Making a Difference:
The report on the evaluation of the Better Beginnings family literacy program 2007-2009

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The parents, who are at the centre of the Better Beginnings program, completed two surveys and took the time to write comments about the Better Beginnings program even though their time was limited, as they had a new baby in the family. This gave us significant insight into their view of Better Beginnings, the value and use of the Better Beginnings toolkit, library membership and activities and future directions.

Finally, 40 families welcomed a researcher into their home in order to discuss Better Beginnings in more depth. This gave us a wealth of information about the impact of Better Beginnings on individual families and insight into book-sharing practices and library membership and use. We thank them all for their interest and commitment, and acknowledge that the evaluation could not have been undertaken without their generous support and enthusiasm.

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Executive Summary

This interim report is based on the second year of the evaluation of the Better Beginnings program in four diverse communities across Western Australia. The research builds on the evaluation of the Better Beginnings pilot program undertaken in 2004 (Barratt-Rugh, Rohl, Oakley & Elderfield, 2005).

What is Better Beginnings?

Better Beginnings is an early intervention family literacy program that has been developed by the State Library of Western Australia. Its stated purpose is to provide positive language and literacy influences for young children through supporting parents as their children’s first teacher. The program is based on strong cooperation between health professionals, local governments and public libraries. In planning and developing the program, there has been a high degree of consultation and engagement with local communities. Better Beginnings has adopted a multifaceted approach to family literacy and aims to encourage parents to gain a better understanding of their role as their child’s first teacher.

The State Government’s continued financial commitment along with that of Local Government and funding from the Rio Tinto WA Future Fund has enabled Better Beginnings to be delivered to communities across Western Australia. The program is being implemented in a range of communities that represent diverse geographical, social, cultural and economic contexts across Western Australia. In 2008, almost 80% of local governments across WA are participating in the program, delivering the program to approximately 89% of parents/careers with new babies.

The overall focus of Better Beginnings is for government agencies to work in partnership with families to support children’s early literacy and learning. The program consists of:

• A Better Beginnings handbook and training module, developed to support partners working with the program. These provide a complete guide to the responsibilities of all partners and samples and templates to follow in delivering the program;

• A literacy toolkit for parents of young babies, given to parents by the Community Child Health Nurse at the 6-8 week health check. The toolkit contains a quality board book, a frieze with nursery rhymes printed on it, and information about the value of reading to children and ways of sharing books, a list of first books for babies and toddlers and information about local library resources;

• Baby Rhymetime, Storytime sessions and workshops. Community Child Health Nurses collect, and pass on to the library contact details of families receiving the toolkit. Parents and their children are invited to free sessions introducing them to stories, rhymes and games to use with their baby as well as workshops covering speech and language development, child development, nutrition and parenting;

• Outreach Toolboxes that contain a rich variety of literacy resources for children and their families, are lent by public libraries to community agencies. The Toolboxes are also used ‘in-house’ to support Rhymetime and Storytime;

• Family resource centres in libraries provide interactive early childhood learning spaces in addition to resources to increase parental knowledge of early childhood language and literacy, and;

• A Reading Gateway, which includes information about Better Beginnings, has been established as part of the website of the State Library of Western Australia. The gateway provides news and information for parents, teachers and librarians about early literacy as well as links to games and activities for children to encourage an interest in books and stories.
The evaluation of the Better Beginnings program

Building on the findings from the evaluation of the pilot program, a team from Edith Cowan University is conducting an evaluation of the Better Beginnings Program in four diverse communities, over a period of three years (2007-2009). The evaluation is jointly funded by Edith Cowan University and the State Library of Western Australia.

The research is based on the following questions:

1. How effective is the Better Beginnings program from the participants’ perspectives?

2. What factors help or hinder the implementation of the Better Beginnings program?

How we conducted the research

Parent/carers in four diverse communities with new babies were surveyed before and after receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit and information about the Better Beginnings program.

- The first survey (Pre-Program survey) was designed to illicit information about demographics, library membership and use, literacy practices and early reading attitudes, confidence and practices.

- The second survey (Post Program survey) was designed to illicit information about program delivery and content, library membership and use and early reading attitudes, confidence and practices.

A number of parents/carers who had completed the first survey were invited to become case studies. They took part in detailed interviews about the impact of the Better Beginnings program.

The co-ordinator of Better Beginnings, librarians and Community Child Health Nurses (CCHN) involved in distributing and promoting Better Beginnings in the four communities were interviewed either individually or in focus groups.
How effective is the Better Beginnings program from the participant’s perspectives?

The parent/carers’ perspectives – Post program survey data

Altogether 300 mothers completed the Pre-Program survey before receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit and information about the Better Beginnings program. Out of these 300, a total of 177 (59%) mothers completed the Post program survey after receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit and program information. As mothers completed the Post Program survey approximately 1 year after receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit, the term ‘child’ is used, where appropriate to indicate the growing maturity of the baby. The following findings are based on the Post Program survey data.

Receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit.

Discussion about the Better Beginnings program and the resources in the toolkit is central to the success of the program, thus it is significant that the majority of mothers surveyed received the Better Beginnings toolkit from the CCHN and remembered being told about the contents of the toolkit (72%) library membership (68%) and library sessions (62%). Over half of the mothers felt that the discussion with the CCHN was either quite useful or extremely useful (58%).

Perceived Influence of Better Beginnings on Reading Practices

Better Beginnings appears to have had a significant impact on early reading practices. Almost all mothers (65%) reported that they read to their child after receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit, only 14% of these mothers reported reading to their child before they received the Better Beginnings toolkit.

Almost every mother reported reading the gift book that was in the Better Beginnings toolkit to their child (93%) and indicated that they and their child liked the book. Suggesting that the gift book was well received and well used. Many mothers continued to read the book almost a year later.

As well as influencing when to start to read to their child, almost three quarters (70%) of the mothers reported that Better Beginnings had changed how often they read to and communicated (read more, talk together more, watch less television) with their child. Mothers also reported an increase in the amount of time they spent reading with their child and the number of children’s books they had after being involved in Better Beginnings.

Over two thirds of these mothers (70%) indicated that they read once a day with their child and almost all mothers (94%) indicated that at least someone had read to their child in the past week. They also reported an increase in others not only reading with their child, but also reading more frequently. This is significant as increased reading can help to foster a love of books and a developing understanding of concepts of print.

In addition, almost all of these mothers (89%) reported that in the past week they or someone in their family had discussed/talked about the story or pictures with their child. This is significant as talking about the story and/or pictures, is an important part of early literacy and promoted by Better Beginnings as a positive way of engaging children in book sharing. It also encourages parents/carers with low literacy skills and confidence, to share books in their own way and encourages bilingual/multilingual parents/carers to tell stories in their home language(s).

Although increasing reading is central to Better Beginnings, reading in ways that support enjoyment and understanding through interaction is equally important. The Better Beginnings toolkit includes an information sheet about ways of sharing books with your baby. Almost all mothers reported that they shared the books in ways suggested in the information sheet. This included ways of interacting with their child to engage them in the text, thinking about a suitable time and place to read, letting the child hold and play with the book, choosing appropriate books and re-reading favourite texts.

These changes in mothers’ early reading practices appeared to influence their child’s involvement, enjoyment and interest in books. Mothers who indicated that they read to their child
reported a marked increase in their child's involvement in book sharing after they had received the toolkit. This included the child pointing to the pictures (83%), turning the pages by him/herself (92%), pretending to read (74%) and talking about the pictures (64%). In addition, almost two thirds of these mothers reported that Better Beginnings had changed how often their child requests a book (59%).

In addition, over a quarter of mothers (30%) reported that Better Beginnings has increased how often they read to their older children. Thus Better Beginnings appeared to have an impact on other family members as well as the new baby.

Perceived Usefulness of Receiving the Better Beginnings program

The information pamphlets are an important part of the Better Beginnings toolkit as they provide information about ways of reading with young children and selecting appropriate books.

Significantly, almost two thirds of mothers reported that the parent information pamphlet (68%) and the book suggestions pamphlet (65%) in the toolkit were either quite useful or extremely useful and over a third of these mothers reported that the DVD was either quite useful or extremely useful (37%).

For many of these mothers Better Beginnings appears to have encouraged them to not only read more, but also to use the information from the pamphlet about choosing appropriate books. As well as reading the Better Beginnings gift book, almost a third of these mothers (29%) reported that they read other books recommended in the Better Beginnings pamphlet, acquiring these books from the library (13%) and a range of other sources, including bookshops, supermarkets and friends.

In addition to reading books, sharing nursery rhymes has been identified as an effective means of developing phonological awareness, which is central to early reading. It appears that the Better Beginnings nursery rhyme chart had a positive impact on many of the families. Almost half of the mothers (42%) reported using the nursery rhyme chart and almost all of these mothers reported using it more than once.

There was an overwhelming positive response to the nursery rhymes, in that, all the mothers who used the chart reported that they and their child liked the rhymes.

Library Membership and Attendance since Receiving the Better Beginnings program

Library membership and use are important outcomes of the Better Beginnings program, giving children and parents access to literacy resources and promoting life-long membership. In addition the Baby Rhymetime, Storytime and parent workshops delivered by the library are an important part of the Better Beginnings program.

Therefore it is significant to note that 28% of mothers had joined the library since receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit. Equally important is that, while only 4% of these mothers had taken out library membership for their child before receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit, almost a quarter of these mothers (23%) took out library membership for their child after receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit. Almost all of these mothers (94%) commented that since receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit they had become aware that they could take out library membership for their baby.

In addition, several mothers who were members of the library before they received Better Beginnings toolkit, reported an increase in library visits and borrowing after their involvement in the Better Beginnings program.

The way in which mothers perceive the library influences decisions to make future visits and use the resources. On the whole responses to the library were positive. Approximately one third of mothers who had been to the library, considered the librarians to be very helpful. Librarians encouraged mothers to take out membership (41%) and promoted the library sessions (51%), mothers were also shown the location of age appropriate books (47%) and the library facilities (41%).

The Baby Rhymetime and Storytime sessions held at the library are an important part of the Better Beginnings program. Given the demands of a new baby, it is significant that almost a quarter of the mothers reported that they
attended the Baby Rhymetime or Storytime at the library. The majority of these mothers found the sessions either quite useful or very useful. Several made comments about how enjoyable and fun the sessions were as well as how ‘good’ and ‘helpful’ they found the library staff.

Many mothers who had been once, or had never been to Baby Rhymetime or Storytime sessions expressed a desire to go, but raised a number of issues. These included, location, timing and age of the child.

Perceived influence of the Better Beginnings program on attitudes and beliefs

It is highly probable that the impact of Better Beginnings is more likely to be sustained when underpinned by confidence in reading abilities and beliefs about the important of early reading. Evidence suggests that Better Beginnings has influenced both of these aspects of early reading.

Although almost two thirds of mothers reported feeling confident about reading to their child before receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit, after being involved in the Better Beginnings program over half of the mothers (52%) reported that their confidence in sharing books with their child had increased. A variety of comments echoed this growth in confidence, ‘I always felt stupid reading to her. Now I know it’s the right thing to do’, ‘made me a bit more confident’, and ‘It reinforced reading. I always felt funny reading to him before, but now I know I am doing the right thing’.

In addition, over three quarters of the mothers (79%) reported that Better Beginnings had influenced their beliefs about the importance of sharing books with their baby. The majority of mothers (96%) felt that sharing books with their baby was very important.

Over half (54%) of the mothers reported that Better Beginnings had influenced their belief that babies could enjoy and benefit from books at an early age, whereas 43% already thought this. Almost two thirds thought that babies could benefit and enjoy songs and nursery rhymes (65%) from an early age compared with only a third of mothers (34%) before their involvement in Better Beginnings.

The sustainment of Better Beginnings is further enhanced by the child’s attitude towards books and nursery rhymes, which is developed through their experience of nursery rhymes. Mothers that reported reading to their child after they received the Better Beginnings toolkit, indicated that their child’s interest and enjoyment in books had also increased. Almost two thirds of mothers indicated that their child was very interested (74%) or quite interested (20%) in sharing books. The increase in mothers’ reading with their baby and the babies’ increased enjoyment and interest in reading creates a powerful incentive to sustain and develop reading.

Improving the Better Beginnings program.

When asked about the best thing about the Better Beginnings program almost half the mothers made overwhelmingly positive comments about the gift book. Almost a third of mothers commented on the usefulness of the information that was included in the toolkit, reporting that the information was easy to understand, that it gave good ideas about reading together and suggested appropriate resources and activities.

However a few mothers indicated that they felt overwhelmed by the information pamphlets and one mother revealed that she ‘much preferred talking to the person when I received it, probably didn’t read the pamphlets at all’, another commented, ‘More for children, less adult reading’. Conversely one mother commented that, ‘Not enough information in it. More information needed on how to help kids who are behind, on how to increase vocabulary etc. Some parents may not approach a speech therapist or doctor.’

Several mothers also commented on how the program encouraged them to read, to read more and to buy or borrow more books. Better Beginnings either introduced them to the importance of early reading or reinforced what they already knew about sharing books and gave them confidence to practice and justify this aspect of early literacy. Other mothers mentioned that they valued the DVD and the nursery rhyme chart. A small number noted that there were items missing from the pack and a few mothers indicated that they did not feel the DVD was very useful.
When asked about how the Better Beginnings toolkit could be improved several mothers made recommendations. Those who commented on the toolkit suggested the need for more books, nursery rhymes, resources (song tapes), information about reading and laminated posters and charts. There were also comments about including nursery rhymes with actions on the DVD and a DVD for ‘non-readers’.

Comments about the distribution of the toolkit included the need for someone to go through the toolkit and explain the contents and demonstrate shared reading. A few mothers mentioned the need for a follow up visit, to help with reading suggestions as their baby matured and particularly for those living in remote communities.

Some mothers also commented on the library and indicated that it would be helpful if the library had all the books on the book suggestion pamphlet. In addition, some noted the need for community language and bilingual books and more Rhymetime sessions. Others mentioned that they would like Rhymetime to be held on different days so they could go more often.

The parent/carers’ perspectives – case study data
The case studies add breadth and depth to the information derived from the surveys and give further insight into the impact of Better Beginnings. The following findings are taken from interviews with 40 mothers from the four communities involved in the Better Beginnings program. They had completed the pre and post Better Beginnings surveys and agreed to participate in an in-depth interview about their perceptions and practices of early literacy in relation to the Better Beginnings program. Although other adults and children were present at some of the interviews all of the respondents identified themselves as mothers.

The Better Beginnings Toolkit
Mothers were overwhelmingly positive about the Better Beginnings program and it was clear that the toolkit was highly valued in each community. Reasons ranged from appreciation of a gift book to an awareness of the importance of literacy and the influence on reading practices. All participants had kept the gift book and the majority used it with their child, commenting on the quality and the durability of the text. Some mothers were already aware of the power of early reading and had begun to read to their babies from birth. Other participants had not used the book until they felt their child was capable of understanding, which they felt was at least six months old.

However, the majority of participants reported that Better Beginnings had prompted them to start reading early, and had begun reading from as early as six weeks.

Some mothers who identified themselves as having low literacy skills, talked about how Better Beginnings had increased their confidence and in some cases led to the involvement of their partner. Others reported a need for bilingual books or books in community languages. It was evident that some mothers who spoke a language other than English were not sure how to most effectively share the book with their baby.

Those mothers who used the nursery rhyme chart, indicated that they put it on the baby’s wall, where it was used frequently. Several participants reported that their partner found the chart useful, as they were less familiar with nursery rhymes. In some families, the chart was used by older siblings, as they learnt to speak English at school. The chart also seemed to encourage different members of the family to sing to the baby in both English and their home language(s).

The DVD was often not received as part of the toolkit and very few of the 40 case study mothers had watched it, but those who had found it valuable. They felt it demonstrated effective book sharing and gave them ideas about which books to read.

Most participants recalled the pamphlets. They commented favourably on the list of recommended books and many had used this to guide them in borrowing and buying books. Many found the guidelines on how to read to babies reinforced their views and practices. Mothers’ descriptions of book sharing practices matched many of the recommendations in the pamphlets.
Library membership and activities

The majority of case study participants (31) indicated that they were members of their local library, either prior to receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit or as a direct consequence of their involvement in the program. Five mothers reported that the Better Beginnings program had prompted them to become library members and a further five had taken out library membership since receiving the toolkit.

Those mothers who used the library, borrowed a variety of resources and commented positively on the range and accessibility of the resources, as well as the early literacy areas and literacy resources for the children.

On the whole the librarians were identified as helpful and encouraging. However, mothers who spoke a language other than English knew very little about bilingual or community language resources and commented on the need for a range of resources in their language.

Furthermore, some mothers expressed concern about taking a young child to the library and disrupting the library or damaging the books, which clearly discouraged them from taking out library membership.

In three of the communities only one or two participants had attended Rhymetime. In the other community the majority of participants were aware of, and had attended these sessions. The majority of those mothers who had attended Rhymetime or Storytime sessions were very positive about the outcomes. Commenting that the sessions gave them confidence and ideas about how to read to their baby.

Mothers gave a number of reasons it was difficult to attend, these included, lack of information, work commitments and concern about the child’s behaviour. One mother commented that she felt the sessions were important but the librarian had not been able to engage the children.

Attitudes, practices and knowledge of early literacy learning

Mothers acknowledged the influence of Better Beginnings in developing early literacy practices with their baby. They had started reading to their baby earlier than expected and felt more confident about using children’s books and interacting with their baby. They had become more confident in selecting appropriate books for their baby and encouraged other family members to read with their baby.

Mothers reported that their baby had shown an increased interest in books and they had begun to read more frequently to their baby. Sharing books had also been identified as a way of bonding, supporting language development and increasing success at kindergarten and school.

Data from the surveys and evidence from the case studies suggests that Better Beginnings has had a significant impact on early reading attitudes and practices not only in relation to mothers and babies but also across families. Better Beginnings has impacted upon mothers’ perceptions of the importance of early reading, confidence in early reading and the way in which mothers and other members of the family and community share books with their child. This in turn has influenced the child’s interest in and enjoyment of sharing books from an early age, a key component of early literacy learning, which might otherwise not have happened. It has increased library membership and use, which gives families access to a range of early literacy resources. Changes in attitudes to early reading have led to sustained and extended book sharing practices that may also impact on subsequent children born into the family.

What are the key factors in the implementation of the Better Beginnings program?

Central coordination has ensured that the distribution of Better Beginnings was carefully planned and well supported

In 2008 approximately 80% of local governments across Western Australia were involved in the program.

Central coordination has facilitated a targeted publicity drive to raise awareness of the program within and across communities, strengthening and sustaining the idea that early literacy is important. This has been highlighted by a number of prestigious awards.
Having an overview of Better Beginnings across Western Australia has enabled the coordinator to develop partnerships with a number of different government agencies.

The central mapping of communities involved in Better Beginnings has enabled the coordinator to identify areas of need. As a result negotiations are being held with several remote Indigenous communities interested in implementing Better Beginnings.

Through central coordination other areas of need within individual communities have been highlighted including, the use of bilingual books and web sites to support parents/carers who speak languages other than English.

Central monitoring and evaluation of the program through the collection of information from local libraries and partner agencies ensures that appropriate support and development is offered. For example, ongoing training and on-line training has been offered to librarians and has recently been extended to include community participants.

Central coordination enables collaboration with other early literacy programs through steering committees, community literacy events and joint literacy activities. All of which serve to promote and extend Better Beginnings into the wider community.

Central funding and coordination has contributed to the coordinator developing the tool kit, extending library activities where appropriate and to commissioning the development of a new ‘gift’ book to meet the needs of babies as they mature.

The role of the librarians and libraries
Librarians are central to the Better Beginnings program. They are involved in the promotion of the program through library and community events. They organise and deliver library activities, including Baby Rhymetime, Storytime and parent workshops. In addition, librarians assemble and distribute Better Beginnings toolkits to the Community Child Health Nurses (CCHNs) and other community groups, ensuring that the toolkits reached the CCHNs and further promoting the Better Beginnings activities. Librarians also saw themselves as literacy educators and some felt ownership of the program, many having developed the program in their library since its inception in 2004.

Contact with the State library team and further training was perceived to be an important part of sustaining and developing the Better Beginnings program. Visits to Rhymetime and Storytime sessions in other libraries, plus opportunities to watch the Let’s Read DVD were seen as ways of developing confidence and effective practices.

Inter-agency collaboration
Collaboration between the library, the Better Beginnings team at the State library, local government, the CCHNs and a range of early literacy organisations in the community was seen as crucial to the implementation and effective outcomes of Better Beginnings.

Training
Training has had a major impact on the success and sustainability of the Better Beginnings program. The strong practical nature of the training enabled librarians to increase their knowledge of early literacy and plan and implement Baby Rhymetime and Storytime sessions more effectively. Librarians have become more aware of the importance of early literacy and the role of libraries in promoting a love of books and reading.

Access to training was available through workshops held at the State Library, while regional training was provided on site by the State Library team. In addition, availability of online training and a handbook ensured that training was accessible for metropolitan, regional and remote librarians. Opportunities to network between librarians, was also seen as a way of sharing ideas and learning about different ways of meeting the needs of the community.

Training also helped to define the role of the librarians in the Better Beginnings program. This included, taking responsibility for liaising with the Community Child Health Nurses (CCHNs) and other community groups, ensuring that the toolkits reached the CCHNs and further promoting the Better Beginnings activities. Librarians also saw themselves as literacy educators and some felt ownership of the program, many having developed the program in their library since its inception in 2004.

Contact with the State library team and further training was perceived to be an important part of sustaining and developing the Better Beginnings program. Visits to Rhymetime and Storytime sessions in other libraries, plus opportunities to watch the Let’s Read DVD were seen as ways of developing confidence and effective practices.
In particular, where there was a strong relationship between the librarian and CCHN the Better Beginnings program was delivered effectively and appropriately. Librarians were working alongside CCHNs in the community and CCHNs were working closely with librarians to promote Better Beginnings.

In communities where there was a high turnover of librarians and/or CCHNs this caused difficulty in the ordering and delivery of the toolkit and the implementation of the Better Beginnings program (library Rhymetime and Storytime sessions, joint literacy activities with community and CCHNs).

Through inter-agency collaboration the CCHNs and librarians were able to involve other professionals who had additional expertise in early language and literacy and in turn they had been invited to promote the program in other community groups.

