



Better Beginnings™

Making a Difference:
The report of the evaluation
of the Better Beginnings
(0-3yrs) family literacy
program 2007 - 2010

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The librarians and the Community Child Health Nurses (CCHN) gave a wealth of information, both spoken and written in individual and focus group interviews. Over the four years of evaluation their enthusiasm did not waiver, they were frank and open in their responses and enabled us to identify factors that had an impact on the successful implementation of *Better Beginnings*.

The parents, who are at the centre of the *Better Beginnings* program, continued to complete a survey each year about *Better Beginnings*. Overall they completed four surveys and took the time to write comments about the *Better Beginnings* program. Their responses gave us insight into the impact of *Better Beginnings* not only on their on their literacy beliefs and practices but how these influenced their child and wider family.

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Executive Summary

This report describes and evaluates the implementation of the *Better Beginnings* program for parents and children aged 0-3 years, within four diverse communities across Western Australia. This State-wide program has been evaluated over approximately four years, from 2007-2010. It contains a summary description and evaluation of its development and sustainability over the four years. Detailed annual reports are available for 2008, 2009 and 2010 (<http://www.better-beginnings.com.au/success.html>). A development of the *Better Beginnings* program, *Better Beginnings+* is being trialled in a number of communities, and is targeted at parents of 4- and 5-year-old children (<http://www.better-beginnings.com.au/bbplus.html>). The focus of this report is *Better Beginnings 0-3*.

Better Beginnings is an early intervention family literacy program that has been developed by the State Library of Western Australia. Its stated purpose is to provide positive language and literacy influences for young children through supporting parents as their children's first teachers. The program is based on strong cooperation between health professionals, local governments and public libraries. In planning and developing the program, there has been a high degree of consultation and engagement with local communities.

In this executive summary we outline the findings over the four years from 2007 to 2010 from the views of participants in the research project. The study participants were:

- Mothers¹ of babies who received a *Better Beginnings Reading Pack* in 2007, who have completed four annual surveys, the last 3 being conducted by phone;
- Case study mothers who have been interviewed annually in their homes;
- Community child health nurses and librarians who are the professionals involved in the day-to-day running of the program and have been interviewed annually;
- The project co-ordinator at the State Library who has also been interviewed annually since 2007.

1. All the parents / carers who participated in this evaluation identified themselves as 'mothers'.





Summary of the findings from surveys and interviews with the participants over the four years, 2007-2010

Aim of the *Better Beginnings* program. During the first year the mothers and the professionals (child health nurses and librarians) who administered the program saw it mostly as involving mothers in sharing books with their babies. Over time these views broadened so that the professionals saw the overall aim as a cooperative approach to providing positive language and literacy experiences for babies and young children through support for their parents. Similarly, the mothers' reports of their and their child's literacy-related practices over time suggested a wider approach to literacy that included a range of significant adults reading with their child and helping them focus on important aspects of texts, relatively regular visits to the library to choose books and other items, and for some, attendance at library-based activities.

The literacy context. Before the mothers were presented with the *Better Beginnings* Reading Pack in 2007, they indicated that the average number of books in their homes that were read to the baby was 18, with almost half indicating that they had no books that were read to the baby. It is likely that for many mothers the *Better Beginnings* book would have been the first book to be read to their baby. The numbers of these books increased dramatically to an average of 125 and a minimum of 6 books by the time the children were 3-years-old. It is clear that by this time many of these children were in homes that contained a wealth of books that were read to them.

At the time of the first survey in 2007 very few of the young babies were attending any form of care outside the home, so that they would have had their first book sharing experiences within the home. However, by 2010, when they were mostly around 3-years-old, just over half were attending childcare or kindergarten, which means that people from outside the home would most likely be reading to them on a regular basis.

Content of the *Better Beginnings* Reading Pack. The mothers who were surveyed had overwhelmingly appreciated receiving the free Reading Pack that contained a board book for their baby, related brochures and information sheet, a nursery rhyme chart, a library membership form and often, but not always, a DVD about reading with babies. Further, in 2010, many

of mothers had kept the book and other items from the pack, which four years later, they still used to some extent with their child/and or new baby. Some did, though have some suggestions for modifications that included a having a range of board books and other resources to cater for the needs of different families, and presenting information in different forms.

Delivery of the *Better Beginnings* Reading Pack. The Reading Packs were prepared by library staff and delivered to the child health clinic for distribution by the child health nurses at the baby's 6-week health check. The child health nurses indicated that they appreciated having the 'free gift' to give to the mother on the baby's first visit and that it set a context for them to discuss child development, including language development, with the mother. Over the four years the presentation of the pack by the child health nurses varied from simply handing over the pack to the mother, to active engagement around the resources. This included discussion about individual aspects of the pack, such as library membership and activities, and advice about how to sing songs and rhymes and read to a baby, with some child health nurses giving demonstrations. It seems that at the presentation of the Reading Pack, the expertise and communication skills of the child health nurses are key. Another important issue in the delivery of the pack raised by the child health nurses was that some mothers who could particularly benefit from the health check and Reading Pack did not attend the health check.

