Reading Helps Kids Fly

Better Beginnings™

MEDIA KIT
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PROGRAM OVERVIEW

WHAT IS BETTER BEGINNINGS?
Better Beginnings is a Western Australia wide program designed to work with families and communities to build literacy skills in children from birth through fostering a love of books and language.

Developed by the State Library of Western Australia and funded via a partnership between the State Government, including Royalties for Regions, Rio Tinto and local government, Better Beginnings is a universal literacy program reaching families through the distribution of free literacy packs designed to engage parents in reading with their children from birth.

Better Beginnings builds on the importance of parents’ role as their child’s first teacher by providing high quality literacy materials and nurturing settings to create positive experiences through books and language.

With targeted services for indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse families the program is delivered across the State, supporting parents and carers in reading to children from birth so that they build the early literacy skills they need to become good readers and succeed at school.

Neurological research has highlighted that 75 per cent of brain development occurs in the first three years of life and studies show that learning to read is the single most important factor in determining children’s future academic success.

Coupled with statistics from the Australian Early Development Index, which indicate that over 32 per cent of children starting school in Western Australia are developmentally vulnerable or at risk in their language skills and 46 per cent of Australian adults don’t have the literacy skills they need to cope with everyday life and work, these statistics have supported the on-going commitment to family literacy through the Better Beginnings program.

AIMS OF THE PROGRAM
The Better Beginnings program aims to develop literacy skills in young children through:

• Introducing children to developmentally appropriate books and language activities through the delivery of free reading packs to parents of newborns and children beginning kindergarten and preschool

• Supporting parents in modeling early literacy practices through providing interactive literacy and parenting information sessions at libraries and in the community

• Raising the awareness of the pleasure of reading and sharing stories with children through the program’s community messages, training practitioners to deliver the program and lending literacy resources to child care centres, playgroups, schools and community groups

• Linking families to the resources and services that libraries offer.

REACHING THE COMMUNITY

• More than 150,000 Western Australian families have received books and reading packs since the program’s inception in 2005

• In 2012 the program is positioned to reach families of up to 85,000 children each year, almost doubling the success of the program over the past seven years.

• To date Better Beginnings has targeted children birth to five however on the back of the program’s success, the coming year will see Better Beginnings pilot extension programs to encourage children aged six to nine to read more widely and adventurously and to support adults to explore their reading, particularly those who are less confident readers or who have lost the reading habit.
AUSTRALIAN LITERACY FACTS AND FIGURES

Secondary research conducted by Better Beginnings has highlighted the following statistics, which demonstrate the state of Australian literacy.

This research, together with anecdotal evidence from the community in WA, drives the Better Beginnings program to continue its work with Australian families to raise awareness of the importance of early intervention in childhood literacy.

- In WA, over 32 per cent of five year old children starting school are developmentally vulnerable or at risk in their language and cognitive skills. (Australian Early Development Index, 2010)
- Children up to the age of five who have had limited exposure to printed language and who have not been read to as a child have increased risk for reading failure and general poor school performance. (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth, 2008)
- Fifteen-year-old students whose parents read with them during their first year of primary school perform markedly better at school than students whose parents read with them infrequently or not at all. (OECD, PISA, 2009)
- The performance advantage amongst students whose parents read to them in their early years is evident regardless of social-economic status. (OECD, PISA, 2009)
- Australia’s reading literacy performance has declined not only in terms of rankings but also in terms of average student performance. Australia was the only high performing country to show a significant decline in reading and literacy performance in PISA 2009. (OECD, PISA, 2009)
- Almost 47 per cent of Australian adults don’t have the literacy skills they need to cope with the demands of everyday life and work. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, 2006).
- More than 75% of employers reported that their business was affected by low levels of literacy and numeracy. (Australian Industry Group, National Workforce Literacy Project, 2010)

Note: The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is an international study that evaluates education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students in over 70 participating countries.
PROGRAM EVALUATION

Edith Cowan University has been engaged by Better Beginnings to undertake an independent longitudinal evaluation of the program in four Western Australian communities – two metropolitan and two regional – over a period of seven years.

The first two stages of the research (2007-2009 and 2010) have been concluded and results have demonstrated Better Beginnings is having a significant positive impact on early reading practices, attitudes and beliefs.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Some key findings from the Edith Cowan study include:

• In 2009, 85 per cent of mothers surveyed reported that they read to their child after receiving the Better Beginnings reading packs (only 14 per cent of these mothers reported reading to their child beforehand)
• In 2010, 99 per cent of mothers and 72 per cent of fathers reported reading regularly with their child
• In 2009, 62 per cent of mothers reported that after being involved in the Better Beginnings program their confidence in sharing books with their child had increased. This figure increased to 88 per cent in 2010
• In 2009, 79 per cent of those surveyed reported that Better Beginnings had influenced their beliefs about the importance of sharing books with their child
• In 2009, 23 per cent of parents took out library membership for their child. This figure increased to 65 per cent in 2010 and most parents who had taken out library membership indicated their decision had been influenced by Better Beginnings
• In 2009, the average number of books suitable for reading to the child in the home was 49. In 2010 this figure increased to 125.

