Making a Difference:
The report on the evaluation of the Better Beginnings family literacy program 2007 - 2010

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Year 4: 2010
We would like to thank Margaret Allen (Chief Executive Officer and State Librarian, State Library of Western Australia), Nola Allen, Susan North and Margaret Kett for their support of the development and implementation of the evaluation of Better Beginnings. The evaluation of Better Beginnings was made possible by the continuing support of the Better Beginnings Project Coordinator, staff from the State Library of Western Australia, the librarians from the Local Government libraries, Community Child Health Nurses and parents in four communities over four years.

The Project Coordinator gave the research team a generous amount of her time to describe the planning, development and implementation of Better Beginnings from a pilot program in 2005 to a state-wide program in 2008, incorporating several new programs. She was always available to answer unexpected questions or elaborate on new aspects of Better Beginnings to ensure clarity and depth of understanding.

The librarians and the Community Child Health Nurses (CCHN) gave a wealth of information, both spoken and written in individual and focus group interviews. Over the four years of evaluation their enthusiasm did not waiver, they were frank and open in their responses and enabled us to identify factors that had an impact on the successful implementation of Better Beginnings.

The parents, who are at the centre of the Better Beginnings program, continued to completed a survey each year about Better Beginnings. Overall they completed four surveys and took the time to write comments about the Better Beginnings program. Their responses gave us insight into the impact of Better Beginnings not only on their on their literacy beliefs and practices but how these influenced their child and wider family.

Finally, we would like to thank all those families who welcomed us into their home year after year to share the ways in which Better Beginnings had impacted on them and their family. 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.

We would also like to thank all the parents who gave us permission to reproduce their photographs to use on the cover and as part of the text of the report.

**Research Team**

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Executive summary

This report describes and evaluates the implementation of the Better Beginnings program for parents and children 0-3 years, within four diverse communities across Western Australia. This Statewide program has been evaluated over four years, from 2007-2010. The report documents and evaluates its implementation for the year 2010. Annual reports for 2008 and 2009 and a summary report (2007-2010) are also available (http://www.better-beginnings.com.au/success.html). A development of the Better Beginnings program, Better Beginnings + is being trialled in a number of communities, and is targeted at parents of 4 and 5 year old children (http://www.better-beginnings.com.au/bbplus.html). The focus of this report is Better Beginnings 0-3 yrs.

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 teachers. 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.

In this executive summary we outline the findings for 2010 from the views of participants in the research project. The study participants in 2010 were:

- 84 mothers of babies who received a Better Beginnings Reading Pack in 2007, all of whom have completed four surveys since 2007, the last 3 being conducted by phone;
- 17 case study mothers who have been interviewed annually in their homes since 2007;
- 6 community child health nurses and 4 librarians, professionals who were involved in the day-to-day running of the program, who were interviewed in 2010;
- the project co-ordinator at the State library who has been interviewed annually since 2007.

Summary of findings from surveys and interviews with the mothers who received the Better Beginnings Reading Pack in 2007

The Better Beginnings Reading Pack

Three years after receiving the Better Beginnings Reading Pack a majority of mothers who took part in the surveys had still kept the gift book, as well as the DVD and the rhyme chart, all of which were still used to some extent. A majority of the mothers in families where there had been a new baby since 2007 reported that Better Beginnings had influenced their language and literacy practices with their new baby.

Most of the mothers who were interviewed in their homes talked about how they had used the resources in the Better Beginnings pack. The gift books had been well received and used, but in view of the developmental levels of the 3-year-old children, they were used less frequently by these children but were being used in homes where there were younger siblings. There appeared to be some inconsistencies in the content and distribution of the packs that was specific to individual communities, particularly with regard to the DVDs, and availability of DVD players for viewing them was not universal. Many of these mothers had found the brochure and information sheets to be useful for choosing books and reading to their children.

Library membership

By the end of 2010, 84% of the surveyed mothers were members of the library and most of the 20% who had joined during the year indicated that they regularly visited the library and borrowed items for their child. Further, by the end of 2010, 65% of the 3-year-olds were members of the library and most of the 20% who had joined during the year were visiting the library regularly and were borrowing a variety of items on their own library cards. Most of the mothers who had taken out membership for themselves or their children during the year indicated that their decision had been influenced by Better Beginnings. Most of the interviewed mothers who were library members indicated that Better Beginnings had influenced their decision to join for themselves or for their children. Those who visited the library did so for borrowing books and to attend the Baby Rhyme Time and/or Story
Time sessions, although a few were concerned that their children might damage the books. Many of the children were beginning to take responsibility for choosing their own books at the library.

**Choosing books at the library**
In the surveys the mothers described how they had thought seriously about the ways in which they and their child chose library books. Whilst choice was often a joint activity between mother and child based on features of the book, such as the topic, the pictures and the story line, many of the 3-year-old children were beginning to take on complete responsibility for choosing their own books.

**Library-based activities**
Just over one third of the survey respondents (37%) had taken part in at least one Story Time session over the past year, but very few (3%), had been to Baby Rhyme Time, most likely because these sessions were aimed at babies and younger children, or to parent workshops (1%). Most of those who had attended the Story Time sessions had found them ‘useful’. Some mothers, mostly those who had not attended the sessions, explained that the timing of the sessions was problematic and that they had other commitments or family issues that prevented their attendance.

Some of the mothers who were interviewed had attended and enjoyed Parent Workshops, Baby Rhyme Time and/or Story Time at the library. However, others cited inconvenient timing of the sessions, insufficient advertising of dates and times, children’s restless behaviour, and inconsistency of library presenters as reasons why they did not attend. A father who was the primary carer had felt uncomfortable as the only adult male in the audience.

**Mothers’ attitudes to early literacy**
All of the surveyed mothers noted that they felt ‘confident’ in sharing books with their child and nearly all felt ‘very confident’. Around one third indicated that their confidence had increased over the year and the other two thirds that it had stayed at the same level. Most (81%) attributed their confidence in sharing books with children to Better Beginnings. All the mothers saw sharing books with children as ‘important’ and all but two as ‘very important’, a view they also attributed to Better Beginnings.

Most of the mothers who were interviewed explained how Better Beginnings had given them, and sometimes their partners, confidence in reading to their children from an early age. Nevertheless, some felt that they or their partner needed further knowledge in order to become really confident in reading to their children. A number volunteered that they did not feel particularly confident when talking with their 3-year-olds about concepts of print, in particular, words, sounds and letters.

**The literacy environment of the home**
The mothers who were surveyed indicated that there were many books in their homes that they read to their child, with an average number of 125 books, and a range 6 to many hundreds. Most mothers (81%) read to their children on a daily basis, and in many cases other family members also regularly read to them. When sharing books with their children the mothers reported that they engaged in a variety of practices that have the potential to help develop reading and writing, such as choosing stories with rhyme and repetition, reading expressively, asking questions about meaning, re-reading favourite stories, pointing to words and pictures and predicting what might happen next. Most of the mothers (87%) indicated that Better Beginnings had influenced the ways in which they shared books with their child and many (60%) that Better Beginnings had influenced the practices of other people who interacted with the children. There was further evidence of the possible influence of Better Beginnings on their book sharing behaviours with their children, in that most of the behaviours that they reported using most frequently were those suggested in the Better Beginnings brochure that was included in the Reading Pack they had received for their baby.

In the interviews almost all of the mothers reported reading with their children on a regular basis, and that Better Beginnings had influenced their knowledge and attitudes towards this and other early language and literacy practices. They described how they used a rich variety of activities to develop their children’s language and early literacy. These included, not only reading books with children, but also conversations on specific topics, singing songs and rhymes (sometimes along with television or CD/DVD), and helping their children develop early literacy and numeracy concepts and skills. The mothers’ use of these activities was backed up
by their deep understanding of reading and of its importance for children’s learning. They identified world knowledge, word-related knowledge, book-related knowledge, comprehension, concentration span, vocabulary development, creativity, enjoyment, imagination and life skills, as valuable aspects of book sharing.

**Changes in home literacy practices over the past year**

Nearly all the surveyed mothers (90%) indicated that Better Beginnings had influenced changes to language and literacy interactions with their 3-year-old child, in terms of the frequency of reading experiences for this child and any other children in the family, the frequency with which the 3-year-old asked for books to be read, and their communication with the child. These changes were most likely linked to the children’s growing maturity in addition to Better Beginnings.

**The children’s literacy attitudes and behaviours**

In the surveys, almost all the mothers reported that since the previous survey, when the children had been 2-years-old, their child’s interest in books had changed, with most of the children (88%) now being ‘very interested’; and with nearly all enjoying being read ‘all the book’ (93%), rather than ‘about half the book’ (7%) or one page (0%). In addition, the now 3-year-old children, whose parents had received the Better Beginnings Pack three years previously, were developing some highly important concepts about books and print. Nearly all the mothers indicated that their child pointed to the pictures and talked about them, turned the pages of the book and pretended to read. Around three quarters said that their child joined in with the reading, predicted what might happen next and asked questions about the story. And around half of the mothers indicated that their child demonstrated interest in and knowledge about words, as they talked about words and pointed to them.

The mothers who were interviewed also described how their children were learning some important early literacy behaviours that included a 3-year-old role-playing parent reading routines with a baby brother or sister, and focussing attention on pictures, words and letters.

**Appreciation of Better Beginnings**

In both the surveys and interviews the mothers expressed their appreciation of Better Beginnings. Some explained that it had given them knowledge and confidence in reading to their child from an early age; some that it had reinforced the beliefs and knowledge they already had; some that it had helped them in reading with new babies in the family; and some that it had encouraged library membership and visits.

*It is such a well thought out kit. I always thought it was important to read to my children, because as a child we were never read to or ever had access to any books, and I was going to make sure that did not happen to my kids. So receiving the kit really helped me on making sure this happened.*

An unexpected comment made by some participants was that they appreciated the yearly contact for the phone surveys and the face-to face interviews, that were part of the evaluation, in which they could discuss their language and literacy interactions with their child. They felt that this ongoing, targeted contact had helped them focus on early literacy and read more regularly with their children. In their concluding comments the mothers were highly positive about the overall influence of Better Beginnings on their confidence as parents, their practices and knowledge about reading to children and about reading as a life-long skill.

*Being a first time mum is overwhelming and you don’t necessarily think about reading to kids at such a young age. Better Beginnings gave us that information and knowledge.*
Summary of Findings from Interviews with the Community Child Health Nurses and Librarians

The community child health nurses and librarians who were interviewed described their roles in the Better Beginnings program within their own communities, and their views of its implementation. The issues that are outlined below emerged from discussions between these professionals and the researchers.

Aim of the Better Beginnings program
The child health nurses and librarians talked about the overall aim of the Better Beginnings program, in terms of a cooperative approach to providing positive language and literacy influences for babies and young children through support for their parents in this endeavour. They explained how they were delivering the program to parents, identified aspects that were helping to achieve this aim and gave suggestions for modifications and extension.

Contents of the Better Beginnings Reading Pack
All the professionals interviewed agreed that the Reading Pack, put together by librarians, was the most important element of the program as it had the potential to help parents and children interact around ‘written and spoken words’ and was generally very well received as a gift by the mothers of young babies. They did, however, identify some limitations of the pack since the program had been running in their communities for a number of years. In particular they identified a need for a variety of books and other materials in the packs to better cater for the needs of families who had multiple births or subsequent children, so that a different book was given to each child in a family. Similarly, they saw a need for modification of the information in the pack to address these needs and those of parents from culturally and linguistically diverse families and parents with low literacy skills.

Delivery of the Reading Pack to the mothers
Usually, but not always, the Reading Packs were delivered by the librarians to the child health nurses, who then gave them to the mothers of babies at the time of the 6-week health check. The librarians and child health nurses were generally satisfied with this arrangement. As most mothers in the target group attended this health check with their babies, most received the pack, usually along with some advice about how to sing songs and rhymes and read to their baby (some child health nurses gave demonstrations) and the importance of these activities for their child’s development. The mothers were usually given some information about the library and activities for babies and young children at this time. There was some concern amongst the professionals that, as some of the mothers who might benefit the most from the health check and presentation of the Reading Pack did not attend the 6-week check, these mothers were not receiving the pack and related contact and advice.

Library events
All the librarians and child health nurses talked about the great importance for social, language and literacy development, of the Baby Rhyme Time and Story Time sessions at their community libraries, which after the Reading Pack, are the other main elements of Better Beginnings in the communities. Nevertheless, despite great enthusiasm for these activities by some of the professionals involved, some factors were identified that had the potential to inhibit attendance of the target age group, and the variation in the frequency and number of participants from library to library. Some factors affecting participation in these events were perceived as being cultural and linguistic and the timing of sessions that did not fit into parent schedules. None of the child health nurses or librarians mentioned the availability of parent workshops.

