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<th>Cranbourne Communities for Children: Library has Legs Project</th>
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<td>Library outreach to kindergartens, playgroups and child care centres</td>
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<td>Project undertaken by</td>
<td>Casey-Cardinia Library Corporation (Melbourne, VIC)</td>
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<td>Start date</td>
<td>June 2006</td>
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<td>Issue</td>
<td>The City of Casey is the largest growing municipality in Victoria. Cranbourne is one of two major activity centres in the City of Casey. The vast majority of Cranbourne’s residents are young families, with Casey boasting the highest 0–5 years population in Australia. Approximately 14% of Cranbourne’s population is aged 0–5 years. Cranbourne is characterised by below-average socio-economic status, which tends to be associated with lower than average literacy rates and low exposure of pre-school children to reading at home. More and more children in the Cranbourne area are placed in early child care settings, either on a long-term or casual basis. Families increasingly expect that these settings also act as prime educators of their children given work and other constraints that parents face in terms of time and resources to commit to literacy development. In response to this, Library has Legs has employed an Early Years Outreach Officer to engage the many child care centres and kindergartens who are unable to visit the library, and provide children with early years literacy appreciation and experiences. Library Outreach gives children and their families story times and information about their access to a free public library service in places where they go regularly during the day.</td>
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| Program context          | Casey-Cardinia Library Corporation provides a network of library services through various service points in Melbourne’s south-eastern metropolitan growth corridor. One of those is the Cranbourne library. Cranbourne is one of the largest communities in the City of Casey. Communities for Children Cranbourne encompasses the selected suburbs of Cranbourne Central, North, East and West. The City of Casey’s Family and Children’s Services offers a wide range of services for children, parents and families who live, work, and study or have another strong link with the City of Casey including:  
  - Australia’s largest Family Day Care Scheme; and  
  - Victoria’s largest Maternal and Child Health Service. The Library has Legs is an activity of Cranbourne Communities for Children, a partnership program developed through Windermere Child and Family Services and the Casey Cardinia Library Corporation. Library has Legs operates as an outreach model that aims to assist and enhance language and literacy development of young children in Cranbourne 0–5 years, |
and to encourage parents and carers to share and read aloud to children from birth. This is achieved through visits to kindergartens, playgroups and child care centres that are unable to get to the library for visits.

The objectives of the program are to:

- increase the outreach of universal and early intervention services;
- increase recognition of the role of early years staff as key educators of children and their families; and
- achieve reported increase of school-age children with participation in the early years service sector.

Practice description

The literature identifies three factors that have been found to support and promote emergent literacy skills prior to school commencement—people (including all who are involved in the child’s life from parents, friends to early childhood professionals), environments (access to materials such as books, crayons, etc that support literacy) and activities that support literacy (reading aloud, playing games, singing nursery rhymes, etc).

The key ingredients in this practice involve and incorporate these three factors in its delivery of tailored reading initiatives:

Closing the gap by bringing the books to the children—outreach to child care centres, playgroups and kindergartens

Many of the child care services in the area are not located close to the library. Likewise, many early childhood services’ policies do not allow excursions, or the cost of bus hire to take these children to the library is prohibitive. Outreach is the only way to introduce the library to both the parents and to the increasing number of children who go to child care centres, playgroups and kinder in order to promote reading to these children and their families. These early childhood services provide both an accessible and ideal venue for the conduct of early literacy activities.

Bookings are organised through contact with the centres, either by phone or personally inviting them to visit the library. If this is not possible then the Early Years Worker will offer to visit. Prior to the visit, the worker drops off library application forms for parents to sign and also asks the Early Years Service Provider of any topic to cover in storytime (e.g., fairytales, pets, etc). A few days before the visit, the worker collects any returned applications and creates memberships for the children and families. On the day of the Outreach visit, the worker talks about the library to the children, asks if they have been to the Cranbourne library, explains what can be borrowed there and discusses how to take care of library books.

Reading appreciation is instilled through the conduct of a storytime session that involves reading aloud at least three books to and with the children. The reading session and conversation with children about the story in the books are followed by other fun activities such as singing songs or nursery rhymes that may reflect the stories in the books. To encourage children to continue the practice of reading books, they are each presented with their own library card, a bag and a sticker to wear home, that all say “Please take me to Cranbourne library” at the end of the reading session.

Library branding

The Cranbourne library logo, bookmark and stickers appeal to the demographic. They personalise the library to families and invite them to visit.

