' school scores, and similar schools scores 2011-2016.

	2011 Target	2011 Similar	2012 Target	2012 Similar	2013 Target	2013 Similar	2014 Target	2014 Similar	2015 Target	2015 Similar	2016 Target	2016 Similar
All schools	488		494		502		501		499		502	
School 1: Henson*	421	421	484	438	501	475	408	482	477	469	494	498
School 2: Cabury	428	453	469	457	452	471	445	465	448	462	450	466
School 3: Gopbourn	482	477	478	483	503	504	515	499	514	495	486	496
School 4: Sudbury	431	455	432	457	470	476	463	466	470	464	438	459
School 5: Compsey	No Results	No Results	No Results	No Results	431	423	385	392	383	404	346	385
School 6: Newton	467	464	480	467	488	475	459	459	481	451	473	467
School 7: St Theresa	514	532	513	531	530	540	532	548	531	537	534	538

Key

Schools outscoring national means in year five reading

Additional schools matching or outscoring means of 'similar' schools in year five reading

* Fluctuations in scores in this school were likely due to the very low year five enrolments in 2013 (9)



assessments and NAPLAN reading score in Years 3 and 5 in 2016. The data must be treated cautiously since there is not a perfect match between data collection dates. Nevertheless, the trends were easily observable. The school with the lowest reading scores (school 6) also had:

- The lowest ICSE score;
- The highest percentage of Aboriginal students;
- The highest % of both AEDC Vulnerable 1 and Vulnerable 2 children in 2015;
- And was the only 'remote' school.

The school with the highest reading scores in 2016 has:

- The highest ICSE score;
- The lowest percentage of Aboriginal students;
- The lowest % of AEDC Vulnerable 1 and second lowest % of Vulnerable 2 children in 2015;
- And was located in a major city.

Table 28: Evaluation school profiles ordered by community

School (community)	*ICSEA value	School location	% Aboriginal	% LBOE	AEDC % Community Vulnerability 1	AEDC % Community Vulnerability 2	Year three Reading Scores 2016	Year five Reading Scores 2016
1: Henson (Fletcher Park)	1012	Major city	20%	8%	16.40% in 2009; 17.50% in 2015	6.90% in 2009; 5.90% in 2015	446	494
2: Cabury (Avoca)	943	Major city	14%	20%	30.90% in 2009; 20.80% in 2015	17.00% in 2009; 11.60% in 2015	394	450
3: Gopbourn (Mascot)	1019	Inner regional	2%	3%	26.10% in 2009; 23.50% in 2015	13.70% in 2009; 11.40% in 2015	431	486
4: Sudbury (Mascot)	928	Major city	19%	15%	26.10% in 2009; 23.50% in 2015	13.70% in 2009; 11.40% in 2015	377	438
5: Compsey (Compsey)	743	Remote	71%	5%	23.50% in 2009; 30.00% in 2015	17.60% in 2009; 17.50% in 2015	303	346
6: Newton (Newton)	933	Outer regional	22%	3%	33.30% in 2009; 27.60% in 2015	19.70% in 2009; 9.20% in 2015	377	473
7: St Theresa (Birdwood)	1127	Major city	0%	15%	16.10% in 2009; 15.30% in 2015	6.90% in 2009; 6.20% in 2015	461	534

Source: http://docs.acara.edu.au/resources/20160418_ACARA_ICSEA.pdf

Summary and discussion

As previously stated, neither the presentation nor the analysis of data from NAPLAN results, *The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)*, or *The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)* included in this evaluation, can provide direct evidence about the potential impacts of *Better Beginnings*, nor any of the individual components that comprise the programs. It is not possible to assume direct cause and effect influences between *Better Beginnings* programs and changing academic results, due to the many interfering variables. However, some discussion of emergent patterns and their relevance is important.

