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## Let's Read Literature review key findings

### Background

Let's Read is an early childhood literacy initiative of the Centre for Community Child Health (a key research centre of the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute) in partnership with The Smith Family. Let's Read aims to improve and measure literacy outcomes in Australia by encouraging parents to read with pre-school-aged children (0-5 years).

The first stage of the initiative, undertaken in mid 2002, was a comprehensive literature review to document the research on how literacy skills are best acquired. Outlined below are a summary of the key findings of the review.

### Literacy in Australia

The most recent population level data on literacy in Australia was gathered via the *Survey of Aspects of Literacy*; SAL (Australia Bureau of Statistics, 1997). Results indicated that almost half of Australians aged 15-74 (6.2 million people) have either *very poor* or *poor* basic prose literacy skills (20% *very poor*; 28% *poor*). Despite the advent of new technology, decades of reading research and teacher training, little has been done to address this issue in schools.

According to a 1997 national literacy survey of 7,000 children, conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), nearly 30 per cent of the sample of Year 3 and Year 5 students failed to meet the appropriate minimum grade reading standard. Consistent with other research, the survey also found that there was a significant gap between the results of students from low socio-economic status (SES) and indigenous families compared with the achievement levels of children from high and medium SES families.

These findings are broadly consistent with the results of Australia's national student achievement benchmarks, which represent the minimum level of competence deemed necessary to allow meaningful participation in the school learning program. The most recent results (2001) show that indigenous students were three times less likely to reach the Year 5 reading benchmark than Australian students as a whole. The results also provide evidence of potential differences between male and female performance in reading and writing, with a greater proportion of girls in grades 3 and 5 achieving the benchmark level than boys.

### Why is literacy so critical?

The links between literacy, 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.

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## **Literacy and socio-economic status**

Reading failure disproportionately affects children from socially disadvantaged homes, which in turn contributes to a continuation of the cycle of disadvantage. Australian data show that more children from families with lower 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**

Language development provides an excellent example of the interactive work of biological and environmental factors. In an environment where language can be heard, most children will naturally develop oral language at the same rate and in the same developmental sequence. Despite its dependence on language, the acquisition of literacy is markedly different. Formal literacy is artificial in that it was developed as a means of facilitating the use of language by representing language via symbols. Literacy is accordingly thought to be 'experience dependent' as it can be encouraged by particular experiences, which 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

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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, funded by The Telstra Foundation, is available from [www.rch.org.au/ccch/news](http://www.rch.org.au/ccch/news).

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#### **Notes to editor:**

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Let's Read gratefully acknowledges the support of Shell in Australia, The Telstra Foundation, Disney Hand, John T. Reid Charitable Trusts, and the Australian Research Council.

More details about Let's Read can be found on [www.letsread.com.au](http://www.letsread.com.au)

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