Community awareness of Better Beginnings and Library Services
In some communities where there were various early literacy initiatives, the librarians and child health nurses felt that there was no escape from the ‘reading to children message’. Nevertheless, some in other communities felt that there needed to be more awareness of the Better Beginnings materials, messages and activities, and that this might be achieved by better advertising, particularly through the media.
Extensions to the program

Some of the professionals suggested that a follow-up Reading Pack for older children, that could include another book, puzzles and other resources to help children begin to focus on word-related features of books, would help sustain the program. One child health nurse suggested that in her community the Let’s Read program was a good follow-up. It is noted that there was little or no reference to the existence of parent workshops at the library that could have the potential to increase parental awareness of children’s early language and literacy development.

Training of professionals for Better Beginnings

Only one of the interviewed child health nurses and librarians indicated that she had not received initial training, and she felt a need for training to help her understand the written documentation she had been given. The other interviewed professionals had received some training a number of years previously. Of these, only one had taken part in recent training, and only one indicated that she felt the need for further training. Given that the aim of the Better Beginnings program, which is ‘to provide positive language and literacy experiences for babies and young children’ is now a core element of the work of both librarians and child health nurses, it is interesting that as a group, they felt little need for any further training in the area.

Liaison of professionals involved in the program

Almost all of the librarians and child health nurses saw a need for strong liaison between their two professions as an essential element of the program. For the most part they liaised around the delivery of the Reading Packs by the librarians to the child health nurses, and in some communities at other times as well, such as community meetings of personnel involved in early childhood and joint presentations to mothers’ groups. Nevertheless, in some communities there was little or no contact between the child health nurses and librarians. There was a suggestion that programmed meetings of the librarians and health nurses might have the potential to help prevent any problems from occurring, although such meetings could involve issues of time and staffing.
Linguistic and cultural diversity

There were reports in some communities of a particular need for Better Beginnings as more families who may not have had books at home were moving into the community. These families included Aboriginal people and particular groups of culturally and linguistically diverse people, including refugees. The child health nurses explained how they were able to use the Reading Pack with these mothers. There was though some concern that Better Beginnings was not reaching some of these families, due to language differences and non-attendance at the 6-week and later health checks. Further, whilst some individual librarians were highly pro-active in producing and sourcing materials for these families, this was not universal. Some libraries had few such resources and some librarians did not see a particular need for them.

Communication

Keeping in contact with families seems to be a very important issue in the sustainability of the program. Whilst there was a procedure for the child health nurses to pass on contact details of the mothers to the library, not all were familiar with the procedure and it was seen as both time consuming and an issue of confidentiality. Some suggested using email as a more efficient and less intrusive means of communication, although parents would still need to provide details of email contact. The availability of some form of parent contact details by the library appears to be most important in informing the target group of parents about library events such as Baby Rhyme Time, Story Time and workshops, and inviting them to take part.

Summary of Findings from Interviews with the Program Co-ordinator

The Better Beginnings Program

The program co-ordinator explained how, by 2010, approximately 100,000 Better Beginnings Reading Packs had been given to Western Australian families with young babies, including those given to 27,000 of the 30,000 families of babies born in 2010. Also in 2010, approximately 90% of local government areas were involved in the program; the remainder were either in the process of implementing Better Beginnings or negotiating to implement it. This program is now often referred to as Better Beginnings 0-3, since a new pilot program aimed at children between the ages of 4 and 5, was being trialled in 25 communities during 2010.

Funding

Over the life of Better Beginnings continuity of funding has always been a dominant and uncertain issue for those involved in the planning and implementing of the program. However, at the end of 2010, continued funding has been assured for the four years from 2011 to 2014. This involves both State Government funding and funding by Rio Tinto.

The role of the co-ordinator

The role of the co-ordinator of the Better Beginnings program has changed dramatically from co-ordination of a small pilot project, to the overall co-ordination of both Better Beginnings 0-3, that covers almost all of the State, and also the Better Beginnings 4-5 yrs pilot program. During 2010, when funding was uncertain, the co-ordinator was highly involved in applying for funding, which is now assured for the next 4 years.

Sustaining the program

Guaranteed State Government funding for four years will allow for consolidation and provide an opportunity for the Better Beginnings team to expand. The coordinator sees the program being sustained also through community recognition of the program. The Better Beginnings State manager will oversee and establish strategic liaisons to ensure the continued efficient delivery of the program and its expansion into regional areas. It is hoped to sustain the supportive partnership with Rio Tinto that provides not only financial support but also links with their community partners.

Training for librarians

The co-ordinator explained that during 2010, training in Better Beginnings was regularly available for new public library staff, often delivered ‘on-site’ in the libraries. New initiatives have been an online training package and a wiki that has been increasingly used to communicate information and experiences between public libraries. There are also moves to establish forums of interested stakeholders, including library and health workers, and other early literacy professionals from a range of fields.
The future of Better Beginnings

Future directions will address areas of need identified in the Edith Cowan University evaluations, one of which is to increase Better Beginnings involvement in culturally and linguistically diverse families. There is a plan to establish a collaborative publishing initiative that targets English as an additional language and Aboriginal families, in order to provide children with access to books that feature their own community group. There are plans to work with the Little Big Book Club in developing and delivering ‘New Arrivals’ packs that also cater for linguistic and cultural diversity. Furthermore there are plans to roll out a Better Beginnings 0-5 program linking Better Beginnings 0-3 and Better Beginnings 4-5 yrs over the next four years, with a strong focus on regional areas.

In the long term there are plans for a 6- to 9-year-old program and perhaps an adult reader development program, both of which could be addressed through building liaisons with groups already working in primary and adult education, and investigating future roles that public libraries could develop.

Conclusions and Implications

Three years after becoming involved in the Better Beginnings program, the majority of mothers in 2010 reported that it was continuing to impact upon their confidence in sharing books, attitudes towards the importance of literacy, book sharing and other literacy practices (such as singing nursery rhymes). Almost all mothers reported sharing books with their child on a regular basis. Some mothers with a new baby and other children indicated that Better Beginnings also influenced their literacy practices with these children. Mothers identified a number of additional benefit of sharing books with their child and in their family, these included emotional, social and educational.

Better Beginnings appears to have had a ripple effect in some families. Mothers reported that involvement in Better Beginnings had also influenced their child's attitude towards books and supported their literacy learning through the sharing of books. As their child showed a developing interest in and enjoyment of books, the demand for sharing books and nursery rhymes grew. This had a wider impact in some families, as sharing books was either introduced or reinforced by partners, grandparents, siblings and other family members. Thus the number of books in homes also appeared to increase.

By the end of 2010, 84%, of the mothers were members of the library and 65% of the 3-year-olds were members of the library. Many of the mothers suggested that involvement in Better Beginnings had influenced their decision to join the library. The library gave mothers access to books and other resources and gave children the opportunity to become familiar with the library and begin to take part in making choices about books and resources. In addition some mothers graduated from Baby Rhyme Time to Story Time sessions, finding these useful. It is possible that some of these sessions gave mothers the opportunity to observe book-sharing practices and introduced them to new books. It is clear that Better Beginnings influenced mothers’ views of not only when it is appropriate to introduce books to babies, but also when to introduce babies to libraries.

Librarians and community health nurses expressed a continuing commitment to and enthusiasm for the Better Beginnings program. In 2010 librarians and community health nurses in all four communities were still involved in the distribution and introduction of the Better Beginnings program and felt that joint collaboration was very important to ensure effective program delivery. Both librarians and community health nurses were actively involved in promoting Better Beginnings and saw the program as an integral part of their role. They felt that the Reading Pack, the library activities, the ongoing advertising campaign and community literacy initiatives reinforced the importance of early literacy. This network of professional and community activities appeared to sustain the Better Beginnings message and reach beyond mothers/carers to the wider community.

The Better Beginnings co-ordinator was a founder member of the team that created the program in 2004 and has co-ordinated its implementation and development during the past seven years. During this time the role of the co-ordinator has changed substantially to incorporate state-wide delivery and development of Better Beginnings and the development and co-ordination of Better Beginnings 4-5year program. In 2010 this role included writing applications for continued funding, negotiating with new local governments,
development of online training for librarians and sustaining the program through the on-going negotiation with community and local government partners to build literacy networks. In 2010 approximately 90% of local governments were involved the program with the remaining 10% either in the process of implementation or negotiating to implement the program.

By 2010 it was clear that the co-ordinator holds a pivotal role in the impact and outcomes of the Better Beginnings program. The co-ordinator is the link between the development and implementation of the program. In addition, involvement in the program over the last seven years has given the co-ordinator insight into the needs of different communities, an overview of the successes and difficulties of the program and knowledge of the impact of the program on families, librarians, community health nurses and other community organisations. This places the co-ordinator in an ideal position to build on and extend the program with the Better Beginnings team.

In addition to the overall conclusions as described above, a number of implications were identified from the 2010 data. These include:

1. Finding ways of increasing the involvement of linguistically and culturally diverse families in Better Beginnings to ensure they are given opportunities to access early literacy. This may involve looking at alternative ways of delivering Better Beginnings and presenting information. Language specific resources and library and community activities delivered through community languages may help to bridge the gap. Further development of partnerships with community based organisations and early childhood services would help to meet different needs and extend the network of providers. Thus creating a greater awareness of the importance of early literacy.

2. Sustaining Better Beginnings through the formalisation of partnerships between the librarians and the distributors of Better Beginnings. A memorandum of agreement would help to ensure that partners include Better Beginnings as part of their core business. Formalised and regular meetings would extend professional knowledge and help to identify ways of linking parents with libraries and offering ongoing support for booksharing practices in addition to library activities.

3. Identifying parent literacy needs. Better Beginnings has given some mothers the opportunity to discuss their own (and in some cases their partners) literacy needs. The collaborative nature of Better Beginnings means it would be possible to meet some of these needs through the extension of library and community programs. This extension could include adult specific literacy programs as well as programs about ‘reading with your child’ including modelling practices and presenting strategies. Thus ensuring that understanding about the importance of early literacy is converted into action.

4. Promotion of Better Beginnings. This is important at a broad community level, through publicity, as well as at a personal level through library activities and links to other literacy initiatives. In the age of increasing use of technology it may be timely to consider ways of reaching and sustaining contact with parents through the use of technology e.g. email.

5. Development of the Better Beginnings program. Within the current program, there is a need to find alternative ways of presenting parent information about ‘enjoy reading with your baby’ and ‘first books for babies and toddlers’, to enable parents with low English literacy skills better access to the Better Beginnings resources. The need to provide extra books for multiple birth families and different books for new babies is also desirable. There is also a need for more support for parents as the child matures. The development of the 4-5 years old program is designed to help meet this need.

6. On going professional development. This is clearly a contentious issue as some professionals indicated that they did not need more ‘training’. Clearly identifying what the professionals’ perceived needs are, would be a good starting point, linking this to professional requirements, new legislation and where possible further qualifications. In order to progress the program at point of delivery professional development might include joint sessions that included work, not only about effective language and literacy practices for parents but about how collaboration could enhance the program.
Findings from the 2010 evaluation

Introduction

This report describes and evaluates the 2010 implementation of the Better Beginnings program for parents and children 0-3 years, within four diverse communities across Western Australia. The program began in 2007 and annual reports are also available for the years 2008 and 2009. The research builds on the evaluation of the Better Beginnings pilot program undertaken by Edith Cowan University in 2004 (Barratt-Pugh, Rohl, Oakley & Elderfield, 2005). A development of the Better Beginnings program, Better Beginnings 4-5 yrs is being trialled in a number of communities, and is targeted at parents of 4-and 5-year-old children. The focus of this report is Better Beginnings (0-3).

What is Better Beginnings?

Better Beginnings is an early intervention family literacy program that has been developed by Public Library Services Directorate, at 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 teachers. 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.

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 wide range of communities that represent diverse geographical, social, cultural and economic contexts. In 2010, approximately 90% of local government areas were involved; the remaining small local government areas were either in the process of implementing Better Beginnings or negotiating to implement it. Approximately 27 000 of the 30 000 babies born in Western Australia received a Better Beginnings Reading Pack. In December 2010, the Minister for the Arts issued a media statement about Better Beginnings that included the following:

More than 100,000 families have benefited from this program since it began in 2005. From its start as a pilot targeting six metropolitan and regional communities, Better Beginnings should soon reach most babies born in the State. Better Beginnings will be expanded to provide additional support and resources for Aboriginal families across the State and to spread the important message to all WA families to ‘read aloud and read often’.

The overall focus of Better Beginnings is for government agencies to work in partnership with families to support children’s early literacy learning. The key elements of the program are outlined below.

