

# Let's Read - A Literature Review

## Summary of key findings



### Background

*Let's Read* is a project to develop an Australian program to promote reading to young children from 4-6 months to 5 years of age in order to encourage the skills which will increase their chances of learning to read and write successfully in later life.

The project was initiated in mid 2002 by the Centre for Community Child Health in partnership with The Smith Family Australia and the initial phase is funded by the Telstra Foundation. A literature review was conducted to document the research on how literacy skills are best acquired and therefore to help determine the key features of this program. It attempts to answer the question of how literacy outcomes for disadvantaged children can be improved by promoting literacy activities during the years prior to school entry.

### Why is literacy so critical?

The links between literacy, the ability to read and write the printed word, school performance, self-esteem and adult life chances have been widely documented. The literature review confirms the findings 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.

### Literacy and socio-economic status

Reading failure disproportionately affects children from socially disadvantaged homes, which in turn contributes to a continuation of the poverty cycle. Australian data show that more children from families with lower socio-economic status (SES) experience difficulties in learning to read than other Australian children. Perhaps even more alarmingly, the research evidence indicates that those children who experience early difficulties in learning to read are unlikely to catch up to their peers. Children who struggle with reading are likely to dislike reading and children who read less fall further behind.

### Language and Literacy development

A number of studies have highlighted the enormous impact of early experiences on brain development and the complex interaction of biological and environmental factors in the development of language and literacy.

Almost all children learn to talk without being formally taught to do so. Humans, it would appear, have an innate disposition for language. 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. Formal literacy is artificial in that its components (letters, words, punctuation symbols) were developed as a means of facilitating the use of language by capturing or symbolically representing the language. Literacy is accordingly thought to be 'experience dependent' as it can be encouraged by particular experiences. Positive experiences to develop literacy may not be available to everyone.

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. Recent research has identified home literacy environments as playing an important role in both language and literacy development. A number of independent skill sets have been identified as early predictors of later reading success, often referred to as *emergent literacy*. These skill sets include language abilities (vocabulary), the ability to identify the names and sounds of letters (the alphabet), an ability to identify and manipulate sounds (phonological awareness), an understanding of print conventions together with literacy environments (having books in the

home). A significant body of research has demonstrated a strong relationship between these emergent literacy skills and later success in reading.

### **The benefits of shared reading**

Reading to young children has long been recognised as having a positive impact on language development, and has been shown to be associated with the development of vocabulary skills. However *phonological awareness* (the ability to identify and manipulate sounds in spoken language) is now widely regarded as an important predictor of reading success in normally developing children. Active parental help in the form of *increased book ownership*, information about *frequency and style* of book reading, the use of *finger-pointing* and *interactive questioning* along with *shared story telling* have all been shown to promote a number of important emergent literacy skills. The selection of *predictable or patterned books* and *alphabet books* is suggested as supporting parents to engage young children in the activity of shared reading and to assist in the development of word identification and awareness of how letters map onto sounds.

Other studies indicate that children's vocabulary skills are related not just to reading to the child but also to the number of books in the home, to library visits and to parents' own print exposure. Children of low-income families, have been found to be at greater risk for reading difficulties and slower in the development of language skills. Such children often come from homes which contain fewer books and where shared reading occurs less frequently.

### **Laying the foundations for future success in reading**

The literature review examined a number of early literacy interventions that specifically target children prior to school entry, including facilitated, curriculum based programs and book-based interventions. The crucial role that parents can play in promoting literacy success were a common feature of the interventions reviewed. Book distribution interventions (ROR and BookStart) are considered to have been successful in increasing the numbers of books, particularly in low-income households, as well as increasing the amount of time children are read aloud to daily.

It has long been recognised that reading to children assists language development. The recent evidence also suggests that it also leads to greater success in literacy if the reading style helps children to acquire early knowledge of letters and the sounds they make. What has emerged, as vitally important in value adding to the activity of shared reading, is additional *anticipatory guidance* for parents and other carers. This guidance should include information about the types of books most appropriate for children at different ages and stages as well as activities that promote phonological awareness (such as mapping of sounds and names to each letter and an emphasis on rhyming and blending).

The recent research evidence suggests that promoting specific literacy-related activities during the years prior to school entry can improve future literacy outcomes for children in disadvantaged communities. Based on these findings, it is concluded that the *Let's Read* program should include all of the following key components:

- *Shared reading* between child and care giver;
- Easy accessibility to age appropriate *free books*;
- *Professional involvement* to convey *guidance messages* and *model* shared reading practices to parents;
- Built upon an *emergent literacy framework*, which promotes emergent literacy knowledge skills and environments, including *language abilities*, *letter sound/name knowledge*, *phonological awareness* and *conventions of print*; and
- *Community involvement* to assist in the sustainability of a community-based early literacy program.

The *Let's Read* Literature Review is available from [www.rch.org.au/ccch/research](http://www.rch.org.au/ccch/research).