The flexibility of the Better Beginnings program led to an increase in community involvement with groups ranging from local government to playgroups. This included links to other programs such as Let’s Read and Montessori, creating a greater awareness of the possibilities of encouraging literacy development from birth to the start of formal education.

Library influence and resources
Although library membership appears to have increased as a result of involvement in the Better Beginnings program, the research findings imply that little effective use is made of the contact data gathered when Better Beginnings toolkits are issued to parents. Several librarians identified a need to contact parents who receive the toolkit, to encourage them to join the library and come to the library sessions. Creating and maintaining contact with parents/carers through the Better Beginnings program was identified as a significant issue.

The employment of designated Better Beginnings librarians and the number of librarians employed at the same library for at least three years has ensured the continuity and development of Better Beginnings. There has been a growing focus on the development of early literacy reflected in the increase of Rhymetime and Storytime sessions; the ordering of more Junior Kindergarten books; and the establishment of appealing library areas designed for children and parents.

Increasing responsibility for the Better Beginnings program and the state-wide implementation of Better Beginnings has led to many librarians becoming pro-active. Librarians made decisions about the most effective way of sustaining and developing Better Beginnings through consultation with other librarians and organisations. For example, some librarians have secured funding partners with local business and others have made links with local schools.

Librarians felt that Better Beginnings had a significant impact on parents/carers and gave them a crucial link to the library. The program provided information and support for early reading and also facilitated the development of important social networks for children and parents.

The need to increase resources for families who spoke languages other than English and Indigenous families was considered to be important. While bilingual and multilingual resources were available the changing nature of the communities, the complexity of different dialects and the prioritising of the importance of learning English were all identified as issues of concern.

An increase in signs and resources in community languages, a deliberate policy of taking new families around the library and showing them the children’s bilingual or community language books, and visits from students involved in English language courses have all helped to promote the importance of early literacy and encourage library membership. One library is working on ways of introducing bilingual Rhymetime and Storytime.

Continuing and new Better Beginnings activities
Activities associated with Better Beginnings have greatly increased and include more frequent, regular and, in some instances bilingual Rhymetime and Storytime sessions. In addition, sessions have been developed specifically targeting fathers with young children, primary school children and school holiday activities. Outreach programs to include Indigenous families have also been established.
The activities and programs were seen as an important part of the librarians' role. Librarians identified the way in which these sessions promote literacy learning, links with school and home, various ways of sharing books and above all a love of books. They also promote a change in attitude of both parents/carers and children in relation to the role of the library in the community.

Librarians commented on ways in which the Better Beginnings activities were being promoted. Reaching a wider audience was a major concern and many libraries were involved in trialling ways of increasing attendance. Libraries which were pro-active, using local newsletters and local community groups to promote sessions had increased participation.

The Outreach Kit has been used for in-house library sessions and loaned to local community groups. The response has been overwhelmingly positive, although several libraries would like to lend the kit to more community groups as they feel it is under-utilised. There was a sense that some groups felt they might damage the kit and were therefore reluctant to borrow it.

**Value of the Better Beginnings program**

All librarians were overwhelmingly positive about the program. They felt the toolkit and the follow-up support from the library and community activities had a positive impact on parents/carers. The gift book and the nursery rhyme chart were seen as central to the program and several librarians commented that they felt the Rhymetime DVD was very useful.

Several librarians commented that they would like more involvement in the actual distribution of the toolkit as they saw the discussion about the kit as crucial to the development of early literacy. Other distribution points were also suggested and some librarians felt that the program should be targeted at 'disadvantaged' communities.

There was general agreement that the publicity drive, the library activities, the inter-agency collaboration and the awards helped to promote and sustain the Better Beginnings program. There was a strong sense that the Better Beginnings program was having an impact on parents/carers' practices and beliefs, and, that libraries had a major and continuing role to play in the development of early literacy.

**Role of the Community Child Health Nurses (CCHNs)**

Community child health nurses (CCHNs) were involved in the distribution of the Better Beginnings toolkit to parents either at their child's 5 to 8 week old or 3 to 4 month old scheduled appointment. Most of the interviewed CCHNs had been part of the program since its inception in their community, which varied from 18 months to three or more years.

**Inter-agency collaboration**

The CCHNs found that the distribution process ran smoothly when they maintained contact with the local library where the Better Beginnings toolkits were assembled. Regular communication, in the form of phone calls, meetings or emails, ensured that the Better Beginnings toolkits were prepared and either ready for CCHNs to collect or to have delivered to their clinics by one of the library staff.

Opportunities for informal discussion also facilitated CCHNs developing an awareness of the Better Beginnings library sessions available at their local library. Consequently, the CCHNs were able to talk to parents with authority about the library services and encourage parents to either become library members or to attend library sessions that were on offer.

In addition, the liaisons developed with the library staff facilitated CCHNs taking their First-time Mothers/Parents Groups to the library for one of their sessions. This visit acted as a form of induction, an opportunity for parents to view the facilities and become members of the library. These visits appeared to have become a commonplace practice, their success due in part to the open communication between the two services.

Liaisons between CCHNs and library staff also exposed parents to a united approach to promoting early literacy in the community. Knowledge of the library's facilities and services, gained from ongoing communication, allowed
CCHNs to continue to promote the library to parents when they attended further scheduled appointments for their child. Inter-agency communication and awareness also contributed to the Better Beginnings' message being sustained in the community. The link between the CCHN and the librarians helped to connect the families to the Better Beginnings program and make them feel part of the wider community.

Complementing the CCHN’s Work Role

The CCHNs found that distributing the Better Beginnings toolkit to parents was in keeping with their own beliefs regarding early literacy, and consequently had little impact on their workload, apart from reinforcing the importance of early literacy and being a really positive innovation. For those who found that the program impacted on their work, their concerns were related to their workload and time constraints, rather than the Better Beginnings' message.

All participating CCHNs reported that they discussed with parents the benefits of reading to their child. On occasion some CCHNs admitted that they added Health Department pamphlets that promoted early reading to the Better Beginnings toolkit. Further to this, one CCHN perceived that by distributing the Better Beginnings program she was raising parent awareness at the early stages of development. Consequently, this CCHN felt that the program had the potential to improve parenting skills and children’s development, in keeping with the role of CCHNs in the community.

In addition, one CCHN recounted how her involvement in the Better Beginnings program had enhanced her work practices. Since being involved in the program this particular CCHN had made children's books available in the Clinic's waiting room. These books were used not only to entertain children waiting for appointments but also used to model appropriate shared-reading practices. Further to this, her observations of children interacting with the books facilitated assessment of their development, including their eye-movement, coordination and behaviour.

The Quality of the Better Beginnings Resources

All participating CCHNs agreed that the Better Beginnings toolkit was a quality resource. In particular, CCHNs revealed that they liked the gift book, with its colourful photographs and simple text.

In addition, CCHNs reported that they had received favourable feedback from parents, who indicated that the gift book had been one of their child's first books, and therefore perceived as something special. Some parents with toddlers returning to the clinic for follow-up appointments reported that they still shared the book with their child and it remained a favourite. Further to this, CCHNs reported that they used the book as a way of involving older siblings with the baby, as well as to engage toddlers in shared reading practices.

The CCHNs also explained that the book could be used with families where English was a second language, as the quality of the pictures allowed parents to make up their own stories to go with the pictures. Two of the CCHNs, mentioned the availability of multilingual books, including books written in Vietnamese, Arabic or Spanish. One CCHN reported a lack of bilingual books and information to cater for families who spoke languages other than English and felt that there was one particular group in her community that would benefit from bilingual resources.

Several CCHNs also found that the information contained in the Better Beginnings toolkit was very good, promoting the importance of literacy from birth. None of the CCHNs indicated that they would make changes to the information pamphlets. Rather, their suggested improvements related to the possibility of adding to the toolkit, including a height chart or separate alphabet friezes.

The library sessions associated with Better Beginnings were also valued by the CCHNs. All were keen to promote and encourage parents to attend the library sessions, indicating that they perceived the sessions to be worthwhile. Feedback the CCHNs had received from parents was positive. While one CCHN reported that attendance at Parent Workshops was poor, several perceived that the other library sessions were popular, and that there appeared to be an increase in library attendance. In addition, several CCHNs commented that they found the library staff to be supportive and welcoming to parents and open and willing to work with others.
Additional Benefits to Families

The CCHNs were aware that the Better Beginnings program promoted early literacy practices to families and found that this aspect of the program was in keeping with their work role. Most CCHNs, however, identified additional benefits the toolkit had for families receiving the Better Beginnings program. These included general development, language development and fine and gross motor skill development. In addition, by encouraging parents to engage in shared reading practices with their child, CCHNs found that the program encouraged parents to spend more one-to-one time with their child, enhancing early relationships and bonding.

Several CCHNs also commented that if older siblings were part of the family, the gift book could be used as a tool for engaging them with the baby, further strengthening family attachments. Furthermore, these same CCHNs also used the gift book as means of enhancing the toddlers’ early literacy skills and, in some instances parents’ literacy skills, thereby extending the impact of Better Beginnings.

In addition, some of the CCHNs noted that through visiting the library and attending library sessions, parents were exposed to more social opportunities, becoming involved in their local community. The library facilitated social networks and formed a meeting place for some mothers.

Sustaining the Better Beginnings program

The majority of CCHNs felt that there was a growing awareness of the importance of early reading as Better Beginnings and other related literacy programs were becoming embedded within the community. In addition, several CCHNs found that attendance at their local library had improved and that the library sessions, in particular Storytime, were popular and well attended. Furthermore, most had developed a working relationship with staff at their local library, this contributed to an ongoing supply of resources and the sustainment of the program.

While the CCHNs did not hand out additional materials after their first distribution of the toolkit, they continued to encourage parents attending scheduled appointments to read to their children and visit the library, further supporting the Better Beginnings message. One CCHN, however, did comment that there appeared to be a “bit of a gap” in those receiving the Better Beginnings program, perceiving that up to ten percent of the families in her community did not attend Child Health Clinics and as a result missed out on receiving the Better Beginning toolkit.

Further to this, several CCHNs revealed that the pressures of their workload and time constraints meant that there were inconsistencies in how the Better Beginnings toolkit was being introduced to parents. Not all CCHNs had the time to go through the contents of the toolkit or show parents how to use the gift book. One CCHN also reported that relieving staff were not always familiar with Better Beginnings and felt that this impacted on how some CCHNs presented the toolkit to parents.

In addition, the majority reported that they had not received training in delivering the program. Most did not appear to be aware of further training opportunities and were either not available or willing to attend such sessions. Consequently, not all CCHNs displayed full ownership of the program, with two regarding the Better Beginnings program to be more the responsibility of the library than theirs, an opinion not expressed by other participating CCHNs.

For the majority of participating CCHNs the continued supply of the Better Beginnings toolkits supported their role of talking to parents about the importance of early literacy. In addition, most found the inter-agency collaboration helped to facilitate community building and sustain the Better Beginnings program.

Background to the Better Beginnings Evaluation Project
The evaluation of the Better Beginnings Program was undertaken in four communities: two metropolitan communities, one regional community and one remote community. Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicated that all four communities were low socio-economic and either culturally diverse, industrial, or in a state of change.

- The first community, Marni, is a north metropolitan district covering five suburbs and perceived to have a culturally diverse population.
- The second community, Killarney, is a south metropolitan district, comprising of five suburbs and considered to be predominantly industrial, though changing in recent years.
- The third community, Bayview, is a large regional country centre, with a diverse population, many either unemployed or working in industrial occupations.
- The fourth community, Kangru, is a northern mining town, with a large contingent of indigenous families and currently experiencing a growth in development and change.

In each community the Community Child Health Nurse introduced the parent/carer to the Better Beginnings program and gave them a Better Beginnings toolkit at the 6-8 week or 3 to 4 month old health check for new born babies.

Methodological Framework
A formative experimental design was chosen in order to evaluate the Better Beginnings pilot program. This methodology involves researchers combining qualitative and quantitative methods of investigation with interventions in learning situations and is well suited to exploratory investigations. The design allows researchers to examine not only learning outcomes, but also factors that contribute to or detract from the effectiveness of an intervention in achieving particular educational goals. The aims of the research are:

1. To document and evaluate the way in which Better Beginnings is implemented in an urban, a rural and a remote community.
2. To document the outcomes of the Better Beginnings program in each community. Specifically:
   - To identify parent/carer perceptions of the Better Beginnings program.
   - To identify changes in parent/carer literacy perceptions and practices after the implementation of Better Beginnings.
   - To identify parent/carer changes in library membership and use.
   - To identify perceptions of Better Beginnings from the professionals responsible for implementing the program.

Quantitative data
The quantitative data-base consisted of two surveys given to parents.

Survey 1
Survey 1 was designed to collect information about demographics, book sharing practices, library membership and use, confidence in sharing books and attitudes towards book sharing, songs and nursery rhymes. The survey was completed by parents/carers, at the community child health clinic, where they had taken their new baby for her/his 6 to 8 week health check. After completing the survey, the Community Child Health Nurse introduced the parents/carers to the Better Beginnings program and gave them a Better Beginnings toolkit.

Altogether 355 pre-program surveys were completed in the four communities. Of these 55 were discarded because
parents/carers had already received the *Better Beginnings* toolkit, leaving a total of 300 pre-program surveys. Thus, data analysis for Survey 1 was based on the valid responses of 300 parents/carers from the four communities.

**Survey 2**

Survey 2 was designed to examine parent/carer perceptions of the *Better Beginnings* program and changes in book sharing attitudes, confidence and practices, as well as changes in library membership and use. Each parent/carer who had agreed to complete survey 2 was contacted by phone approximately a year after completing the first survey and receiving the *Better Beginnings* toolkit and information about the *Better Beginnings* program. Approximately 59% (n=177) of parents/carers who completed the Pre Program survey agreed to complete Survey 2, after receiving the *Better Beginnings* toolkit.

**Qualitative data**

**Case studies of families**

Forty parents/carers were either visited in their homes and interviewed by a researcher from Edith Cowan University or interviewed when attending a community centre. These participants were selected from those mothers who had indicated in Survey 1 that they would be willing to participate in the case studies. A cross-section of mothers from all those who had agreed to be interviewed was chosen to represent a range of socio-economic, cultural and educational backgrounds. In total there were eleven mothers from Bayview, nine from Killarney, ten from Marni and ten from Kangru. Although other adults (fathers, grandmothers) were at home during the visits, they did not contribute to the interviews.

**Interviews with Better Beginnings personnel**

The program coordinator was interviewed in order to gather information about her role and the design, implementation, sustainability and future of *Better Beginnings* in Western Australia. Librarians and Community Child Health Nurses (CCHNs) were asked to describe their role, experiences and perceptions of the implementation and content of the *Better Beginnings* program in either a focus group or individual interviews. This included comments about:

- their training;
- the logistics of receiving and distributing the toolkits; and,
- the impact on their work practices and their perceptions of the program.

Participants also described their awareness of and involvement in additional activities related to the *Better Beginnings* program, as well as their perceptions of the impact of *Better Beginnings* on parents/carers and children. Participants were asked to identify and comment on key issues or concerns related to *Better Beginnings* and to make suggestions about ways of promoting and sustaining the program.

Altogether in the four communities two librarians were interviewed in 2006, ten librarians were interviewed in 2007 and 13 Community Child Health Nurses (CCHNs) took part in interviews during 2006 and 2007. Where possible the same Community Child Health Nurse and librarians were interviewed again in 2008.

These focus group interviews provided insights into the implementation of the program, inter-agency collaboration and the content of the toolkit from the point of view of the professionals involved. Focus group interviews were used in order to provide opportunities for rich insights into the views of these people. This type of data collection and analysis provided the opportunity to examine the complexity of factors that contribute to inter-agency collaboration in the provision of effective service delivery and participation.
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Key factors in the design and implementation of Better Beginnings

Perspectives from the Coordinator of the Better Beginnings Program

Background

The co-ordinator of the Better Beginnings program for the State Library was interviewed in 2006, 2007 and 2008 by researchers from Edith Cowan University in relation to her role in the management and implementation of the Better Beginnings program in Western Australia. The coordinator (pseudonym, Nora) also described how the program had evolved from its inception to present time. In addition, Nora provided an outline of the communities involved in the program and the approaches they had taken to implementing and maintaining the program, as well as outlining the training of staff. Also mentioned was the future of the program and issues impacting on the continuance of the program. These topics are described more fully in the following sections.

The Coordinator’s Role 2008

The role of the coordinator for Better Beginnings involves the coordination, management and promotion of the implementation of the program throughout the state. As Nora stated:

My position is to oversee the delivery of the program, develop areas that need more work and general day-to-day liaison with public library staff.

While this aspect of her role had not changed, as funding for the program ceases in June 2009, the past year has also seen Nora focussing on ways to secure further funding. Consequently, Nora has worked with the manager, director, and CEO of the State Library to compile a brief for the Minister. In addition, Nora attended meetings with other government departments that may have an interest in the program, with a view to continuing and extending Better Beginnings, as well as looking at ways of partnering with other departments.

Communities involved in the Better Beginnings program 2008

The implementation of the Better Beginnings program continues to be extended across the state of Western Australia. Nora reflected that, in 2008, almost 80% of local governments were participating in the program, with Better Beginnings being delivered to approximately 89% of babies and parents in the participating communities. As Nora commented,

Currently 100% of metropolitan local governments and 100% of local governments in the Pilbara, and the South West region are participating in the program. There are however a number of local governments in the Central Murchison area that are not involved.

There are a number of towns in the Kimberley participating. As far as coverage goes I’m referring to local governments. There are many remote Aboriginal communities that aren’t participating in the program - but we’re making some slow progress in this area, too.

Furthermore, the coordinator explained that, in 2008, a deliberate strategy had been adopted to involve more remote communities in the program. To illustrate this point, Nora described how Cocos Island had joined the program and the ways in which Better Beginnings was being modified to meet the needs of that particular community:

Cocos Island has just started with the program. We’re working with the school at Cocos Island We’ve had a very enthusiastic reception by the Principal and the Council is also very supportive. With the Storytime box that’s been provided to Cocos Island we’ve included a more diverse mix of resources for the Malay community. We’re very interested in getting feedback from the staff who are going to be delivering the program about how the resources are used by these parents so that we can review how appropriate and useful they are in relation to the needs and interests of the families that they’re intended for.

In addition, Nora commented that several remote indigenous communities had recently requested the program and that
the Better Beginnings resources were being assessed for their appropriateness in those communities:

Just recently we’ve received requests from a couple of remote indigenous communities so we have delivered Better Beginnings books and some selected information, not all of the information that we put in the bags, to Wingellina in Ngaanyatjarra Lands, to Bidyadanga, south of Broome, to Warmun which is the community half way between Kununurra and Halls Creek. We’ve also had interest from Jigalong and Kalumburu.

Nora indicated these requests have come from community child health nurses (CCHNs) working in the communities, who wanted to use the Better Beginnings bags as library bags for the indigenous children. The State Library Better Beginnings team added to these resources by supplying boxes of ‘pre-loved’ books. While this practice was extending the program beyond the targeted “under three” age group, Nora perceived that they were responding to a need in these communities, explaining:

The local community child health nurses working with these families have identified that there is a need for children’s books in these communities. So instead of sending all of the Better Beginnings materials we’ve sent around 150 pre-loved children’s books based on the information that has been given to us by the health workers about the types of books that the parents and children are interested in.

Other remote communities have also joined the program, including Wingellina, Bidyadanga and Warmun. The coordinator also related how the State Library Better Beginnings team had modified their implementation of the program in response to information from health and community workers based in each community, recounting:

After the State Librarian and the Outreach Team Manager visited Wingellina and met with health and education staff, it was suggested that we provide kits as well as pre-loved books. With Bidyadanga, where a library is based at the school we’ve supplied the teaching staff with a Story Time box. Each community’s needs and resources are different. In Warmun we’re in contact with someone who is working with the local mothers to run a regular playgroup or early learning centre.

Nora further disclosed that the State Library Better Beginnings team intends to contact health workers, teachers and other stakeholders in each community in the forthcoming year, to ascertain how the program is being used and to determine how successful Better Beginnings has been.

The coordinator outlined a further objective for 2008: increasing the clientele of the program to include more indigenous families and groups. One of the State Library team members had begun working with Derbarl Yerrigan Health Service, an Indigenous community health agency, to help achieve this objective in the metropolitan area. Nora explained how the team hopes to further extend the program by continuing to work in conjunction with this agency:

Through Derbarl Yerrigan the kits are being given to parents by health workers at the Maddington and East Perth offices. By working with agencies like Derbarl Yerrigan we are reaching families that may not be accessing traditional community health services. It was really pleasing to get a call from one of the staff out at the Maddington office asking for more kits. We’ve also supplied the offices with pre-loved books for parents and children to look at while they’re waiting.

Another area of development in 2008 was to focus on recently arrived migrant families, aiming to reach these families through community organisations and networks outside the libraries. As Nora explained:

Our aim is to introduce these families to the library through receiving their kit. We’re still working with another program that is targeting disadvantaged families with young children in the Mirrabooka-Girrawheen region. It’s important to partner with different agencies that are building relationships with hard-to-reach families.
A number of libraries have multi-language collections. Libraries are also looking at electronic portals such as My Language to provide information and websites in different languages. The coordinator also reported that many libraries are also accessing different groups by organising sessions for fathers to attend with their children, or for grandparents to bring their grandchildren to library sessions.

"We’re just starting to run Storytime sessions here at the State Library and tomorrow we’re holding a session for grandparents and their grandchildren. Some libraries hold Rhymetime and story sessions for dads and their babies. It would be very worthwhile to develop some strategies to support fathers with reading to their babies because, it’s all about bonding and you know some fathers feel so left out in those very early years."

The coordinator’s comments reveal that in 2008 the Better Beginnings program had been extended and widely implemented across the state. At the same time, efforts were made to access a greater range of families within each community and encourage their involvement in the program. Furthermore, Nora’s comments reflect an ongoing perception that the Better Beginnings program is dynamic and flexible, capable of responding to the demographics of each community and able to modify the implementation model and resources accordingly.

**Maintaining and adapting the program**

The coordinator went on to explain the process by which the Better Beginnings program is implemented and maintained in each community. Once each local government group signs the participation agreement the responsibility for putting the program into action rests with the contact person at the library. Nora explained, "Usually, in the case of the large libraries, it’s someone who is responsible for the young people’s and children’s services, special services librarian, the titles vary but they’re our main contact person."