1. A Reading Pack (also called a ‘literacy toolkit’) usually given to parents of young babies by the community child health nurse at the 6-8 week health check, although in a few communities it is given out by librarians. The contents of the Reading Pack may vary somewhat, but normally would include:
   - a colourful board book for babies;
   - a frieze with nursery rhymes printed on it;
   - a brochure containing suggestions for enjoying reading experiences with a baby;
   - a list of first books for babies and toddlers;
   - information about local library resources;
   - a library membership form;
   - a highly motivating DVD that shows adults reading and singing rhymes and songs to young children and babies of various ages and information about the value of this (the DVD is not available in all packs and in some areas is distributed at a later date).

2. A Better Beginnings handbook and electronic training module, developed to support health and library partners working with the program. These provide a complete guide to the responsibilities of all partners and include samples and templates to follow when delivering the program.
3. **Baby Rhyme Time and Story Time sessions and workshops** at the library, designed to provide enjoyable shared early literacy experiences for parents/carers and young children. There are suggested procedures for community child health nurses to collect and pass on to the library contact details of families receiving the Reading Pack. Parents and their children are invited to free sessions that introduce them to stories, rhymes and games to use with their babies/children. In some libraries there are workshops that address various topics, including speech and language development, child development, nutrition and parenting.

4. **Story Time boxes** (also called ‘Outreach Toolboxes’) that contain a rich variety of literacy resources for children and their families. These are lent by public libraries to community agencies and are also used ‘in-house’ to support Baby Rhyme-time and Story-time.

5. **Family resource centres in libraries** providing interactive early childhood learning spaces, in addition to resources designed to increase parental knowledge of early childhood language and literacy.

6. **A Reading Gateway** that includes information about Better Beginnings (http://www.better-beginnings.com.au). This has been established as part of the website of the State Library of Western Australia. The website provides news and information for parents, teachers and librarians about early literacy and links to games and activities for children in order to encourage an interest in books and stories. It also includes access to interactive electronic books that can be read to children by the computer.

**The evaluation of the Better Beginnings program**

Building on the findings from the evaluation of the pilot program, a team from Edith Cowan University has conducted an evaluation of the Better Beginnings Program in four diverse communities, over a period of approximately four years (2007-2010). This evaluation has been jointly funded by Edith Cowan University and the State Library of Western Australia.

The research addresses the following questions:

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

2. How has the program, including its implementation, developed and been sustained over the four years of its evaluation?

**Who has participated in the evaluation of Better Beginnings?**

In order to answer the research questions it was decided to focus on the Better Beginnings participants. These include:

- Mothers of babies, in four communities, who received Better Beginning packs in 2007;
- Community child health nurses who distributed the Better Beginnings packs to the mothers;
- Local librarians who followed up the distribution of the packs with invitations to visit the library, provided information about library services for mothers and babies/young children, and conducted story and rhyme sessions, as well as information sessions on specific aspects of child development;
- The Better Beginnings co-ordinator, based at the State Library, who has overall responsibility for the program

**How have we conducted the research?**

Mothers of new babies living in four diverse communities were surveyed before and after receiving the Better Beginnings toolkit and information, over a period of approximately four years. In 2007, 300 mothers of young babies completed the Pre-Program Survey before they received the Better Beginnings Reading Pack and information. Approximately one year later, 177 (59%) of these mothers completed Post-Program Survey 1 (2008). Two years after receiving the Better Beginnings Reading Pack, 102 (34%) of the original mothers completed Post-Program Survey 2 (2009). Three years after receiving the pack 84 (28%) of the original mothers completed Post-Program Survey 3 (2010).

The first survey was given to mothers in paper format, usually by a research assistant, and the following three surveys were conducted by telephone by members of the research team. The content of the surveys is outlined below.
The first survey (Pre-Program Survey, 2007) asked parents about demographics, library membership and use, their own literacy practices and attitudes to reading to babies, as well as their confidence and practices in this area.

The second survey (Post-Program Survey 1, 2008) asked parents about program delivery and content, library membership and use, and their attitude to reading to babies, as well as their confidence and practices in this area.

The third and fourth surveys (Post-Program Survey 2, 2009 and Survey 3, 2010) addressed issues similar to those in previous surveys, but questions also addressed the sustainability and continuing influence of the Better Beginnings program.

In addition, a number of mothers were invited to take part in case studies. In 2008, 2009 and 2010 these mothers took part in face-to-face interviews, usually in their homes, about the impact of the Better Beginnings program on their literacy perceptions and practices, their child, and broader family literacy practices that included library membership and use. The coordinator of Better Beginnings and a number of librarians and community child health nurses who were involved in distributing and promoting Better Beginnings in the four communities, have also been interviewed each year, either individually or in focus groups.

This report presents the findings from 2010 and identifies important issues in the effectiveness and implementation of the program.

Findings from the mothers: Survey data 2010

This section of the report presents the perspectives of a sample of the mothers who had received the Better Beginnings Reading Pack for their new baby in 2007. In 2010, three years after receiving the pack 84 of these mothers were located and completed a telephone survey. They were asked about their children, the Better Beginnings pack, library membership, use of the library, their language and literacy interactions with their child and their attitudes to early language and literacy. They were also asked about the extent to which these attitudes and practices had changed during the previous year and how far they felt that Better Beginnings had impacted on these factors.

Characteristics of the children

Just over half the children (57%) were the eldest child in the family. The proportions of boys and girls were relatively similar, with a slight majority of boys (52% boys; 48% girls). Their mothers reported that just under half attended some form of day-care (47%), with some attending kindergarten (6%). As most of the children were still around 3-years-old, it would not be expected that many would be attending kindergarten in 2010.

Receiving the Better Beginnings program

In 2010, three years after receiving the Better Beginnings pack all respondents indicated that they remembered receiving the Better Beginnings Reading Pack. One third (32%) had produced a new baby since receiving the pack and approximately half of the new mothers (48%) had received another pack for the new baby. These mothers indicated that the Better Beginnings Reading Pack received for their first child had influenced:

- their communication with their new baby (73%);
- their sharing of books with their new baby (92%);
- their book choices through the book suggestion pamphlet (69%).
The Better Beginnings Reading Pack content

Nearly all respondents (93%) indicated that they still had the gift book they had received three years previously and approximately two-thirds (68%) still remembered the name of the book. Further, over half of mothers (58%) indicated that they still read this book to their child, with just under half (44%) reporting that they read it ‘often’. In addition, 54% reported that their child had chosen the Better Beginnings book for reading.

More than half (55%) indicated they still had the nursery rhyme chart, with 62% of these saying that they still used it, and 44% that they used it ‘often’ with their child. Most of the respondents who still had the chart reported placing it where it could be seen, for example on the wall or door of the bedroom or playroom, with one mother reporting that it was on the wall of a new baby’s room.

A majority of mothers (64%) indicated that they still had the Let’s Read or Baby Rhyme Time DVD and 30% that they sometimes watched it with their child. Some still had the parent information pamphlet (18%) and the book suggestions pamphlet (25%).

Changes in parent/child reading practices

The mothers were asked to think about how Better Beginnings had influenced specific aspects of their literacy practices, in terms of how these practices might have changed since the previous interview in 2009.

### Changes in reading practices since the last survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What has changed</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>Quite a bit</th>
<th>A great deal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How often parent reads to toddler</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often toddler asks for a book to be read</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How parent communicates with toddler (reads more, talks more, watches less TV and talks more)</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often other people read with their child</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*How often parent reads with other children</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*25% indicated that there were no other children to read to.

- Seventy four percent of mothers indicated that since the last survey the frequency of reading to their child had changed.
- Ninety three percent of mothers indicated that since the last survey the frequency of their child asking for a book to be read had changed.
- Ninety four percent of mothers indicated that since the last survey their communication with their child had changed (for example reading more to the child, talking more and watching less television).
- Eighty five percent of mothers indicated that, since the last survey, the frequency of other people reading with their child had changed.
- Sixty three percent of mothers indicated that, since the last survey, the frequency of reading with their other children had changed (25% of mothers indicated that they had no other children to read to).
- Nearly all mothers (90%) indicated that Better Beginnings had influenced these changes to their language and literacy interactions with their child.
Library membership and use of the library

The mothers were asked to think also about how Better Beginnings had influenced their library membership and involvement in library activities since the previous survey in 2009.

Twenty per cent of the mothers reported that, since the previous survey, they had taken out library membership for themselves, while 64% reported they were already members of the local library, indicating that in 2010, 84% of mothers were members of the local library.

Of those who indicated they had joined a local library since the last survey, 82% indicated that Better Beginnings had influenced their decision to do so and 77% reported that they had borrowed books for their child. In terms of frequency of borrowing, 94% of the recently joined members indicated that they went to the local library at least once a month.

When asked if they had taken out library membership for their child since the last survey almost half of the mothers (45%) indicated that their child was already a member, and 20% indicated that they had taken out library membership for their child since the last survey, suggesting that 65% of the 3-year-old children were library members in 2010.

Of those mothers who reported that they (and their child) were already members of the library at the last survey, 48% indicated that they now went to the library ‘about the same’ as before, 32% ‘more often’ and 20% ‘less often’. Furthermore, 41% indicated that their child borrowed ‘about the same number of items’, 12% ‘less items’ and 44% ‘more items’. These results suggest that participants were making somewhat more use of the library than in the previous year.

Choosing children’s library books

Mothers were asked how they and their child selected books at the library. Many chose to respond to this open-ended question, their responses falling into five broad categories. These categories and the percentages of responses for each, can be seen below (percentages add to more than 100 as some responses that concerned book features referred also to the person who chose the item so were double coded). Some of the mothers’ recorded responses are provided for each category.

Choose on the basis of book features (44% of responses)
- Bright pictures, familiar characters.
- Topics of his interest, look for books that are the appropriate length for him; he loves dinosaurs.
- Usually look at nice bright illustrations and then read through to see if the story is appropriate.
- Look for a book that has something she likes in it. At the moment she loves cats; we are reading lots with cats in.
- My daughter selects them based on what she is interested in. When I choose I go to the pre-kindly section and choose ones that will help her with her alphabet etc.

Parent and child choose together (38% of responses)
- We flick through and pick what looks good that we have not already read.
- Look at pictures, read through the storylines and let them choose to a certain extent.
- She selects them randomly off the shelf and then I go through them and decide what is coming home. Always get a CD with rhymes on it.
Free for all, [we] pick through the boxes to see what interests her. I then cull to what I think is right.

Let them go into the children’s section, which is fantastic, and help them choose, but then I check through them.

Let her choose a couple. Sometimes I point her towards what she is interested in.

Child chooses alone (33% of responses)
- He just chooses what he wants from the kids’ section.
- I let her go through the boxes and choose her own.
- Whatever tickles her fancy.

Parent chooses (5% of responses)
- I select books. I like Mem Fox.
- I select books I think he would like, things he is interested in like dinosaurs or animals.

Does not borrow now (3% of responses)
- [Do not] let child borrow books anymore as she grows attached to them and does not want to return them.
- We prefer to read our own books.

It will be seen from the above comments that the mothers had thought seriously about the issue of choice of library books for their children. They ensured that the books chosen would be interesting for their child in terms of the pictures, the story and the subject matter. It also appeared that most of their 3-year-old children had some control over their choice of library items, with parents giving varying amounts of guidance. The very few who no longer borrowed for their children indicated that this was a personal decision.

The mothers were also asked about activities provided by the library. Just over one third (37%) had taken part in a Story Time session, 3% in a Baby Rhyme Time session and 1% in parent workshops. Of those who did attend the activities (mostly Story Time) nearly all indicated that they had found them ‘useful’ (58%) or ‘extremely useful’ (33%). Open-ended comments about these library activities addressed two areas: satisfaction with the activities, and reasons why attendance was not possible:

Satisfaction with useful and enjoyable activities
- Combine nursery rhymes and songs; better now she can do the activities properly and see the link with the stories.
- Craft was good; they enjoyed that.
- He enjoys the sessions and interacting with other children.
- Helping her thrive.
- Kids enjoy the activities.

Other mothers commented that either they had moved to another area or the times of sessions clashed with family commitments:

Difficult to attend
- Work fulltime, so cannot attend session.
- Have just moved to Marni so have not had time to do everything yet.
She goes to day care on that day.

They are on too early in the day; with a new baby I cannot get organised and out of the house in time.

Have not been as it clashes with uni timetable.

[New] library does not do it the way as previous Story Times we have attended in Bayview. Do not run during school holidays.

These comments suggest that, whilst the Story Time sessions were appreciated for many reasons by those who were able to attend, family and work commitments made attendance at the available times impossible for many. It is noted that very few had attended either Parent Workshops or Baby Rhyme Time. The low attendance at Baby Rhyme Time is most likely explained by the fact that these sessions are aimed at babies and toddlers so that the 3-year-old children and their parents may well have found them no longer appropriate. Of more concern is that only one parent had attended a library-based workshop. It is not known if these were offered, or if they were, why these parents did not attend.