Library membership. In 2007, less than half of the surveyed mothers were members of the library, but by the end of 2010, 84% of mothers had become members. Further, whilst only 6% of the babies were members in 2007, by the end of 2010, 65% of the 3-year-olds were members of the library and most of those who had joined during the year were visiting the library regularly and borrowing a variety of items on their own library cards. Most of the mothers who had taken out membership for themselves or their children during 2010 indicated that their decision to do so had been influenced by *Better Beginnings*. By this time many of the children were beginning to take responsibility for choosing their own books at the library.

***Better Beginnings* library-based activities.** The pattern of attendance at library-based activities changed over the four years, with increased attendance at Story Time Sessions as the children grew older, with more than one third attending in 2010, and decreased attendance at Baby Rhyme Time sessions,

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most likely reflecting the changing developmental levels of the children. Most of those who had attended sessions had found them 'useful', although in the first years there was concern amongst a number of mothers as to the suitability of the venue, the content and the format for very young children. Only a very small proportion of parents had attended any workshops throughout the project.

Workshops on early language and literacy development therefore appear to be an area for future initiatives, particularly as some of the mothers by 2010 indicated that they felt a need for knowledge about the teaching of early reading and writing to help the literacy learning of their developing child. Other areas for development appear to be catering for young children's needs effectively, advertising of the sessions and the timing of the library-based activities. Some mothers, mostly those who had not attended the sessions, explained that the timing of the sessions was problematic in that they had other commitments such as work or family issues that prevented their attendance. A father who was the primary carer had felt intimidated as the only adult male in the audience.

Mothers' attitudes to early literacy. Whilst a majority of the mothers indicated that they felt confident in sharing books with their babies/children from an early age, their feelings of confidence nevertheless increased from year to year, with nearly all feeling 'very confident' by 2010. In addition, by 2010, 81% of mothers indicated that *Better Beginnings* had influenced their confidence in sharing books with their child. Even those who had initially reported feeling confident, indicated that *Better Beginnings* had reinforced their confidence. The mothers' views of the importance of sharing books with their child also developed over the four years, so that by 2010 almost all saw it as 'very important' and attributed this view to *Better Beginnings*. Their comments showed that for some, *Better Beginnings* had reinforced and extended existing knowledge and beliefs, while for others it had provided new understandings and practices.

The mothers' views of the early enjoyment and benefit of sharing songs and rhymes also changed over time, with 99% or 100% either changing their view or already holding the view that the practice is enjoyable and beneficial. Whilst in 2007 only around one third had held this view, by 2010 nearly all reported that they saw the practice as enjoyable and beneficial.

Changes in home literacy practices. The mothers indicated that there were some marked changes in home literacy practices

over the four years that most likely reflected the children's early literacy development and possibly their parents' increasing knowledge of early literacy. These changes were evident in all years of the research project, but were particularly noticeable in the 2010 survey responses. The great majority of mothers reported changes during the 2010 year in the frequency of reading to their child, the child asking for a book to be read, communication between parent and child, and other people reading with their child, in addition to almost two-thirds reporting changes in the frequency of reading to other children in the family. Further, 90% of mothers in 2010 indicated that these changes in language and literacy practices had been influenced by *Better Beginnings*.

A majority of the mothers in 2008 reported that they read with their child six or seven days a week and this frequency was sustained and extended by 2010. Many fathers read to their child, but less frequently. A range of other people within and outside the family also read to the children on a regular basis. Nearly all the mothers reported in all years, that their child had recently shared a book with a family member who had talked about the book with them. Many family members had told a story not from a book, and almost one quarter had used a language other than English when reading to the child.





Over the four years the mothers had developed a range of useful book sharing practices that were sustained and extended, and by 2010 they put a stronger focus on discussion of the book, predicting what would happen next and discussion of the words. Most of the reported practices were strongly related to those outlined in the *Better Beginnings* brochure.

The children’s reported literacy attitudes and behaviours.

The mothers reported that their children’s interest in books, the amount of a book they enjoyed being read aloud, and other book-related behaviours also changed as they grew older. Whilst nearly all children were said to have shown some early interest in books, by the time they were 2- and 3-years-old nearly all were showing great interest. The children’s increasing levels of interest, and their increased levels of development, were reflected in the proportion of a book they enjoyed hearing read aloud, which by 2010 was overwhelmingly reported as a whole book, rather than just part of a book.

Over the four years most mothers reported that their children had been developing early literacy behaviours that will be very helpful for learning to read and write. As babies and toddlers many had learnt about having a favourite book, pointing to the pictures and talking about them, turning the pages, joining in the reading and pretending to read. By 2010, the majority were asking questions about the story being read, and hypothesising about what would happen next, while nearly half were pointing to the words during a book reading. Most of these reading behaviours are closely related to those outlined in the *Better Beginnings* brochure and to those that the mothers reported they had modelled for their children.

Communication between the library and families. Keeping in contact with families seems to be a highly important issue in the sustainability of the program. Whilst there was a procedure for the child health nurses to pass on contact details of the mothers to the library, not all were familiar with the procedure and some saw it as both time consuming and an issue of confidentiality. Some suggested using email as a more efficient and less intrusive means of communication, although parents would still need to provide details of email contact. The availability of systematic procedures for collecting parent contact details for use by the library appears to be vital in informing the target group of parents about library events and inviting them to take part.

Liaison of professionals involved in *Better Beginnings*.