While Nora acknowledged that the implementation process varies, often libraries work with the community child health nurses to present a Better Beginnings session as part of the new mothers’ group program. Here, librarians talk about sharing books with babies and young children and discuss library programs such as Baby Rhymetime with the parents/carers. They also encourage parents/carers to take out library membership. Some libraries organise parent workshop sessions for parents/carers delivered by external speakers on topics such as sleep patterns. As Nora commented:

"In some cases Community Health Nurses might run one session in the new mothers’ group series of sessions at the library or in other instances the librarian may be invited to a session at the community health centre and give kits to mothers and even join them to the library there and then.

Some libraries hold parent information sessions with speakers on various topics so for instance someone from Ngala will go along and speak about sleep or feeding topics of interest to mothers."

Nora also reflected that while the Better Beginnings toolkit remains the same, with its labelled bag and library pamphlets, the book given in the bag has changed. Baby Ways is still offered, but there are also other books, including the team’s own book Let’s Go Baby. Although this book is intended for a slightly older age group, it still appeals to babies and can be used with older siblings and by the child as she/he matures. Nora explained:

"It's (Let’s Go Baby) still a book that is ideal for babies but we also anticipate that it will be a book that two year olds will enjoy just as much because it has that added interactivity with the flaps. It’s always been the bane I think of labelling a book for a particular age group when you know that while it may be identified for a particular age group you know it can be used by a much wider audience."

During 2007 a marketing campaign was begun to promote awareness of Better Beginnings and the importance of early book sharing in the community. The coordinator explained that this has continued into 2008 and appears to have raised the profile of Better Beginnings and libraries across communities. Posters and signage have appeared in shopping
centres, billboards and on public transport. Anecdotal evidence suggests the program has achieved considerable awareness across many areas. Nora reflected:

I think it’s an important aspect of the Better Beginnings program that we have been able to get libraries thought about and talked about in very different arenas, within education, within communities, within the Arts. It’s something that the program has achieved for libraries in general, being able to have the luxury of having an advertising budget where you can promote literacy, books and libraries to the general public.

Furthermore, the Better Beginnings program received an award in the 2008 West Australian Business and Arts Partnership awards in the Community Partnerships category, adding to community awareness and raising the profile of the program across a range of different community and government sectors.

Training of library staff

The coordinator outlined how training is regularly offered to all library staff involved in the Better Beginnings program. More recently, this has been extended to involve community members. Nora commented:

A team member went to Narrogin recently and ran a training session for the library staff and also for all the libraries in that greater area but also someone from the school was interested so she went along and spoke to a group of parents at the school. Also one of the Aboriginal workers in the Best Beginnings program was interested and invited her to come along to a Best Beginnings session.

Nora also reported that the Community Health network has been lobbying, with some success, for the Better Beginnings program to be adopted in other areas. Health workers, parents and other community members involved in Early Years Networks have attended training sessions in regional centres.

In addition, the coordinator also commented on one of the key components of successful delivery identified in the 2004-5 and 2007 evaluation of the Better Beginnings program which was the liaison between community child health nurses and library staff. Inter-agency collaboration is likely to be a focus for training sessions in 2009. Nora perceives that the relationship between the library and the community child health nurse is a crucial link in successfully delivering the program to parents, reflecting:

I think we need to probably look again at the training offered to library staff and really spend more time talking about that initial relationship with community health nurses.

Further to this, online training was first introduced in 2008. This innovation was thought to be essential for remote communities such as Cocos Island, as well as offering support to smaller country libraries where staff are unable to come to Perth for training. All newly appointed library staff are invited to attend training, which includes a component about implementing the Better Beginnings program, when they begin working in a library. However, as training is voluntary, and is dependent upon local governments paying relief staff, not everyone attends. It is hoped the online training can overcome this problem. All libraries receive a comprehensive handbook to accompany the Better Beginnings program.

While feedback from those attending training sessions is positive, the Better Beginnings team continue to look at new ways to improve the sessions. In 2008, one such area that received attention was training for the delivery of the Baby Rhymetime, as this was perceived to be an area where some librarians appear to lack confidence. Nora indicated that she would like to see a greater emphasis placed on staff attending training, particularly when they take on delivery of the Better Beginnings program, stating:

I’d just like the training to be taken up a little bit more, particularly say Baby Rhymetime training. It’s not compulsory but ideally it would be great if when they joined the program, this training would be a part of the program delivery agreement with local government.

The coordinator’s comments reveal that training appears to be an ongoing issue that she is aware of, particularly
in relation to all those distributing the program (i.e. librarians and CCHNs) gaining a clear understanding of the implementation of the Better Beginnings program. Consequently, improving training availability and content continues to be a focus for the State Library Better Beginnings team.

Recording and sustaining the Better Beginnings program

Nora explained how the Better Beginnings team maintains its own evaluation system to keep track of the progress of the program, stating “All of the participating libraries are issued with an evaluation template where they can record quantitative and qualitative data about how the program is progressing.”

Libraries report quarterly on their statistical data, including: recording the number of kits that are distributed; the deliveries made through libraries; the number of kits distributed through community health clinics; the number of Storytime sessions that they run; the attendances at the sessions; the number of parent information sessions and attendances; the use of the Storytime boxes. They also record the number of loans of picture books as well as memberships that can be attributed to Better Beginnings. Nora admitted that this last statistic is a difficult one to gauge as:

Libraries gather membership statistics in varying ways and the specific age group breakdown that we’re particularly interested in can’t be collected. Also it’s very hard to say whether a membership has been directly attributable to Better Beginnings. Some libraries use membership forms that are tagged Better Beginnings but those statistics are quite minimal, and don’t provide an accurate picture.

Librarians are also asked for qualitative data about the program, including successes, problems and any special adaptations for their community. Nora cited one such example:

So, for instance, there’s a library in the south west that loans their storytime boxes quite regularly to the local school and they’re the sorts of things that we find really interesting.

In addition, librarians receive a regular online newsletter to keep them up-to-date with details of the program. This is seen to work as a networking tool and allows librarians to share successes and ideas. There is also regular contact between libraries and the State Library team through administrative support to maintain supplies of materials.

Nora expressed the hope that the program will continue and that in the future it can also access families and communities which are currently not being reached. Further to this, Nora would like to be able to invest more staff and resources in this area, as well as extend the program beyond the current age group, making links with children’s entry to schooling.

Given the increasing awareness of the program, evidence of the impact of the program on families and the program receiving the Partnership award, a compelling argument exists for the program’s continuation. The partnership with Rio Tinto has been extremely rewarding and the award reflects their input. Nora and the State Library Better Beginnings team are hopeful this very productive partnership can continue.
Perspectives from the librarians

Overview
In 2008, nine librarians from four libraries, one regional (pseudonym Bayview), one remote (pseudonym Kangu) and two metropolitan (pseudonyms Killarney and Marni) participated in the evaluation of the Better Beginnings program. Of those interviewed, four librarians were from the same regional library (in Bayview), working across four branches, and a further three librarians worked in the same metropolitan library (in Killarney). The roles of the interviewed librarians ranged from being the designated Better Beginnings librarian in their particular library, to the chief librarian, who was not involved in the practical side of implementing the program.

Training
All of the librarians had received some form of training for implementing the Better Beginnings program in their community. This was usually in the form of a session held at the State Library and presented by the Better Beginnings team, where they were given an overview of the program and ideas for conducting library sessions associated with the Better Beginnings program. Two participants described the sessions:

- It covered the program, from beginning to end really. It took us through the stats; it took us through conducting Rhymetime. It was fairly comprehensive.
- It was an introduction to how to run the sessions with ideas and suggestions for the session, which was really useful. That was probably the most valuable part. For the hands on information, having done sessions is the most valuable source of information to pass on. It did cover the aims and expected outcomes of Better Beginnings.

None of the librarians had attended further training, although one librarian indicated that her library was currently undergoing personnel changes and planned to revisit Better Beginnings training in the near future. All of the librarians found the training to be helpful and commented on the strong practical nature of the training. Many felt the training increased and reinforced their knowledge of early literacy. As one librarian reflected,

> The practical things would be the most beneficial, particularly, like how to run a Rhymetime session and suggestions for that and handouts, handout sheets on the different rhymes and how to actually impart that information and knowledge to parents.

Further training was seen as a good idea, a way of sharing ideas and maintaining enthusiasm. However, for some librarians working in the regional libraries, having to find relief staff as well as travel to Perth was at times, problematic. These librarians did reveal, however, that the Better Beginnings team had visited their community and provided them with training related to implementing the program. In addition, these participants also commented that they were aware that online training had recently been made available and that this would address some of the issues related to accessing training. Further to this, the librarians indicated that they continued to maintain contact with the Better Beginnings team and were kept up-to-date with the latest trends and practices. As one participant commented:

> I get regular updates from the State Library. I contact the ladies in charge of Better Beginnings regularly, because I'm down there every month, so anything new that comes up, we're certainly made aware of.

Comments were also made by two librarians about the usefulness of the Better Beginnings handbook. Furthermore, one participant had found that viewing the DVDs given to parents, Let's Read and Rhymetime, had proved useful in developing techniques which could be applied to Rhymetime sessions. This same participant also planned to "sit in" on a Rhymetime session in a neighbouring library, as a means of further advancing her skills in implementing the program.

Clearly the librarians' comments suggest that the Better Beginnings training is appreciated and perceived to be worthwhile. Participant comments also suggest that they would value further training and opportunities to meet with other librarians involved in the program, where they could...
share ideas about ways of implementing the program and conducting library sessions.

Changes in Logistics in the Program

The four communities where the librarians were located continued to implement the Better Beginnings program, distributing the toolkit through the CCHNs and conducting Better Beginnings library sessions. However, in some libraries there had been changes to the structure of implementation, including the targeting of families and the type and number of Better Beginnings library sessions being offered. Mention was also made of changes to collaboration and community involvement and the structure of management, as well as variations in the content and distribution of the Better Beginnings toolkits.

For example, in one regional community, Better Beginnings is being introduced through the first-time mothers groups, organized by the CCHN in conjunction with the library. One participant reflected that this change had taken place as a result of the growing numbers of first-time parents in the community. Perceiving that this was the best approach to target this group, the number of first-time parenting sessions had been increased and the program was introduced to those parents attending such sessions. As one participant recounted:

More recently we haven't had Better Beginnings programs as such. We have a number of first-time parenting groups now. Because Bayview (pseudonym) is such a fast growing area, with a huge number of babies born each year, our first time parenting groups have grown. We've had an extra two added in, for the last twelve months, and we would have probably anything from 15 to 20 in each session.

Another librarian, also working in a regional library, reported a similar shift in the focus of Better Beginnings, where they too were concentrating on working with the CCHN and the first-time mothers group:

We virtually run the first-time parenting groups as we would a Better Beginnings program. It's an introduction to early literacy. I still give them the introduction to the library and talk about early literacy and the importance of it and talk about Rhymetime and give them information to take away, so it's basically the same.

Furthermore, one librarian working in a metropolitan library also reported modifications to their Better Beginnings library sessions. The library where she worked had decided to revitalise their Rhymetime sessions as, in the past, such sessions were run irregularly and spread across the branches. This particular librarian was enthused about the changes, hoping that they would be well received by parents involved in the program:

I think the main change that we're going to have next year is that we're going to have weekly Rhymetime sessions, which I'll be doing, which will be really exciting. Whereas before, I think it must have been going on for at least a year, we'd have one every two months. We've had like (sic) a parenting talk... and a ten or fifteen minute Rhymetime session at the beginning... and now we're going to have just weekly Rhymetime with no parenting talk, so that's a big change. It will be for half an hour. It's aimed at zero to two year olds, so once a week we'll have Baby Rhymetime and then once a week we have Early Storytime, two to five year old, so I think that's fantastic!

Several librarians also commented on the changing nature of collaboration and community involvement. One librarian considered that liaisons within the community had grown. This librarian had found that the working relationships developed with CCHNs had proved to be particularly supportive, assisting in and strengthening the implementation of the program, commenting:

We were able early to set up a really good working relationship with the community child health nurses and they do the vast bulk of the work. There are between 45 and 50 packs delivered each month by the child health nurses at the babies’ six week check up... the community has a bit more in the way of the support network and the program is developing and evolving really well.
In contrast, another librarian working in a regional library felt that inter-agency collaboration had been affected by irregular communication and changes to staffing, disrupting the distribution of *Better Beginnings* toolkits. Now aware of these issues this particular librarian was making a conscious effort to maintain contact to ensure the smooth implementation of the program in the community. The librarian recounted the events:

It went very well the first year; the second year no, it didn’t, because there was a complete breakdown in contact and communication and a lot of confusion as to the roles and who was doing what. I also think that a lot of it had to do with staffing down at the community centres. It’s picked up again now. They’re now distributing the bags and we’re making a conscious effort to catch up on any kids that miss out. I probably wasn’t contacting them often enough personally and I was the only one that was running with the program at the time. I assumed that they were doing it and it wasn’t until many months had gone by that I found out that they had actually ceased to, it was one extra thing for them and they dropped it. They just said there was too much work for them to do.

Comments made by some of the librarians also suggested that their libraries had become more focussed on developing a greater community presence. Regional librarians reported that they were members of Early Years committees and liaised with other libraries and the shire councils on a regular basis. One librarian from a regional library recounted his involvement with local community groups:

Yes, certainly. I’m a member of the Communities for Children committee so I have a lot to do with the shire committees ….. So we’re trying to run it [literacy events] side-by-side, rather than everybody doing the same thing and nothing being sustainable.

Similarly, another related how the librarian’s role had been extended beyond the confines of the library buildings, to include attendance at local parenting groups and playgroups:

Yes, we often go up to the local community centre and do story reading up there and talk to the kids. It’s where the child health nurses all are and that’s where they have all the playgroups and things down there as well.

Further to this, a metropolitan librarian, new to her position, was also aware of the need to develop a greater community presence and had begun to liaise with a local school-based group for young mothers. This same librarian was also planning to visit playgroups in the near future, commenting:

I also met the director who runs the Teen Family Centre at the Senior High School. She’s very keen to bring students out next year for the Baby Rhymetime and Storytime, so that will be really good. I have thought that once we’ve got the new program up and running, of going out and visiting the playgroups again.

Several librarians also commented on changes made within their libraries to the structure of overseeing the program. In one regional library, staffing had recently been increased, allowing the chief librarian to relinquish the day-by-day responsibility for the implementation of the *Better Beginnings* program. The interviewed librarian perceived that this change would lead to a more effective implementation process, commenting:

I’m not taking control of the whole thing. We’re actually fully staffed, or virtually fully staffed, now for the first time in three and a half years so that makes a huge difference. Yes, able to delegate. I have two staff members who are sharing the load and they’re helping the other three libraries in the Shire. They’ve split up the Storytime packs so that they can actually go to the public. They’re checking on stats, they’re getting things done.

A further two metropolitan librarians also reported that their libraries had gained a new staff member, who had been given responsibility for planning and delivering the *Better Beginnings* sessions in their particular libraries.

While the participants also reported that library staff continued to assemble the *Better Beginnings* toolkits, some variations in the content of the toolkit were noted. Each kit basically contained a gift book, a Rhymetime
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The librarians also reported that they did not have a formal system for maintaining contact with parents receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit from CCHNs. Generally, contact was made when families attended library sessions or through a “mail out,” to families who were existing members of the library. One librarian emphasized the point that those receiving the toolkit from CCHNs were not flagged on the library system and that the library had no way of knowing who they were, unless they came into the library or used the membership form provided in the toolkit to join the library.

Further to this, all of the librarians identified Better Beginnings as being a standing item in their library budget, through the input of their local government group. In addition, one librarian reported that one branch of their regional library had also received funding through the sponsorship of a major local company. Financial support from such sources was considered to be a “bonus.”

The librarians’ comments indicate that Better Beginnings continues to evolve in each community, where adaptations continue to be made to the program in an effort to access the targeted population and ensure their literacy needs are met.

Changing Involvement in Better Beginnings

All of the interviewed librarians acknowledged the importance of the Better Beginnings program and its relevance to promoting early literacy in families. Librarians considered the program to be worthwhile and in keeping with their work roles. Several commented on the value of informing parents about the benefits of reading to their child from a young age and the role library staff can play in promoting shared reading practices. As one librarian reflected:

Better Beginnings has the potential to make huge differences to some lives. It won’t have the same impact on everyone but there’s people in there who it’s going to have a really big difference in their life because their Mum sat them down, told them stories and they’ve learnt to really like stories, like books and develop a desire to read.
Although the librarians had been involved in the Better Beginnings program for varying lengths of time and had differing roles in the implementation process, all expressed an ongoing commitment to the program. Seven of the nine librarians had been part of the program since its inception in their communities, ranging from a period of two to four years. Only one of the interviewed librarians was new to Better Beginnings, having been in her position for the past three months. The other participating librarian indicated that although she had only been in her current position for a year, she had previously been involved in the program when working at another library and, consequently, was aware of its value. Further to this, while participants revealed that their roles in implementing the program varied, from assembling the toolkits, to conducting the Better Beginnings library sessions and liaising with other community groups, all displayed a great enthusiasm for promoting the Better Beginnings program. Many of the librarians saw their role to be facilitators of the program, ensuring that the toolkits were prepared and reached the CCHNs for distribution to parents. Librarians also promote the library to families, encouraging them to use the services and to attend the Better Beginnings library sessions. In addition, several librarians considered themselves to be literacy educators, acting as ambassadors for the Better Beginnings program and further promoting early literacy. Their comments included:

- "It's important to introduce the library to the young Mums and the facilities."
- "My role, I've been promoting the library, showing that it's a friendly place to visit, introducing the facilities."
- "Promoting early literacy and the importance of it and encouraging parents to be confident in being that primary educator of their child and often as a first time parent they don't have the confidence to do that so it's important to reassure them that they are quite capable of doing that."
- "Just to see that it keeps going here in the Shire and for me to make those outreach contacts with other groups and let them know that it is happening. I try to get to as many things as I can."

Librarians also commented on the importance of collaboration and developing harmonious working relationships with CCHNs, other libraries, the State Library Better Beginnings team and local governments. These liaisons, in particular those forged with CCHNs, were perceived to be crucial to the success of the program. As several commented:

- "It's extremely important. Without that support network you just wouldn't be able to do such a large program, it's just impossible."
- "I think it's important because through liaising and distributing the Better Beginnings they actually introduce parents to the library - tell them about the family learning centre and activities over here. They're pretty good at promoting things in the library. We have a lot of young Mums come over because of them I think."
- "It's crucial really. The library would not have probably that initial contact with a lot of the parents if we didn't have the support of the Community Health and the Child Health Nurses."

Participants also mentioned how appreciative they were of CCHNs involvement in the program, realising that they had a busy schedule, were "always rushing around like mad" and, in some instances, experiencing staffing shortages. Some also expressed the view that the implementation process would run more smoothly if they had greater opportunities for meeting and discussing the program with the CCHNs, but were aware of time constraints.

Librarians also recounted how the Better Beginnings program had impacted on their work roles. Their involvement in the program was not considered to be onerous. Furthermore, all indicated that the program made them more aware of the importance of early literacy and how libraries can best promote this. As one librarian revealed, her involvement in the program had caused her to reassess past assumptions and become aware that exposure to books was not always commonplace, commenting:
It has made me realise that not every child has the same access to books. I think I’ve probably always assumed everyone has books in their house.

Others had found that involvement in the program had reinforced their appreciation of the role libraries play in their local community, offering families a range of resources and services that encourage early literacy practices. Involvement in the program not only emphasized the worth of the library but also underlined the value of the work they do, indirectly contributing to their workplace satisfaction. Comments included:

"It re-emphasises the importance of it as probably introducing children at the earliest age to the facilities in the library and encouraging parents to bring them into the library and make use of the fantastic resources that we have here that are provided by State Library Service."

"There is a certain amount of work involved but we understand that these are benefits to the community and that’s what we’re here for."

Participation in the Better Beginnings program had also influenced book-buying policies. Most librarians indicated that as a consequence of their involvement in the program more board books were being purchased. In addition, their libraries were now offering a greater selection of books to cater for junior-kindergarten aged children. Librarians also expressed an awareness of the need to acquire a range of books suitable for use in Rhymetime and Storytime sessions. As one participant commented:

"We don’t have a huge budget to buy books ourselves but it certainly has made us probably place a bit more emphasis on really good quality board books that we wouldn’t have done prior to that."

Comments made by the librarians clearly indicate that they are aware of the benefits of the program and remain committed to its ideals. Clearly collaboration and ongoing community involvement are perceived to be key factors contributing to the implementation of the program. In addition, appropriate resourcing of books suited to the targeted population are considered to be desirable if families are to continue engaging their child in early literacy activities, using the library as source of support.

Parent/carer Responses to Better Beginnings

The interviewed librarians were also invited to comment on parent responses to the program. While most were not involved in the ongoing distribution of the toolkits to families, those who did present the Better Beginnings resources to parents found their responses were positive and supportive of the program. In particular, librarians perceived that the parents appreciated receiving a free gift, the bag, the book and the DVD. Librarian comments included:

"All I can say is when I show it to them they think it’s pretty good I think and they like the idea of receiving a book."

"They actually love it. Initially at that stage as a first time parent they’re inundated with information, it’s a bit of information overload but they really do take note of what’s in that bag because it’s explained to them and they’re always very positive about what’s in the bag and they love the free book, the board book."

"They love it. They think it’s great, free book and DVD. They’ve been very positive about it. Very positive."

One librarian, not involved in the direct delivery of the program to parents, even lamented on not receiving feedback from parents, commenting, “It would be nice to know. I’d like to see that smile when they open it up. I’m sure they respond quite positively when they receive their bag.” For this participant, distribution of the program was a pleasurable task, where parent response provided affirmation of her work role.

In addition, most librarians felt that the program represented one of the few opportunities where families receive something free from government bodies. Furthermore, this “gift” was seen to contribute to parents becoming more aware of their local library and the free resources and support available in the library and wider community. Introducing parents to libraries was also perceived to have
the potential to impact on families’ literacy practices and lead to their developing a long-term relationship with the library. As one librarian commented:

Well for perhaps a young parent or anyone who hasn’t previously used the library or doesn’t have a book oriented household that could be their very first introduction to making it a regular part of their child’s upbringing.