The mothers were also asked about the nature of their contact with the librarians on their visits to the library.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>N/A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encourage you to take out library membership for your toddler?</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show you where age appropriate books were?</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show you the library facilities?</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promote the Better Beginnings library activities?</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Attitudes to early literacy and the influence of Better Beginnings

Confidence in sharing books

All the mothers (100%) indicated that they were confident in sharing books with their child, with most (88%) feeling ‘very confident’. Just over one third (37%) indicated that, since the previous survey, their confidence in sharing books with their child had ‘increased’, while 63% noted it had ‘stayed the same’. Most (81%) felt that Better Beginnings had influenced their confidence in sharing books with children.

Importance of sharing books

All the mothers (100%) indicated that since the last survey they felt it was important to share books with their child, with almost all (98%) seeing it as ‘very important’, and 2% noting that they felt it ‘fairly important’. Nearly all of the participants (96%) attributed their views about the importance of reading to their child to Better Beginnings.

The child’s attitude to books

Most mothers (91%) indicated that since the previous survey their child’s interest in books had ‘changed’, and 88% reported that at the time of the survey their child was ‘very interested’ in books, 11% that their child was ‘quite interested’, and 1% that their child was ‘not very interested’. Almost all (96%) also indicated that since the previous survey
their child’s enjoyment of sharing books had ‘changed’ and most of these mothers (93%) reported that their child enjoyed being read ‘all the book’ with a few (7%) indicating that their child enjoyed being read ‘about half the book’.

Change of opinion on other aspects of early literacy

Mothers were asked if their opinion on certain other issues around young children’s literacy had changed since the last survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>Already thought that</th>
<th>Changed opinion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Toddlers can enjoy and benefit from books</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toddlers can enjoy and benefit from rhymes and songs</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toddlers can join the library</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It can be seen that most mothers indicated that their opinions on these issues had not changed since the last survey, which was two years after receiving the Better Beginnings pack, as they had already understood that young children can enjoy and benefit from rhymes, songs and books and that young children can join the library.

Respondents were also asked if Better Beginnings had changed their opinions in any other ways. Two mothers responded to this open-ended question as follows:

- Encouraged me to take the time after work reading, singing or just playing with my toddler.
- I would never have even thought of reading to my baby until I got Better Beginnings. I never read to my first two until I got the pack.

Influence of Better Beginnings on early literacy practices

Sharing books with children

The mothers indicated that, on the whole, they had a large number of books in their homes that they read to their child, the average being 125 (range 6 – 999).

In terms of how often they read to their child, most mothers (81%) indicated that they read to their child seven days a week, 2% indicated six days, 8% five days, 8% four days, 1% three days, and 2% indicated two days. Most mothers (81%) indicated that Better Beginnings had influenced the number of days they read to their children.

In addition, most of the mothers reported that their child was read to regularly by at least one other person, most frequently by their father.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person reading</th>
<th>7 days</th>
<th>2-6 days</th>
<th>Rarely/ Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparents</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby-sitter/ Childcare worker</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Other</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*’Other’ included relatives not specified above, friends and teachers of 3-year-old kindergarten classes.
A majority of the mothers (60%) indicated that Better Beginnings had influenced to some extent the other people who read to their child. They also reported on some early literacy practices that their child had taken part in during the previous week, with other family members. It can be seen that nearly all the children had shared a book with a family member, who had talked about the book with them. Many family members had told, rather than read a story, and almost one quarter had used a language other than English when reading to the child.

The mothers were asked for further details of their book sharing practices with their child. Most of the participants (87%) indicated that Better Beginnings had influenced the way they shared books with their child. There is some further evidence for the possible influence of Better Beginnings on their book sharing practices in that almost all of these parent behaviours were related to the suggestions in the Better Beginnings brochure ‘Enjoy reading with your baby’ that was included in the Reading Pack. The two book sharing behaviours that were not included in this brochure were:

- Encouraged their child to predict what would happen next in the story.
- Moved their finger under the words, from left to right, as they read to their toddler.

### Literacy practice engaged in with family member in previous week

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shared a book with the child.</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talked about the story or pictures with the child.</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Told a story, not from a book with the child.</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used a language other than English when reading to the child</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Other</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Specific book sharing practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Frequently</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chosen a comfortable place and the right time to share a book.</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Held the book within the child’s visual range and turned pages slowly.</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let their child hold and play with board books.</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chosen books with bright pictures and a small amount of print.</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moved their finger under the words, from left to right, as they read to their toddler.</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read stories aloud with expression.</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chosen stories with a lot of rhyme and repetition.</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While reading to their child, pointed to pictures and named them or described them.</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While reading to their child, asked questions about the pictures.</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouraged their child to predict what would happen next in the story.</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read and re-read favourite stories.</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talked about words in the book</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As the Reading Pack that included the ‘Enjoy reading with your baby’ brochure was given to the mothers of young babies, it did not include these particular book-sharing behaviours that may be seen as more developmentally appropriate for somewhat older children. It can be seen that the mothers nominated use of these more sophisticated behaviours with their 3-year-old less frequently than most of the other behaviours in this section of the survey.

Mothers were also asked about the literacy attitudes and behaviours of their child during book sharing experiences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child’s attitudes and behaviours</th>
<th>response %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Had a favourite book</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pointed to the pictures</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talked about the pictures</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turned the pages by himself/herself</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joined in with the reading</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asked questions about the story</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretended to read</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pointed to words on the page</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talked about words in the book</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Said what would happen next</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It can be seen that these 3-year-old children, whose parents had received the Better Beginnings Pack three years previously, were developing some highly important concepts about books and print. Over 90% of the children pointed to the pictures and talked about them, turned the pages of the book and pretended to read. Over 70% joined in with the reading and asked questions about the story. Further, around half of them demonstrated interest in and knowledge of words, as they talked about words (51%) and pointed to them (45%). Equally important, almost 90% of the children were reported to have a favourite book.

In terms of the two parent reading behaviours not included in the ‘Enjoy reading with your baby’ brochure, it is noted that, whilst fewer than half of the mothers had indicated that they frequently encouraged their child to predict what would happen next, more than three quarters noted that their child did actually say what would happen next. On the other hand just over half had indicated that they frequently demonstrated moving their fingers under the words in the book, and just under half that their child pointed to the words in the book during a shared reading experience.

**Additional comments about the influence of Better Beginnings**

Some of the mothers (34%) provided additional comments about how Better Beginnings had influenced them since the previous survey. Some indicated that the comments they had made in previous surveys were still current. Their additional comments have been categorised and are presented below with examples.

Many of the responses referred to the ways in which the participants felt that Better Beginnings had encouraged them to have regular family reading routines, and some of the mothers explained that they thought this had benefitted their child’s development.

**Parent-child literacy practices**

- Encourage me to keep reading and keep up the routine. This keeps up father/son time as he is the one who does the bedtime routine and they always share a book.
- From the beginning when I read to him I felt like a dill reading to the baby, but as he has grown and responded I realised it really was worthwhile. Now he has a great vocabulary and people comment on how well he speaks and I put that down to him being read to. Better Beginnings has made me make reading a part of everyday routine.
- Made me more confident in reading to my children. I have taken the books off the top shelf, where I kept them safe and put them down where he can reach them. Now he picks up books so we can read them together or he flicks through by himself.
- It has encouraged me to persevere and continue bringing books into K’s life. It is hard with his disability but I believe that books have helped with his speech development.
- It has really changed me; I now make sure I read to all my kids before they go to bed and when they bring me books.
Some mothers indicated that the Better Beginnings materials and activities had increased their knowledge and awareness of reading with children.

Knowledge and awareness of early literacy
- Really liked the book suggestion pamphlet, it gave me ideas for new books to read.
- It gave me the insight on the stepping stones on how to encourage my child to learn to become a reader, how to get her ready for school.
- Made me more aware of reading to my child.

Some indicated that whilst they were already aware of the importance of reading to young children Better Beginnings had reinforced this knowledge.

Reinforcement of beliefs about the importance of reading with children
- It reinforced taking the time out from your schedule to make that special closeness, quiet time just with the girls and me.
- It just reminded me at the beginning to read from an early age.

At the time of this 2010 survey new babies had been born into many families. Their mothers indicated how useful they had found Better Beginnings for their new babies, and several explained that their 3-year-old was reading the Better Beginnings book to the new baby.

Reading to new baby or other children
- Yes, it has been passed down from my 3-year-old. Babyways is my 19-month-old's favourite book; we have read it so many times now. Now I have a new baby we will be reading it together as well.
- It has made me be aware of reading to my child from an early age, which reinforced this behaviour, which I then continued to do with my next two babies.
- It just gave me positive information and encouragement on reading to my children, which I have taken on board with my new baby as well.
- Receiving Better Beginnings the first time around has encouraged me to start sharing books with my 10-week-old.
- Toddler now reads Babyways to new baby.
- Brilliant program, they should definitely keep doing it. Now read Babyways with new baby and the nursery rhyme chart is on baby’s bedroom wall.

Several parents indicated that Better Beginnings had made them more aware of the local library, its facilities, library membership and how it had helped in providing appropriate resources.

Using the library
- The biggest influence was probably just motivating me to join the library… I have joined up my two children as well. Now they have the new cafe, we will go more often.
- Made me aware of going to the library and joining my toddler.
- It has encouraged me to go to the library and keep reading to my child.
- Encouraged me to go to the library and keep finding new books to share with the girls. Helped me recognise my toddler was a little “behind”, so I have sought help through a Speech Pathologist to get her on track for Kindy.

Some participants added other comments. Many expressed appreciation of the contents of the Better Beginnings Reading Pack, the program in general and the need for the program to continue.

Appreciation of Better Beginnings
- I really hope this program continues. There is no manual when you have a baby and I would have had no idea when to start reading to my child. So I hope it continues and helps other people like me.
- I recommend this programme to all new parents. I am obsessed with books so it did not influence me greatly, but I can see it would make a huge difference in some new parents’ lives.
I think it is a good program; it definitely would play an encouraging role in getting people to read to their kids from early on instead of waiting until they can read. In the beginning it motivated me to join my child up at the library.

Better Beginnings is such a brilliant program; reading is so important in so many ways.

Some mothers made comments that referred to issues that may have impacted on the results of the survey, such as prior knowledge and experience of the needs of young children and access to books.

Prior knowledge, experience and access to books
- Worked in Day Care prior to becoming a mother so already knew the importance of sharing books the right way with my kids from a young age.
- Although have not joined local library I work in a school and have access to those books.
- It just reminded me at the beginning to read from an early age.

Several mothers made reference to the yearly evaluation phone surveys that they felt were an important part of the program. It is noted that the surveys were part of the research study and that only the research participants were contacted for the phone surveys.

Ongoing contact by researchers
- Having the surveys regularly is really good because it keeps it top of mind. I think if it was only a one off delivery, with no further contact it would just fade away in the memory.

Summary of findings from mothers: Survey data 2010

The Better Beginnings Reading Pack. Three years after receiving the Better Beginnings Reading Pack a majority of the mothers had still kept the gift book, as well as the DVD and the rhyme chart, all of which were still used to some extent. A majority of the mothers in families where there had been a new baby since 2007 reported that Better Beginnings had influenced their language and literacy practices with their new baby.

Library membership.
By the end of 2010, 84% of the mothers were members of the library and most of the 20% who had joined during the year indicated that they regularly visited the library and borrowed items for their child. Further, by the end of 2010, 65% of the 3-year-olds were members of the library, and most of the 20% who had joined during the year were visiting the library regularly and were borrowing a variety of items on their own library cards. Most of the mothers who had taken out membership for themselves or their children during the year indicated that their decision had been influenced by Better Beginnings.

Choosing books at the library
The mothers described how they had thought seriously about the ways in which they and their child chose library books. Whilst choice was often a joint activity between mother and child based on features of the book, such as the topic, the pictures and the story line, many of the 3-year-old children were beginning to take on complete responsibility for choosing their own books.
Library-based activities

Just over one third of the respondents (37%) had taken part in at least one Story Time session over the past year, but very few (3%), had been to Baby Rhyme Time, most likely because these sessions were aimed at babies and younger children, and to parent workshops (1%). Most of those who had attended the Story Time sessions had found them ‘useful’. Some mothers, mostly those who had not attended the sessions, explained that the timing of the sessions was problematic and that they had other commitments or family issues that prevented their attendance.

Mothers’ attitudes to early literacy

All of the mothers noted that they felt ‘confident’ in sharing books with their child and nearly all that they felt ‘very confident’. Around one third indicated that their confidence had increased over the year and the other two thirds that it had stayed at the same level. Most (81%) attributed their confidence in sharing books with children to Better Beginnings. All the mothers saw sharing books with children as ‘important’ and all but two as ‘very important’, a view they also attributed to Better Beginnings.

