

## Tool 3 – Early Literacy Research and the Let’s Read Community Program



This document provides a brief overview of the research-evidence that demonstrates the need for early literacy programs and the research that has informed the development of the Let’s Read Community Program.

### Why do we need an early literacy program like the Let’s Read Community Program?

Australia’s future prosperity depends on the collective investments we make as Australians in all of our children’s development. Developing children’s literacy is an area where, as a country, we have an opportunity to make those investments. By investing in our children’s early literacy, we’re laying the foundations for children’s success in school and life – and the future prosperity of our whole country. Without strong literacy skills, children’s opportunities in life for education, employment, income and wellbeing are negatively affected.<sup>1</sup> Currently, however, around half of Australians aged 15 to 74 do not have the literacy skills to meet the demands of everyday life and work.<sup>2</sup>

The building blocks for literacy start very early in life – well before a child starts school or preschool. The years from birth to 5 are critical for building the emergent literacy skills that precede learning to read and write. Those literacy skills predict later literacy and academic achievement.<sup>3</sup>

Not all children arrive at school ready to take advantage of the learning opportunities provided at school,<sup>4</sup> and those who don’t sometimes never catch up.<sup>5</sup> Currently, Australia’s primary school children are some of the worst performing internationally in literacy – Australian Year 4 children are ranked 27<sup>th</sup> out of 45 countries in reading.<sup>6</sup>

The early home learning environment makes a difference for children’s later academic and literacy success, particularly for children in disadvantaged circumstances.<sup>7</sup> However, many families are not aware of the importance of early literacy or how to foster its development.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, community services and the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector have an important role to play in working with families to support children’s emergent literacy development.

### What does the research say about successful early literacy promotion programs?

In 2014, following a review of the Let’s Read Community Program, The Murdoch Childrens Research Institute (MCRI) and The Smith Family (TSF) revised the program to align with both current research and practice-based evidence from community professionals and coordinators with ‘on the ground’ experience in Let’s Read communities. Below is a brief overview of the research evidence that has informed the development of the Let’s Read Community Program.

**When to intervene?** A successful intervention or program needs to be implemented early enough so that children have the best chance to acquire and develop emergent literacy and formal literacy skills.<sup>9</sup> It is increasingly recognised that skills for literacy should be developed from birth, and not from the commencement of formal schooling.<sup>10</sup>

**How often does a successful program need to be delivered?** Building a strong foundation for brain architecture matters a lot for all children’s future development and behaviour. Building that foundation starts early, even before birth. When we have different opportunities to contribute to strong foundations in children’s developing brains, by supporting their early literacy skills, we are providing those children with skills for life. That’s why Let’s Read offers support and opportunities to engage with families right throughout a child’s early years, rather than at one specific point in time. Implementing 10 interventions throughout the first 5 years of a child’s life has a measurable impact on families’ early literacy behaviours.<sup>11</sup>

**Who should emergent literacy programs target?** Focusing interventions solely on children and families from the most vulnerable groups or communities will not reduce health inequalities sufficiently. “ To reduce the steepness of the social gradient in health, interventions must be universal, but with a scale and intensity that is proportionate to the level of disadvantage. This is called proportionate universalism”.<sup>12</sup> Let’s Read takes a proportionate universalism approach in order to establish solid emergent literacy foundations for all children from birth to 5 years.

**What should the program include?** Ongoing, systematic and integrated approaches to early literacy development need to take an ecological approach in order to:

- support the broader service and community environment to engage in children’s emergent literacy skills and engage families in their capacity to build their children’s emergent literacy skills<sup>13</sup>
- support vulnerable families’ home environments, for example providing stimulating environments, resources and books<sup>14</sup>
- support vulnerable families’ capacity to engage their children’s emergent literacy skills.<sup>15</sup>

**Who should deliver the program?** Community professionals who have existing close working relationships,<sup>16</sup> or work with families in a trusted role <sup>17</sup> are best placed to deliver the messages about emergent literacy behaviours. More sustainable literacy programs include community commitment to and ownership of the program.<sup>18</sup>

## Let’s Read

Let’s Read is a national, evidence-based early literacy initiative that promotes reading with children from birth to five years. Let’s Read was developed by the Centre for Community Child Health at the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute and The Royal Children’s Hospital. The Murdoch Childrens Research Institute (MCRI) and The Smith Family (TSF) have partnered to implement Let’s Read with communities across Australia.

