

Pre-school-aged children targeted in literacy drive

Parents of children as young as four months are being encouraged to read aloud with their children in a bid to improve Australia's literacy levels, as part of a major new initiative being launched to coincide with National Literacy and Numeracy Week (29/8–4/9).

Let's Read, 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, aims to improve and measure literacy outcomes by encouraging parents to read with pre-school-aged children (0-5 years).

Almost half of all Australians aged between 15 and 74 years (6.2 million people) have either 'very poor' or 'poor' basic literacy skills, experiencing considerable difficulties in using many of the printed materials encountered during daily life (Australian Bureau of Statistics), according to the findings of a literature review undertaken by the Centre with seed money from The Telstra Foundation.

"The fact that we have not seen literacy levels improve over two consecutive generations, despite substantial investment into schools by government and decades of reading research and teacher training, highlights the urgent need for a new approach," said Professor Oberklaid, director of the Centre for Community Child Health.

Let's Read seeks to address research that has found that children who have not developed emergent literacy skills (the ability to identify and manipulate sounds) by school age are unlikely to catch up with their peers.

"Reading with young children is the single most important activity parents can do to develop their future literacy skills," explains Professor Oberklaid.

Research has also found strong links between literacy, school performance, self-esteem and life chances and that reading failure disproportionately affects children from socially disadvantaged homes.

"Our aim is for all children to have exposure to books and reading from a very young age, regardless of their parent's financial position," adds Elaine Henry, chief executive officer of The Smith Family. "By making sure these children have the building blocks of early literacy skills in place before they start school, we will be giving them the best opportunity to succeed with their education and break the cycle of disadvantage."

Thanks to a \$750,000 commitment from Shell in Australia, Let's Read aims to reach a minimum of 50,000 children by 2007 and will initially be offered in Corio, Victoria and the Parramatta area, New South Wales.

“Let’s Read is a unique opportunity for Shell to invest in the future of Australian children,” said chairman of the Shell Companies in Australia, Tim Warren. “Shell has been committed to the program since the initial planning stages and we’re thrilled to see it come to fruition.”

Let’s Read will be gradually rolled-out nationally to families through community-based professionals, including community child-health nurses, child care staff and general practitioners, who will receive emergent literacy training and resources as part of the initiative.

“By tracking today’s babies in the Let’s Read program over a five year period, we hope we will be able to demonstrate an increase in their literacy levels by the time they start formal schooling,” said Professor Oberklaid.

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Notes to editor:

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 to pre-school-aged children (0-5 years). Let’s Read will be delivered to families through community-based professionals using research-based, emergent literacy techniques and resources.

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

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