The literacy environment of the home

The mothers indicated that there were many books in their homes that they read to their child, with an average number of 125 books, and a range of 6 to ‘hundreds’. Most mothers (81%) read to their children on a daily basis and many of the children were read to by other family members as well. When sharing books with their children the mothers engaged in a variety of practices that have the potential to help develop reading and writing, such as choosing stories with rhyme and repetition, reading expressively, asking questions about meaning, re-reading favourite stories, pointing to words and pictures and predicting what might happen next. Most of the mothers (87%) indicated that Better Beginnings had influenced the ways in which they shared books with their child and many (60%) that Better Beginnings had influenced the practices of other people who interacted with them. There was further evidence of the possible influence of Better Beginnings on their book sharing behaviours with their children, in that most of the behaviours that they reported using most frequently were those suggested in the Better Beginnings brochure that was included in the Reading Pack they had received for their baby.

Changes in home literacy practices over the past year

Nearly all mothers (90%) indicated that Better Beginnings had influenced changes to language and literacy interactions with their 3-year-old child, in terms of the frequency of reading experiences for this child and any other children in the family, the frequency with which the 3-year-old asked for books to be read, and communication with their child.

The children’s literacy attitudes and behaviours

It must be taken into account that the children’s attitudes and behaviours were reported by their mothers and were not observed by the researchers. Almost all the mothers indicated that since the last survey, when the children had been 2-years-old, their child’s interest in books had changed, with most of the children (88%) now being ‘very interested’; and with nearly all enjoying being read ‘all the book’ (93%), rather than ‘about half the book’ (7%) or one page (0%). Further, the now 3-year-old children, whose parents had received the Better Beginnings Pack three years previously, were said to be developing some highly important concepts about books and print: nearly all pointed to the pictures and talked about them, turned the pages of the book and pretended to read; around three quarters joined in with the reading, predicted what would happen next and asked questions about the story; and around half of the children demonstrated interest in and knowledge of words, as they talked about words and pointed to them.

Appreciation of Better Beginnings

Some of the mothers expressed their appreciation of Better Beginnings in additional comments. Some explained that it had given them knowledge and confidence in reading to their child from an early age; some that it had reinforced the beliefs and knowledge they already had; some that it had helped them with reading with new babies in the family; and some that it had encouraged library membership and visits. An unexpected comment made by several participants was that they appreciated the yearly contact by phone for the surveys, in which they could discuss their language and literacy interactions with their child.
Findings from Case Study  
Mothers: Interview data 2010

In 2010, 17 mothers took part in face-to-face interviews, usually in their homes. These participants represent a range of age, domestic arrangements and educational levels. The children, for whom they had received the Better Beginnings Reading Pack when they were babies, were either 3 years of age, or approaching 3 years of age at the time of the interview, and the majority were boys (12 boys and 5 girls). One of the children had been diagnosed as having a disability.

The responses made by these mothers were consistent with those given in the surveys and provided more detailed information on some important issues. The number of children’s books in their homes ranged from ‘15’ to ‘hundreds’. The mothers described some ways in which their children’s literacy was developing and how they were able to adapt their interactions with their child to make them appropriate for their developing literacy concepts and skills. Many of the children at this time enjoyed outdoor play and physical activities and, because of this, some of their book-reading practices were changing.

- He’s very active and busy, and because of that his reading has dropped off a bit in the last year. He’s not really interested in sitting quietly reading a book; he’d rather be running around. However, we do read before bed.

On the other hand many of the mothers commented on their child’s growing independence with books in that they preferred to ‘read’ alone, chose their own books and ‘role played’ reading to toys or siblings. Many talked about reading as an enjoyable and important learning activity that they had fostered in their children.

- [Reading to children provides] togetherness with parents. Both of my kids love it. Also the fact that they’ll be literate.
- I think my 3-year-old is exceptionally bright, and I credit that to early literacy. We were very diligent from very early on.

Consistency of distribution and the contents of the Reading Packs seemed to vary by community. Some mothers had received more than one kit, sometimes from different sources and at different times; some had received an additional kit for a new baby. At the time of the interview, the books from the kit were not generally used, or were used only with younger siblings as most mothers felt that their 3-year-old children had moved beyond board books.

There were some mixed responses to the other contents of the kits that had been received three years previously. Around half of the mothers recalled the brochure and information sheets; some had used these resources to help choose books for their children and use appropriate strategies when reading aloud with them. Not all mothers had received the DVD, and of those who had, some indicated that it reinforced the ‘early reading message’ and encouraged them to read. Some indicated that they didn’t find the DVD particularly useful; some had ‘watched it once or twice’ and one said that her children now watched it ‘occasionally’. One mother explained that she couldn’t use it as she didn’t ‘have a DVD player’.
The mothers’ attitudes, practices and knowledge of early literacy learning

Almost all of the mothers interviewed said that they read with their children and that Better Beginnings had influenced their attitudes, practices and knowledge. Many explained how it had changed their attitudes towards reading to children and early literacy learning.

Reading to children:

- The Better Beginnings program brought the importance of early literacy to the forefront at birth. I think it made me seek out early literacy programs in town. We now regularly attend ‘Bookworms’ which is run by [Community Organisation], and have done since A was about 9-months-old.

- I know how important books and reading are to everyday life and now know it is never too early to teach a child/toddler. The sooner the better!

- It gives an insight into what to do, and how to read to children; also that reading is important.

- It’s a good reference.

- It makes me keep an eye out to see what else is available.

Confidence in reading to children

Many of the mothers talked about the ways in which Better Beginnings had given them and sometimes their partners, confidence in reading to their children from an early age. Even those who had purchased children’s books prior to their child’s birth, found it had encouraged them to start reading earlier.

- Yes, children’s brains are like big sponges and the first time my daughter reacted [to a book reading] I felt so proud and found it so rewarding as a parent.

- I feel very confident reading to him…the Better Beginnings pack was definitely a good starting point: It taught me ‘how’ to read to him.

- Yes, I think Better Beginnings has influenced my confidence by giving me information on ‘how’ to read to my children.

- My husband is getting more confident, especially with rhyming stories like Dr Seuss.

- I suppose Story Time has helped.

A few explained that they needed additional knowledge in order to become more confident in reading to their children: one father told stories instead of reading a book, as he felt that his literacy skills were not good enough to read aloud. A mother, who was uncertain about her own literacy levels, felt that Better Beginnings had given her some confidence and that she ‘would have given up without the support of the Better Beginnings ideas’. Along with some of the other mothers she felt that she needed more support in helping her 3-year-old learn about words, letters and sounds.

- [I need] more education on how to introduce the alphabet, recognising letters and sounding out, learning about upper/lower case letters.

- [I’d like] more education material and how to teach a child to read, like sounding out letters, recognising upper/lower case etc., and if the library had flash cards to borrow.

All parents had purchased children’s books, and some used the Better Beginnings book classifications when choosing children’s books at the library.
…we do borrow lots of books from the library and I refer to the Better Beginnings stickers on the books that suggest what age the book is suitable for.

All children enjoyed selecting books to be read. They were being read to regularly by mothers and other family members, and on the whole, more often than mentioned in previous interviews.

**Literacy-related practices with the 3-year-old children**

The mothers described how they used a rich variety of activities to develop their children’s language and early literacy. These included conversations on specific topics with their children, singing songs and rhymes, sometimes on television or CD. Three of the mothers reported that they did not have English as their first language. They explained that they used English when reading to their children, but sometimes used their first language when talking and singing.

Nearly all of the mothers mentioned songs and rhymes as one of a range of important learning experiences for their children.

- We sing songs, watch TV, go to Story Time, and I ask him to repeat back what I say.
- Singing, we have lots of kids CDs with songs about counting etc. We also have Christian CDs that teach them about sharing, caring for others etc. My husband and I talk to our children a lot, so day to day discussion helps their language I think, especially with our 3-year-old. We do baby signing too.
- We sing nursery rhymes, my 4-year-old has started playing computer games that teach the alphabet etc, and they watch the Wiggles.
- He knows heaps of nursery rhymes, and has a nursery rhyme book that he loves to read. We sing in the car too. I try to limit his time in front of the TV, but that’s pretty easy, he plays outside a lot.
- We sing, he loves watching Hi-5, and we attend speech therapy.

Many of these parents also described how they were helping their children develop early reading, writing and numeracy skills and concepts.

- We go to a music class that incorporates language, counting, and colours. We’ve put up posters in his room recently with the alphabet, numbers and colours. He also has a computer game that he plays that is interactive and teaches the alphabet.
- Talking, drawing, writing, singing, pointing out letters anytime of the day, reading labels, correcting her language when talking.

Many of the mothers demonstrated that they had a deep understanding of the importance of reading to children for children’s learning. They identified world knowledge, word-related knowledge, book-related knowledge, comprehension, concentration span, vocabulary development, creativity, enjoyment, imagination and life skills as valuable aspects of this activity.

- Reading encourages children to learn new words and expressions; it teaches them about the beginning and ending of a story/book. By asking them questions it gives you a better understanding of what they understand.
- I like the fact that it teaches them concentration and to sit quietly and focus on the book. Them discovering a ‘new world’ in each story and getting absorbed into the book is fantastic too.
- Everything - quality time, concentration and attention span, listening to the story, asking ‘Why?’ (we get that a lot at the moment), looking at pictures and words, learning the importance of reading as a life tool.
- Them grasping the storylines, and the creativity that it seems to unlock. The enjoyment that books bring.

**The children’s literacy behaviours**

The mothers talked about some important early literacy behaviours of their children that included the 3-year-old role playing parent reading formats to a baby brother or sister, and also focussing attention on pictures, words and letters.

- He repeats words…looks at and points to pictures. If it’s a story he knows well, he’ll pre-empt the story.
- Our 3-year-old will sit down with her brother and ‘read’
to him, pointing out things like, ‘Where’s the duck?’ and then praising him if/when he gets it right; it’s very cute.

- She is very interactive, I ask her to find letters from people’s names and she points them out. She’s getting more interested in words than pictures now. My one-year-old points at pictures, trying to say words, animal sounds etc.

**Library use**

A majority of the mothers were library members and some of the children also had their own library cards. They indicated that Better Beginnings had influenced their decision to join for themselves or for their children. Those who visited the library did so for borrowing books and to attend the Rhyme Time and/or Story Time sessions. Several did not borrow books from the library for their children in case they damaged them.

- My son’s behaviour with library books; we had a few incidents that discouraged me from borrowing books for him.

Those who did borrow, chose books, educational packs, DVDs, videos and audio books. One commented that her family took advantage of a variety of library facilities.

- Story Time, borrow books for the whole family, the children's area - toys, pillows, chairs, borrow children's activity Reading Packs.

On the whole the mothers found library staff to be helpful. Most allowed their children to choose their own books, whilst one commented that she used the Better Beginnings stickers on the books for information about their suitability for her child.

- I usually choose a book based on whether I think they’ll be interested in it, [look at] the Better Beginnings sticker that recommends ages, and how long it is, that is, if it’ll hold their (particularly my son’s) attention.

**Library sessions**

Several mothers had attended and enjoyed Parent Workshops at the library. Others had attended Rhyme Time and/or Story Time. Those who had not attended cited lack of time, inconvenient time slots or children’s distracting behaviour as issues. One mother indicated that her partner felt uncomfortable because he was the only father and another, who was told that her child was ‘too young’, had not returned. However, the majority of those who had attended reported that the sessions were enjoyable and useful.

- I think they’re great, they’re just long enough that the kids don’t get bored or restless. The lady who does it up here interacts with the kids really well. I’m glad the library runs it.

- They’re fantastic; there are always different books that they may not have heard before. Different people reading to them, and their expressions.

Nevertheless, satisfaction levels with the sessions did seem to vary according to the individual presenter.

- At one session we went to, the person running it didn’t know the songs they were supposed to sing with us.

The mothers offered some suggestions for the sessions, which mostly appeared to be related to the context of their own local library.

- Maybe if they had age-appropriate sessions. A story and session that a 3-year-old is interested in isn’t going to hold the attention of an 18-month-old, and vice versa.

- Maybe more physical space, I stopped [going] because it was quite busy and when my son started to crawl he was getting into everyone else’s way.

- There should be more information from the library about their sessions. Better advertising.

**The overall value of Better Beginnings**

In their concluding comments the mothers were extremely positive about the overall influence of Better Beginnings. They felt it had either introduced new knowledge or reinforced knowledge they already possessed and had influenced their child-rearing practices to include a range of reading and
reading-related experiences. Several reported that they had heard that children ‘need to hear a thousand stories before starting school and formal reading’, and ‘felt sure’ that their 3-year-olds already had this experience.

- Better Beginnings gave me confidence. I know reading is an everyday tool and teaching my children will help them be more successful in life.
- It’s highlighted how important it is to read to the children and that I’m doing a good thing.
- It’s a good reminder to sit down and read with children.
- Reading is a part of our everyday life.
- It’s given me a reason to find out more about the importance of early literacy.