Others emphasised the way in which the program made parents aware of the importance of early literacy. Better Beginnings had the potential to encourage parents to read to their children and extend their child’s language development. Further to this, the program was perceived to prepare children for formal education and promoted community involvement. Librarians’ comments included:

The impact would be a positive one, that a mother is going to read a book to them and again all the different things associated with reading to your baby. You’ve got the physical contact with the baby and emotional and they’re listening to the voice. So you’ve got the whole verbal and the language development that’s going on would be improved. It’s not just happening for the baby, it’s happening for the other children in the room as well.

And the fact that reading, the effect it does have on children. They probably weren’t aware of that before but after the session with the information that’s supplied they’re certainly aware of how important it is to read.

Well I think they’re getting a love of libraries from a very early age and that’s important. They’re going to be more school ready, reading ready by the time they get to school simply because they are handling books and having books read to them and I think socially it’s a great thing for parents, being involved in anything like that to get Mums out and talking to other Mums it’s great for everybody.

The librarians were also asked how their libraries catered for Indigenous and multilingual families. Librarians working in the remote community (Kangru) felt there was little need to cater for diversity, as few people in their region spoke languages other than English. Similarly, those working in one of the metropolitan libraries (Killerney) also reported that their members were not from diverse cultural backgrounds and consequently they did not have to resource this area. However, the librarians suggested that it was important to recognise and support diversity. One librarian commented that “they don’t have to read English terribly well to work with a picture book, you can tell the story, or a story, from the pictures,” indicating that while the library’s resources were not specifically designed for catering for multilingual families, they could be used for telling stories in different languages.

In contrast, librarians working in one of the regional libraries (in Bayview) reported that they had a selection of books available in a range of languages, as well as books for the Indigenous population. These librarians were aware of the diverse and transient nature of their population. Consequently, they tried to accommodate the changing trends within their community. Their comments included:

We have multilingual junior kindy books. We’re able to get things but we have to know if they’re needed and we have quite a strong multilingual collection in languages which have been identified as used in this area. We get people in who’ll say, suddenly everyone’s reading Thai again, whereas for awhile there nobody was reading any Thai and we had a lot of Croats in about a year ago but we’re able to get those resources through the State Library.

We have made an effort to get bilingual books in for JK’s (junior kindergartens) in particular. The majority of those tend to be the Indian dialects but having spoken with a couple of the parents they sort of say once they’re out of India they tend to speak English, and they lose that which I think is a bit of a shame. But I have also noticed a lot of English speaking parents are actually borrowing foreign language books just to show their children there are differences here, this is in Spanish, it’s not the same. We also try very hard to do a number of Indigenous books because obviously we buy...
a lot of Indigenous material, whatever is put out. We include those in our Storytime.

Similar efforts were also made in the other metropolitan community (Marni), where the library had a diverse clientele from a range of cultural backgrounds. The library had made efforts to include signs in the most commonly spoken languages as well as make books available in those same languages. In addition, groups from the local TAFE college where courses in English were conducted, were regularly shown the library facilities as part of their course. The librarian working in this particular library also described how they were intending to modify their Better Beginnings sessions to include other languages, commenting:

I think we’ve built up a ‘Save the Children Fund’ of picture books here at Marni, which is in different languages: Somali, Arabic, Vietnamese. I know in January, and this is aimed at older children, they’re going to have a bilingual Storytime at a nearby library and I thought maybe when we do the Rhymetime session we could try.

For librarians working with culturally diverse families there appeared to be a determined effort to provide resources that reflected community needs. Interestingly, none of the interviewed librarians reported that the Better Beginnings toolkits had been adapted to cater for such families, and only one librarian suggested how Better Beginnings library sessions could be modified.

Activities Associated with Better Beginnings

The librarians were also invited to discuss the Better Beginnings sessions they conducted at their library. Interestingly, some librarians considered that both Rhymetime and Storytime were part of the Better Beginnings program, while others identified only Rhymetime as being part of the program. In addition, one library heavily involved with the First Mothers Group (run in conjunction with CCHNs) also saw that activity as belonging to the Better Beginnings program.

While all the librarians reported that their library offered Storytime sessions on a regular basis, other activities, including Rhymetime sessions, varied. Two librarians indicated that their library branches offered regular Rhymetime sessions, held either on a weekly or fortnightly basis. Another two libraries intended to commence such sessions in the new year. One librarian reported that her library regularly ran sessions in conjunction with the CCHN’s First Mothers Group, as well as being involved with a Montessori program. Attendance at Better Beginnings sessions in each library also varied, ranging from ten to 25 people (including children) attending each session.

Further to this, the librarians revealed that they were involved in other activities that promoted literacy. One library offered, “Dates with Dads,” an evening program aimed at fathers bringing their children to the library and participating in shared stories and rhymes. Another offered “Bookworms,” a program for primary school aged children. In addition, several ran school holiday activity sessions.

All of the librarians indicated that the activities their library offered helped children’s early literacy learning. In particular, the sessions were aimed at providing opportunities for children to interact and engage with books and other children, develop their book skills, increase their ability to comprehend and question and ability to sit still and listen and to learn about libraries. Comments included:

They’re learning to read a book, they’re learning to listen. They’re actually sitting still for awhile. Even just parents by coming to the library and having books or stories read to them they’ll be more inclined to read to them at home. At the end of the day every child should know what a book is before they get to school and they should know which way it works and which way the letters go.

It teaches them enjoyment for reading a desire to learn how to read themselves. Storytime is reinforcing the fact that reading and stories are fun activities and it’s something you can do together. It is also modelling the correct way of reading to children, how to make the story an enjoyable and interactive process for the
children and help the parents realise that books are a great way to interact with your children. They've got that whole sharing aspect when they're there and being able to sit still for awhile as they're getting older because of the story reading sessions and the craft sessions, they've got to sit there and listen through the story so they're also getting a little bit more attention span developing there as well which is all ready for school when they get there.

Librarians also indicated that the sessions had contributed towards making the library a more family-friendly environment. Consequently, several were now seeing a change in how parents approached the library, with two librarians commenting:

I must admit in the last twelve months we seem to see a lot more parents sitting here reading to their kids in the library on the cushions than there was before. They seem to feel that this is a place where they can sit and read, it's just not a place to go in and grab a book and run so they're obviously feeling very welcome, very comfortable here.

There's been a complete turnaround in attitude towards serving the public from within this facility so that had a lot to do with it as well. I've been up here for four years. Before I came it was very white, very Anglo. It wasn't a very welcome place and by changing staff and a few other things we actually get a lot more Indigenous people in the library, a lot more young kids, young adults. It's right across the board so they're obviously feeling very welcome, very comfortable here.

The other seven librarians did not indicate that they had a system for contacting Better Beginnings families, other than incidentally, when attending library sessions. Two librarians, however, mentioned how their libraries informed all library members of events and advertised library activities, commenting:

We can put stuff in the Shire newsletters, we have our own website. We do lots of little bookmark things. If there's something special coming up we hand notices out with our books.

We advertise within the library of course. In our brochures, we put flyers out on the desk and we also have a page, the Shire has a page in the Bayview Mail once a month so we advertise any of our activities in that.

While most of the librarians focussed on library-based activities, two librarians also commented on their involvement in the wider community. One librarian, working in a metropolitan library, was in the process of trying to expand their outreach program. This particular librarian had already attended a playgroup at the local community centre and been involved in a children's party organized by the local government, as well as a Literacy Day, promoted by the Early Years group and held at a local shopping centre. The other librarian, working in a regional library, spoke about her plans to conduct an outreach program and the difficulties she faced in relation to staffing, she commented:

We're trying to actually do some outreach, but it's very difficult with staffing at the moment. But we actually have been invited to go out to one of the Aboriginal groups and run a story there once a month or something, which would be something we'd be keen to do because it's very hard to get into the library with transport problems.

In addition, some librarians commented on the physical design of their libraries and how the library either had, or planned to have, a designated space incorporating the junior collection, parenting books and comfortable seating. Two librarians described recent changes in their libraries as
providing “more room for parents to actually sit with kids” and having more of a “whole children’s area.” However, one librarian found that in her library the actual layout of the junior section made it difficult to conduct Better Beginnings library sessions, commenting:

The last couple I did, we actually did out where all the junior kindy books are. But I found it a little bit awkward because there’s a pillar and also there’s little steps and I thought about the safety aspect and I felt a little bit constrained the last time I did it there. So I’m going to probably do it in here (small conference room).

Participants also commented on the availability of resources and their use of the Outreach Toolbox. All of the librarians had received the kit and felt that it contained excellent resources. While the librarians appreciated the contents of the kit, most indicated that few groups appeared to have borrowed the Outreach Toolbox. This was despite letters being sent to local playgroups and community groups. One librarian suggested an explanation:

I think some are a bit reluctant to use it. They’re worried that they’re going to get ruined and they don’t want to have that kind of hassle and a lot of the playgroups they’re just so well stocked as well in this area that they don’t really need it.

Only one library (in Killarney) had been successful in lending the Outreach Toolbox to community groups, with the resource being borrowed on several occasions by Ngala, a private health practitioner and a school. The other libraries tended to use the kit themselves, when conducting their Better Beginnings library sessions, with one librarian disclosing that their library deliberately retained the toolbox for this purpose. Those who had used the Outreach Toolbox provided positive feedback, with librarians commenting:

It’s been fantastic for Storytime, for Rhymetime and introducing some of the fantastic stock that’s in it to the first time parenting group.

Anybody who’s seen them or uses it loves it definitely. There’s some really, really good stuff in there.

The librarians indicated that Storytime was a regular event at their local libraries and was generally well attended and received by the public. Rhymetime was less frequently offered, although some libraries were making attempts to increase the number of sessions. In addition, participants reported that their libraries offered a range of activities and were implementing plans to make their libraries more family-friendly. However, participant comments suggest that involvement and promotion within the community is still an area to be addressed, as is the encouragement of community groups and members to use all the Better Beginnings resources on offer.

Perceptions of Better Beginnings

Finally, the librarians were asked about their perceptions of the program, including what they considered were the most valuable features of the program; the major impacts on families; and possible improvements to ensure the program’s sustainment in the future.

The majority considered that the gift book in the Better Beginnings toolkit to be the most valuable feature of the program, as it acted as an introduction to literacy. As one librarian commented:

The most valuable feature is the tool kit itself and the book, the fact that that baby hopefully is going to get that book read to it and it’s going to be introduced to the world of reading.

The librarians also identified the support that was offered through the information in the toolkit and the library sessions. One librarian commented how the book and exposure to information might act as a prompt to parents and encourage them to engage in early literacy practices, stating:

It just gets them thinking about that whole business of reading to your baby. Some people’s perceptions are “don’t be silly, it’s a baby, it can’t read, it doesn’t even speak yet” but having the discussion with the parents and explaining to them that this is how you acquire language may be of benefit.
Individuals also commented on other valuable aspects of the program, including the sessions and the Rhymetime DVD. One librarian also commented on the political aspect of the program, perceiving that by supporting the program local and state government bodies had a "wonderful opportunity" to say "Look, this is something that you can have and hopefully it will be a support to you."

The librarians suggested that, apart from speech and language development, the major impact of the program was the social interaction it encouraged. Not only did the program promote bonding between parents and babies, but also provided opportunities for social engagement with other children and between parents. As two librarians commented:

Well there's the social aspect, they're with other children they're with other Mums if they're coming to our sessions. There's lots of social benefits from that. As I said the Mums and babies are now coming up for morning tea, up to the canteen which is great. They're forming friendships. I think that's really important.

Besides speech and language development I think the social development side of Better Beginnings is really good because they're coming along to things like Rhyme Time and meetings and those children are then interacting with each other so that's only going to support them.

In addition, librarians described how the Better Beginnings library sessions appeared to facilitate social networking for some parents. Several of the librarians, working in communities that were constantly changing and either growing or transient in nature, were aware that formal support systems were not in place. Attending the library sessions had the potential to alleviate social isolation and offered young families social support. Librarians' comments included:

I would have to say apart from the information that they take away with them, the value of that, it would have to be the networking particularly in a place like here, with so many new families and it's a young community so there hasn't been the opportunity to come together for that networking and that social support prior to this sort of thing happening so it's very well attended for that reason.

I think they like the friendships that they develop by coming along to Rhyme Time. I know we've had a lot of Mums that are new to the area or have never really got out of the house especially after they've had their first baby and they come along. Our Rhyme Time sessions now the most important part almost is the cup of tea afterwards.

When discussing possible improvements to the program, most considered that the toolkit was a quality product and needed little change. Librarians generally indicated that they liked the Rhymetime DVD. Several made favourable comments about the gift books, finding they were of high quality and a good introduction to literacy. One librarian found that the book Baby Ways was most appropriate as it represented babies from a variety of backgrounds, thus valuing diversity and difference.

In discussing their involvement in other literacy programs, one participant identified that in her library, perceiving that there was a need in a specific age group, they had developed a literacy program through collaborating with their local Montessori group. Further to this, two other libraries, both metropolitan, were involved in implementing the Let's Read program, an early literacy program also based on the Bookstart program. Librarians participating in the Let's Read program considered that the program was a continuation of Better Beginnings and further promoted the value of early literacy practices.

Participating librarians were also asked about sustaining the program. Most agreed that the Better Beginnings message was being sustained through a promotional campaign, including the advertisements on buses and posters in shopping centres. In addition, the continuation of the program was perceived to be aided by the consistent message being offered by libraries, the support of the CCHNs and brand recognition in the public domain. The librarians felt the program would continue to develop and be sustained, strengthened by these factors. Their comments included:
The Better Beginnings posters are always up and I keep that permanently on view as something that they can see and see what actually goes in the bag so that they know that there’s this Better Beginnings program that’s available. It’s advertised in the newspapers fairly regularly. Every term or so one of the library makes a comment about what they’re doing with Better Beginnings so I’ve noticed it has been in the paper as well.

It’s being sustained because people are actually, well they recognise the branding now and that’s really important, they see the yellow bag and we do have Mums that come in and ask oh I missed out or I just got this at health clinic but I didn’t get one for the one before and we’re like sure you can have one.

At the same time, most of the librarians also suggested that there were issues relating to the distribution of the program and the delivery of the message. Some librarians indicated that they would like to have a more “hands on” role in delivering the toolkits to parents or to provide an “outreach” service in the community, possibly targeting children at risk in literacy.

All acknowledged that the CCHNs were the major strength in the program. They were appreciative of the fact that these busy people were prepared to distribute, explain and promote the toolkit, when they had so many other duties to perform. However, they were also aware that not all families attended community health centres and received the program. Only one librarian actually questioned the ownership of the program, and felt the Better Beginnings message would be better delivered if distribution was maintained by the library. In contrast, several librarians suggested extending the implementation process, providing further distribution points other than CCHNs to ensure more new mothers received the program. Suggested delivery points included other health services, such as general practitioners and local maternity hospitals.

When asked, the librarians also offered a range of suggestions about how the program could be improved and further sustained in their communities. Some librarians commented on the actual structure of the program and suggested either that a continuous program be developed “to take children through from infancy to school age,” or in contrast, that the program be refined to “target areas of need rather than a broad sweep.”

Comments were also made about the need to develop and implement better systems for contacting and communicating with parents, encouraging them to come to the library. One librarian suggested advertising at a local level to attract more families to the library. Another proposed that the library have access to a “pool of professionals” to use as guest speakers to boost attendance at library sessions. Also suggested was the adoption of incentive schemes, which “rewarded children for participating in library activities.”

Mention was also made of changes to the implementation of the program, with one librarian proposing that in each library there be a specific appointment of staff responsible for the Better Beginnings program (a practice already in operation). Suggestions were also made to develop and strengthen community contacts through liaising with different groups within the community. Other recommendations relating to the administration and continuation of the program included streamlining the record-keeping processes and “simplifying the statistics,” “developing infinite resources” and “ensuring secure funding.”

The librarians indicated that they considered the program to be worthwhile and beneficial to families. In particular they valued the book and the information provided in the toolkit and library sessions, perceiving that these resources promoted awareness of early literacy practices. Furthermore, the librarians felt that the program offered opportunities for social engagement and was compatible with other early literacy programs, such as Let’s Read. In addition, participating librarians noted that while the program was functional, it was also dynamic and open to change and further improvements. Librarians also indicated that the Better Beginnings message was being sustained in their local communities, enhanced by the promotional campaign and reinforced and extended through the collaboration and involvement of participating CCHNs and library staff.
Making a Difference

The report on the evaluation of the Better Beginnings family literacy program 2007-2009
Perspectives from the Community Child Health Nurses

Overview

Community Child Health Nurses (CCHN) from the four communities, Bayview, Kangu, Killarney and Marni were asked about their role in distributing the Better Beginnings toolkit to families within their communities. Of the eight CCHNs who were interviewed in 2008, five indicated that they had previously participated in the data collection in 2007. These same five CCHNs had also been delivering Better Beginnings since the program's inception in their respective communities. During the interviews the CCHNs were invited to comment on aspects relating to their training, the logistics of the Better Beginnings program's distribution, their involvement in the program, parent responses to the program and parent perceptions of the Better Beginnings program. Their comments, with pseudonyms assigned to each of the eight participants, are further described below.

Training

The majority of the CCHNs who were interviewed in 2008 had not received any formal training related to the background and distribution of the Better Beginnings program. However, each of the three CCHNs who had received training could recall attending a meeting when the program was first implemented in their communities. Two CCHNs, both from the same community, recalled that the meeting outlined “information on how the program works and the giving out of the bag”. They commented that the training “supported” and reinforced what they already knew about the importance of early reading and literacy.

In addition, while most had not received training, the participating CCHNs indicated that they were comfortable in their understanding of the program and were aware of the benefits. Better Beginnings could offer to families in their communities. As one CCHN commented, “The Better Beginnings program encourages literacy in children, encourages reading from a very young age and increases the literacy levels for when they go to school and for later in life”, indicating that even though she had not participated in any training sessions, she was familiar with what the program was trying to achieve, possibly because she had been distributing the Better Beginnings toolkits in her community since it was first introduced, nearly three years ago.

When interviewed, all eight CCHNs also revealed that they were unaware of the availability of any opportunities for further training. Further to this, only three of the interviewed CCHNs indicated that they were prepared to attend such sessions, two commenting “it would be good” and one “Yes, I think so”. In addition, two of the participating CCHNs, both from the same community, emphasized that time and staffing constraints were an issue in their centre, limiting their availability to attend training sessions, commenting “We need an extra child health nurse... It’s just something else extra added to it, that you know (sic), our time is already cut fairly short, especially with staff shortages”.

Another identified that the continuance of the program was more of an issue than attending further training sessions, commenting “I wouldn’t think it (training) is a priority. I think if we just sustain the program it will be great”.

Comments made by the CCHNs indicate that while few have received training, most feel well equipped to deliver the Better Beginnings program in their community. Those who did receive training felt they were already aware of the importance of early literacy and, for them, the value of training related to informing them of the delivery process. CCHNs also indicated that they didn’t place a high priority on receiving training, particularly when they were already limited by time constraints and their existing workload.

Logistics of the Better Beginnings Program

All of the CCHNs reported that they were not responsible for assembling the Better Beginnings toolkits. Rather, they relied on the library staff to either have the toolkits ready for when they collected the Better Beginnings resources from the Library or to deliver the toolkits to their Clinic. Furthermore, while the majority disclosed that they did not add to the toolkits on a regular basis, three of the CCHNs revealed that “on occasion” or “when I think it is appropriate” they placed additional Health Department pamphlets in the toolkit about child development, introducing solids to your child or reading to your baby.
When giving out the Better Beginnings toolkit to parents, all of the CCHNs reported that they mentioned the benefits of early literacy and the importance of reading to your child. Several also admitted that they didn’t always go through the pamphlets with each parent or show them how to use the gift book with their child. As one CCHN explained, “It depends on how much time I have”. This same CCHN, however, compensated for a lack of dialogue by displaying the contents of a Better Beginnings toolkit on her office wall, where parents could view the resources and, if necessary, ask questions. In addition, two CCHNs, both from the same community, disclosed that they were unfamiliar with the contents of the toolkit, with one stating, “I haven’t even looked inside. I just say like (sic) it’s a gift bag and I just talk about the importance of reading to your children early, those sorts of things”.

However, one of these CCHNs later was able to explain the benefits of early literacy, including “their language, their finer motor skills… and parents spending one-on-one time with their kids”, indicating that her failure to go through the toolkit with parents may be due to time constraints and workload, rather than a lack of awareness of the benefits of the program.

While discussing individual items in the toolkit was not always a common practice, six of the eight CCHNs did reveal that when delivering the toolkit to parents they specifically talked about library membership and the library sessions associated with Better Beginnings. One CCHN described how she made parents aware of library events, commenting:

I take the flyer out with the library times. I talk about Story time that the librarian does over at the library on Tuesday morning and encourage parents to go there and say that Claire (pseudonym) is very welcoming. You get morning tea and do something with food and nutrition and just say that it’s a good way for meeting other people in the community as well.

In addition, although the remaining two CCHNs, both from the same community (Kangru) did not identify that they discussed the library when giving out the toolkit, one of these CCHNs later revealed that she was constantly recommending the library to parents, stating “I’m always telling my clients how important it is to seek the library’s resources, because not only are we encouraging the Story time and the Father Story time on Tuesday nights, we’re also telling them there’s a massive resource up there”. Comments also indicated that in some stage of their discussion with parents all of the CCHNs promoted the library to parents, either when distributing the toolkits or at a later date.

For those CCHNs who did discuss the library when distributing the toolkit, four also commented that they completed the authority forms on a regular basis, which outlined the name and contact details of parents. These CCHNs then either faxed or posted the information to the library. One CCHN explained, “They sign the form, usually in my office. I find that’s a better way of me collecting the forms and sending them off to the library. I post them off once a month, usually when I’ve got a bundle of them”. A further two CCHNs revealed that they recorded parent information and passed this on to the library, but this was not done on a regular basis, due to time constraints. The remaining two CCHNs, both from the same community, stated that while they maintained communication with the library they did not pass on any information to the library about the parents receiving the toolkits.

In addition, although the participating CCHNs distributed the toolkits to parents and their children at different times, five at the 6 to 8 week old check up appointment and three at the 3 to 4 month old check-up appointment, all reported that they continued to see the parents and their children when they attended further scheduled appointments, including the 6-month, 9-month and 18-month check ups. One CCHN also revealed that although time constraints limited her contact with families, she continued to see families through a parent group, commenting:

Child health nurses no longer have the time and the capacity to actively keep contact with those families. However, I do see them occasionally if families go on to take part in the active parents program run by the child health nurses.
Further to this, six of the participants also explained that they maintained contact with other community groups, including the library, playgroups, kindergartens and their community’s Early Years network. One CCHN, however, admitted that she had been invited to attend playgroups and functions promoting early literacy but was restricted by time constraints.

