

The Little Big Book Club: Spreading the word!

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For most of us, reading is something we take for granted. We have the necessary literacy skills to read for whatever purpose – pleasure, work, study or just day-to-day living. However, the reality is that a staggering percentage – almost 50 per cent – of Australians aged 15–74 have poor or very poor literacy skills. In other words, in 1996, when the Australian Bureau of Statistics conducted its Aspects of Literacy survey, approximately six million people were found to have experienced difficulty reading many of the printed materials they encountered in everyday life.

It's hard to understand why this should be the case. To date, there appears to be more questions than answers. Debate continues about teaching and testing methods, and not just in Australia. Many other countries including Canada, the US and England are all seeking ways to improve literacy levels.

What we do know is that reading difficulties can limit career and education choices and can cause embarrassment and frustration throughout life. We also know that reading regularly with young children is probably the single most important activity that you can undertake to develop a child's ability to read and write. The human brain is most open to environmental influences in the first few years of life, with a major proportion of brain development occurring between birth and the age of three.

By reading aloud to babies, parents and caregivers can make a positive impact on their child's success in school and later in life.

Although the vast majority of parents realise that reading to their children is important, they struggle to find the time on a regular basis. Even those parents who do read regularly to their children don't know at what age they should start, how often, how long for and what they should read to their baby or toddler.

To answer these questions and to support and encourage parents to read to their young children, a number of excellent early childhood literacy programs are already underway in various communities. The most recent program to be announced is The Little Big Book Club.

The Little Big Book Club is the most extensive early childhood literacy program ever conducted in South Australia and has received a four-year funding commitment from the state government. From February 2006, The Little Big Book Club will provide every baby aged between four and six months (over 17,500 babies) with a free reading pack, containing: a reading book; a story-time DVD; a library bag; and information for parents, including reading lists and tips on reading aloud.

Giving away reading packs is a great initiative, but this is not enough on its own. For ongoing support and guidance for families, The Little Big Book Club has established a broad network of partnerships with key organisations such as Child and Youth Health and the state's 139 public libraries. The media also has a key role to play in 'spreading the word' and a unique partnership with the state wide daily newspaper, The Advertiser, will ensure monthly stories, book selections and the promotion of storytelling sessions.

When 'spreading the word' about reading to children, one of the key words is fun. Not just for the child, but also for the reader. When asked recently about the importance of reading to children, author Dr Fred Guilhaus responded, 'We are seldom 'present' anymore. Life is a revolving door. A young child demands that we are really doing something fully, in the moment. The quality of that interaction becomes almost a meditation for stressed parents. Allowing oneself to become the characters in the book is therapy. We chance upon our child selves again. When the expression is genuine, the story lives, the child reacts with delight, and all is well with the world. Can there be a better reason to read to one's child?'

Fiona Lange

Project Manager

The Advertiser Little Big Book Club

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