At both national and state levels, *The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)* affirms that different communities can experience quite distinctive patterns of socio-educational advantage or disadvantage. The characteristics of a child's community and home background are somewhat predictive of their educational outcomes. The *ICSEA* allows for some measure of fairness in comparing schools on the basis of similarities of educational advantage or disadvantage, and allows for predictions to be made about the degree of challenge faced by particular schools and communities in trying to improve their children's educational outcomes. The schools included in this evaluation had a range of *ICSEA* values: One as high as 1127; one as low as 743. As shown above, the *ICSEA* did indeed appear predict the relative reading scores (See *Table 28*), although there is not a perfect match. There were some anomalies, such as one school (school 1) which achieved higher reading scores in 2016 than another (school 3) with a higher *ICSE*. Investigation of anomalies might potentially provide insights into the effectiveness of educational, social or library practices within specific schools, libraries and communities.

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) notes the percentage of children at the start of their first full-time year in school, who are considered developmentally 'on track': Scoring above the 25th percentile); 'at risk' (Scoring between the 10th and 25th percentile); 'vulnerable' (scoring below the 10th percentile).

Overall, the AEDC identifies some improvements between 2009 to 2015, in the development of children in the *Better Beginnings'* evaluation communities on the measures of language and cognitive skills, communication and knowledge, and social skills. There is statistical evidence of increased numbers of children arriving at school 'on track'. This period of improvement is consistent with the expansion of the *Better Beginnings Birth to Three* program; and the introduction of the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program. It cannot be argued that *Better Beginnings* made a particular contribution to improvements, as cause and effect is not demonstrated by the data. However, this evaluation has collected reliable data confirming that the public libraries have succeeded in delivering a *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program that has:

- Provided books and other literacy resources to a significant number of homes with Kindergarten children;
- Provided access to information about how parents can support the literacy development of their child to many families; and
- Role modelled literacy activities to families and engaged them in interactive learning sessions at school, in the library or in the wider community.

Initiatives such as these, have been researched worldwide, and found to have positive impacts raising the literacy levels within communities, families and with individuals. So, at the very least a positive influence can be seen not only as possible, but also likely.

Feedback from library staff, schools, parent and children who contributed in this evaluation also provided extensive support for the belief that *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program was indeed exerting a strong influence changing family thinking and practices, and leading directly to better outcomes for the children. Even families who thought of themselves as committed 'book people', who owned many books and already used many or most of the recommended literacy support



strategies, commented on the way the *Kindergarten Reading Pack* had excited and encouraged their child; and reminded them as parents, about what was important. Many stated that the experience with the program re-invigorated their efforts to work with their child.

The AEDC data also highlights school communities where limited or no progress has been made particularly in the category of ‘*vulnerable*’ children. SLWA *Better Beginnings* team members were very aware of the national data, and somewhat frustrated by the difficulties of developing refined mechanisms that would allow them to evaluate progress associated with *Better Beginnings* programs:

Because even other statistical mechanisms that are there, like the [Australian] Early Development [Census], there's still one in five children starting school who are vulnerable, or at risk in language and cognitive development, which is probably the main one, but we don't know, and that percentage has reduced, but within that children are starting kindy earlier as well, so when that testing is done, they've possibly had a year of kindy... So, it's hard to know how much influence we've had.

(Better Beginnings Team, SLWA, Focus Group)

A number of evaluation participant parents, teachers and library staff raised discussions about the needs of different families and their children, and wondered if the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program could do more to support the most disadvantaged children:

A wonderful initiative, although I have always valued books and reading. I would like to think that the program gave opportunities to families/ children who otherwise would not feel the same.

It's a great idea for people who don't have awareness of the importance of literacy. Unfortunately, I feel the people who will use it aren't necessarily the people who need to.

An interesting observation on the profile of families who contributed to the evaluation, is that they typically reflected characteristics of AEDC ‘*on track*’ communities.

It proved very difficult to engage families that reflect ‘*vulnerable*’ communities. One example of this was the lack of representation of Aboriginal families from the ‘*remote school*’. Seventy one percent of the students in that school identified as Aboriginal, yet there was only one participant family that included an Aboriginal child. Research assistants reported great difficulty in persuading people in this school to participate.

A related issue emerging from the thoughtful contributions of library staff is the problem of tracking which families attend *Better Beginnings* sessions, and which have received packs, and then having sufficient time and effective strategies to follow up on those who miss out. Although some library data tracking is extremely good, for example the distribution rates of Reading Packs through schools, it remains likely that the most vulnerable of children were the ones who do not receive a pack. According to AEDC and ICSEA data the most ‘*vulnerable*’ families would be the least able and likely to participate, because of remote location, language barriers, and perhaps for parents with lower educational achievement a cultural and social discomfort with library and school contexts. Since 2010, *Better Beginnings* has recognised this issue through the *Read with Me – I love it!* program. However, there were many ‘*vulnerable*’ and ‘*at risk*’ families who would fall outside these targeted services.