Almost all of the librarians and child health nurses saw a need for strong liaison between their two professions as an essential element of the program. As the program developed they liaised around the delivery of the Reading Packs by the librarians to the child health nurses, and in some communities at other times as well, such as community meetings of personnel involved in early childhood initiatives and joint presentations to mothers’ groups. Nevertheless, in some communities there was little or no contact between the child health nurses and librarians. There was a suggestion that programmed meetings of the librarians and health nurses might have the potential to help prevent any problems from occurring, although such meetings could involve issues of time and staffing.

Training for professionals involved in *Better Beginnings*.

Training for the librarians developed over the 4 years on the basis of identified needs. In 2007 it was undertaken at the State or local library. The content and delivery of training evolved to take account of needs identified by librarians and delivery developed from a print-based handbook to an integrated approach that included a variety of formats. Whilst in the first years the interviewed librarians generally saw the initial training as useful, and additional training as a means of sharing ideas and maintaining enthusiasm for the program, by 2010 there appeared to be little enthusiasm for more training.

Child health nurse attendance at training sessions seemed to be sporadic throughout the four years; those who had attended training saw that it ‘supported and reinforced’ their child health role, and they saw value in the information given about the delivery process. Those interviewed in 2010 did not feel the need for any further training. Given that the *Better Beginnings* program, the aim of which is ‘to provide positive language and literacy experiences for babies and young children’, is now perceived as a core element of the work of librarians and child health nurses, it is interesting that as a group, the majority felt little need for further training in the area. There seems to be a need for ongoing professional learning, especially for staff new to the program, staff in regional and remote communities, staff working with diverse populations, and for staff who do not have extensive knowledge of early language and literacy learning.

Linguistic and cultural diversity. From the beginning of the program there were calls in a number of communities for more resources that represented and could be used with Aboriginal

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and culturally and linguistically diverse families. Over the following years a number of initiatives were developed to find ways of creating a more inclusive approach to *Better Beginnings*. Nevertheless, in 2010 child health nurses and librarians in some communities reported a particular need for *Better Beginnings* as more families, who might not have had books at home or attended the 6-week and later health checks, were moving into the community. Whilst some individual librarians were highly pro-active in producing and sourcing materials for these families, this was not universal. Some libraries had few such resources and some librarians did not see a particular need for them. It seems that a consistent approach to involving parents from a range of backgrounds is necessary if the aims of *Better Beginnings* are to be met for all families with young children.

There were some suggestions that advertising events within the community by various means could help disseminate information. Some libraries made contact with the families of the children for whom they had details by sending birthday cards from the library. The comments of some of the mothers suggested that having regular contact was helpful in reminding them of the *Better Beginnings* messages.

Community awareness of *Better Beginnings* and Library Services. By 2010, in some communities where there were various early literacy initiatives, the librarians and child health nurses felt that there was no escape from the 'reading to children message'. Nevertheless, in other communities some felt that a need for more awareness of the *Better Beginnings* materials, messages and activities, and that this need might be addressed by better advertising, particularly through the media.

Funding and extensions to the program. For most of the life of *Better Beginnings* uncertainty of funding from year to year was a difficult issue for all involved in the planning and implementation of the program. However, the announcement towards the end of 2010 that funding would be available for four years facilitated planning for future sustainability and extensions to the program. Specifically, there were plans for *Better Beginnings* 0-3 and *Better Beginnings*+ to be consolidated into a State-wide 0-5 literacy program. These plans could well take account of the suggestion of some of the professionals and mothers, that a follow-up reading pack for older children, possibly including another book, puzzles and other resources to help children begin to focus on word-related features of books, would help sustain the program. These plans could also take into account the fact that, between the ages of 0 and 5, many children spend time in child-care settings, so that links between libraries and child-care could well be developed, and extended in communities where they already exist.

A number of publishing initiatives were being considered, some of which had an emphasis on producing materials for culturally and linguistically diverse children and young people. There were also long range plans for a program for children in the school years 1 to 3 and possibly an adult reader development program, both arising from needs identified in the annual evaluations. It was considered that these could be addressed by building liaisons with groups already working in primary and adult education and by investigating future roles that public libraries could develop, that would complement their existing work.



The Better Beginnings program

Better Beginnings is an early intervention family literacy program that has been developed by the State Library of Western Australia. Its stated purpose is to provide positive language and literacy influences for young children through supporting parents as their children's first teachers. The program is based on strong cooperation between health professionals, local governments and public libraries. In planning and developing the program, there has been a high degree of consultation and engagement with local communities.

The State Government's continued financial commitment, along with that of Local Government and funding from the Rio Tinto WA Future Fund, has enabled *Better Beginnings* to be delivered to communities across Western Australia. The program is being implemented in a wide range of communities that represent diverse geographical, social, cultural and economic contexts. In 2010, approximately 90% of local government areas were involved; the remaining small local government areas were either in the process of implementing *Better Beginnings* or negotiating to implement it. Approximately 27 000 of the 30 000 babies born during the year in Western Australia received a *Better Beginnings* Reading Pack. In December 2010, the Minister for the Arts issued a media statement about *Better Beginnings* that included the following:

More than 100,000 families have benefited from this program since it began in 2005. From its humble start as a pilot targeting six metropolitan and regional communities, *Better Beginnings* should soon reach most babies born in the State'. *Better Beginnings* will be expanded to provide additional support and resources for indigenous families across the State and to spread the important message to all WA families to 'read aloud and read often'.