Comments made by the CCHNs reveal that they are committed to promoting the benefits of early literacy to their clients. In addition all participants appear willing to encourage families to become members of their local library and attend library sessions that promote early literacy. However, due to time constraints and their existing work loads, the participating CCHNs are less likely to discuss each aspect of the Better Beginnings toolkit when delivering the program to parents. Likewise, they are less likely to complete the library authority form and pass the information on to the library on a regular basis, due to these same restrictions. The participants, however, indicated that they continue to see most of the families that receive the toolkit and continue to promote the benefits of early literacy, and the library, to them.

Involvement in the Better Beginnings Program

All but one of the participating CCHNs viewed Better Beginnings as a valuable and important program. The majority of CCHNs made positive comments, including “it’s extremely important”, “it’s very important”, “it’s a very positive thing” and “it’s all good. All parents will embrace it. I haven’t any problems with that”. One CCHN also found that the program to be a form of early intervention, stating “I think it’s preventive, isn’t it. We’ve got kids with delayed speech and the earlier you do something the less problems you’re going to have and the cost-wise, I’m sure it’s effective”. One CCHN, however, did not think the program was as valuable for families in her area, feeling it may be more beneficial for families identified ‘at risk’ of education failure.

As this particular CCHN had previously acknowledged that she had not attended any Better Beginnings training or examined the contents of the Better Beginnings toolkit, it is possible that she was not fully aware of how the program could benefit her current clients: encouraging shared-reading and engagement between family members.

In describing their roles in the Better Beginnings program, all of the eight participating CCHNs were involved in distributing the Better Beginnings toolkits to parents, either at the child’s 6 to 8 week old check-up or 3 to 4 month old check-up. In addition, six disclosed that they had been involved with the Better Beginnings program since its inception in their respective communities, which varied from eighteen months to more than three years. The remaining two CCHNs had only been involved in the program for the past eighteen months.

Further to this, all participants acknowledged that they maintained contact with librarians at their local library, either through emails, phone-calls, or meeting regularly and engaging in informal talk, to ensure they received an ongoing supply of Better Beginnings toolkits. Six of the CCHNs considered maintaining contact with librarians to be extremely important. Comments made by these CCHNs included “It's really important”, “It's extremely important. It really builds a good relationship with this community” and “I don’t think it could run without liaisons with the library staff and I just think they couldn’t do it without us”. One CCHN further elaborated on how these liaisons impacted on the community, stating:

- It's being collaborative, so many families feel really committed and part of the community, so it really builds on and gives them something to move on to and the response to the library has been overwhelming. They just love it as a resource.

Another CCHN also explained how her long-term involvement in the program had contributed to her developing and strengthening her liaisons with the library, in comparison to other CCHNs in her community, commenting:

- Probably some of the other nurses that haven’t been here as long as me don’t have that liaison, because I also do the new Mum’s Group, which are on a Thursday afternoon. We have the mums over four consecutive Thursdays and she (the librarian) will come for about half to three-quarters of an hour and talk about the
library facilities, not only for little babies, but for Mums themselves”.

In contrast, however, two of the CCHNs, once again from the same community, held a different perspective on the importance of liaising with other professionals, stating “We don’t liaise with other professionals in terms of Better Beginnings”, indicating that they had not considered their contact with library staff to be a form of professional liaison.

When asked if being involved in the Better Beginnings program had any impact on their work, most participating CCHNs agreed it did not really affect their work load, and actually supported what they were already doing. Comments included “Not really an impact on my work, it’s a message I’m delivering to parents anyway”, “I’ve always been pro book anyway. I’m a big book reader and my kids have always been book readers. So, I don’t think it has impacted on me that much” and “I’d say that it’s probably just reinforced what I’ve always felt that about early literacy, hard cover books and getting in with babies”.

One CCHN had found that her involvement in the program had proved rewarding, commenting “As far as me talking about those things, to me it’s positive, something nice, pleasant”. Another CCHN identified that distributing the Better Beginnings program had made her more aware of her priorities, stating “It probably makes me more aware of the need to get into things early with everything really”. Another CCHN explained how involvement in the Better Beginnings program had led to a change in her approach to promoting early literacy to parents:

Certainly, I think, since the beginning of the Better Beginnings program we talk about books more. I actually didn’t have any books in the Clinic and after I started the Better Beginnings program I did get some hard cover books to have on a little table for kids to look at. And quite often I do a little story with a two or three year old that’s been in the clinic and getting a bit restless, to demonstrate that children, if they’re given a bit of attention, will look at a book and that it’s a worthwhile thing to do. And I certainly can tell the children that have had contact with books by the way they pick up the book, open the pages, the eyes scan left to right, compared to the kids that come in and just chuck it on the floor. I’ve certainly tried to pick up on those families more.

In addition, another CCHN explained how involvement in distributing the program had the potential to limit her workload in dealing with future problems, commenting:

Better Beginnings may indirectly impact on my work. If Better Beginnings contributes to raising parental awareness and improving their skills and their baby’s development, then this may prevent me from having to put in a referral, later on in the child’s life.

For these CCHNs their involvement in the Better Beginnings was positive and rewarding, reinforcing their existing beliefs and supporting their work roles.

However, two CCHNs participating in this focus group, felt that promoting literacy was part of their role but sustaining the Better Beginnings program was more the library’s responsibility, with one stating:

Well, the only way you can make it more effective and sustainable is really, to me, that’s the librarian’s role up there. Where you’re actually sitting down in front of the group of Mums, like you’re doing Story time and really pushing aspects of how to read clearly. I don’t see that as our role, because, like we’ve both said, we’re doing it all the time in a more subtle way.

Once again, these two CCHNs had earlier disclosed that they had not received any training in Better Beginnings and had not been involved in distributing the program for as long as many of the other participating CCHNs, so may not have taken ownership of the program. In addition, their comments indicated that they were possibly feeling overwhelmed by their workload and the time constraints place upon them.

Comments made by the CCHNs reveal that they consider Better Beginnings to be a worthwhile program, supporting their existing beliefs regarding the importance of reading to children at an early age.
In some instances, their involvement in the program contributed to CCHNs placing a greater emphasis on early literacy in their work roles. Only two participants indicated that their involvement impacted negatively on their work load, citing time constraints and the view that the program was more the responsibility of the library, than theirs. Most participants had been involved in the program since its inception in their community, delivering the Better Beginnings toolkits, either at the child’s first or second visit to their health clinic. Further to this, all participants acknowledged that they maintained regular contact with library staff, with the majority considering the liaisons they made to be critical to the implementation of the program in their community.

**Parent Responses to the Better Beginnings Program**

All of the participating CCHNs commented how they had received favourable comments from parents receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit. The general consensus was positive: “All of them just love it, they’re just rapt”. “They react very positively, having a gift is lovely”, “Quite pleased, most like having a bag with goodies in it” and “They’re fairly positive, they’re actually getting something worthwhile”. Further to this, all CCHNs indicated that parents receiving the toolkit appreciated the gift book. One CCHN recounted how she had children returning to the clinic, now toddler age, still valuing and using the gift book:

> They absolutely love it. They just think it’s fantastic getting a book and I’ve had feedback from different people who’ve got two and three year olds. They’ve come back and said they’re still got their first book that they received and they just, really, really love it.

This same CCHN further explained on how receiving the toolkit, and the book in particular, impacted on families: “They just love having a book that they can read to their child, a simple book. It’s a chewable book as well. The other kids often read the book to the babies. I think it’s just been fantastic.”. This view was shared by three other CCHNs, who also perceived that by receiving the toolkit, parents were motivated to start engaging in early literacy practices, either through reading to their child or visiting the local library and attending the library sessions. As one CCHN commented:

> The impact will be positive. It promotes development and encourages interaction between the baby, their siblings and their parents. I also believe that it might give them ideas to join the library and attend Story time sessions, if not for the baby but maybe for older toddlers in their family. It might encourage families to access services they may not have thought of.

Another CCHN also commented on how receiving the Better Beginnings program had the potential to develop a wide range of skills in the child and their family, stating “it bring peoples together, doesn’t it: the language skills, the colour, the coordination, fine and gross motor skills, all of the stuff that we’re doing all the time really. So, it fits in very easily that way.” For these CCHNs the toolkit was considered to be a valuable resource.

In addition, five of the participating CCHNs recounted how the book, having “lots of pictures and little text”, could be used with indigenous families or with families where English was a second language. One CCHN found that the book became a learning tool for both the parent and child, stating:

> Fantastic, and even for some of the Mums where obviously English isn’t their first language. So they struggle with some of the literacy stuff if they’re migrants or refugees. But most of them really enjoy the books and I’ve had really positive response. They’ve actually started to learn to read with their children.

Another CCHN related how parents with low literacy skills could use the gift book, commenting:

> The books are very simple and it doesn’t matter if they’re not literate, they can make up their own stories. And I would also make up my own stories when I’m giving it as an example anyway. A lot of the books don’t have words, so it doesn’t really matter about that.

Two CCHN also encouraged her families to “make up their own stories to go with the pictures”. One of these CCHNs also acknowledged that “While multicultural books are good, maybe in the future it would be beneficial to have access to books in alternative languages” as she perceived that there was a specific group within her community that would
benefit from this. In contrast, the other CCHN explained that she had several books available in different languages, "We have got books in Vietnamese and most of the Vietnamese families know there are books available in Vietnamese... We did have some Arabic books, but they're available at the library... And I think there is also this one (holding up a book), this one is in English but it is available in Spanish." In further discussion one CCHN revealed that not all of these books were Better Beginnings resources or included in the toolkits, but that parents were made aware of that they were available at the local library.

The remaining three CCHNs found that catering for families from diverse backgrounds was not required in their respective communities, so they did not consider this aspect when delivering the program. Furthermore, none of the participating CCHNs indicated that they accessed pamphlets in different languages or bilingual resources. In addition, only one CCHN enlisted the services of a translator, who assisted in delivering the Better Beginnings message to parents attending the First Time Mothers Group.

Comments from CCHNs revealed that all consider parent responses to the Better Beginnings program to be positive. Not only was the program considered to promote early literacy, but also benefited language and general development, as well as fine motor and hand-eye coordination and bonding and family attachment.

In addition, CCHNs related how the book could be used as a tool to cater for families where English was a second language, and as a means of promoting literacy in toddlers and, in some instances, the mothers as well. Fewer commented on the availability of bilingual books or pamphlets in their communities, with several indicating that the provision of multi-cultural or bilingual resources in their respective communities was not an issue.

**Activities Associated with the Better Beginnings Program**

While participating CCHNs reported that they continued to see families at scheduled check-up appointments, most commented that they did not offer follow-up activities specifically related to the Better Beginnings program. Only one CCHN reported that she offered follow up activities "only if there is a problem", implying that the activities related to set tasks the parent could do at home, rather than being linked to the Better Beginnings program. All of the participating CCHNs, however, did reveal that they encouraged parents to participate in follow up activities either by joining a playgroup or attending the Better Beginnings sessions available at their local library.

In addition, several of the CCHNs offered First Time Mother/Parent Groups, where aspects relating to child development, including early literacy, were discussed. For those who ran these groups, one session was given to either taking parents to the library, where parents were encouraged to join the library and attend library sessions, or to the librarian coming to the Clinic and talking to the group. One CCHN recounted how the librarian was involved in her Mothers Groups, commenting:

I run the new Mums Groups and Pat (pseudonym), the children's librarian comes over to each group and talks to them and their babies are around eight weeks to four months old. So she comes and brings her trolley over. She brings half-a-dozen books about babies and about Mums health as well and she invites them there to the library, and we make sure they've all got the bags and stuff like that.

In discussing the popularity of these sessions the CCHN acknowledged that attendance was an issue, reflecting "People perhaps in this area because of a number of factors, say transport and time, don't go to a lot of groups. With my new Mums group I could have thirty people eligible to come and ten would turn up." In contrast, two other CCHNS felt that their Mothers Groups were well received in their local community.

Furthermore, only two CCHNs directly commented on the popularity and impact of the library sessions on families, with one indicating that Baby Rhyme Time was the most popular: "At the library the Baby Rhyme time one is really popular and they also make it as a get-together as well. And a lot of first-time parents actually join that group as well". This CCHN also
felt that parents valued the sessions because they were free and non-restrictive, stating "I think being free, not being forced to go along, not having to go along every week. Just being easy, easy going and also the story reading is just beautiful. They do a really good job of that". The other CCHN reflected that, although she couldn’t comment on the popularity of the sessions, she did feel they were of value to parents, stating: 

I wouldn’t know which are (the most popular and well attended) but there is an awareness out there as more Moms are taking them up… I think because it’s accessible, it’s free and it’s really just going back to the basics of reading. Not having to have a lot of gear or anything and just engaging earlier with the library.

These two CCHNs appeared to have developed an awareness of what was happening at their local library, in alignment with their earlier comments related to how important they felt it was to maintain liaisons between the two agencies.

Comments from the participating CCHNs reveal that while most CCHNs offered First Time Mother/Parents Groups for their clients, they were not directly involved in the Better Beginnings sessions offered at their local libraries. Few commented on the library sessions, other than to report that they generally appear well attended and support early literacy in the community.

Perceptions of the Better Beginnings Program
In reflecting on their perceptions of the Better Beginnings program three of the participating CCHNs considered the book to be the most valuable feature. In particular, these participants considered that the child receiving a quality resource to keep was of benefit, as was having something in the toolkit that attracted the parent’s attention. Comments included: “Getting the book, a really good book that they can keep for a lifetime… The three year olds that I see have still got it and they love it”, “I think the book personally, they really do love that. I do take the book out and give them a flick and certainly do endorse that it is sponsored by the local government” and “I actually think that the little book in there certainly gets parents in there looking at it”. This same CCHN then went on to discuss the value of the wall frieze, saying “I think some families really like the frieze chart and the ABC and rhymes on it. Some of the families particularly in my area wouldn’t use them… but I’m hoping that the parents that need it most would use them”.

Comments were also made that the most valuable feature of the Better Beginnings program was how the program promoted early literacy and impacted on families, with one CCHN perceiving that Better Beginnings was “Fostering positive interaction with a mother and a child”. Another found the most valuable feature to be “Making parents aware of how important it is to talk and read”. Similarly, another CCHN perceived the program was “bringing the importance of early literacy to babies at an early age”. In addition, this CCHN also reflected that “It is delivered at the right age, as any younger, for example, while in the hospital, the message would be lost”. Furthermore, one CCHN summed up the value of the Better Beginnings program by saying “It is all equally important, the information, the DVD, the book all complement each other”.

Regardless of what aspect of the program each CCHN most valued, all participants could recount additional benefits Better Beginnings held for those receiving the program. Four CCHNs identified that the program contributed to the child’s language and general development. Their comments included “Better Beginnings supports literacy, communication and self esteem” and “language and any other sort of development, reaching milestones, most things, it’s all incorporated”. One CCHN went on further to describe Better Beginnings influence on the bonding between parent and child, as well children’s behaviour, commenting:

Probably just their language, their fine motor skills and that sort of thing, but just their communication with their parents and parents spending one-on-one time with their kids basically. And also behaviour I suppose… teaching children how to sit down and how to care for books.

An additional three CCHNs also mentioned that the program promoted parents spending quality time with their child, one describing how she encouraged parents to develop a nightly reading routine:
The relationship building with the parents, that closeness, that bonding, early attachment, all those sorts of things: the child sitting on the knee, a nice time. It's a wind-down thing. I often talk about reading as part of the bedtime routine and language development.

Another CCHN also commented on that value of time spent together, stating “Just giving Mum or Dad time, just that closeness and just sharing a book. How much more precious can you get than that and really engaging with your children”.

Further to this, all participating CCHNs were positive in their comments regarding the Better Beginnings toolkit. Comments included: “As far as I know, I think it’s all good” “There is a lot of information in there but I think it’s all very good and I’m quite happy with it” and “Very good, it covers everything”. One CCHN also noted a change in the contents, with the toolkit “having more variety of books now”. One CCHN considered this to be an improvement, as in the past she had had to swap books between packs to ensure that the sibling of an older child didn’t receive the same book, or a that baby girl didn’t receive a book (Trucks) which she considered was more suited to the baby boys.

In addition, one CCHN admitted that she probably put too much information in the pack, as she also included some of the Clinic’s own pamphlets on first-time parents group and the sleep program, but she went on to clarify that “I’ve heard that a lot of parents find that really interesting and informative, so if that’s what they say, then that’s fine. But everything else in the pack is great!” However, another found that the pack was “good” and particularly liked the information about the library, indicating that she perceived the toolkit to be a valuable resource.

Furthermore, all of the participating CCHNs found that parents appreciated the Better Beginnings toolkit, commenting “They love it!” and “It’s very important, you cannot put a price on its value”. Four of the participating CCHNs also commented that if a toddler was present they encouraged the toddler to read the book to the baby, although, as one CCHN reflected “I sometimes think they (the toddler) usually think it’s theirs because toddlers think everything is theirs, and I’m wondering if the baby gets a look-in on the book sometimes”. Such comments indicated that the CCHNs were aware that the resources were shared and used within the families receiving the toolkit.

Comments made by the participants reveal that the gift book and the message of promoting early literacy to families are perceived to be the most valuable features of the Better Beginnings program. Once again, participating CCHNs nominated language, motor and general development as being additional benefits for families participating in the program, as well as bonding: developing “that closeness” between parent and child. Furthermore, CCHNs indicated that parents, and in particular toddlers, respond well to the toolkit, perceiving that the Better Beginnings resources had benefits for the whole family, and not just the baby receiving the toolkit.

Sustaining Better Beginnings Program

The participating CCHNs were also asked about sustaining Better Beginnings in their communities, many indicating that early literacy was being actively promoted in their community. One CCHN recounted how parents in her community appeared to value literacy and engaged in activities enhancing their child’s literacy, stating:

In my community the parents I mainly see consider literacy is very important and education is very important. The children I mainly see do have access to books, are taken to libraries and playgroups and the socialization and language is important to parents.

Similar comments were made two CCHNs, working in another community, finding that “there’s quite a bit happening”. A further two CCHNs were also aware that attendance at their local library was increasing, commenting:

It’s hard to say but I think there is a real growth in the library, not just because we’ve suddenly built a new library... they’re just very welcoming and friendly and just engaging more families... I think change is happening, but they’re non-threatening and really being used.
I think they are in our community anyway. There's so many people going to the library now and read books and sit and read books, kids from eighteen months to fifteen. I guess I see more and more in the library.

In addition, one CCHN found that the Better Beginnings message was being extended in her community: "bringing the importance of early literacy to everyone's mind, not just this generation we are reaching now".

Another CCHN indicated that there was "a bit of a gap" in her community as "no one else is giving out Better Beginnings and the child health nurses do not see everyone". Consequently, this CCHN perceived that up to ten percent of the children in her community were not receiving the Better Beginnings message. Further to this, when asked, some of the CCHN's indicated that they are aware of or involved in a range of literacy activities in their community involving Better Beginnings.

Participating CCHNs were also asked for their thoughts about any changes or improvements that could contribute to the sustainment of the Better Beginnings program. Two participating CCHNs, as mentioned previously, considered that the program was more the responsibility of the librarian than theirs. These CCHNs perceived their role in the program was to support the parent and allow others to extend the parent's learning, stating "I see our role as more supporting Mum and helping her so that then she can cope. You need her in the right space, so that she's able to do it. That's a big start, and then once you've got her there then she can do these extras".

In addition, one CCHN thought that no changes to the program were necessary, "just to keep supplying it. I think it's good". Another CCHN suggested that she would like to see a height chart included in the toolkit and possibly "bigger separate friezes, with the alphabet letters on it".

Comments were also made on the library sessions offered by their local libraries. One CCHN related that the library offered a session, where a speech therapist attended and noted that few parents attended the session, stating "They don't really want to go along to that, they prefer to go to the Baby Rhyme Time, would be valued in that particular community.

Comments made by most of the participating CCHNs indicated that the Better Beginnings' message appeared to be sustained in their communities, they felt that parents were aware of the program and appreciated the message being delivered. In some communities, library attendance appeared to have increased. One CCHN, however, expressed concerns that not all families in her community were receiving the resources. In addition, comments were made by CCHNs about feedback they had received regarding library sessions, including the need for more. Overall, CCHNs indicated that they felt the program was operating effectively.

**Perceptions of Key Issues Sustaining the Program**

Participating CCHNs were also asked about issues related to sustaining the Better Beginnings program. Several CCHNs, reflected that the Better Beginnings toolkits were a key factor impacting on sustainment, with one CCHN finding that the toolkits "encouraged discussion about early reading and literacy". Another CCHN elaborated on this aspect, stating "Better Beginnings is very important as it has a role in the general development of the baby. The toolkit reminds parents and carers of what to do". Similarly, one CCHN felt that the toolkit provided a "fantastic opportunity to talk with the parents on the importance of reading to enhance their child's language and play". Feedback from parents attending their child's 3 to 4 month old appointment revealed that they "love the gift pack". These comments indicated that the quality of the resource is a key contributor to the sustainment of the program.

Furthermore, one CCHN commented on the supply and distribution process as being critical to the sustainment of
the program. This CCHN found that the distribution of the toolkits was implemented smoothly, when "the packs were given out at the appropriate age for the child, were easily organized and there was no problem with supply"; then the program was likely to remain sustainable. Likewise, another CCHN commented, "I think the variety of books is good now, the fact that they're all packed up, they're ready to use and we know quickly where we need to get more if we need them". For these CCHNs, the supply of the Better Beginnings resources was a key component of the program's sustainment.

Two CCHNs also spoke about the enthusiasm of those delivering the program in their respective communities. One CCHN considered that "maintaining the enthusiasm of the child health nurses" to be a critical factor and felt that her community was not an easy area to work in, which resulted in "perhaps not a lot of work satisfaction". This CCHN noted that her community experienced a constant change-over of Child Health Nurses and a high incidence of relief staff, which resulted in not everyone being familiar with the program and inconsistencies arising in how the program was delivered to families. These issues had the potential to impact on the sustainment of the program.