Summary of findings from Case Study Mothers

The Better Beginnings Reading Pack.
Most of the mothers had used the resources included in the pack. The gift books had been well received and used, but in view of the developmental levels of the 3-year-old children, were no longer generally used, or used only with younger siblings. There appeared to be some inconsistencies in the content and distribution of the packs that appeared specific to individual communities, particularly with regard to the DVDs, and availability of DVD players for viewing them was not universal. Approximately half of the mothers had found the brochure and information sheets useful when choosing books and reading to their children.

Library membership and use.
The majority of the mothers who were library members indicated that Better Beginnings had influenced their decision to join for themselves or for their children. Those who visited the library did so for borrowing books and to attend the Rhyme Time and/or Story Time sessions, although several were concerned that their children might damage the books. Many of the children were beginning to take responsibility for choosing their own books at the library.

Library-based activities.
Some mothers had attended and enjoyed Parent Workshops, Rhyme Time and/or Story Time at the library. However, others cited inconvenient timing of the sessions, insufficient advertising of dates and times, children’s restless behaviour and inconsistency of library presenters as reasons why they did not attend. A father who was the primary carer had felt uncomfortable as the only adult male in the audience.

Mothers’ attitudes to early literacy.
Many mothers reported that Better Beginnings had given them, and sometimes their partners, confidence in reading to their children from an early age. Some explained that they or their partner needed more knowledge in order to become really confident in reading to their children and many did not feel particularly confident when talking with their 3-year-olds about concepts of print, in particular, words, sounds and letters.
The literacy environment of the home.

Almost all of the mothers reported reading with their children on a regular basis, and that Better Beginnings had influenced their knowledge and attitudes towards this and other early language and literacy practices. They described how they used a rich variety of activities to develop their children’s language and early literacy. These included not only reading books with children, but also conversations on specific topics, singing songs and rhymes sometimes along with television or CD/DVD, and helping their children develop early literacy and numeracy concepts. The mothers’ use of these activities was backed up by their deep understanding of the importance of reading aloud to children’s learning. They identified world knowledge, word-related knowledge, book-related knowledge, comprehension, concentration span, vocabulary development, creativity, enjoyment, imagination and life skills as valuable aspects of book sharing.

The children’s literacy attitudes and behaviours.

The mothers described how their children were learning some important early literacy behaviours that included a 3-year-old role-playing parent reading routines with a baby brother or sister, and focussing attention on pictures, words and letters.

Appreciation of Better Beginnings.

In their concluding comments the mothers were highly positive about the overall influence of Better Beginnings on their confidence as parents, their practices and knowledge about reading to children, and about reading as a life-long skill.

Findings from the Community Health Child Nurses: Interview data 2010

The community child health nurses are of vital importance to Better Beginnings as they generally (but not always), distribute the Reading Packs to the mothers at the scheduled 6-week health check. At this time they have the opportunity to discuss with new mothers the contents of the Reading Pack, early language development and the value of reading to young children from an early age. They also have opportunities to provide the mothers with information about the library and its early childhood activities, including Baby Rhyme Time and Story Time. In 2010, six community child health nurses were interviewed, all of whom had been involved in Better Beginnings for at least three years, one having been involved since 2004, ‘right at the beginning…told it was coming on board and just to give out the books to the babies’. All were positive about the program and saw it as an important part of their work. Their perceptions of the information provided about Better Beginnings focussed on that provided both for themselves and for parents. They saw language development, reading to children, readiness for school and life, and library membership as aims of the program.

- There’s a book and information about the importance of reading to children.
- It is a research-based program. I think it was originally through England. It really helps promote early language development in children.
- Information is given to parents to read to their children and encourage them to join the library and teach them the importance of reading in preparation for school, and life in general.
- [It’s a] joint program between the library that helps to promote early language development. We give the tool kit out to parents to encourage them to read to their children, so that every child has a book at home before they go to school so they are reading books before they are 4-years-old.

Involvement of community child health nurses in Better Beginnings

Most of the child health nurses liaised with their local library as they had done since the program started, although one stated, ‘Personally I just deal with parents,’ and another explained that she didn’t get any feedback from the library, ‘I don’t know who I’m supposed to talk to - I just ring up when I need bags and they deliver them’. Several pointed out the importance of liaison between professionals involved in the program in that the child health nurse-library relationship was vital for encouraging library use. One compared Better Beginnings with other programs, ‘Liaison is very important and other programs don’t work without it.’ Some child health
nurses who had contact with local early years groups that were also targeting the age group explained that changes of staff and policy in these groups had caused difficulties. One described how recent liaison with the library had improved so that ‘distribution of packs has become more streamlined and feedback of implementation (our reporting process) is more streamlined; these changes are definitely positive.’ Since the pack is put together by the librarians and delivered to the child health clinic, this liaison is most important for sustainability of the program.

The child health nurses normally distributed the Better Beginnings packs to mothers at the 6-week check, or occasionally at the 3-4 month check. One explained that the 6-week check was a most appropriate time, ‘because there is no child health material to give out at this visit, it’s nice to be able to give the parents something.’ Some described how they encouraged the mothers to use the resources in the pack, for example suggestions on how to initiate a conversation about the nursery rhyme frieze by talking about the pictures and colours as well as the rhymes. One child health nurse explained that she did not take out the contents of the pack but instead drew the mothers’ attention to a copy of the poster and frieze on the wall and she then promoted Baby Rhyme Time at the library. Another pointed out that she often demonstrated reading to the baby at this time.

- I usually, depending on the parents, sit the baby on my lap and read to him/her; this can often help parents learn how to read to their babies. I have had parents comment that they would’ve been anxious and not known if they were doing it properly, and have another parent who told me that her 3-year-old sits down and reads to her baby.

Training for community child health nurses

Whilst they had attended an introductory Better Beginnings training session when they became involved in the program, none of the child health nurses had received further training and did not see a need for it, although one suggested that if there were changes to the program she ‘might be interested’.

Logistics of Better Beginnings for community child health nurses

There were no significant changes in the composition of the Better Beginnings packs during 2010. The only additional material added by some communities had been the Health Department brochure, Talking Together. In some communities there had been links to other early literacy programs, such as Let’s Read, which meant the child health nurses were able to reinforce the reading to children aim of Better Beginnings when they gave the Let’s Read pack to parents. However, one child health nurse told how this program was no longer being delivered in her community, ‘it’s a shame really. I have had mothers coming in and asking about getting the next pack for their child and it is really disappointing that I can’t give it to them.’ Another explained that Let’s Read had been delivered in her community, had been discontinued, but was soon to start up again and she was looking forward to being involved.

Links with playgroups and mothers groups were maintained and links to the local library were made with the First Mothers’ Groups; one child health nurse explained, ‘I feel I drive them [the First Mothers’ Group] crazy with the importance of Baby Rhyme Time’. In some communities, at the First Mothers’ Group the Better Beginnings packs were given to those who had not previously received one and these mothers were encouraged to attend health checks for their babies. In one community a new resource centre was under construction and when completed the child health nurse was planning to organise a visit of the First Mothers’ Group to the library; meanwhile she advertised the Baby Rhyme Time sessions and encouraged the mothers to go along ‘and have fun’ with their babies. Other liaisons were with speech pathologists, occupational therapists and an Early Years Group, made up of representatives from various interest groups connected with health and general care in Early Childhood, that was organising an Early Literacy Forum to take place at the library.

Keeping in contact with the mothers and babies and providing the local libraries with parent contact details seemed to be somewhat problematic for most of the child health nurses who were interviewed. Whilst there was a contact authority form for passing on parent contact details to the library, one said that she had never seen it, and another that she had used it, but had some reservations about it, and suggested email as a better channel of communication.

- I must admit that is a little bit hit and miss, it just depends what is going on within the group. I try to remember to do it [fill in the contact authority form] but I...
don’t always remember in the meeting with the parents. I don’t if it’s a fourth child, but I try and get the first [time] mums on board – that is why I think it would be good to send an email so that contact is not just a one off. So that there is a payoff for filling it out when they get the book.

All of the child health nurses saw providing the library with details of the mothers who had received the packs as an issue of confidentiality and most suggested email as a possible solution.

**Better Beginnings and cultural and linguistic diversity**

Several child health nurses explained that the Better Beginnings program was becoming increasingly important in their communities, as the demographics of the area had changed.

- It’s just such a good program- particularly in this area the demographic has changed. We’re having a lot more children that might not have had books at home; certainly I have a few more Indigenous families and they really enjoy getting the books and we show the babies everything and that’s really good. Also we have quite a lot more State housing now.

However, the child health nurses identified some issues concerning the sustainability of Better Beginnings amongst particular groups of mothers. One felt that although the librarians and child health nurses ‘did a good job with Better Beginnings’, it was difficult in a community with so many ‘non-English speaking people’ where she rarely saw books on home visits. She noted that in this community many women had low written literacy skills in their own language and that some of these languages did not have a written form.

**Perceptions of the Better Beginnings program by community child health nurses**

All the child health nurses felt that Better Beginnings was being sustained in their communities to a certain extent, particularly at the scheduled health checks:

- As we talk to parents at the 3-4 months, 8-month and 18-month checkups we talk about whether they read to their children. Parents comment on when/where/how often they read to their children.

- We maintain contact with parents for their children’s checkups, and I chat to parents about whether they’re reading to their kids at these checkups.

- There is revision through client contact. Some child health nurses also explained that awareness of the importance of early literacy, especially reading to children, was achieved through a multi-faceted approach by various organisations.

- I think the people who are interested are getting the message. With so many people promoting early literacy it’s hard for parents to ignore.

- Playgroup have started up Baby Rhyme Time twice a week, every other library does it twice a week. The [main] library is the only one not doing it, so there really needs to be more of a push from [there].

- Parents who attend playgroups, NGALA and library sessions are continually receiving the message. Community days at [the main shopping centre] are great too to get more involvement with maybe people who don’t access playgroups or such.

One thought that Better Beginnings was being well sustained, but was concerned that some mothers did not appear to have much knowledge of their child’s language development. She explained that she promoted Baby Rhyme Time as a valuable language learning opportunity that was more important than some other activities their children were engaged in.

- I continually promote Baby Rhyme Time at our 8-month check. The children come in and the parents don’t recognise that the children are babbling, which I think is a sad reflection that they are not tuned in with their children and then I will really go into Baby Rhyme Time…how important it is, in a nice way, in a partnership way, how good it is, a nice way to enhance speech better than anything else ... They all take their kids to swimming so I say, ‘If you want to do something really important for your kids how about going to Baby Rhyme Time?’ Because I think it’s more important then Baby Swim and cheaper.
Another child health nurse pointed out some concerns with the delivery of the Reading Packs. She didn’t feel that there was a general awareness in the community that all mothers would receive a Better Beginnings kit for their baby and that ‘occasionally a mother will comment that a friend received a pack but she didn’t because she attended a different centre for the 6-week check’. This child health nurse also felt that the packs did not address the needs of mothers who had multiple births or subsequent children, ‘Parents of second or third babies do comment that it’s the same book in the bag - we had Baby Ways for ages - and that, our issue is with multiple births where we like to give one bag but two different books’. This child health nurse thought that some other books had been delivered for this purpose but she had not been able to locate them.

The child health nurses offered a variety of comments about how to sustain, improve or extend the Better Beginnings program. In terms of sustaining the program, several mentioned the importance of the simplicity of the program, continued funding that included availability of the free resources that are ‘relevant’, and library co-ordination of resources and rhyme and story sessions.

In terms of suggestions for improvement, several of the child health nurses nominated more rhyme and story sessions at the library, alternative packs for multiple births and subsequent babies, and a procedure for sending the email addresses of the mothers to the library so that they could be sent details of library services and forthcoming events that would be relevant to them.

- I would like to see those emails used for a good purpose so that parents are notified of what’s happening in the library, particularly for children and families so they can come and join in and bring their friends. It’s free and they get that information into their homes.

- I think it would be nice if when we get the packs a greater proportion of them had different books so that next time the Mums come in with their next baby they don’t get the same books again; also Mums with twins don’t want two books the same.

- An alternative DVD for subsequent baby would be nice, maybe an alternative pack for Mums with the second or third child so they don’t get the same information all over again. They could receive a slightly modified brochure, reinforcing previous good practice and encouraging them to continue the same behaviours with their subsequent children.

Several gave suggestions for extending the Better Beginnings program in terms of providing follow-up materials when the children were older.

- When we see the 3-year-old for their review it would be nice to have something to give them.

- If there was more funding you could value-add to the packs and put more resources in them such as flash cards, puzzles that are word-related and link to the book, especially if you could have packs to hand out to older children, 2-or 3-year olds that would be great.

- Let’s Read would be a good follow up … we integrate the language and the reading into everything – so that kids hit school with the best possible potential ready to be woken up by the teachers - already grown by the parents.