In a context where Western Australian educational outcomes lag behind national standards, and equity measures consistently demonstrate that socio-educational disadvantage continues to limit WA children's development, these issues should be regarded as significant. **Findings from the evaluation suggest a need for the SLWA *Better Beginnings* team and librarians in public libraries to build on their current strengths and continue to:**

- Evaluate all available data in depth;
- Enhance data collection in relation particularly to ‘*vulnerable*’ and ‘*at risk*’ families;
- Develop stronger ways to follow up on ‘*vulnerable*’ and ‘*at risk*’ and non-participating families; and

- Review the current provisions and outcomes in the light of the data, and where appropriate, consider further strategies to ensure the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program fully supports 'at risk' and 'vulnerable' families in all communities.

Advocates for NAPLAN, ICSEA and AEDC, see great value in comparing and contrasting data sets and tracking change over time. They promote the use of the data sets as a more rigorous, evidence-based approach to understanding socio-educational contexts, evaluating the influence of different social and educational programs and events; and planning for continued improvements into the future. The *AEDC User Guide Early Childhood Sector*¹⁷ for example, encourages people across all early childhood services to examine their data in order to know what is happening in their communities and respond to relevant local issues. In the context of the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program this implies a need for the SLWA and branch librarians to regularly interrogate all available data, compare it with program specific data, and use findings to inform policy and decision-making. This evaluation did not investigate the current use of NAPLAN, ICSEA and AEDC data, but it did confirm that the SLWA *Better Beginnings* team recognises the value of data collection. SLWA managers were aware that there were opportunities for improving data collection and analysis, and branch librarians raised concerns about their ability to track what happens at a local level with great accuracy. **The evaluation strongly supports the expressed intentions of library staff to work towards further improvements in data collection and analysis.**

The *AEDC User Guides* also recognise the need for collaboration across different services, and suggest that the AEDC data should be used to link services¹⁸. A significant finding of this evaluation is that schools are critical partners in the delivery of *Better Beginnings* Reading Packs, and co-operate well in identifying the numbers of kindergarten children requiring resources and in liaising with local librarians about the best delivery strategies. However, **there is very little evidence of shared professional debate about the program, the data or collaborative critical thinking**

and mutually supportive planning around early literacy. School principals in particular reported potential for increasing collaborative work in relation to the *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program. The findings imply a need for on-going commitments to:

- Continuing to working towards further improvements in the collection, analysis and use of *Better Beginnings* data;
- Review current use and application of NAPLAN, ICSEA and AEDC data to inform policy and decision-making;
- Developing strategies for the use of data from all sources to identify and respond to the specific needs of the most vulnerable children and families in all WA communities; and
- Reviewing and evaluating strategies for collaborating with other sectors, particularly schools and other early years health and care services in the collection, analysis and application of available data to sustain positive outcomes and improve children's socio-educational outcomes.

There is a wealth of evidence that suggests that over the last decade *Better Beginnings* has significantly influenced the literacy practices, attitudes and confidence within and across families in Western Australia. The *Better Beginnings Kindergarten* program has been universally applauded by the participants in this evaluation, and historically in evaluations of 2010 and 2012. There is a deep commitment by all the participants to maintain and extend the program, especially to those families that appear 'hard to reach'. However, sustaining and enhancing book access and reading activities effectively, through transition into school poses a significant challenge. In order to capitalise on the positive impact of the *Kindergarten* program, it is essential to find complementary ways of providing ongoing support for parents which not only increases their involvement in literacy learning, but also facilitates a smooth transition to formal schooling. Although continued support for all families is important, it is those families that are in vulnerable circumstances that may benefit the most, in ways that ultimately help to 'close the gap' in early childhood education.

17. See: [User%20Guide%20-%20Early%20Childhood.pdf](#)

18. [Schools%20sector%20messages.pdf](#)



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