The overall focus of *Better Beginnings* is for government agencies to work in partnership with families to support children's early literacy learning. The key elements of the program are outlined below.

1. A Reading Pack (also called a 'literacy toolkit') usually given to parents of young babies by the community child

health nurse at the 6-8 week health check, although in a few communities it is given out by librarians. The contents of the Reading Pack may vary somewhat, but normally would include:

- a colourful board book for babies;
 - a frieze with nursery rhymes printed on it;
 - a brochure containing suggestions for enjoying reading experiences with a baby;
 - a list of first books for babies and toddlers;
 - information about local library resources;
 - a library membership form;
 - a DVD that shows adults reading and singing rhymes and songs to young children and babies of various ages, and information about the value of this (the DVD is not available in all packs and in some areas is distributed at a later date).
2. A *Better Beginnings* handbook and electronic training module, developed to support health and library partners working with the program. These provide a guide to the responsibilities of all partners and include samples and templates to follow when delivering the program.
 3. Baby Rhyme Time and Story Time sessions and workshops at the library, designed to provide enjoyable shared early literacy experiences for parents/carers and young children. Some procedures for community child health nurses to collect and pass on to the library contact details of families receiving the Reading Pack have been outlined. Parents and their children are invited to free sessions that introduce them to stories, rhymes and games to use with their babies/children. In some libraries there are workshops that address various topics, including speech and language development, child development, nutrition and parenting.
 4. Story Time boxes (also called 'Outreach Toolboxes') that contain a rich variety of literacy resources for children and their families. These are lent by public libraries to community agencies and are also used 'in-house' to support Baby Rhyme Time and Story Time.



5. Family resource centres in libraries providing interactive early childhood learning spaces, in addition to resources designed to increase parental knowledge of early childhood language and literacy.
6. A Reading Gateway that includes information about *Better Beginnings* (<http://www.better-beginnings.com.au>). This has been established as part of the website of the State Library of Western Australia. The website provides news and information for parents, teachers and librarians about early literacy and links to games and activities for children in order to encourage an interest in books and stories. It also includes access to interactive electronic books that can be read to children by the computer.

The evaluation of the *Better Beginnings* program

Building on the findings from the evaluation of the pilot program, a team from Edith Cowan University has conducted an evaluation of the *Better Beginnings* Program in four diverse communities, over a period of approximately four years (2007-2010). This evaluation has been jointly funded by Edith Cowan University and the State Library of Western Australia and builds on the evaluation of the *Better Beginnings* 2004 pilot program (Barratt-Pugh, Rohl, Oakley & Elderfield, 2005).

The research addresses the following questions:

1. How effective is the *Better Beginnings* program from the perspectives of the participants?
2. How has the program, including its implementation, developed and been sustained over the four years of its evaluation?

Participants in the evaluation of *Better Beginnings*

In order to answer the research questions it was decided to focus on the *Better Beginnings* participants. These include:

- Mothers of babies, in four communities, who received *Better Beginning* packs in 2007;
- Community child health nurses who distributed the *Better Beginnings* packs to the mothers;
- Local librarians who followed up the distribution of the packs with invitations to visit the library, provided

information about library services for mothers and babies/young children, and conducted story and rhyme sessions and information sessions on specific aspects of child development;

- The *Better Beginnings* co-ordinator, based at the State Library, who is responsible for the development of the program.

The table below shows some details of the participants and their contexts for each year of the evaluation in each of the four communities. In order to comply with ethical guidelines the communities are identified by pseudonyms.

COMMUNITY	DATA COLLECTION			
	Parent Survey			
	2007	2008	2009	2010
Bayview	74	30	22	22
Killarney	87	69	36	26
Marni	77	42	18	11
Kangru	62	36	26	25
Total	300	177	102	84

Case Study Mothers				
	2007	2008	2009	2010
Bayview	NA	11	2	2
Killarney	NA	10	2	3
Marni	NA	10	5	4
Kangru	NA	9	2	10
Total		40	11	19

Librarians				
	2007	2008	2009	2010
Bayview	5	4	1	1
Killarney	2	3	1	1
Marni	2	1	1	1
Kangru	1	1	1	1
Total	10	9	4	4

COMMUNITY	DATA COLLECTION			
Community Child Health Nurses				
	2007	2008	2009	2010
Bayview	2	3	2	2
Killarney	3	1	1	1
Marni	4	1	1	1
Kangru	4	3	2	2
Total	13	8	6	6

Program Coordinator				
	2007	2008	2009	2010
Perth	1	1	1	1

The research process

Mothers of new babies living in four diverse communities were surveyed before and after receiving the *Better Beginnings* toolkit and information, over a period of approximately four years. In 2007, 300 mothers of young babies completed the Pre-Program Survey before they received the *Better Beginnings* Reading Pack and information. Approximately one year later, 177 (59%) of these mothers completed Post-Program Survey 1 (2008). Two years after receiving the *Better Beginnings* Reading Pack, 102 (34%) of the original mothers completed Post-Program Survey 2 (2009). Three years after receiving the pack 84 (28%) of the original mothers completed Post-Program Survey 3 (2010).