In contrast, another CCHN found that the positive relationships developed between agencies involved in distributing the program and the families receiving the program contributed to sustaining the program in her community. She commented that the "Library is so open and willing to work with clients". This positive approach resulted in her being able to build a "relationship with the library" as well as "building positive relationships with Mothers and babies through books". For this CCHN the liaisons formed between community child health nurses, librarians and community members were vital to the sustainment of the program.

Comments made by the participating CCHNs reveal that the quality of the Better Beginnings resources and the ongoing supply of resources are critical to sustaining the program, as is the ongoing commitment of those involved in the distributing the program to families in the communities: the community child health nurses and librarians. In addition, CCHNs perceived that the liaisons and relationships formed through implementing the program, between community child health nurses, library staff and participating families, were a key to Better Beginnings' continued success.
Impact of the Better Beginnings Program on Parents / Carers: Survey Responses

In 2007, parents with children under 2 months of age attending Community Child Health Clinics in four communities (pseudonyms Killamey, Mami, Bayview and Kangru) were asked to participate in a survey, prior to receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit and information about the program. When completing the Pre-Program Better Beginnings Survey (2007), parents were asked to describe their demographics and the activities they engaged their child in, as well as their attitudes, confidence and practices in relation to shared reading with their baby. They were also asked about library membership and use.

The same parents were contacted a year later and asked to complete the Post Program Better Beginnings Survey (2008). They were asked about program delivery and content, library membership and use and shared reading attitudes, confidence and practices. By comparing participants’ responses before and after they received the Better Beginnings program we were able to identify changes in attitudes, confidence and practices in relation to shared reading and library membership and use.

Altogether 300 parents/carers completed the Pre-Program survey and out of these 177 (59%) completed the Post Program survey. Occasionally fathers or other adults attended the community child health clinic with the new baby.

However, it was the person who identified themselves as the mother of the baby, who completed the pre and post Better Beginnings survey. Therefore, in the following section the participants are referred to as the mother of the baby.

As mothers completed the Post Program survey approximately 1 year after receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit, the term ‘child’ is used, where appropriate to indicate the growing maturity of the baby.

The Participants

Three hundred mothers from the Killamey, Mami, Bayview and Kangru communities completed the Pre-Program Better Beginnings (BB) Survey. The following section outlines demographical backgrounds.

Each question is represented by the abbreviation Pre-P Q (Pre-Program Question) followed by the number of the question.

Pre-P Q A1. When was your baby born?

The majority of children (70%) were born between March and September 2007, with a further 19% born between October 2007 and January 2008 and 11% born between August 2006 and February 2007.

![Parents’ Highest Level of Education](chart.png)
Pre-P Q A2 & A2a. Does your baby have any brothers or sisters?
Half of the mothers reported having only one child (50%), a further 30% had two children and 20% had three or more children.

Pre-P Q B1. What is your age group?
Nearly two-thirds of the participants (63%) were between 25 and 34 years of age; 19% between 18 and 21 years of age and 16% were between 35 and 44 years of age. The remaining 2% were either younger than 16 or older than 45 years of age.

Pre-P Q B2. & B3. What is the highest level of education completed by the baby’s mother and father?
Approximately a third (30%) of the participants had completed either Year 11 or 12 secondary schooling. Nearly another third (30%) had achieved some form of TAFE qualification. A further 23% had finished a university degree (16% undergraduate & 7% post-graduate). In addition, while 14% had completed Year 10 secondary education, only 1% indicated that they had completed primary school education or Years 8-9.

Pre-P Q B4 & B5. Is English the main language you speak at home? Is your baby regularly spoken to in a language other than English?
The vast majority of participants (91%) identified English as being the main language spoken in their homes. However, 17% of mothers also reported that their child was regularly spoken to in a language other than English, including Arabic, Vietnamese, Italian, Croatian and Spanish.

Pre-P Q B6. What is your country of origin?
The majority of participants (77%) were born in Australia, including 3% who identified themselves as being either Aboriginal or of Torres Strait Islander descent. The remaining 23% of participants came from a range of countries, including New Zealand, England, Sudan, Vietnam, Scotland, Philippines, Italy and Serbia.

When contacted in 2008, 177 of the original 300 participants agreed to complete the Post Program Better Beginnings Survey, indicating a 59% response rate to the Post Program Survey.

Post Better Beginnings Surveys
Parents who received the Better Beginnings program were surveyed in order to answer the following research questions:

- How effective is the Better Beginnings program from the participants’ perspectives?
- What factors seem to add or detract from the effectiveness of the Better Beginnings program?

The following findings are taken from the parent responses to the Pre and Post Better Beginnings program surveys. Under each section the survey question/s are provided, followed by a description of the parent responses recorded as a percentage of the sample (rounded to the nearest percent).

Each question is represented by the abbreviation Post P Q (Post Program Question) followed by the number of the question.

Receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit.
Parents were asked about who they received the Better Beginnings program from and the contents of the discussion that took place when they received the Better Beginnings toolkit. While many could remember what took place when
they received the pack, in each instance there was a small
group of mothers who had difficulty recalling what took place.

**Post P Q A1. Have you received the Better Beginnings toolkit?**

**Post P Q A3. Who did you receive the Better Beginnings toolkit from?**

99% of participants recalled receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit. Over three-quarters of the participants (77%) had received the toolkit from the Community Child Health Nurse (CCHN). An additional 12% had received the toolkit while attending the First-Time Mother’s Group at the CCHC, or while waiting to see the CCHN. The others received the toolkit from the library and either playgroups or child care centres.

**Post P Q A4. Did they tell you about the Better Beginnings program, library membership, library sessions and free DVD about reading to children?**

**Post P Q A5. Did they tell you about the Better Beginnings toolkit?**

**Post P Q A6. Did they show you how to use the gift book?**

Over two thirds (68%) of mothers could remember being told about the library membership and 52% recalled being told about the library sessions. More mothers (72%) recalled being told about the BB toolkit and a third could remember being shown how to use the gift book.

**Post P Q A7 & A8. Since receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit do you ever read children’s books to your child?**

**Post P Q A8. If no, do you think your child is too young to be read to?**

Almost all participants (85%) reported that since receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit they read to their child. 14% of parents/carers indicated that they already read to their child before they received the Better Beginnings toolkit. In total, 98% of mothers surveyed read to their child. Of the three mothers who did not read to their child, two thought their child too young to be read to.

**Perceived Influence of Better Beginnings Program on Reading Practices**

Parents were asked about how much they thought the Better Beginnings program had influenced their reading practices. The majority of mothers reported that involvement in the program had a positive impact on their reading practices.

**Post P Q B1. Overall, about how much do you think the program has changed each of the following:**

*How often you read to your child?*

*How you communicate with your child?*

**Recall of the discussion when receiving the BB program**

![Diagram showing recall of discussion for different topics](image-url)
Perceived Influence on Reading Practices

- Reading to older children: 20% quite a bit, 60% a great deal, 20% little.
- Others reading to child: 40% quite a bit, 60% a great deal, 0% little.
- Communicating with child: 20% quite a bit, 80% a great deal, 0% little.
- Child requesting a book: 20% quite a bit, 80% a great deal, 0% little.
- Reading to your child: 20% quite a bit, 80% a great deal, 0% little.

How often your child asks for a book to be read? How often other people read with your child? How often you read with older children?

Over two-thirds (70%) of the mothers reported that Better Beginnings had changed how often they read to their child. Of these mothers, over 50% felt that program had influenced them a great deal or quite a bit and almost 20% felt the program had influenced them a little, in that they now read more often to their child.

This is significant as increased reading may have influenced the child’s interest in reading, as almost 60% of mothers reported an increase in how often their child appeared to request a book to be read to them.

Similarly, 70% reported that Better Beginnings had influenced how they communicated with their child, including reading and talking more and watching less television. Of these parents, again over 50% felt the program had influenced their communication with their child a great deal or quite a bit.

Furthermore, almost two-thirds of the mothers (60%) felt the program influenced how often others read to their child. Of these parents, 38% perceived the program had impacted a great deal or quite a bit and 22% a little on encouraging others to read to their child.

Finally, over a quarter of the mothers (30%) also reported that Better Beginnings had increased how often they read to their older children.

Perceived Usefulness of Receiving the Better Beginnings Program

Parents were asked about the usefulness of the discussion about the Better Beginnings program and what they thought about the content of the toolkit. They were asked about how much they had used the resources, such as the book, nursery rhyme chart and the DVD and if the information in the pamphlets had been useful.

Post P Q C1. Now think about the contents of the Better Beginnings toolkit. How useful was each of the following:

- The discussion?
- The parent information pamphlet?
- The book suggestions pamphlet?
- The Let’s Read DVD or the Rhyme Time DVD?

Over half of the mothers surveyed found the discussion with the person from whom they received the Better Beginnings toolkit (i.e. community child health nurse, librarian, day care carer) to be either extremely useful or quite useful (58%). Similarly, over two thirds of mothers reported that they found the parent information pamphlet in the toolkit to be either extremely useful or quite useful (68%). Likewise, 65% of mothers surveyed found the book suggestions pamphlet in
the toolkit either extremely useful or quite useful. In contrast, fewer participants (37%) reported that watching the DVD was either extremely useful (8%) or quite useful (29%).

Post P Q C2. If you have watched the Let's Read DVD how many times have you watched it?
Over a third of the mothers surveyed (40%) indicated that they had watched the Let's Read DVD in the Better Beginnings toolkit. For those who had watched the Let's Read DVD, the range was from 1 to 50 times, with the average being 3 times.

Post P Q C3. Your toolkit also had a gift book, do you remember the name of the book?
Post P Q C4. Have you read this book to your child?
Q C4a. If yes, how many times?
Q C4b. If yes, did you like the book?
Q C4c. If yes, did your child like the book?

Over two-thirds of the mothers surveyed (68%) could recall the name of the gift book they received in the Better Beginnings toolkit. While most recalled receiving Baby Ways, others also reported receiving books about trucks, colours, kittens and puppies.

Significantly, almost every mother reported reading the book.
to their child (93%). Mothers reported reading the book to their child from between 1 to 99 times, the average being 26 times. In addition, the vast majority of mothers surveyed also revealed that they (94%) and their child (93%) liked the gift book.

Post PQ5. Have you read any of the other books in the Better Beginnings’ Book Suggestions pamphlet?

Post PQ6. If yes, where did you get the Better Beginnings’ recommended books from?

Almost a third of mothers surveyed (29%) reported that they read other books recommended in the Better Beginnings pamphlet, ranging from 1 to 20 books, the average being 4 books. For those mothers who had read the recommended books, they acquired them from the library (13%) and a range of other sources, including friends (14%), bookshops (6%), families (5%), supermarkets (3%). Several mothers commented that they already had some of the recommended books.

Post PQ7. Your toolkit also had a nursery rhyme chart, have you used this with your child?

C7a. If yes, how many times?
C7b. If yes, did you like the nursery rhymes?
C7c. If yes, did your child like the nursery rhymes?

Almost half of the mothers (42%) indicated that they used the nursery rhyme chart from the Better Beginnings toolkit, ranging from 1 to 99 times, with the average being 28 times. All of these mothers indicated that they and their child liked the rhymes.

Library Membership and Attendance since Receiving Better Beginnings Program

Participants were asked about their library membership, library visits and attendance at library sessions associated with the Better Beginnings program. Mothers were also asked to comment on the library sessions and the services they received from librarians.

Post PQ D1. Since receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit have you joined the local library?

D1a. If yes how often do you go to the public library?
D1b. If yes, do you borrow books for your child?

Since receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit, over a quarter of mothers (28%) reported that they had become library members. The new library members reported that they were likely to visit the library on a monthly basis (38%), a fortnightly basis (29%), or weekly (12%) basis. The others reported that although they had taken out library membership, they found it hard, for a variety of reasons to visit the library. However, over 60% of mothers who were new library members reported borrowing books for their child since receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit.

Library Membership

![Library Membership Chart]

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School of Education, Edith Cowan University
**Post P Q 02.** Since receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit have you taken out library membership for your child?

**D2a.** If yes, how often does the child go to the public library?

**D2b.** If yes, does your child borrow books?

Significantly, 23% of mothers reported that they had taken out library membership for their child since receiving Better Beginnings. Only 4% of mothers reported that their child was a member of the library before they received Better Beginnings. In total, 27% of the children belonging to Post Program participants were members of their local library.

Of those who had taken out library membership for their child over half reported that their child goes to the library once a month, 13% reported that their child goes once every two weeks and almost a quarter (20.5%) reported that their child goes to the library once every week. Given the difference between the weekly visits by the mother and child, this suggests that the child goes to the library with another adult.

**Post P Q 03.** If you and your child were already members of the library before receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit since receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit how often do you go to the library?

**Post P Q 04.** Does your child borrow less items, about the same number of items or more items?

For those mothers (34%) who were already members of the library prior to receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit, over a quarter (27%) reported going to the library more often after receiving Better Beginnings. In addition, over a third of mothers (35%) who were members of the library reported that their child borrowed more items after receiving Better Beginnings.

**Post P Q 05.** Have you taken part in any library activities linked to Better Beginnings and how useful were these activities?

**Post P Q 06.** Please add any comments about the activities.

Less than a quarter of the mothers reported that they attended the Baby Rhymetime (10%) or Storytime sessions (17%) at the library and only a small percentage of mothers had attended Parent Workshops (9%). However, mothers who had attended the sessions, found the sessions to be either extremely useful or quite useful (Rhymetime 66%; Storytime 67%; Parent Workshops 32%). Positive comments made by mothers included “I enjoyed it,” “I found Rhymetime excellent,” “I wish it was on every week,” “Good fun, everyone has a sing and dance,” “The staff are good, always so friendly” and “I only went to one, but it was very useful.”

Parents also commented on the reasons why they hadn’t attended the library sessions, or had only been once or twice to the sessions. In particular, several mothers mentioned...
Perceptions of the Library Sessions

![Perceptions of the Library Sessions](image)

time-related issues such as "They're at inconvenient times," "I'm working so I don't have time" "They're in the middle of sleep time" and "I'm too busy to go to the library." Comments were also made about the age-appropriateness of the sessions, including "I feel he is too young at the moment" and "Still too young for Storytime, he wouldn't sit still." Mothers also mentioned location issues such as "Parking is a nightmare, a lot of construction going on" and "I don't like the area where the Library and Clinic are situated."

The quality of the library sessions was commented on: "The session was more beneficial for a three year old," "It should have more songs" and "It depends on who is running it, sometimes it was disorganized and the leader didn't lead." Mothers also commented on personal circumstances, including "My husband is the main caregiver and he felt uncomfortable going to Rhymetime, as it was all women and their babies" and "I have 3 children so it is too chaotic to take them all to the library together."

Post P Q D7. When visiting the library did the librarian do any of the following: encourage you to take out library membership for your child, show you where the age appropriate books were, show you the library facilities, promote the Better Beginnings library activities?

On the whole mothers found librarians to be very helpful. Mothers who visited the library reported that librarians encouraged them to take out membership (41%) and promoted the library sessions (51%). Mothers were also shown the location of age appropriate books (47%) and the library facilities (41%).

Perceived influence of the Better Beginnings program on Attitudes and Beliefs

Mothers were asked about changes to their confidence in reading to their child, their beliefs about importance of shared reading and their child's interest and enjoyment of books after receiving Better Beginnings. They were also asked if receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit had influenced their beliefs, including babies enjoying and benefiting from books, rhymes and songs, and being able to join the library. In addition, participants were invited to identify any other changes to their attitudes and beliefs. The majority of mothers revealed that their confidence in shared reading practices had increased and that receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit had a positive impact on their early literacy beliefs and practices, leading to an increase in shared reading with their child. Mothers also reported an increase in their child's enjoyment and interest in books.
Post P Q E1. Since receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit how confident do you feel about sharing books with your child?

Post P Q E2. Since receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit do you think your confidence in sharing books with your child has decreased, stayed the same or increased?

Almost two thirds (62%) of participants reported that their confidence had increased since receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit. The majority of mothers (81%) now felt very confident in reading to their child, an additional 17% felt quite confident. Only 2% of participants reported that they did not feel very confident or not at all confident.

Post P Q E3. Has Better Beginnings influenced your beliefs about the importance of sharing books with your child?

E3a. If yes, how important do you feel sharing books with your child is now?

Over three-quarters of the mothers (79%) thought that receiving the Better Beginnings program had influenced their beliefs about the importance of sharing books with their child. Almost all mothers (96%) reported that they now feel that sharing books with their child is very important.

Post P Q E4. Has Better Beginnings changed your child’s interest in books?

E4a. If yes, how interested is your child in books now?

Post P Q E5. Since receiving Better Beginnings has your child’s enjoyment of reading books changed?

E5a. If yes, how much of the book does he/she enjoy being read now?

Over two thirds of the mothers (70%) felt that their child’s interest in books had changed since receiving the Better Beginnings program. Of these 74% indicated that their child was now very interested and 20% indicated that their child was quite interested in books. In the Pre-Program survey, only 10% of the participants indicated that their child was very interested in books and 38% reported that their child was not interested at all.

A change was also evident in how much of a book the child appeared to enjoy. Over three-quarters of mothers (83%) felt their child’s enjoyment of being read to had increased. Over half these mothers reported that their child enjoyed all of the book (72%) or half of the book (25%). In contrast, responses to the Pre-Program BB Survey indicated that less than half of participants’ children enjoyed all (19%) or half of the book (24%).
Post PQ E6. Has the Better Beginnings toolkit/Program changed your opinion on any of these ideas:

The idea that babies can enjoy and benefit from books at an early age?

The idea that babies can enjoy and benefit from rhymes and songs at an early age?

The idea that babies can join the library at any age?

Post PQ E7. Has the Better Beginnings toolkit changed your opinion in other ways?

Mothers indicated that the Better Beginnings program had been influential in changing their opinions about early literacy. Over half of the participants (54%) reported that Better Beginnings impacted on their belief that babies could enjoy and benefit from books at an early age. Furthermore, nearly two-thirds (65%) thought that Better Beginnings influenced their awareness that babies could benefit from rhymes and songs. The majority of mothers (84%) also felt Better Beginnings was instrumental in informing them that babies can join the library at any age.

Many mothers also made additional comments about the positive impact of Better Beginnings had on their attitudes and beliefs about early literacy. Thirty participants described how Better Beginnings reinforced their existing beliefs. Comments included “It cemented how I already thought,” “It reinforced you were doing the right thing,” “I always felt stupid reading to her, now I know it’s the right thing to do” and “My older son didn’t appear to be coming along with speech, so I started reading more and more and can see the progress, particularly between 6 and 9 months. I always knew reading was important to read books to my kids, but this has opened my eyes to how important and how much.”

Participants also commented about how Better Beginnings had encouraged them to start reading earlier to their child, with one stating “It changed how early I began reading” and another “It encouraged me to be consistent and read early. I realised my child didn’t need to be able to read to enjoy a book.”

Parents also indicated other ways Better Beginnings had been influential, “It gave me a tool (book) straight away to use,” “It had just made me more aware that I should be making more of an effort to read to him,” “If I didn’t get the pack he might not even own a book. I didn’t know whether he would get anything out of it beforehand,” “It encouraged my partner to read to our baby,” “It has encouraged me to have a higher value of books and reading time” and “It showed me that there is a wealth of information that is out there, like Story time at the library. I was surprised at how much a little baby can enjoy a book.”

Influence of the Better Beginnings Program on Early Reading Practices

Parents were then asked questions about their shared reading practices, including number of books suitable for reading to their child at home, who read to their child, and how often, and the reading behaviours they engaged in when reading to their child. Responses indicate that there was an increase in the number of suitable children’s books in their home and marked increases were evident in the frequency of those reading to the child and the child’s level of engagement in the shared reading experience.

Post PQF1. How many books altogether do you have in your home?

Mothers reported that the number of books suitable in their home for reading to their child ranged from 2 books to 999, the average being 49 books. The most common response made by participants was 50 books (19%). Interestingly, Pre-Program participants had indicated that number of suitable books in the home ranged from 0 to 300 and an average of between 15 and 20 books, with 44% of Pre-Program respondents indicating there were no books suitable for reading to their child in their home at that time.

Post PQF2. How many days each week do you read books to your child?

Two thirds of mothers (70%) reported that they read to their child on a daily basis. In contrast only 23% of Pre-Program participants reported reading to their child each day. In total, 97% of Post program mothers indicated that they read to their
Making a Difference

The report on the evaluation of the Better Beginnings family literacy program 2007-2009

Who reads to your child?

Post-P QF3. Who else reads to your child?

Nearly three-quarters of Post Program mothers (70%) indicated that the child’s father read to the child, 23% on a daily basis. In the Pre-Program data less than half of the participants (42%) reported that the father read to the child and then only 3% read on a daily basis.

Post program mothers reported an increase in other people who read to the child, including siblings, grandparents, babysitters and child-carers and others such as family members and friends.

Mothers who had more than one child reported that 72% of siblings read to their child. In addition, Post program data indicated that 40% of grandparents read to the child.

Post P QF4. In the past week have you or someone in your family:

- Shared a book with your child?
- Discussed/talked about the story or pictures with your child?
- Told a story, not from a book, to your child?
- Used a language other than English when reading to your child?

The vast majority of mothers (94%) reported that since receiving Better Beginnings they or someone in their family
had shared a book with their child in the past week. Only 55% of mothers when asked the same question in the Pre-Program survey reported sharing a book with their child.

In addition, almost all Post Program participants (89%) had discussed the story or talked about the pictures with their child, and 60% reported telling a story, but not from a book. When asked this in the Pre-Program survey, just over a third (39%) had discussed the story and talked about the pictures and told a story not from a book.

Nearly a quarter of Post Program participants (24%) also reported that they had read to their child in a language-other-than-English.

Parents completing the Post Program Survey were asked questions about their shared reading practices which related to the parent information pamphlet they received in the Better Beginnings toolkit.

Post P QF5. Since receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit do you:

Choose a comfortable place and the right time to share a book together?

Hold the book within the baby’s visual range and turn pages slowly?

Let your baby hold and play with board books?

Choose books with bright pictures and small amount of print?

Move your finger under the words, from left to right as you read?

Read stories aloud with expression?

Choose stories with a lot of rhyme and repetition?

While reading to you child do you point to pictures and name them or describe them?

While reading to your child do you ask questions about the pictures, encourage your child to predict what will happen next in the story, and, read and re-read favourite stories?