**Findings from the Librarians: Interview data 2010**

The librarians are responsible for providing the Reading Packs for Better Beginnings, and usually for delivering them to the community child health nurses, in addition to the activities that take place within the library, particularly Baby Rhyme Time and Story Time. Of the four librarians interviewed in 2010 one had been involved in Better Beginnings for ‘about a year’; the other three had been involved since 2007, although not always at the same library. None had any experience of Better Beginnings 4-5 yrs, although it was being delivered in one of their communities, but by another librarian.

Their involvement in the program varied. One explained that she ‘ran occasional Story Time or Baby Rhyme Time sessions’; one had primary responsibility for running the Better Beginnings program in her district, which included organising the ordering, overseeing the packing of the toolkits, arranging their delivery to the child health nurses and attending the local Early Years Network meeting, which she did not find
particularly relevant. One ran the weekly Baby Rhyme Time sessions for 0-3 year olds and packed the bags for distribution to the child health nurses, although Story Time for 3-5 year olds was run on another day by a different librarian. The librarian with the least experience in the program explained that she oversaw the distribution of kits and the collection of statistics, and that another staff member was responsible for overseeing the program within the Shire.

Three of the four librarians saw liaison with the child health nurses as highly important since they were the professionals who distributed the packs to the new mothers. In one of the communities the Better Beginnings program ‘had lapsed for a while due to staff shortages,’ but communication had been re-established and the program was again being delivered. However, this librarian did have a suggestion for extending the contact.

- I think it’d be very useful to have one or two staff members from the library attend a meeting with the Health Nurses so we can discuss how the program is running, and any potential issues or problems. Though due to a lack of time and staff this doesn’t seem possible.

Another librarian who liaised with the child health nurses when dropping off the packs, had been asked for changes to the book in the pack, as some mothers were visiting for check-ups of second and third babies. She responded by exchanging some books from the pack with another library that had different books. Some of the librarians had also liaised with State Library Better Beginnings personnel, sometimes by email, and two had used the Better Beginnings wiki and found it useful, but not always user friendly.

One of the librarians, who was based in a branch library in a small regional town, had no contact with the child health nurses. The main library made up the packs that were then distributed to the mothers by a librarian at the branch library.

- We liaise only with parents and children within our community. The [main library] is responsible for the administration and management of the program in the Shire and they liaise with the community child health nurses and other agencies.

**Training for librarians**

The librarian who had recently become involved in the program had received no Better Beginnings training, nor was she aware of any, although she would have appreciated it.

- As far as I am aware no-one at [our] library has ever had training; we’ve just been given files and folders to go through. Some training would help us to understand the program a bit better.

The three librarians who had been with the program since 2007 had completed initial training with the Better Beginnings team from the State Library, which they saw as helpful to their understanding and implementation of the program. One had taken advantage of some recent training from the State Library on how to run a Baby Rhyme Time session. She had found this ‘adequate’ and planned to make use of the training in her sessions, but did not feel any further training would be ‘really necessary’. One had attended a training session for Let’s Read and handed out the Let’s Read materials at Baby Rhyme Time sessions. The other librarian did not think that she would benefit from further training - she had the opportunity for further training earlier in the year, but another staff member had attended.

**The logistics of the Better Beginnings program for librarians**

Each community was still involved in the Better Beginnings program, although one had withdrawn temporarily at the end of 2009, and there were very few changes to the makeup and distribution of the packs, apart from substitution of the book for multiple births and subsequent births in the family and presentation of the DVD. Three libraries included it in the pack, but at one library it was given out only to those mothers who visited the library. In all four libraries Better Beginnings was a standing budget item.

The Better Beginnings library activities discussed by the librarians were Baby Rhyme Time and Story Time. The frequency and number of participants at these activities varied by library from two Story Time and one Baby Rhyme Time sessions per week, each attended by approximately 20 families at a large main library, to one fortnightly session that alternated between a Story Time and Baby Rhyme Time session attended by an average of six families at a small branch library.
All four librarians saw these sessions as being highly important, not only for children's language and literacy development, but also for their social skills and for providing a meeting place for parents new to the locality.

- Reading to, and interacting with children ie, showing them words, reading the words, and explaining what the word means, it increases a child’s ability to read.

- They help the children’s early literacy learning by creating familiarity, repetition and enjoyment at the sessions

- I think the programs are incredibly valuable; it teaches children to associate words, stories, sounds. Children get social skills from being around other children and adults. I also think that there are lots of positives for parents. [This town] has lots of programs on offer for families with small children; however most of them have waitlists, so for families new to town it’s important to have a program like Story Time where they can come at their leisure, and meet other parents and families. I have had lots of positive feedback about it.

- They develop early literacy learning and also educate the mothers on literacy and how to encourage children’s enjoyment of books. Children gain pleasure from the rhymes and music during the session and also by hearing a story read well. This gives the mothers a model to use at home.

One librarian had changed the Baby Rhyme Time space to an enclosed and quiet meeting room, which she set up with mats and bean-bags to help contain the very young children. All the librarians had divided the Outreach toolboxes into smaller packs that they used at the sessions and also lent out to community groups such as playgroups, schools and childcare centres.

None of the librarians mentioned having a record of contact details of the families who attended, although one mentioned ‘friendly greetings’ at the sessions. The librarian from the small branch library said that in her community, contact was ‘mostly by word of mouth’ and that the Community Association sent out a fortnightly newsletter in which she included ‘info’, as well as sending it to the local playgroup.

Better Beginnings and cultural and linguistic diversity

One of the librarians told how she saw the Better Beginnings program as particularly important in her community that had a large culturally and linguistically diverse population. She was concerned that the program might not be reaching all of the target audience because of language differences. A further problem that she identified for these and other parents was that of obtaining transport to attend library sessions.

In view of the diversity of population in her area, this librarian had compiled a booklet of the rhymes used in the Baby Rhyme Time sessions for parents to take home that had pictures to guide parents’ comprehension, and she used the same rhymes each week for continuity (adding a new one occasionally). In addition she had collected a range of pamphlets in two languages to assist parents of young children, sourced from the British Book Start website. She suggested that more resources and training in working with culturally and linguistically diverse populations would be appropriate and helpful.

Other librarians were more ambivalent in their perception of this population group. One had noticed an increase the diversity of the families living within her community, especially an increase in African families using the library. The library had not, at the time of the interview, put into place any special resources or planning for these families.

Another librarian noted that her library did not ‘specifically target families who speak English as their second language’, although she pointed out that the library did have a small selection of children’s picture books that were ‘not specifically for readers of English’ and a few books in ‘other languages’. She added that ‘people who are coming [to the library] are interested in learning English, not reading books in other languages’. The other librarian felt that the issue of culturally and linguistically diverse populations was ‘not really relevant’ to her library as there was ‘only one current participant who is not Anglo and she has very good English’.
Perceptions of Better Beginnings by the librarians

All of the librarians spoke highly positively of the Better Beginnings program and identified the Reading Pack as the most valuable element of Better Beginnings, with one indicating that she thought that the Baby Rhyme Time and Story Time sessions might be better delivered in a dedicated early childhood setting such as a playgroup.

- Everyone gets the yellow bag … a free book! It is the most valuable feature of the Better Beginnings program.
- The tool kit is the primary feature of the Better Beginnings program. It is always delivered by the child health nurses so it reaches the most families therefore has the most impact.
- I think the toolkit is most valuable, teaching parents and children to interact with written and spoken words. In my opinion the activities are more suitable in a play environment eg playgroup, rather than at the library.

Whilst several were concerned about continuity of funding for the program, they believed it was being well sustained and would continue to be as long as funding was available and the Reading Pack was ‘continuously delivered’ so that ‘the message is being sustained’. Other factors that were seen as important to sustainability were the library-based sessions, ownership of the program by the community in terms of coordinating the distribution of Reading Packs, government support, combination with other early literacy programs, strong leadership from the State library, and the library facilities provided.

One librarian commented that in her district Better Beginnings had been working well alongside the Let’s Read program in reinforcing the ‘reading to children’ message, but when a multi-agency early literacy group had broken up, links between the programs were difficult to sustain without any leadership. Nevertheless, in another community there was more continuity, ‘The library acts as a link for both Better Beginnings and Let’s Read - two great programs with similar aims from different organisations.’ The librarian in this community explained that links between State and local government also helped sustainability of Better Beginnings, ‘It’s wonderful that support for the program stems from the State Government and filters down to local government. It emphasises the importance of the program.’ Another commented on the way her library was actively maintaining ‘a strong junior/kindy collection of books and resources; we have a separate area where parents and children can be comfortable reading and choosing books.’

The librarians identified some factors that could hinder sustainability, in addition to funding of the program. [It is noted that since the interviews took place, funding for the program has been guaranteed in the medium term.] One important issue in the communities was transience of staff and clientele.

- The constant changing population in the town has a big impact on the ability to keep the message current. It is a very transient town and there are constantly changes to staff involved in the program i.e. library & health nurse staffing, and the general community.

The librarians were asked about features of Better Beginnings that could be changed to make it more effective or sustainable. One saw no need for any change, ‘I think here the program works the way it is. If it’s not broken, don’t fix it!’ The others gave a variety of suggestions for change that included:

- Training for staff new to the program at all levels, and training in working with culturally and linguistically diverse populations;
- Use of interpreters to help communication with parents;
- Visits by librarians to multicultural parent groups to find out their perceptions of why they do not visit the library, particularly for Baby Rhyme Time and Story Time sessions and how they might be encouraged to attend;
- Stronger links between Better Beginnings and Let’s Read that would need to be coordinated at a State level;
- More events at the library;
- Introducing Saturday sessions to encourage greater attendance at library sessions;
- Introducing a larger range of books for the Reading Packs;
Summary of the findings from the Community Health Child Nurses and Librarians: Interview data 2010

The community child health nurses and librarians who were interviewed described their roles in the Better Beginnings program within their own communities, and their views of its implementation. The issues that are outlined below emerged from discussions between these professionals and the researchers.

Aim of the program.
The child health nurses and librarians talked about the overall aim of the Better Beginnings program, in terms of a cooperative approach to providing positive language and literacy influences for babies and young children through support for their parents in this endeavour. They explained how they were delivering the program to parents, identified aspects that were helping to achieve this aim and gave suggestions for modifications and extension.

Contents of the Reading Pack.
All the professionals interviewed agreed that the Reading Pack, put together by librarians, was the most important element of the program as it had the potential to help parents and children interact around ‘written and spoken words’ and was generally very well received as a gift by the mothers of young babies. They did, however, identify some limitations of the pack since the program had been running in their communities for a number of years. In particular they identified a need for a variety of books and other materials in the packs to better cater for the needs of families who had multiple births or subsequent children, so that the same book was not given to more than one child in a family. Similarly, they saw a need for modification of the information in the pack to address these needs and those of parents from culturally and linguistically diverse families.

Delivery of the Reading Pack to the mothers.

Usually, but not always, the Reading Packs were delivered by the librarians to the child health nurses, who then gave them to the mothers of babies at the time of the 6-week health check. The librarians and child health nurses were generally very satisfied with this arrangement. As most mothers in the target group attended this health check with their babies, most received the pack, usually along with some advice about how to sing songs and rhymes and read to their baby (some child health nurses gave demonstrations) and the importance of these activities for their child’s development. The mothers were usually given some information about the library and activities for babies and young children at this time. There was some concern amongst the professionals that, as some of the mothers who might benefit the most from the health check and presentation of the Reading Pack did not attend the 6-week check these mothers were not receiving the pack and related contact and advice.

Library events.
All the librarians and child health nurses talked about the great importance for social, language and literacy development, of the Baby Rhyme Time and Story Time sessions at their community libraries, which after the Reading Pack, are the other main elements of Better Beginnings in the communities. Nevertheless, despite great enthusiasm for these activities by some of the professionals involved, they were attended by a relatively small proportion of the target age group, and the frequency and number of participants varied from library to library. Some factors affecting participation in these events were perceived as being cultural and linguistic issues and the timing of sessions that did not fit into parent schedules. None of the child health nurses or librarians mentioned the availability of parent workshops.

Community awareness of Better Beginnings and Library Services.
In some communities where there were various early literacy initiatives, the librarians and child health nurses felt that ‘there was no escape from the ‘reading to children message’. However, those in other communities felt that there needed to be more awareness of the Better Beginnings materials, messages and activities, and that this might be achieved by better advertising, particularly through the media.

Extensions to the program.
Some of the professionals suggested a follow-up Reading Pack for older children that included another book and possibly puzzles and other resources that could help children begin to focus on word-related features of books, as a means of sustaining the program. One child health nurse suggested that in her community Let’s Read was a good follow-up. It is noted that there was little or no reference to the existence of parent workshops at the library. These could have the potential to increase parental awareness of children’s early language and literacy development.

Training of professionals for Better Beginnings.

Only one of the interviewed child health nurses and librarians indicated that she had received no initial training and she felt a need for training to help her understand the written documentation she had been given. The others had received some training a number of years ago. Of these, only one had taken part in any recent training, and only one indicated that she felt the need for further training. Given that the aim of the Better Beginnings program, which is ‘to provide positive language and literacy experiences for babies and young children’ is now a core element of the work of librarians and child health nurses, it is interesting that as a group, they felt little need for any further training in this area.