The first survey was presented to mothers in paper format, usually by a research assistant, and the following three surveys were conducted by telephone by members of the research team. The content of the surveys is outlined below:

- The first survey (Pre-Program Survey, 2007) asked parents about demographics, library membership and use, their own literacy practices and attitudes to reading to babies, as well as their confidence and practices in this area;
- The second survey (Post-Program Survey 1, 2008) asked parents about program delivery and content, library membership and use, and their attitude to reading to babies, as well as their confidence and practices in this area;
- The third and fourth surveys (Post-Program Survey 2, 2009 and Survey 3, 2010) addressed issues similar to those in previous surveys, but questions also addressed the sustainability and continuing influence of the *Better Beginnings* program.

In addition, a number of mothers were invited to take part in case studies. In 2008, 2009 and 2010 these mothers took part in face-to-face interviews, usually in their homes, about their views of the impact of the *Better Beginnings* program on their literacy perceptions and practices, their child, and broader family literacy practices that included library membership and use. The coordinator of *Better Beginnings* and a number of librarians and community child health nurses who were involved in distributing and promoting *Better Beginnings* in the four communities, were also interviewed each year, either individually or in focus groups. It is noted that, because of movement of library and health department staff within Western Australia, the librarians and child health nurses who were interviewed each year were often not those who had been interviewed previously. On the other hand, the mothers who were surveyed and interviewed each year had taken part in the research project since the first survey in 2007. The program co-ordinator remained in the position throughout the time of the research project from 2007 to 2010 and was interviewed each annually.

This report presents a summary of the findings from 2007 to 2010 and identifies important issues in the development and sustainability of the program.





Findings from surveys and case studies of the mothers

The format of the surveys changed somewhat over the four years from 2007 to 2010 in order to reflect the development of the children from babies and toddlers to 3-year-olds, with the result that there are not strictly comparable data available for all surveyed areas. Accordingly, not all areas could be examined for each year, and in some cases where the wording of questions was slightly different for different years this is noted. Further, for ease of reporting, in some cases where data from consecutive years was very similar, data from all years is not presented. In these cases the data presented is from 2008, the year after the mothers had received the Reading Pack, and 2010, the final year of the evaluation. The numerical data is complemented where appropriate with comments from the participants in both the surveys and the case study interviews.

One of the first questions asked of the mothers was if their child was involved in any form of childcare. Very few children were attending any form of care outside the home at the time of the first survey in 2007, when most of them were young babies. However, by 2010, when they were mostly around 3-years-old, just over half were attending childcare or kindergarten, which suggests that people from outside the home would most likely be reading to them on a regular basis.

Percentage of children attending some form of childcare

2007	2008	2009	2010
3%	NA	39%	53%

The *Better Beginnings* Reading Pack

The mothers were asked if they remembered the name of the gift book in the Reading Pack, if they still read the book to the child, and about the child's responses to the book. A majority were able to remember the name of the book one, two and three years after receiving it. During the first year nearly all had read the book to their baby, during the second year around three quarters had read the book, and even in the third year just over half had read the book to their child during the previous year. Further, in 2008 most of the babies were said to 'like' the book, and in the two following years a majority 'chose' the book to look at or to be read to them.

Response to the Reading Pack

Response	2008	2009	2010
Mother remembered the name of book	68%	64%	68%
Mother read the book to child	98%	74%	58%
Child liked or chose the book*	98%	64%	54%

* In 2008 respondents were asked if their child had 'liked' the book. In 2009/10 respondents were asked if their child had 'chosen' the book.

I thought [the book] was fantastic. First of all you had every colour in there and you had every size of baby... They were all doing something that was naturally a baby and they all looked at you... the fact that my son actually sat on my lap for the whole minute and a half and just flicked through the faces, flicked through all of them and when he got to the end he just held it and giggled and laughed at himself looking at the mirror, so I thought it was a really good first session.

It's good. It's got cardboard pages and the clear pictures, especially when they're littler; for them to focus on and just have a look where it's not too much. We were reading that every day, several times a day. (Mothers, 2008)

The mothers were asked about the other contents of the Reading Pack. In 2008 almost half (42%) reported that they had used the nursery rhyme chart with their child during the previous year and 35% of these mothers had used it more than once. By 2010, over half of the mothers (55%) indicated that they still had the nursery rhyme chart, with 62% of these stating that they still used it, and 44% that they used it 'often' with their child. Most of the respondents who still had the chart reported placing it where it could be seen, for example on the wall or door of the bedroom or playroom, with one mother reporting that it was on the wall of a new baby's room.

The mothers also responded to questions about the brochures included in the kit and about the DVD, which was sometimes included and was sometimes collected from the library. In 2008, around two thirds (68%) had found the suggestions for how to read to babies and young children in the *Enjoy Reading with your Baby* brochure to be 'useful'. Further, almost one third (29%) reported that they had read with their baby some of the books suggested in the brochure *First Books for Babies and Toddlers*,

and two thirds (65%) had found it to be 'useful'. Even by 2010, some mothers had still kept *Enjoy Reading with your Baby* (18%) and *First Books for Babies and Toddlers* (25%).