Let’s Read works with communities to promote the importance of emergent literacy development. Since 2005, the Let’s Read Community Program has been delivered in more than 100 disadvantaged communities across seven Australian states and territories – over 200,000 children have participated in the program.

In 2014, following a review of the Let’s Read Community Program, MCRI and TSF revised the Community Program model to align with both current research and practice-based evidence from community professionals and coordinators with ‘on the ground’ experience of working in Let’s Read communities. To learn more about the Let’s Read Community Program model read [Tool 1 - Let’s Read Community Program Overview](#).

## Let’s Read Key Messages

Drawing on Let’s Read market research findings, the Let’s Read key messages promote and reinforce early literacy messages that encourage families to share books, rhymes, songs and stories with their children every day from birth. As recommended by the market research findings, the key messages have been developed to include the following components:

**Procedural or instructional component:** To make reading with children every day from birth more appealing, reading needs to be seen as fun, relaxing, realistic, carefree, modern, easy going, something special between the family and the child, and not based on others’ expectations of what a good parent is. Messages should suggest and offer help, and advise parents of alternatives without directing or making families feel guilty.

**Emotive component:** Messages should promote two immediate personal benefits in particular to families to encourage them to read more with young children. These benefits are:

- Love and learning – promote that reading/early literacy activities will provide more opportunities for ‘special time’ bonding and building a closer relationship with children, and improve future literacy skills and social and emotional development.
- Feeling proud and being respected for being a ‘good parent’ – promote or show families feeling proud of themselves and being respected by other families.

**Outcome component:** Demonstrate that reading with children from birth enhances a child's future ability to read and write, and that an individual's literacy levels affect their opportunities in life for education, employment, income and wellbeing.

Based on the market research results, and in line with the above components, eight key messages were developed for Let's Read that have informed the development of the Let's Read resources and the Let's Read Community Program:

1. Share, rhymes, songs and stories every day (Procedural/Instructional)
2. Words are everywhere (Procedural/Instructional)
3. Read, Play and Learn with books (Procedural/Instructional)
4. Story time is a special time (Emotive)
5. Bond with books (Emotive)
6. Build a love of books (Emotive)
7. Sharing books from birth helps children become better readers for life (Outcome)
8. Sharing stories from birth gives children a great start to life (Outcome)

## About Us

### The Centre for Community Child Health and Murdoch Childrens Research Institute

The Murdoch Childrens Research Institute (MCRI) is Australia's largest child health research organisation. The Institute is recognised globally for its contribution to improving health outcomes for children. MCRI's vision is to excel in research that improves the health and quality of life of all children and their families, both in Australia and globally.

The Centre for Community Child Health (CCCH) leads two research groups at the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute and is a department of The Royal Children's Hospital (RCH). We provide leadership in children's health, wellbeing and learning through research, service system innovation, education and professional development, knowledge translation, and specialist medical clinics for child development, behaviour and learning. Our evidence-based approach seeks to inform early childhood policy and practice, support families in their important role and facilitate professional development. We have over 20 years of experience strengthening and refocusing service delivery to improve children's learning, health and wellbeing.

### The Smith Family

The Smith Family (TSF) is a national, independent children's charity, helping young Australians in need to get the most out of their education, so they can create better futures for themselves. TSF's vision is "a better future for young Australians in need" and their mission is to create opportunities for young Australians in need by providing long-term support for their participation in education. TSF believes that every child deserves a chance.

TSF recognise that in Australia today more than 638,000 children are living in jobless families. For these children, the effects of their family's financial disadvantage go beyond the pressures of not having enough money for the basics; it can prevent them from accessing the same educational and life opportunities as their peers. When children are left out, they get left behind and without support the disadvantage they experience today is likely to continue into adulthood – and on to the next generation.

TSF believes that circumstances should never limit the achievement of potential. With research showing that education has the power to transform lives, not just minds, TSF's programs enable disadvantaged children and young people to get the opportunities they need to fully participate in their education and create better futures for themselves.

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