Almost all mothers participating in the Post Program survey indicated that they found a comfortable place to sit (96%), held the book in the child’s visual range (97%) and let the baby hold the book (97%). Mothers also indicated that they chose books with bright pictures (97%), read stories aloud with expression (97%), and while reading pointed to the pictures and named or described them (95%). Most also chose books with a lot of rhyme and repetition (89%). Two-thirds of the mothers (67%) also moved their finger under the words while reading to their child and over half (59%) asked questions about the pictures. Just over a third (35%) encouraged their child to predict what would happen in the
story. Almost all mothers reported re-reading their child’s favourite story (95%).

Post P QF6. When sharing books, does your child: point to the pictures, talk about the pictures, turn the pages of the book by himself/herself, join in with the reading, ask questions about the story, pretend to read, say what will happen next, point to words on the page?

Post Program mothers reported a marked increase in their child’s shared reading behaviour. Mothers reported that when sharing books their child pointed to the pictures (83%), turned the pages of the book by themselves (92%) and pretended to read (74%). More than half also indicated that their child talked about the pictures (64%) and joined in with the reading (61%). Mothers also reported that less frequently their child pointed to words on the page (31%), asked questions about the story (24%) or say what would happen next in the story (54%).

General comments about the Better Beginnings program.

Parents participating in the Post program **Survey were also invited to make general comments about the Better Beginnings toolkit and program. While not every parent participated in this section of the survey, many made comments that could be grouped together under common themes. The majority of comments made by participants were positive. In particular the book and information pamphlets were favourably received by many of the parents. In addition, mothers were able to identify potential areas for improvement, indicating a shared interest in the program. Parent comments are outlined below.

Post P QG1. What was the best thing about receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit?

Nearly half of the participants (49%) commented on the value of the gift book. While some just stated “The free book”, others expanded on this to say “The free book was a good start. The more books she has the better.” “Getting the book was a good starting place on what sort of books suit babies.” “The book wasn’t one I would normally choose, it had a teething ring. My daughter loved this and she would not have got it through my choice,” and “The book, it was a good book that she liked. It included a lot of good photos. I did not know that babies enjoyed looking at photos of other babies.” Several also mentioned that this was their child’s “first book,” with one parent stating, “The book was the first one she had, I was surprised how interested she was, so it prompted me to buy more.” Another parent described how the book prompted her to start reading to her child, “Receiving the book meant I could share it with my child without having to go out to the bookshop and buy one. We could get started right away.”
Over a quarter of the mothers (28%) also valued the information they received in the Better Beginnings toolkit, finding that the pack “Gives you useful information and resources about reading to children.” “It gave a helping hand and opened my eyes that babies of all ages can enjoy books,” “The ideas and giving us a head start on books she might enjoy and what sort of activities we do with her.” “It had basic information and was easy to understand” and “The fact that it points you in the right direction, that you should read to your child and what is appropriate to read.”

In addition, participants (14%) commented on the encouragement the Better Beginnings toolkit provided, they were “encouraged to read books” and “encouraged to get books.” Other comments included “It made me realise to read to him, I didn’t think to do so, being so young.” “It was an encouragement to do something positive, something enjoyable we could do together, straight away” and “It encouraged me to read more to her. I felt really silly reading to a month old but now I think it is fine.”

Fewer participants mentioned the OVO (6%), the nursery rhyme chart (4%) or the bag (3%). One parent stated “I enjoyed the Rhymetime OVO and learning the actions that go with each rhyme,” while another commented, “The book and OVO has stuff that could actually be used. The OVO still gets watched all the time by the kids.” Four mothers also found that “everything” about the Better Beginnings toolkit was good, “That it was free, it was just there!”

Comments about missing items related to not having individual resources such as the DVD, book or nursery chart in the Better Beginnings toolkit they received, although one parent humorously reflected that there were “No chocolates in the bag for mum.” Participant comments about the DVD varied, including “Haven’t looked at the DVD, don’t really do that sort of thing,” “The DVD took too long to get to the point” and “The DVD could have been more entertaining.” In contrast, one parent complained that her child watched the DVD repeatedly, commenting, “When my child watched the DVD over and over again. It was fantastic, really. I’m glad she enjoyed it.”

Post P OQ3. What would make the Better Beginnings toolkit better?

Over two-thirds of the participants (70%) did not respond to this section of the survey, presumably because they could not think of any improvements to made to be to the Better Beginnings toolkit. A further 30 participants (17%) commented “nothing,” “not applicable” or “can’t think of anything.” As one participant recounted “Really good as it was. Whoever put it together did a really good job” and another, “I think it had pretty much everything I needed in it. It covered everything.”

For those who did offer suggestions, their comments related to books (8%), nursery rhymes (5%), information (5%), distribution (3%), follow-ups (3%), the library (3%) and extra or different inclusions. Several suggested “More books” or “More books, less pamphlets.” In addition, requests were made to include more nursery rhymes or make the nursery rhyme chart more sturdy. “More examples for parents, that
is, more rhyming rhymes." "Sample nursery rhyme tapes for words and music," "More nursery rhymes, flash cards to store, or laminate posters" and "The nursery rhyme chart being more sturdy, laminated or something." Several suggestions were made in regards to the presentation of the information, including "If the pamphlets were in a folder," "the information pamphlets- less words, brightly coloured, more pictures, to stick up on fridge," "A booklet form I would read" and "less paper, keep it simple, book and DVD only." In contrast, two mothers requested more information, stating "More education on how to read to a child, for those without experience" and "More developmental information, what studies were used, so a mother can go to them and read more."

Parents also suggested either receiving the Better Beginnings resource at a different time or having the information being presented orally. Comments related to the timing of the distribution included "Getting it maybe at a different time...I didn't take in much information at the time due to lack of sleep" and "Receiving it at 12month." Comments related to the presentation of the program included "Having someone that comes and visits, being a remote community, that keeps us to date with information for our children" "Having receive it with the information presented to you orally, rather than all the pamphlets" and "If someone could go through the pack. We were lucky we talked to the research assistant about reading and we were already doing it, child health nurses just don't have the time to discuss the importance with people." In addition, six mothers requested a "follow-up" when their child was older, stating "Maybe a follow-up. They were so young when we got the first pack" and "More information on good books at 12 months."

Several mothers also made suggestions about the Better Beginnings library sessions, including the timing and availability of the sessions, "Having the chance to do Rhymetime more" and "Rhymetime is at the same time, every session. I would like to go but it is not possible." Mention was also made about availability of recommended Better Beginnings books at the library, "For the library to make sure that they have all the books in the book suggestion pamphlet." In addition, one parent mentioned being aware of the availability of another complimentary early literacy program at the library, stating, "The knowledge that if you went to the library you would then receive the Let's Read pack when you joined."

Finally, mothers made suggestions for other possible inclusions in the Better Beginnings toolkit, such as "Flash cards, something tactile that they can touch and feel," "Bright toys or things" and "A simple fridge magnet stating something like—Reading just one book each day will set your child up for life."

Post P Q64. Any other general comments?
Given the range of comments made by participants in this section of the survey, it proved difficult to tally how many mothers held similar beliefs. Consequently, the percentages provided are only a rough guideline as to frequency of response.

Many of the comments made by mothers in this section related to the age of their child and what developmental stage they were at (15%). For example, several commented how responsive their child was to books, such as "My baby is at the stage where she wants to turn the pages herself," "My son's birthday is coming up and I've asked my family to buy books as presents" and "All books go straight in my 9 month aids' mouth."

Some mothers also explained why they weren't reading as often as they would like to their child (4%), or hadn't visited the library regularly or attended library sessions associated with Better Beginnings (8%). Several of these mothers reported that they had tried to read to their child, but the child was "Yet to sit still and listen to a story." In addition, some mothers preferred to buy books, rather than borrow, as "All books go straight into the mouth." Others had returned to work in a fulltime capacity, which limited their opportunities to visit the library or attend library sessions. Others indicated that they had moved and hadn't been in touch with their local library.

Those who made comments about either the Better Beginnings program (16%) or early literacy and shared
reading practices (6%) were generally enthusiastic and positive. Mothers commenting on the Better Beginnings Program reflected that it was a "good" program and of benefit to the community. Comments included: "A good idea and would like to see it keep going," "it's really good in the community, as a program for people new to the area," "I had just joined the library when I received the pack. I go regularly and love the library, really impressed with them" and "I think that it is great that Better Beginnings promotes the importance of reading to children, especially in this area."

Parents also spoke about the influence of the Better Beginnings program on their attitudes and shared reading practices (6%), stating "It has made me read to my child. We started at four weeks of age," "It was a good kick start. It made me start reading," "We started reading a lot earlier," "I tell stories in Vietnamese and read to my children in English. I only started reading English after receiving Better Beginnings" and "In the beginning I never thought of reading to the children. It has really boosted my confidence, I was a non-reader. I like to give them books to play with so they get a feel for them and are comfortable around them."

Several also extolled the benefits of shared reading and the shared reading practices they engaged in with their child (6%). Comments included: "My child learns a lot from pictures," "I have four children, all active boys. Two have speech impairment and I have learnt that reading books benefits the whole family," "I read to the three older kids every night time, before bed," "My family loves to read," "I'm an avid reader with big ideas on reading to my child. I feel it is important to help vocabulary develop" and "You need to learn to read. It helps you with every other subject and if you don't read, well you struggle with everything else in life."

**Summary of the Survey Findings**

In general, the majority of mothers indicated that they valued shared reading and perceived there were benefits in reading to their child from a young age. Findings from the Post Program BB survey suggest that receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit had a strong impact on mothers beliefs about early reading, as well as their shared reading practices. Even taking into account that their children were now up to a year older, supposedly more mature and responsive when engaging in early literacy practices, the findings suggest that the Better Beginnings program has been influential in shaping and reinforcing participants' beliefs and practices.

Parents revealed that they valued receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit. They were appreciative of the "free book" and information about shared reading. At a time when they were still adapting both physically, mentally and emotionally to the birth of their child, the majority of participants could still recall who had given them the toolkit and the contents of the discussion that had taken place. Further to this, the majority of participants perceived that the discussion was useful, as was the contents of the Better Beginnings toolkit, including the parent information pamphlet and the book suggestion pamphlet. Two-thirds could remember the actual title of gift book and almost all mothers reported that they had read the book to their child, they liked the book and the child liked the book. In addition, while fewer had watched the DVD or used the nursery rhyme chart, those who had had tended to use them multiple times, indicating that these mothers hold some value to these resources. Furthermore, almost a quarter of the participants had read books to their child from the Better Beginnings book suggestion pamphlet, those who did could recall where they sourced the books and had, on average, read more than four of the books on the recommended list.

When asked about the influence of the Better Beginnings program on their early reading practices, over half to two thirds of the mothers reported that the program had impacted on how often they read to their child, how often their child requested a book and how they communicated with their child. Further to this, many mothers perceived that the Better Beginnings program also influenced how often others read to their child and how often they read to their older children.

Since receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit, approximately a quarter of the mothers indicated that they had taken out library membership for themselves and their child. In addition, nearly ten percent of the participants had visited the library more often. For those who frequented the library,
they also reported an increase in how often their child visited the library. The majority of mothers who visited the library found the librarian to be very helpful and informative about library membership and library sessions associated with the Better Beginnings program. Many mothers were shown the library facilities and where age appropriate books were located.

However, the findings reveal that a relatively low percentage of mothers surveyed had attended library sessions, a number of issues were raised about the logistics of getting to the library, timing and suitability of the sessions. Those who did attend found the sessions to be stimulating and provided good examples of ways of engaging babies in books, songs and nursery rhymes.

The findings also suggest that nearly two-thirds of the mothers surveyed perceived that receiving the Better Beginnings program had a positive impact on their confidence in reading to their child, with the majority now feeling very confident. In addition, most felt that Better Beginnings had influenced their belief about the importance of reading and their child’s interest in books and enjoyment of books. Over half of the mothers also became aware of the value of reading books to babies from an early age and engaging the child in rhyme and songs. Furthermore, over three-quarters were informed that babies can join the library. Many felt that the program also reinforced their existing beliefs, encouraged them to start reading earlier to their child and provided a resource for reading.

The findings also indicate that since participating in the Pre-Program Survey in 2007, more mothers had purchased books for their child and read to their child (Pre-Program 53%, Post Program 97%). Mothers also indicated that they were now more likely to read to their child on a daily basis (Pre-Program 23%, Post Program 66%). Further to this, fewer mothers thought that their child was now too young to be read to (Pre-Program 27%, Post Program 1%). In addition, other members of the family, including the child’s father, siblings and grandparents were more likely to read to the child, as well as those who had babysitters or attend child care facilities.

Parents also reported changes in their reading behaviours. Almost all mothers indicated that someone in their family had shared a story with their child in the past week, whereas just over half of Pre-Program mothers reported this practice occurring. Similarly, someone was more likely to have discussed the story and pictures (Pre-Program 39%; Post program 87%), told a story (Pre-Program 43%; Post Program 59%) or used a language other than English (Pre-Program 17%; Post Program 23%) when engaging in early literacy practices with their child.

The findings also suggest that the vast majority of mothers have followed and adopted the recommendations made in the Better Beginnings parent information pamphlet including, finding a suitable place and time to read to their child, holding the book appropriately, reading the stories with expression and allowing the child to hold the book and turn the pages. In addition, the vast majority of mothers indicated that they were selective in choosing books, based on bright pictures and the use of rhyme and repetition. Furthermore, when reading the book nearly all mothers read and re-read favourite books, as well as pointing to the pictures. Over half of the mothers also pointed to the words on the page and asked their child questions about the pictures or story. However, only a third of the mothers indicated that they asked their child to predict what would happen next, possibly due to the age and maturity of the child.

The majority of mothers also reported that since becoming involved in the Better Beginnings program, their child had become significantly more engaged in the shared reading experience. Mothers revealed that their child was more likely to point to and talk about the pictures, as well as turn the pages by him/her self. In addition, mothers reported increases in other behaviours, such as joining in with the reading, asking questions, pretending to read, pointing to words on the page, and predicting what will happen next. Once again, it is difficult to determine how much these changes can be attributed to natural maturation of the child, or how much may be attributed to participation in the Better Beginnings program. What is apparent, however, is that many children appear to have made gains and that they are engaging in shared reading.
Finally, mothers were asked to comment on the Better Beginnings program. The overwhelming majority made very positive comments about the program. Describing how the program had either encouraged them to read to their child or reinforced their existing beliefs. Furthermore, mothers were appreciative of receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit, in particular, the free book and the information on how to engage their child in shared reading. While comments were made by some about the amount of information and the quality of the DVD, the majority seemed to appreciate the information they had received and felt they had benefited from it. Several also expressed concern about missing items from their toolkit, further indicating that many mothers value receiving the toolkit. In addition, mothers were able to offer several suggestions in ways to improve the contents or delivery of the Better Beginnings toolkit, such as including more books or nursery rhymes, improving the quality of the nursery rhyme chart and the DVD and minimising the information. Suggestions also included distributing the toolkit when the child was older, delivering the information orally and offering a follow-up resource pack, or support visit, at a later date.

Overall, mothers participating in the Post Program Survey were positive in their support of the Better Beginnings initiative and the promotion of shared reading practices. Many mothers were able to identify how the program had reinforced their existing beliefs and encouraged them to start reading to their child at an age earlier than they had previously anticipated. Others felt that the program acted as a stepping stone, reinforcing their confidence in shared reading and providing them with the resources to “get started.” A few even acknowledged that the book they had received in the Better Beginnings toolkit was their child’s first, or something they personally would not have chosen, yet found it had become a much loved and valued item in their household. As one parent recounted, “It was a really nice thing to receive. A kick-up-the-pants to read to the kids more. I didn’t realise how important it was. And now we spend less time playing with toys and more time interacting together with rhymes, songs and books.”
Parent / Carer Case Study Interviews

Overview

To gain a greater insight into parent/carer perspectives of the Better Beginnings program selected mothers who completed the Pre (2007) and Post (2008) Better Beginnings surveys were invited to be case study participants in the second phase of the evaluation process. In total, forty mothers from the four communities (pseudonyms Kangru, Mami, Killarney and Bayview) agreed to participate in one-on-one in-depth interviews. They were asked to comment on receiving the program, the content of the toolkit and the impact of the program on their beliefs and practices about early reading and library membership and attendance. Further to this, participants were also invited to offer suggestions as to how the program could be modified to improve the quality of delivery and impact on families.

The Participants

Case study participants were chosen to represent a cross-section of the communities they came from. Consequently, the case study participant demographics were diverse. While all the interviewed mothers were mothers of children who had received the Better Beginnings toolkit, their ages ranged from 21 to 40 years of age. In addition, the mothers had varied levels of education, including four having left formal education after completing Year 10 secondary education, eight after Year 11, five after Year 12, nine having completed a TAFE qualification and eleven a university undergraduate degree. Furthermore, while the majority spoke English as their main language, nine revealed that they had come from a non-English background and spoke another language in their home. In one particular community (Mami) seven participants had come from other countries, including El Salvador, Italy, Malaysia, Macedonia and Sudan. These participants also spoke another language to their child, such as Spanish, Arabic, Macedonian, Mandarin or Vietnamese.

The family sizes of the case studies varied with nearly half of the cohort (18) having only one child in their family. A further eleven reported having two children, eight had three children and the remaining three participants had four, five or six children, respectively, in their families. At the time of the interviews their youngest child, the child who received the Better Beginnings toolkit, was between 8 and 18 months of age.

The majority of participants were interviewed in their home, with their youngest child present at the time of the interview. In one community (Kangru), however, nine of the mothers were interviewed at local community centre. Most participants reported that they had between 1 and 500 books in their home. Not all participants indicated how many of these books were suitable for their child’s viewing. Some participants, however, specifically mentioned that less than 50 of the books in their house were children’s books, one being the book they had received in the Better Beginnings toolkit. Over half of the mothers commented that their child was very interested in books.

Receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit

All of the case study participants spoke positively about the Better Beginnings program and remembered receiving the toolkit. The majority of mothers (35) had received the toolkit from the community child health nurse (CCHN) at their six to eight week check-up. The remaining five participants, all from the same community (Kangru), received the toolkit at the local Community Centre or through a home delivery.

Recall of the conversation which took place when mothers received the Better Beginnings toolkit varied, from being minimal, with a brief mention of the importance of reading, to a discussion about individual contents of the toolkit. However, several mothers were able to recall the conversation which took place in detail. Not only did they receive encouragement to commence reading to their child, but were informed of the benefits of engaging in early literacy practices and how they could assist their child’s development. Their comments included:

*Basically we were given it and they went through everything in the bag to encourage our children and us to read and to show them different books and colours. Just to get them used to us talking to them, expressing ourselves to them and teaching them at an early age*
and nursery rhymes and visiting the local library.

They showed me the bag and the books and everything that was in it... showing me that kids can use it at the ages they were. The child does not have to read to be able to look at a book, because you can look at the pictures.

I just think she explained how important it is for reading to kids, no matter what age. Just explained about the library and library facilities, and then gave us the bags.

It was about reading to the kids and how important it is for their learning, about reading and how to read, for children's reading and how that's working on improving reading and that sort of thing.

Several participants admitted that they could not recall if a conversation took place, or the specific content of what was said when they received the toolkit. Others indicated that their introduction to the program was brief and that they were left to view the contents of the toolkit by themselves. Their comments included:

- They sort of told us what was in there, but they did go through it in a great deal of detail, they really just handed it out.
- No, she didn’t show me, but she told me to go and read it.
- Nothing really, she just handed it over.

Regardless of the discussion which took place when the mothers were introduced to Better Beginnings, their response to the program was still overwhelmingly positive. Several made comments about including more books in the toolkit or extending the delivery of the program to include another distribution when their child reached twelve months of age.

The Book

All of the case study participants recalled receiving the gift book in their toolkit. While the majority had received “Baby Ways,” mention was also made of the books “Trucks” and “Colours.” Further to this, all mothers commented on sharing the book with their baby, many still continuing to read the book to their child. Case study participants praised the quality of the gift book. The diversity of the babies in “Baby Ways” was seen as very positive, with some mothers commenting on the high quality of the photographs and the appeal the mirror at the back of the book held for their child. The appropriate size and durability of the book was also mentioned. Comments included:

- I thought it was fantastic. First or all you had every colour in there, you had every size of baby in that some were a bit skinny, some were real plump. They all had happy faces. They were all doing something that was naturally a baby and they all looked at you so the cameraman or whoever did the photography was superb, I’d recommend him to anybody and the fact that my son actually sat on my lap for the whole minute and a half and just flicked through the faces, flicked through all of them and when he got to the end he just held it and giggled and laughed at himself (looking at the mirror) so I thought that was a really good first session.

- It’s good. It’s got cardboard pages and the clear pictures. Especially when they’re littler, for them to focus on and just have a look at where it’s not too much. We were reading that every day, several times a day.

- I sing the book to him actually, like this is the way the baby sings. He likes looking in the mirror. It was a good size for a baby to handle.

- I thought it was a good book for babies in particular because it didn’t have too many words and it was something that they’re interested in and it’s just easy to go from page to page and talk about each of the pictures and stuff like that.

Several of the mothers recounted the way in which they shared the book with their baby. All of the described interactions related to the information in the Better Beginnings pamphlet and DVD. Some mothers asked questions and encouraged their baby to repeat the words, point to the pictures and turn the pages of the book. Others
mentioned talking about and looking at the pictures together. Comments included:

I read it to him and we point out the babies while he’s looking at the babies and what they’re doing. He can see himself at the end.

I would just sit him on my lap and we’d show him and we’d be quite animated and show him the baby and make noises with it. And we even took it overseas with us and entertained him on the plane with it, so it’s quite a favourite of his.

I read the words, point to the pictures. There were babies splashing and that sort of thing... Sometimes it was just reading, sometimes it was pointing straight to the mirror.

One mother also explained that although she found reading in English difficult, she still tried to engage her child in shared reading, stating “She doesn’t stay still for long. I read the words. I’m not really good at English so I try and do my best and after I explain about the picture.” Two of the mothers who spoke languages other than English, expressed the opinion that it was difficult to “read” to young children, with one indicating that she was not sure whether to read and talk about the book in her own language or in English.

The Rhyme Chart
While most case study participants had received the nursery rhyme chart, less than half of the mothers (15) indicated that they used the chart. For those that did, they found that the chart prompted them to sing to their child and reminded them of the words to traditional rhymes. Several mothers revealed that they had placed the chart on the wall in the child’s bedroom and encouraged the baby to point to and choose rhymes from the chart. Their comments included:

I stuck it up in her bedroom and actually had to move it a few times because she was ripping it down. I was trying to get it at eye-level... But yes, we did use it. We were singing some of them.