Many of the mothers, particularly during the first year, commented on how they appreciated these brochures, although a few had found them overwhelming at the early stages of their baby's life and would have preferred to have received the information in a face-to-face conversation.

It points you in the right direction: that you should read to your child and what is appropriate to read.

It gave a helping hand and opened my eyes that babies of all ages can enjoy books. I don't like reading things.

I prefer conversations. I'd prefer more for children, less adult reading. (Mothers, 2008)

Not all mothers had received a DVD, but in 2008, almost half of those who did have one (45%) found it to be 'useful', whilst by 2010, a majority of mothers (64%) indicated that they still had the *Let's Read* or *Baby Rhyme Time* DVD and almost one third (30%) that they 'sometimes' watched it with their child.

The literacy environment of the home

Before the mothers were presented with the *Better Beginnings* pack in 2007, they indicated that the average number of books in their homes, that were read to the baby was 18, with almost half indicating that they had no books that were read to the baby. It is likely that for many mothers the *Better Beginnings* book would have been the first book to be read to the baby. The numbers of these books increased dramatically to an average of 125 and a minimum of 6 books by the time the children were 3-years-old. It is clear that by this time many of these children were in homes that contained a wealth of books that were read to them; some had many hundreds of these books by the time they were 3-years-old. Nevertheless, a small minority of the children did not have many books in their homes.

Numbers of books in the home that were read to the children

Number of books	2007	2008	2009	2010
Average number of books	18	49	86	125
Minimum number of books	0*	2	5	6

* In 2007 44% indicated that there were no books in the home that were read to the baby

Mothers' attitudes to early literacy

Whilst a majority of the mothers indicated that they felt confident in sharing books with their babies/children from an early age, their feelings of confidence still increased from year to year, with nearly all feeling 'very confident' by 2010.

Mothers' feelings of confidence in sharing books with their baby/child

Confidence level	2007	2008	2009	2010
Very confident	64%	81%	86%	88%
Quite confident	29%	17%	14%	12%

When asked if their levels of confidence in reading to their children had changed over the previous year, almost two thirds of the mothers agreed that their confidence had increased from 2007, the year in which they had received the Reading Pack, to 2008. Further, from 2009 to 2010, the proportion of those who indicated their confidence had increased was just over one third. Taken together with the findings about their reported confidence levels, this is further evidence of strong confidence building over the four years. In addition, by 2010, 81% of mothers indicated that *Better Beginnings* had influenced their confidence in sharing books with children. Even those who had initially reported feeling confident, indicated that the *Better Beginnings* program had reinforced their confidence.

Mothers' changed confidence levels in reading to their child during the previous year

Changed confidence level	2008	2009	2010	2010
Increased confidence	62%	54%	37%	88%
Same level of confidence	36%	46%	63%	12%

In the beginning I never thought of reading to the children. [Better Beginnings] has really boosted my confidence. I was a non-reader. I like to give them books to play with so they get a feel for them and are comfortable around them.

I tell stories in Vietnamese and read to my children in English. I only started reading English after receiving Better Beginnings. (Mothers, 2008)

Better Beginnings gave me confidence. I know reading is an everyday tool and teaching my children will help them be more successful in life. (Mothers, 2010)



The mothers' views of the importance of sharing books with their children also increased over the four years, so that in 2008, 2009 and 2010 all saw it as important, with most seeing it as 'very important'. Over half of the participants in 2008 (54%) and nearly all of the participants in 2010 (96%) attributed their views about the importance of reading to their child to *Better Beginnings*.

Mothers' changing perceptions of the importance of book sharing with their child

Level of Importance	2007	2008	2009	2010
Very important	76%	96%	98%	98%
Fairly important	18%	4%	2%	2%

The mothers' open-ended comments showed that for some, *Better Beginnings* had reinforced and extended their existing knowledge and beliefs; and for some it had provided new understandings and practices.

- *[Better Beginnings] made me realise to read to him. I didn't think to do so, him being so young.*
- *This [Better Beginnings] book was the first one she had and I was surprised how interested she was, so it prompted me to buy more.*
- *I always knew reading to my kids was important, but this has opened my eyes to how important and how much.*
- *It has encouraged me to have a higher value on books and reading time.*
- *You need to learn to read. It helps you with every other subject and if you don't read well you struggle with everything else in life.*
(Mothers, 2008)

- *It reinforced taking the time out from your schedule to make that special closeness, quiet time just with the girls and me.*
- *From the beginning when I read to him I felt like a dill reading to the baby, but as he has grown and responded I realised it really was worthwhile. Now he has a great vocabulary and people comment on how well he speaks and I put that down to him being read to. Better Beginnings has made me make reading a part of everyday routine.*
(Mothers, 2010)



The mothers' views of the early enjoyment and benefit of sharing songs and rhymes also changed over time, with 99% or 100% either changing their view or already holding the view that the practice is enjoyable and beneficial. The greatest change of view was in the first year when two thirds of the mothers (65%) reported in the 2008 survey that, over the previous year, they had changed their views about the early enjoyment and benefit of sharing songs and rhymes, and that *Better Beginnings* had influenced their awareness of the benefit of these practices. By 2009 and 2010 most reported that they already held this view, suggesting that this understanding was sustained over time.