- The logo bookmark promotes the library Storytimes and Tinties’ Times which are free early literacy programs for 0–5 year olds run regularly by the
Cranbourne library.

- The literacy flyer included in the library bag, tells the family that their child had a visit from the Librarian at the Cranbourne library and the books that were read during the visit. To encourage parents to pursue the child’s interest in reading, helpful conversation starters are included on the flyer, such as: "Today we had a visit from the librarian, she read us Harry the Dirty Dog. Please ask me what happened to Harry at the beach?"

**Establishment of strong reciprocal links between the library and early childhood service providers**

Strong reciprocal links are established with early childhood service providers. The cooperation of early childhood providers is vital as they provide the link between the program and the children and parents. The providers encourage the parents to join the library by filling out the forms. On the other hand, the visits by storytellers are also exciting events for the children. As new children and new families enter the services over time, this outreach session is expected to be part of the centre’s program.

**Affordability**

This universal service is affordable. Library membership is free, and early literacy programs are free to library members and service providers.

**Personal approach**

Integral to the Library has Legs program is its personal approach. Children love to hear stories while child care workers and educators value the promotion of literacy—it is an easy and positive message to convey.

**An appointed Early Years Worker**

The program works because resources, both time and staffing, have been allocated for this program to develop. A dedicated worker is able to nurture relationships with early childhood providers in the community and to actively promote the initiatives above and undertake any follow-up action required.

**Research base**

Evidence shows that poor literacy skills are associated with generally lower education, employment, health and social outcomes as well as being linked to high rates of welfare dependence and teenage parenting (Berlin & Sum, 1988; Stanley, 2001; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998 in Centre for Community Child Health & The Smith Family, 2004). More children from families with lower socio-economic status experience difficulties in learning to read than other Australian children (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997 in Centre for Community Child Health & The Smith Family, 2004). Research evidence shows that those children who experience early difficulties in learning to read are unlikely to catch up with their peers. Children who struggle with reading are likely to dislike reading and children who read less fall further behind (Baydar, Brooks-Gunn, & Furstenberg, 1993; Stevenson & Newman, 1986; Tramontana, Hooper, & Selzer, 1988 in Centre for Community Child Health & The Smith Family, 2004).

Families today are raising children under very different social circumstances to previous generations. Because of this, they often require more flexible combinations of formal and informal social support. Public libraries are ideally placed to extend the social investment that communities make in their young people:

To remain relevant and sustain its value the public library needs to anticipate and respond to the needs of its community. Public libraries play a vital role in strengthening communities and enhancing the individual’s quality of life. Their role in offering family literacy programs that introduce children and their parents to literature and libraries is fundamental. (North, 2003)

Reading with young children is probably the single most important activity that one can do to develop a child’s future ability to read and write. Reading aloud with children also supports their development in other ways, such as language development, promoting parent-child bonding and socialisation, and helps parents relate positively to their children.
There are very strong links between literacy, school performance, self-esteem, and life chances. Poor literacy skills are associated with generally lower education, earnings, health and social outcomes as well as being linked to high rates of unemployment, welfare dependence and teenage parenting.

Almost all children learn to talk without being formally taught to do so. On the other hand, the development of literacy skills such as reading and writing is markedly different from the development of language, although dependent on it. Literacy is thought to be "experience dependent" as it can be encouraged by particular experiences. Positive experiences to develop literacy may not be available to everyone.

The research evidence shows that those children who experience difficulties in learning to read are unlikely to catch up to their peers. Children who struggle with reading in their first years of schooling are more likely to dislike reading, read less, and thus fall further behind. Efforts to help children who have an established reading problem and negative attitudes to reading are not always successful. We need to focus on activities early in life that encourage positive attitudes to books and reading to lay the foundation for sound literacy at school. Although "learning to read" in a formal sense usually begins once a child commences school, the building blocks for success in literacy are laid much earlier in childhood.

Despite the fact that fewer than 10% of children fail to read because of a bona fide reading disability, nearly 40% of students in Australia in Year 3 from low socio-economic backgrounds fail to read at or above the age-appropriate reading benchmark, while their more affluent peers perform significantly better, with only 12% falling short of the benchmark. Children from low socio-economic backgrounds appear to have lost significant ground in literacy (with poorer emergent literacy skills) even before starting school, and the differences appear to widen as they progress through school. (What the Research Shows © Centre for Community Child Health, 2006, p. 21)

A significant body of research has demonstrated a strong relationship between a number of recognised emergent literacy skills and later success in reading. There are three key factors that have been found to support and promote emergent literacy skills prior to school commencement. Contributions to literacy come from the interplay among these three elements rather than from any one of the elements alone. These elements are described briefly below.