I stuck it on the wall near the change table and I would sing the nursery rhymes, especially as she got older. If she was unsettled or whatever, I’d sing a song and getting to know the nursery rhymes again because I’d forgotten them, so I used that.

If he pointed to one, I’d sing him that one. It was fabulous!

Others identified that the chart acted as an introduction to English (for them) and was used by older siblings to engage with the child and to demonstrate their new reading skills. As one mother commented, “We sing the English ones, Incy Wincy Spider, Round and Round the garden. I mostly learnt them from my daughter (the older child).” These mothers felt that their children benefited from the experience of sharing rhymes, sometimes sung in the mother’s first language. Several mothers also indicated that the baby’s grandmother also sang rhymes to the child, often in their first language.

Furthermore, four participants reported that the chart had proved beneficial for their partners, the child’s father, acting as a prompt for those with low confidence or literacy skills. As one mother recounted “My husband probably used the chart more because I knew quite a few of the rhymes from working with kids but it was good for him to actually look at the chart.”

In addition, some mothers who had received the nursery chart disclosed that they chose not to use the chart as they already knew the rhymes. However, these same mothers also acknowledged that the chart was a useful resource, particularly for those who were unfamiliar with nursery rhymes, commenting “I think it’s a good idea because we do the rhymes anyway, but in case people don’t know them, then it’s a good idea.”

The pamphlets
The majority of the mothers interviewed recalled receiving the pamphlets and indicated that they had read the information provided. Most found that the pamphlets either introduced them to the importance of reading to young children or reinforced their existing beliefs and extended...
their understanding of the importance of reading to their baby. Comments included:

Yes, I can now understand that you can open a book, even to a child who doesn’t speak, like a one year old, and she can still enjoy turning the pages and she understands what a book is even though she can't read, but she can relate to the pictures and what I’m telling her.

I did read them because I had no idea how to read to a baby, and then after reading to Cody he sort of prompted me what he'd like to do.

Some of the tips in here, like mover your finger under the words from left to right, I do that now and I pick up things like that, and reading to her and asking questions so that she can get involved and like congratulate her when she gets it.

In particular several mothers revealed that they used the “Recommended Books” pamphlet to choose books from the library or to buy books and found these a valuable resource. As one mother mentioned “It gave me a good idea of what was appropriate for his age and sort of told me that I was on the right track as well.”

The DVD

Just over half of those interviewed (23) indicated that they had received the DVD in the Better Beginnings toolkit, most being given the Let's Read DVD. In addition, one mother had attended her local library, where she received both the Let's Read and It's Rhymetime DVDs. Of the twenty-four mothers who received a Better Beginnings DVD, fourteen had viewed the DVD, five indicating that they had watched the DVD with their child. Four of these mothers had found that their child was too young to appreciate the contents of the DVD. However, one mother did admit that she would try the DVD again, at a later date, commenting:

He was a bit younger so didn’t have much of an understanding of what was going on. Now that he’s older I have been putting DVDs on, not that one but I’m sure soon I’ll put that on and see what he thinks of it.

While most of the mothers indicated that they preferred the pamphlets to the DVDs, several had found that the information on the DVD useful. One mother indicated that she preferred visual information to the written form, while others found the DVD provided them with encouragement and made them aware of particular strategies to use when reading to a child. Their comments included:

I'm more of a visual person and I popped the CD on, Let's Read I think it was. Yes, I learnt from that more than anything.

It encouraged me and gave me guidance, just tips on how to improve, because I'm not a storyteller myself, so I haven't done it before. So it was good.

I guess it just teaches you how to read to them and different ages as well, it was good having the broken up ages and with the younger babies more sort of going through the pictures and that sort of thing, not necessarily the words and then with the older children I think it sort of showed you how to point to the words as you read through them and that sort of thing which is good because other than that you don't think to do things like that, you just read it as you would sort of thing, not as a child would.

Library membership form and library session information sheets

The case study participants had varied recall of receiving library membership forms and information sheets in their Better Beginnings toolkit. Several indicated that, as established members of the library (7), they already had access to the information contained. Furthermore, some claimed that the information was not in their toolkit.

Consequently, one mother, having been made aware of the library services through the discussion which took place when she received the toolkit, visited her local library and became a member. Another two mothers also joined the library, one as a result of receiving the toolkit, and one after completing the Post Better Beginnings phone survey.
Response to the Better Beginnings toolkit

Overall, the response to receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit was very positive. The mothers appreciated receiving a free book and found the information valuable. As one mother admitted:

"I thought it was quite refreshing to have something like this. Having this presented to you made my life a lot easier because I probably wasn’t going to be inclined to go out and look for it."

Several mothers also made suggestions as to how the contents of the Better Beginnings toolkit or the delivery of the program could be improved. As mentioned earlier, some suggested including more books or having a further delivery when their child was older. One mother commented that she would prefer another book to the DVD, while another suggested including bright objects that were visually appealing to babies. Two other participants suggested that the rhyme chart could be laminated to improve its’ durability. Also requested by two mothers from the same community (Bayview), was more information about the library and links to the library,

"I suppose probably that library stuff and probably the other few bits that I didn’t get, manage to get at the time, they would have been really helpful. I don’t know, maybe even like a bit more of a connection between the child health nurse and the library, maybe and I suppose to get up a list, maybe an email list and they could send out information, like there might be an upcoming event at the library because I feel a little bit disconnected from the library because I don’t get down there all the time. I’m on email all the time so they might be able to email out some thing that are happening down there.

Maybe some more information about what’s going on like the story telling and that kind of stuff. I would be interested in that.

Comments such as these indicated that the mothers appreciated the information and resources they received and would value a continuation of such services.

Attitudes, practices and knowledge of early literacy learning

All of the case study mothers revealed that receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit had in some way influenced their attitudes, practices and knowledge of early reading. While many indicated that they already knew about the importance of reading to young children, receiving the toolkit had reinforced their existing beliefs, confirming that reading to their child was appropriate and desirable. For these mothers receiving the toolkit had heightened their awareness, resulting in a conscious effort to read to their child and increasing the amount of time they spent reading to their child. Comments included:

"It probably just reinforced it, yeah (sic), just really reinforced and reiterated that we’re probably on track and doing all the right things.

"I think I’m more aware. I knew it was important but I probably wouldn’t have done as much if I didn’t have the book list and the ideas and you’re given it, I think it’s good that you’re focused on it because you’re so busy doing other things you don’t seem to think about that so it did make me more aware.

"It probably made me more aware about reading to babies in particular, like starting very, very young and that sort of thing. It probably made me aware and more conscious of doing that and reminded me like you such make the time to do it with little babies.

Receiving the toolkit had also prompted several mothers to start reading to their child at an earlier age than they previously anticipated. Many of these mothers said that if they had not received the toolkit with the “gift” book they would never have considered sharing a book with their baby. One mother summarised this belief, stating,

"I didn’t realise that you could start so early. I wanted to read to him and everything, but I didn’t realise you could start so young. I probably would have waited until he was a bit older if I hadn’t have had it."
In addition, several mothers revealed that receiving the toolkit had improved their confidence in reading to their child. Some of these mothers mentioned that although their literacy skills, or those of their partner, were not very high, the program had increased their confidence and assisted in their skill development. As one mother recounted:

*I had trouble reading when I was little but that confidence thing was still very much there but then realising well he doesn’t really know and yes it’s given me that confidence and he’s quite happy to listen to me read. Yes, yes(sic), boosted my confidence and that I can do something with him other than just rattling a toy.*

Similarly, another mother related how the program had impacted on her husband’s confidence:

*The program probably encouraged Tom to do more reading with him (baby) and it probably improved Tom’s reading.*

However, some mothers who spoke English-as-an-additional language, indicated that they still did not feel confident about reading to their baby in English. One mother expressed the opinion that she would prefer to read to her child in her own language but did not have the resources, stating “I’d probably read to them in Spanish.”

**Beginning to read**

The case study mothers reported a range of ages at which they commenced reading to their child. While some began shared-reading from the time of their child’s birth, others waited until their child was older. As over half of the mothers (22) had more than one child in their family, many indicated that their youngest child, “the case study child,” was read to from birth; the child being present when the mother read to her older children. For these mothers, engaging in shared reading with their child was a family event and already part of their daily practice.

Others waited until their child was older, up to a year in age, when they felt the child showed more interest in the pictures in the book and/or could understand what the mother was saying. As one mother explained “Like just lately (at 12 months), because like now (sic) she actually looks at the pictures. I feel like she understands me more now if I read her something.” Another mother, who spoke English-as-an-additional-language, also revealed that she waited until her child had commenced talking, when 12 months old, before she started reading to her, perceiving that the child needed to be able to vocalize before she could comprehend the meaning of words.

Several mothers, however, specifically stated that receiving the *Better Beginnings* toolkit had prompted them to start reading to their child. These mothers found that the toolkit had given them direction and reinforced the belief that shared-reading was an appropriate practice to engage in with babies. In particular, the “gift” book was seen as being a good introduction to reading. Consequently, many of the interviewed mothers commenced reading to their baby when the child was between one and six months of age. Several of these mothers also reported that they had continued with shared reading as their child responded to being read to, showing interest and enjoyment of the experience. Their comments included:

*I think the little book was great because it was the first time I had something really appropriate for him.*

*I involve her in the reading because she actually, believe it or not, enjoys it.*

*Very early on, I’d say as soon as, he just connected with the babies in the book (“Baby Ways”) I think and then the mirror at the back. It was good too, because he saw himself.*

All participants (except one mother) had found that their child had begun to show an interest in books, bringing books to be read and also looking at books by themselves. These mothers felt further encouraged to continue reading to their child.

Indeed, one mother related how she had originally felt “stupid” when she started reading to her baby, lacking confidence and preferring to sing nursery rhymes or songs instead. Receiving the toolkit and persevering with the practice had boosted her confidence. This mother reported that she now feels her child is responding to her and she has gained the confidence to "make
faces and do actions” while sharing a story with her child.

Choosing books, favourite things and reading times

Many mothers commented that the information pamphlets in the toolkit had influenced their criteria for choosing books for their child. Comments about selecting books echoed the suggestions offered in the Better Beginnings pamphlet. Mothers indicated that they chose books based on bright, bold, colourful pictures and a small amount of print. Others commented that board books were an appropriate choice, as were books with photographs and different textures. Their comments included:

- Easy to read books, colourful, big pictures and hard cover books.
- I just think I'm more aware with Lucas about the books that he can just have a look and maybe not so much reading but just looking at pictures and talking about them.
- Yes. It's not that I hadn't thought about buying board books but they seemed to heavy for him but then I realised that I didn't want him to touch other books either because he rips them so it's sort of influenced that and some of the books that I wanted for him I've now bought in board books, like The Hungry Little Caterpillar and things like that so that he can touch them.
- Big bold pictures, again we were talking before about more the photographs. We've got one book at home that is photographs of lots of different things including fruit and vegies and people and kids getting dressed and animals and toys and that and that one seems to be a really favourite one for her where we can just sort of point and say dog, cat.

Several mothers also revealed that they looked for books with content that would appeal to their child. At the same time, some mothers were aware of the need to extend their child's interest and looked for books that had a storyline, or were written by a reputable author. Comments included:

- I suppose like non-fiction in a way because most of it is the real life because I'm trying to get him to see real animals and things like that.
- We bought a few trucks books because he just loves the trucks books and his Dad loves the trucks books but if I was going to buy one I'd probably buy him a story one.
- I often go by the author, Janet Alberg, [inaudible], a lot of them if they make a good one the first time.

Other mothers favoured books that included rhyme or repetition in their text. Also commented on was the use of “simple” language. Mothers revealed that the books they sourced were obtained from a range of sources, including as gifts, and from bookshops, the library and friends.

Further to this, the majority of the mothers reported that their child had a favourite book. While many of these were interactive or textured books, several of the mothers indicated that the Better Beginnings gift book, “Baby Ways,” still continued to be a favourite with their child. Mention was also made of books some children had received from their involvement in another early literacy program, Let’s Read, such as “Dear Zoo” and “Brown Bear, Brown Bear.” A number of mothers also reported that their baby boy appeared to favour non-fiction books, which included pictures of animals or machinery, such as trains and trucks.

All of the mothers reported sharing books with their child, some on a regular basis and some when and where they felt it appropriate. For children with older siblings, shared reading tended to be a family activity, where the mothers encouraged older children to join in or share books with the baby. One mother commented “they lay down and listen, they're actually in the bed. They love it when I read to them.” For others, shared reading varied from several times a day to once a week. Some mothers reported that they were in the process of developing a routine. Reading had begun to form part of their child’s general routine, usually at bed-time, nap-times or quiet times during the day when the child was less active. Comments included:
If he wants to bring me a book we’ll sit down and read. At night time he does. He sits up on the couch when he’s getting a little bit tired and he’ll flick through magazines or anything that’s lying around.

We’re trying to do it every day, like we’re trying to do just one book before bed and even I try and get in a book in the day. We aim for one a day with him.

Usually early evening after bath or something, just winding down, we sit in the toy room and read a book.

Several mothers also indicated that other family members had started to read to their child, including older siblings, the child’s grandparents and the child’s father.

Benefits of reading to babies

Almost all participants indicated that they were aware that reading to young children was beneficial. Several mentioned the importance of sharing books to support language development. These mothers considered that shared reading contributed to learning to speak ‘correctly’ and provided exposure to different forms of language. As one mother reflected, “It helps a lot with their speech. I found that out because I have two with speech problems.”

Others perceived that reading to their child benefited their child’s cognitive development and prepared them for school. Shared reading was seen to contribute to their child becoming familiar with books, knowing how to hold the book, turn the pages and care for books. Furthermore, shared reading was considered to be a learning tool, expanding their child’s knowledge and awareness of the world around them.

Comments included:

- A bit of communication, obviously, they can learn things over time from reading different books.
- Just telling them what things are and pointing things out to them and their associating pictures with words, telling them stories.
- The most valuable thing is that it is a learning tool for when they go to school.

Mothers also related how shared reading acted as a bonding experience, an activity where they could spend quality one-on-one time with their child. Many valued the opportunity to sit with their child and enjoy each other’s company. One mother described the experience:

“I think that the connecting, like the closeness of it, the cuddles and he sits here and we read, and just that quality time together, and yeah (sic), definitely helping him to pick up the language.”

Also mentioned by several mothers was the belief that by engaging in shared reading, their child would develop a love of books. For those mothers who had unfavourable reading experiences or low literacy skills, having their child develop an interest in books was considered to be important. As one mother recounted:

“I just think to show him that reading is fun. I hated reading when I was a kid. That’s not a chore and I like the fact that we read books sometimes for like (sic) the information and we read other ones for fun.”

Other language development and literacy-related activities

Most mothers indicated that they also sang songs and nursery rhymes to their child as a means of enhancing their language development. Such practices were aided by the use of the Better Beginnings nursery rhymes chart, where it was used directly or acted as a prompt. As one mother commented “Lots of nursery rhymes at the moment and we’re singing nursery rhymes, like we’re making up games and singing them in the pool and things like that. Like Humpty Dumpty and she gets right into that.”

Educational DVDs and television were also perceived to promote language development. One mother revealed that she had purchased a commercial product promoting early literacy, the “Your Baby Can Read” DVD, as a result of receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit. Many mothers also felt it important to talk to their child, modelling language and engaging them in everyday tasks. Several also reported that they purchased educational toys, such as Leap Frog, Baby Einstein and V-tech, as a means of enhancing their child’s development.
In addition, some mothers indicated that they were beginning to take their child to social gatherings, including ‘kindy-gym’ and playgroups where they could sing and dance and engage with other children. Five mothers also reported that they had received Let’s Read resources, a complementary early literacy program. Mothers indicated that their involvement in the Better Beginnings program had made them more aware of finding ways to extend their child’s development. As one mother commented:

I think it’s (Better Beginnings) made me more aware that there are programs around. Up until then I guess, my previous children I didn’t have in this country so it’s something different. I’ve not been exposed to these kinds of programs before. I’ve actually found them really great. I think they’re fantastic.

Library use
The majority of case study participants (31) indicated that they were members of their local library, either prior to receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit or as a direct consequence of their involvement in the program. Five mothers reported that the Better Beginnings program had prompted them to become a library member and a further five identified that their baby had also become a member since receiving the toolkit. Visits to the library varied, from twice weekly to none in the past year. Several reasons were given for non-attendance, in particular, the behaviour of their child, or children, when visiting the library. As one mother recounted:

With him it’s actually quite hard to even go to the library because he just pulls books off the shelves, so it’s quite hard to contain him. Even in a bookshop, he’s a nightmare at Angus & Robertson. Even at Kmart he just grabs books, pulls them off the shelves and turns pages.

Another mother mentioned that although since receiving the toolkit and talking to the CCHN she felt that reading to her baby was important she felt daunted by the library, and although she had gone to the library building, to “check out the surroundings” she had not managed to go in. Some mothers also indicated that as they had an adequate supply of books in their home, or preferred to buy books, they hadn’t felt it necessary to regularly attend the library.

Those mothers who visited the library tended to borrow a variety of resources, including books, magazines, jigsaws, CD’s and DVD’s, and some used the play area in the library. On the whole, comments about the library resources and librarians were positive, including:

Yes, when we started going on the Wednesday, they (the librarians) went through which section.

They didn’t come up to me, but when I asked questions they were very helpful, yes.

The staff have been helpful, yes, and told us about other things that they’ve had, like Rhymetime sessions and their Reading Books to Toddlers sessions and stuff like that.

Mention was also made of the range and accessibility of resources for babies and young children. As one mother commented:

I think the library facilities we use are great. They’ve got boxes that the kids can reach of all the kid’s books. They’ve got big books, they’ve got jigsaw puzzles. They’ve got toys that can keep the babies occupied while the bigger kids choose their own books, DVDs.

Some mothers, however, did indicate they were not encouraged to join their child as a member or made aware of sessions that were available at the library. Consequently, several still continued to take books out for their child using their own card. In addition, mothers who spoke English as an additional language appeared to be unaware that the local library may have books in languages other than English.

Library sessions
Case study participants were also asked about their attendance of Better Beginnings library sessions, such as Rhymetime and Storytime. Ten of the mothers reported that they had attended one of the library sessions and gave mixed reports of their experiences. Some felt the sessions gave...
them confidence and ideas about sharing books, while others felt the sessions needed to be more appropriate for babies, more interactive and be given with a little more enthusiasm. Their comments included:

I thought they were really good, bit of singing and then they do the big story book, stuff like that. So, yeah (sic), it was good.

I like them. A lot of my friends wouldn’t go because they thought their babies were too young. I took Jacob from, I don’t know, probably about the same time we started going to post natal, it was something to get out of the house and lots of people said to me, like friends ‘oh, but he’s so young,’ but we sing nursery rhymes at home so I didn’t think it really mattered.

The girl that does it is nice, she’s very nice, but she lacks a bit of an oomph and a bit of energy I feel all the songs need to change because it’s the same songs. There was only three songs I remember and the same ones for the two weeks and it was just getting a bit boring.

A number of reasons were given for not attending Rhymetime or Storytime sessions, including mothers being unaware of the sessions, work constraints, concern about the behaviour of the child, being told their child was too young, their child’s needs already being met at home and a lack of knowledge about the times of the sessions. Several mothers made suggestions about ways to inform families of the library’s sessions, such as providing information leaflets and emailing library members of forthcoming events.

Comments were also made by one mother about the Rhymetime session she had attended being useful. However, she said that the Rhymetime session had been shortened to accommodate the parent talk and she felt that her child “missed out.” Only one other mother had attended a parent workshop, the majority unaware if workshops were offered at their local library. That particular mother had attended a workshop organised by her CCHN and could not recall the librarian talking about Better Beginnings, but remembered a speech pathologist speaking about reading books:

I remember the speech pathologist. They said you can rent out books. There was books at the back, like all set up. It was in the library and there was a table full of books at the back because there were some Mums with older children. He was only four months. He was really little. The bigger ones were playing with the books while the lady talked.

Additional Comments

Mothers were also invited to make further comments about Better Beginnings. There was unanimous support and enthusiasm for the program, including comments such as:

I think it’s good. It’s really good. You don’t really know much when they’re first born and it gives you a bit of an idea and some advice I guess for people that don’t know.

I think it’s a valuable thing because I mean apart from our family I don’t know how much other mothers really emphasise on reading to their kids on how important it is but it was just an extra awareness for our family or for us, a reminder yes about reading.

I think it’s worthwhile because they’ve never too young to expose them, to educate them and I think it’s good. Some people might not realise that and so if it helps promote that and they really start to realise how important it is.

All of the mothers commented that they appreciated the gift book and how Better Beginnings had introduced them to the concept of reading to babies. Many appreciated the information on what to read and how to read with your baby and make it fun. A number of mothers made connections between reading to their baby and the child’s language development, suggesting that sharing books and talking about stories had a positive impact on their baby’s language. As one mother recounted:

I think it’s really good. I’m now aware how important it is to read because Hugh talks a lot. For fifteen months I think he speaks well and I’ve known babies that are not too much younger than Hugh that only say a couple of
words and I think it’s mainly because I read to him a lot.

Another mother indicated that the program had been a learning tool for her, making her aware of what was important in her life:

*It doesn’t matter that the dishes are in the sink, it doesn’t matter that there’s washing to be done. The most important thing is I’m here with you and I’m reading you a book.*

Several comments were also made about the importance of ensuring that their child had a good start to school, which they felt could be achieved through the early introduction of books, songs and nursery rhymes. The importance of joining the library was also mentioned as a positive outcome of the program, giving mothers access to resources and early literacy sessions for their child.

In addition, several suggestions were made about developing the program. Some mothers suggested that the program be extended to include another delivery, a follow-up toolkit to be given when the child was twelve months old, including another gift book and more information about literacy for older children, including recommendations for age-appropriate books. Some also suggested more integration between the library, childcare providers, the CCHN and *Better Beginnings* to reinforce the importance of books, songs and nursery rhymes. Mention was also made of ensuring that information about the library sessions was delivered to members and non-members of the library across the community.

Perhaps the most powerful impact of *Better Beginnings* is summed up in the comments made by one of the participating mothers:

*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 into the kids’ lives*
FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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