Change during the previous year in the idea that babies and toddlers can enjoy and benefit from rhymes and songs at an early age

Change of idea	2008	2009	2010	2010
I changed my idea	65%	19%	12%	98%
I already thought this	35%	80%	88%	2%

Reading practices with the child

The mothers were asked to think about how *Better Beginnings* had influenced specific aspects of their literacy practices, in terms of how these practices might have changed over the previous year. There were some quite marked changes in these practices over time that most likely reflected the children's early literacy development and possibly their parents' increasing knowledge of early literacy. These changes were evident in all years of the research project, but were particularly noticeable in the 2010 survey responses. The great majority of mothers reported changes during the 2010 year in the frequency of reading to their child, the child asking for a book to be read, communication between parent and child, and other people reading with their child, in addition to almost two-thirds reporting changes in the frequency of reading to other children in the family. Further, 90% of mothers in 2010 indicated that these changes in language and literacy practices had been influenced by *Better Beginnings*.

Change in reading practices over the previous year

Aspect of reading practice that has changed	Not at all		A little		Quite a bit		A great deal	
	2008	2010	2008	2010	2008	2010	2008	2010
How often parent reads to toddler	30	26	19	30	36	29	15	15
How often toddler asks for a book to be read	48	7	23	25	22	43	15	25
How parent communicates with toddler (reads more, talks more, watches less TV and talks more)	29	6	21	24	36	49	14	21
How often other people read with toddler	39	15	23	23	30	47	9	15
How often parent reads with other children*	12	12	12	18	14	37	4	7

* Not all families contained other children

NOTE: All Values shown in the above table are percentages (%)

their child shows a high incidence of mothers reading to their child six or seven days a week in 2008 that was sustained and extended by 2010. Many fathers also read to their child, but on a less regular basis.

Frequency of parent reading with their child

Parent	2008	2009	2010
Mother reads to child 6 or 7 days per week	72%	80%	83%
Father reads to child 2 or more days per week	66%	72%	72%

A range of other people also read to the children on a regular basis. These included the child's siblings, grandparents, babysitter or child-care worker, and other significant adults. In 2010, a majority of the mothers (60%) indicated that *Better Beginnings* had influenced to some extent the other people who read to their child.

The mothers also reported on some early literacy practices with family members that their child had taken part in during the previous week. In both 2008 and 2010, during the previous week nearly all the children had reportedly shared a book with a family member, who had talked about the book with them. Many family members had 'told a story' and almost one quarter had used a language other than English when reading to the child.

Literacy practice the child engaged in with a family member during the previous week

Literacy practice	2008	2010
Shared a book with the child	94%	99%
Talked about the story or pictures with the child	89%	95%
Told a story, not from a book with the child	60%	70%
Used a language other than English when reading to the child	24%	23%
Father reads to child 2 or more days per week	66%	72%

The mothers were asked for further details of their book sharing practices with their child during the previous year. It is noted that for 2008 the question referred to the previous year as 'since receiving the *Better Beginnings* toolkit', which the mothers had received in 2007. In the first year after receiving the pack almost all mothers chose an appropriate book, place and time for



reading and position for holding the book, in addition to pointing to the pictures and naming them, reading with expression and re-reading favourite stories. Some mothers in 2008 had a wide repertoire of practices that included moving their finger under the words as they read, choosing stories with rhyme and repetition, asking questions about the pictures and encouraging prediction about what might happen next. Most of these practices were outlined in the brochure that came in the Reading Pack. By 2010 most mothers employed all these practices and in addition many were talking about the words in the book with their child.

Frequency of specific book sharing practices over the previous year

Book sharing practice	Frequently		Occasionally		Never	
	2008	2010	2008	2010	2008	2010
Choosing a comfortable place and the right time to share a book.	77	91	19	8	2	1
Holding the book within the child's visual range and turning pages slowly.	87	92	10	7	1	1
Letting their child hold and play with board books.	94	95	3	4	1	1
Choosing books with bright pictures and a small amount of print.	82	97	15	1	1	1
Moving their finger under the words, from left to right, as they read.	48	56	19	30	24	14
Reading stories aloud with expression.	86	94	11	5	1	1
Choosing stories with a lot of rhyme and repetition.	53	60	36	36	9	4
While reading to their child, pointing to pictures and naming or describing them.	83	79	12	20	3	1
While reading to their child, asking questions about the pictures.	35	61	24	36	39	3
Encouraging their child to predict what will happen next in the story.	16	46	19	36	62	18
Reading and re-reading favourite stories.	87	97	8	2	2	1
Talking about the words in the books	NA	45	NA	34	NA	21

NOTE: All Values shown in the above table are percentages (%)

The children's reported literacy attitudes and behaviours

Not only did the mothers' ideas and literacy practices change during the research project, but they reported that their child's interest in books, the amount of a book they enjoyed being read aloud, and other book-related behaviours also changed as they grew older, reflecting their increased levels of development. Whilst nearly all children were said to have shown some early interest in books, by the time they were 2- and 3-years-old nearly all were showing great interest.

The child's reported level of interest in books

Level of interest	2008	2009	2010
Child very interested	74%	91%	88%
Child quite interested	20%	9%	11%
Child not very interested	6%	0%	1%

The children's increasing levels of interest, and most likely their increased levels of development, were reflected in the proportion of a book they enjoyed hearing read aloud, which by 2010 was overwhelmingly reported as a whole book, rather than just part of a book.