1. **People**, including all who care for and are involved in a child's life: parents, family members, friends and early childhood professionals.
   - Adults involved in reading and literacy-related activities, in particular males, can have a positive impact during children's early years.
   - Parental involvement in reading to a child increases opportunities to strengthen relationships and motivates and encourages children to read or look at books more often.

2. **Environments** that allow access to materials such as books, crayons and paper that support literacy.
   - The home is the most practical and accessible venue for early literacy activities.
   - Strong correlations have been reported between the literacy environment in the home and preschool-aged children's language abilities.

3. **Activities** that support literacy, such as reading aloud, playing games, conversations, naming objects, rhyming, singing nursery rhymes and other songs.


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**Outcomes**

The initial outcomes evidenced from the implementation of the program include the following:

- increased understanding in the community about the importance of reading in the early years;
- primary carers, including early childhood educators and families, have
increased awareness of the importance of children’s emergent literacy needs; and

- parents and early years educators and professionals are equipped to model and assist their children.

Evidence of outcomes

The data that has been gathered from the use of surveys and number of library memberships is currently being analysed and written into a report.

Increased understanding in the community about the importance of reading in the early years.

As per last reporting year (2007) Library has Legs directly enrolled 245 new members aged 0–5 years and/or their family members. These enrolments were directly collected through the Library has Legs program on orange application forms, as opposed to the usual white forms used by the Library for other potential users.

Outreach visits to kinders directly engaged 2,562 children. This number was achieved through head counts of visits to kinders and child care centres.

Primary carers, including early childhood educators and families have increased awareness of the importance of children’s emergent literacy needs and Parents and early years educators and professionals are equipped to model and assist their children.

The information gathered from the surveys suggests that carers found the Library has Legs program useful in assisting them in highlighting to families the importance of reading to kinder aged children. Early Years staff recognised the importance of reading in the early years and value the kinder outreach program. Sixteen early childhood educators (76%; n = 21) indicated that they strongly agreed or agreed that the program has increased their access to the library’s resources. Below are some comments received from staff.

“We always need new information and resources.”

“It’s a great activity, very good to add to childcare programs.”

Of the 21 early childhood educators surveyed, 15 (71%) also strongly agreed or agreed that this activity led to increased awareness and access to these resources for parents. The following comment from an early childhood educator indicates how the program enhanced access to resources such as the library for parents.

“Excellent program to let parents know about the library and get them motivated to go and borrow books.”

Below are two case studies of children who participated in the Library has Legs program:

Case study 1

“Savindee” was introduced to the Library has Legs Early Years Worker who conducted a Storytime visit at a local kinder.

She enjoyed the story reading and the next day visited the library with her mother and asked to see me. I introduced myself to her mother and had a chat to Savindee. She borrowed some picture books and her mother borrowed some books from the Basic English collection. When I next saw the family at the library, Savindee’s mother said Savindee was so excited about her library book that they read it all weekend and then when she went to kinder on Monday she “read” the story to the rest of the children at show and tell.

Case study 2

Another little person came to the library immediately after kinder finished. The mother said, he had “nagged and nagged to go the library. I wished we had done it years ago. We have spent a good peaceful hour in the library, with my son reading picture books and I have been enjoying some magazines.”

Below are some of the feedback received from early childhood staff:

“Having Sandra come and share the library and stories with the children is a definite plus—concrete way of reinforcing the library’s
place in the community.” (Clarendon St Preschool)

“Excellent program to let parents know about the library—and get them motivated to go and borrow books.” (Woodbine Preschool)

"I have a teaching background. Very pleased that the information is becoming available to pre-schools. Excellent presentation." (CYP)

Policy analysis

The Library has Legs program is a positive example of placed-based early intervention approach to child protection and development. It has developed linkages between service systems, including the Early Years services and the Regional Library services to assist and enhance language and literacy development in the 0–5 years target group. This is consistent with government policy of helping families and communities build better futures for children. Enhanced learning and literacy opportunities are believed to address issues of socio-demographic disadvantage which can be associated with lower reading and literacy capacity leading to early exit from education systems.

Project evaluations

The program is yet to be formally evaluated. While the program is continuing until 2009, and has not yet brought together sufficient performance data to reach a conclusive view, preliminary results are most encouraging.

Project related publications


References


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More information
More information on Library has Legs Project and Promising Practice Profiles can be found on the PPP pages of the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia website at http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/ppp/ppp.html

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