Liaison of professionals involved in the program.

Almost all of the librarians and child health nurses saw a need for strong liaison between their two professions as an essential element of the program. For the most part they liaised around the delivery of the Reading Packs by the librarians to the child health nurses, and in some communities at other times as well, such as community meetings of personnel involved in early childhood. Nevertheless, in some communities there was little or no contact between the child health nurses and librarians. There was a suggestion that programmed meetings of the librarians and health nurses might have the potential to help prevent any problems from occurring and strengthen relationships, although such meetings could involve issues of time and staffing.

Linguistic and cultural diversity.

There were reports in some communities of a particular need for Better Beginnings as more families who may not have had books at home were moving into the area. These families included Aboriginal people and particular groups of culturally and linguistically diverse people, including refugees. The child health nurses explained how they were able to use the Reading Pack with these mothers. There was though some concern that Better Beginnings was not reaching some of these families, due to language differences and non-attendance at the 6-week and later health check. Further, whilst some individual librarians were highly pro-active in producing and sourcing materials for these families, this was not universal. Some libraries had few such resources and some librarians did not see a particular need for them.

Communication.

Keeping in contact with families seems to be a very important issue in the sustainability of the program. Whilst there was a procedure for the child health nurses to pass on contact details of the mothers to the library, not all were familiar with the procedure and it was seen as both time consuming and an issue of breech of confidentiality. Some suggested using email as a more efficient and less intrusive means of communication, although parents would still need to provide details of email contact. The availability of some form of parent contact details by the library appears to be most important in informing the target group of parents about library events such as Baby Rhyme Time, Story Time and workshops, and inviting them to take part.
Findings from the Better Beginnings Co-ordinator: Interview data 2010

The information in this section is based on that provided in two interviews with the co-ordinator of the Better Beginnings program at the State Library of Western Australia.

The role of the co-ordinator

The role of co-ordinator of the Better Beginnings program has changed dramatically since 2005, when it was set up as a pilot project that involved the mothers of young babies in six metropolitan and regional communities. The role now includes, not only responsibility for the overall co-ordination of the Better Beginnings program that is the focus of this report and is now called ‘Better Beginnings 0-3’, but also responsibility for Better Beginnings +, a pilot program that is aimed at children between the ages of 4 and 5.

Her key role in Better Beginnings 0-3 involves maintaining partnerships with public libraries, organising training, delivering the program, reinforcing links with a range of other agencies, and strengthening the networks within the program. Until the end of 2010 she was highly involved in securing funding. This has now been assured for the next four years, following the announcement, in December 2010 by the Minister for the Arts, that State Government funding and funding by Rio Tinto, has been committed to the program.

A large proportion of the co-ordinator’s time during 2010 has been devoted to establishing the new Better Beginnings 4-5yrs pilot program. The team has always had a vision of Better Beginnings as addressing literacy from birth to 5 years, but recognised the need to focus on the early years in the initial stages. She sees the interface between the Better Beginnings 0-3 and the Better Beginnings 4-5 programs as a continuum, with Better Beginnings 4-5yrs reinforcing the aims of Better Beginnings 0-3, and building on its foundations. Better Beginnings 4-5yrs is mainly directed at helping parents build and develop their children’s literacy in enjoyable reading interactions, and ultimately in helping children achieve a smooth transition into school.

The development of Better Beginnings

The co-ordinator explained that in 2010 the Better Beginnings 0-3 program was available to most mothers and their babies in Western Australia. Overall participation by local government was 84%, with 10 small local government councils recently joining. She sees as high priority the encouragement of membership of the program by the remaining local government councils.

In 2010, there were some changes in the delivery of Better Beginnings 0-3 in particular communities, as a result of the introduction of the Better Beginnings 4-5yrs pilot program that was being trialled in 25 diverse communities, some of which were in regional and remote areas. In approximately half of these pilot communities, during 2010, the Better Beginnings 0-3 book program was offered through schools. The remaining Better Beginnings 4-5yrs communities offered the 0-3 program through their community councils and through health department staff. During the year other remote communities also became involved in Better Beginnings 0-3 through the agency of a community child health nurse and library staff, when they made visits to remote communities, usually in relation to the Closing the Gap program, and promoted Better Beginnings 0-3 on these visits. This led to requests for Better Beginnings 0-3 book packs for distribution in these communities.

Better Beginnings 0-3 has generally remained unchanged in format, with public libraries conducting it as part of their core service. This involves librarians packing and distributing the reading packs, usually to the community child health centres, and conducting library-based Rhyme Time, Story Time and parent information sessions. As part of the continuing process of evaluation regular reviews are made that include reference to the Edith Cowan University evaluation reports. The co-ordinator explained that there were plans to review the reading pack components in 2011 as part of a 0-5 continuum linking the Better Beginnings 0-3 and Better Beginnings 4-5yrs programs.

Training for librarians

The co-ordinator explained that training in Better Beginnings was regularly available for new public library staff, often delivered ‘on-site’ in the libraries by members of the Better Beginnings team. As the program was well established,
in 2010 training was generally on a ‘needs’ basis for both continuing and new staff. A new initiative for 2011 will be an online training package developed to provide training for librarians in all communities. The team was also considering setting up forums of interested stakeholders, in particular library and health workers, but also early literacy professionals from a range of fields. Another innovation was the Better Beginnings wiki that was being increasingly used to communicate information and experiences between public libraries.

The co-ordinator identified as high priority the further development of the Better Beginnings website as a primary source of information for professionals and parents. It was planned to incorporate the wiki in order to provide tools for library staff to deliver the program. Access would be available to community child health nurses, teachers and community workers, as a source of literacy information.

**Sustaining the program**

As the co-ordinator made clear, gaining State Government funding for the next four years would allow consolidation and provide an opportunity for the Better Beginnings team to expand. Several new initiatives were planned. Depending on the results of the evaluation of the Better Beginnings 4-5yrs pilot program, there would be a roll out of a Better Beginnings (0-5) program to link Better Beginnings 0-3 and Better Beginnings 4-5yrs over the following four years. There would also be a strong focus on building the program in regional areas with funding from the Royalties for Regions initiative.

As there was evidence in 2010 that the program was seen by many local governments as part of their core service, the Better Beginnings team were hoping to develop this leverage across all local governments. The co-ordinator also saw the program being sustained through community recognition of the program, so that new parents become aware that they will receive ‘a yellow bag’ and book for their baby. In addition, the Better Beginnings’s State Manager would oversee and establish strategic liaisons to ensure the continued efficient delivery of the program and its expansion into regional and remote areas. The team hoped to continue the supportive partnership with Rio Tinto in providing not only financial support but also links with their community partners such as the Kulunga Research Institute.

**Developing links with other early literacy family programs**

The Better Beginnings team had been working with The Smith Family to ensure compatibility between the Let’s Read and Better Beginnings programs. Ngala was overseeing the delivery of the Let’s Read program in selected metropolitan communities and there were plans to develop the program in Port Hedland and Karratha. The co-ordinator saw Let’s Read as a possible link between the Better Beginnings 0-3 and Better Beginnings 4-5yrs programs.

A long-term aim was to increase Better Beginnings involvement in culturally and linguistically diverse families. The Better Beginnings 4-5yrs team was working with the Little Big Book Club in developing and delivering New Arrivals packs to cater for linguistic diversity that would be trialled at a local Primary School. The team was also working with the Gowrie group in the Manning area.

**The future of Better Beginnings**

The co-ordinator saw the program as becoming a 0-5 literacy program through the consolidation of Better Beginnings 0-3 and the roll out of Better Beginnings 4-5yrs across the State. The team planned to address areas of need identified in this evaluation. They also planned to establish a community publishing initiative with KIDS’ OWN publishing, a Melbourne based independent publishing group that uses community content to create quality children’s books. These books could include community content for English as an Additional Language and Indigenous groups, thus providing children with access to books that feature their own community group. The co-ordinator pointed out that such books can be powerful in creating personal identity through reading that is compatible with the State Library’s aim of representing Western Australian stories.

She also talked about long range plans for a 6-9 year-old program and perhaps an adult reader development program, both arising from needs identified in the Edith Cowan University evaluations. These would be addressed by building liaisons with groups already working in primary and adult education and investigating future roles that public libraries could develop, that would complement their existing work.
Summary of the findings from the Better Beginnings Co-ordinator: Interview data 2010

The Better Beginnings Program.
The program co-ordinator explained how, by 2010, approximately 100,000 Better Beginnings Reading Packs had been given to Western Australian families with young babies, including those given to 27,000 of the 30,000 families of babies born in 2010. Also in 2010, approximately 90% of local government areas were involved in the program; the remainder were either in the process of implementing Better Beginnings or negotiating to implement it. This program is now often referred to as Better Beginnings 0-3, since a new pilot program called Better Beginnings 4-5yrs, aimed at children between the ages of 4 and 5, was being trialled in 25 communities during 2010.

Funding.
Over the life of Better Beginnings continuity of funding has always been a dominant and uncertain issue for those involved in the planning and implementing of the program. However, at the end of 2010, continued funding has been assured for the four years from 2011 to 2014. This involves both State Government funding and funding by Rio Tinto.

The role of the co-ordinator.
The role of the co-ordinator of the Better Beginnings program has changed dramatically from co-ordination of a small pilot project, to the overall co-ordination of both Better Beginnings 0-3, that covers almost all of the State, and also the Better Beginnings 4-5 pilot program. During 2010, when funding was uncertain, the co-ordinator was highly involved in applying for funding, which is now assured for the next 4 years.

Sustaining the program.
Guaranteed State Government funding for four years will allow for consolidation and provide an opportunity for the Better Beginnings team to expand. The co-ordinator sees the program being sustained also through community recognition of the program. The Better Beginnings State manager will oversee and establish strategic liaisons to ensure the continued efficient delivery of the program and its expansion into regional areas. It is hoped to sustain the supportive partnership with Rio Tinto that provides not only financial support but also links with their community partners.

Training for librarians.
The co-ordinator explained that during 2010, training in Better Beginnings was regularly available for new public library staff, often delivered ‘on-site’ in the libraries. New initiatives have been an online training package and a wiki that has been increasingly used to communicate information and experiences between public libraries. There have also moves to establish forums of interested stakeholders, including library and health workers, and other early literacy professionals from a range of fields.

The future of Better Beginnings.
Future directions will address areas of need identified in the Edith Cowan University evaluations, one of which is to increase Better Beginnings involvement in culturally and linguistically diverse families. There is a plan to establish a collaborative publishing initiative that targets English as an additional language and Aboriginal groups, in order to provide children with access to books that feature their own community group. There are plans to work with the Little Big Book Club in developing and delivering ‘New Arrivals’ packs...
that also cater for linguistic diversity. In addition there are also plans to roll out a Better Beginnings 0-5 program linking Better Beginnings 0-3 and Better Beginnings 4-5yrs over the next four years, with a strong focus on regional areas.

In the long term there are plans for a 6- to 9-year-old program and perhaps an adult reader development program, both of which could be addressed through building liaisons with groups already working in primary and adult education, and investigating future roles that public libraries could develop.

**Recommendations**

A number of recommendations have been identified from detailed analysis of the Better Beginnings evaluation data from 2007 to 2010 that involved participants and professionals who took part in the program. It is clear from the evaluation that Better Beginnings was overwhelmingly appreciated and has influenced literacy practices, attitudes and confidence within and across families, making a positive contribution to early literacy learning. Better Beginnings has also fostered partnerships between a range of agencies and created a strong network of support that has promoted and sustained the program. Overall the evidence suggests that Better Beginnings should continue to support parents’/carers’ early literacy practices and convert new knowledge about book sharing into sustained practice. Better Beginnings now faces two challenges: the first is to engage families who are traditionally hard to reach in the program; and the second is to find ways of extending practices that support children’s literacy development as they grow older. Thus our recommendations are as follows:

- **Extend** Better Beginnings to support children’s developing literacy concepts and skills in terms of resources for learning that include book-sharing, through greater dissemination of practices shown to be effective.

- Market library activities and resources through a range of media, including digital technologies as well as paper information.

- Formalise relationships with other literacy programs/initiatives to develop coordinated and complementary implementation.

- Establish and/or extend links with childcare providers in order to create continuity of Better Beginnings literacy practices across home and care settings.

- Work closely with other State and Territory libraries to promote Better Beginnings as part of a national strategy for literacy.

- Establish new links with agencies that have contact with ‘hard to reach’ parents/carers.

- Develop Better Beginnings resources and ways of working that reflect the diversity of communities in Western Australia.

- Strengthen relationships between librarians and community health nurses, especially in relation to professional learning and development, and subsequent contact with program participants.
FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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