The full report, Making a Difference: The report on the evaluation of the Better Beginnings family literacy program 2007 – 2010 is available at:

www.better-beginnings.com.au
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Quotes from Parents participating in the Edith Cowan Research

“If I didn’t get the pack, he might not even own a book”

“I think it was actually really good, like for someone like me that didn’t like reading or couldn’t read very well it was actually quite daunting to read to your own kids. You think that they know how bad you read but they don’t. That’s good to bring it back to the kids’ lives.”

“I always knew reading to my kids was important, but this has opened my eyes to how important and how much.”

Quotes from Teachers involved in the Better Beginnings Kindergarten/Pre-School program

“I love the program and feel it fills a gap between the home and school in regard to literacy that has not been targeted at kindergarten/pre-primary level before.”
Teacher feedback, 2010

“The kids love it when we get [the packs]… they cheer and cheer. One mother reads with her four year old every afternoon after school now…. She said without these books, they would not have any to read. I didn’t realise the program was having this kind of an impact on families!”
Teacher feedback from remote Aboriginal community, 2010

Quotes from Community Health Nurses distributing the Birth to Three program

“Some of the mums… if they’re migrants or refugees where English isn’t their first language … struggle with literacy. But most of them really enjoy the books and I’ve had really positive responses from them. They’ve actually started to learn to read with their children.”

“It’s wonderful to have support across the community emphasizing the importance of reading and language development. It’s not just a health issue, it’s a community issue.”

Quotes from Stakeholders

“As one of the State’s largest employers, we recognize the impact early literacy development has on further education and career success. Together with the State Library we’re helping Western Australian families develop in their children, from birth, skills that will help them perform well at school and in later life.”
Greg Lilleyman, President, Pilbara Operations, Rio Tinto

“Better Beginnings aims to spread a simple but critical message that the act of sharing books and stories with even the smallest babies and young children has a positive impact on literacy development and a lifelong influence on educational, social and justice outcomes. It’s also a further opportunity for libraries to contribute in yet another positive way to the communities which they serve.”
Margaret Allen, CEO and State Librarian, State Library of Western Australia
FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: How is the Better Beginnings Program funded?
A: The program is funded by the State Government, including the Royalties for Regions program, Western Australian local governments, as well as the private sector, namely Rio Tinto. The State Library partners with staff in public libraries, child health clinics and schools to deliver the program across the State.

Q: How does the Better Beginnings program differ from literacy programs in schools?
A: Better Beginnings supports parents to build a reading culture in the home. Parents are their child’s first and most important teacher and play a vital role in building their children’s early literacy. Better Beginnings supports families to become engaged with reading and deliver lasting improvements in literacy, numeracy and language skills for both children and their parents. As Australia’s most extensive family literacy program, Better Beginnings adopts a whole family approach to literacy, recognising the positive impact that intergenerational learning and parental involvement bring to a child’s literacy, education and raising attainment for all family members.

Q: Does Better Beginnings reach children in remote Aboriginal communities?
A: Yes, Better Beginnings is available to all Western Australian families including those in remote communities. Better Beginnings is currently being delivered through community councils in over 85 remote Aboriginal communities across Western Australia from Tjuntjuntjara in the Great Victoria Desert to Billiluna, almost 200 kilometers from Halls Creek.

Q: How do you measure the success of the program in achieving its aims?
A: Edith Cowan University conducts an ongoing longitudinal study of Better Beginnings that demonstrates that the program is having a significant positive impact on early reading practices, attitudes and beliefs across Western Australia.

Q: How long do you expect the Better Beginnings program to last?
A: It is much better to tackle literacy problems at the start of life, both in terms of the well being of individuals and the cost to society. Literacy is transmitted across generations. Better Beginnings is a low cost, long term initiative, providing a well tested program that offers Western Australian families an opportunity to make a lasting improvement to literacy, ending its transmission from one generation to the next, improving the well being of families and minimising future costs to society.

Q: Does the Better Beginnings program value the rising use of electronic media?
A: Reading is the essential life skill, vital to success at school and throughout life. In today’s world of fast changing electronic media, the ability to read is more essential than ever. Good literacy is necessary to access technology and learn the new skills necessary to cope with our fast changing environment.