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Reported proportion of the book the child enjoys in a shared reading activity

	2008	2009	2010
All of the book	71%	83%	93%
About half of the book	25%	16%	7%
Only the first page	4%	1%	0%

Over the four years of the research project most mothers reported that their children had been developing early literacy behaviours that will be very helpful for learning to read and write. As babies and toddlers many had learnt about having a favourite book, pointing to the pictures and talking about them, turning the pages, joining in the reading and pretending to read. By 2010, the majority were asking questions about the story being read, and hypothesising about what would happen next, while nearly half were pointing to the words during a book reading. Most of these reading behaviours are closely related to those outlined in the Better Beginnings brochure and to those that the mothers reported modelling for their children.

Child's behaviour when sharing books

Early literacy behaviour	2008	2009	2010
Has a favourite book	NA	86%	87%
Points to pictures	83 %	100%	99%
Turns pages	92 %	99%	96%
Talks about pictures	64%	93%	96%
Joins in reading	61%	82%	85%
Asks questions about the story	24%	46%	73%
Pretends to read	74%	94%	95%
Says what will happen next	NA	40%	79%
Points to the words	31%	48%	45%

Some of this development is illustrated in the comments of the mothers in 2008 and 2010

- *[My child is] yet to sit still and listen to a story.*
- *All books go straight into the mouth.*
- *My baby is at the stage where she wants to turn the pages for herself. (Mothers, 2008)*

- *Our 3-year-old will sit down with her brother and 'read' to him, pointing out things like, 'Where's the duck?', and then praising him if/when he gets it right; it's very cute.*
- *She is very interactive: I ask her to find letters from people's names and she points them out. She's getting more interested in words than pictures now. My one-year-old points at pictures, trying to say words, animal sounds etc. (Mothers, 2010)*

Library membership and use of the library

Library membership for both mothers and children also grew dramatically from the time when the mothers received the *Better Beginnings* Reading Pack to when the children were 3-years-old, rising to 65% child membership and 84% parent membership by 2010. It was clear that the mothers took library membership for themselves and their children very seriously and even by 2010, three years after they had received the *Better Beginnings* Reading Pack, most new members (82%) indicated that *Better Beginnings* had influenced their decision to join the library.

Library membership

Library member	2007	2008	2009	2010
Mother	47%	66%	68%	84%
Child	6%	27%	50%	65%

In 2008, 27% of mothers who had been library members at the time of the 2007 initial survey, reported that they had visited the library 'more often' since receiving the *Better Beginnings* Reading Pack. Furthermore, a majority of mothers who had become members of the library during each year of the research project indicated that they had borrowed books for themselves and their child, that their child had borrowed items on their own card, and that they and their child had visited the library at least once a month.

Library borrowing practices of new members who had joined during the previous year

Library practice	2008	2009	2010
Member borrowed books for child	62%	68%	77%
Members' child borrowed on own card	56%	80%	88%



Member visited the library at least once a month	80%	90%	94%
Member's child visited the library at least once a month	84%	96%	93%

By 2010 the mothers had thought very carefully about the issue of choosing books for their child at the library. Many of them chose to respond to an open-ended question that asked how they and their child selected books. Over one third of responses indicated choice on the basis of features of the book:

■ *I usually choose a book based on whether I think they'll be interested in it, [look at] the Better Beginnings sticker that recommends ages, and how long it is, that is, if it'll hold their (particularly my son's) attention. (Mothers, 2010)*

Just over one third indicated a joint decision between parent and child:

- *We flick through and pick what looks good that we have not already read.*
- *She selects them randomly off the shelf and then I go through them and decide what is coming home. Always get a CD with rhymes on it.*
- *My daughter selects them based on what she is interested in. When I choose I go to the pre-kindergarten section and choose ones that will help her with her alphabet etc. (Mothers, 2010)*

And one third indicated that the child chose alone:

■ *[I] let her go through the boxes and choose her own. (Mothers, 2010)*

The remaining small number of responses in 2010 indicated parent only choice (5%) or some individual difficulty (3%). Whilst many mothers gave positive responses to library visits in previous surveys, a much higher proportion of responses indicated difficulty of some sort, usually associated with the child's level of development in the earlier years.

■ *I prefer to buy books so he has ones he can handle like board books that are safe for him and the book.*

■ *I choose so he doesn't run amok in the library (Mothers, 2008)*

Library-based activities

The pattern of attendance at library-based activities changed over the time of the research project, with increased attendance at Story Time Sessions as the children grew older, and decreased attendance at Baby Rhyme Time sessions, most likely reflecting the changing developmental levels of the children. Only a very small proportion of parents had attended any workshops. It seems that this could well be an area for development, particularly as some of the mothers by 2010 indicated that they felt a need for knowledge about the teaching of early reading and writing to help the literacy development of their developing child.

■ *[I'd like] more education material on how to teach a child to read, like sounding out letters, recognising upper/lower case etc., and if the library had flash cards to borrow. (Mothers, 2010)*

Mothers' attendance at library-based activities during the previous year

Activity	2008	2009	2010
Story Time	17%	24%	37%
Baby Rhyme Time	10%	12%	3%
Workshops	9%	2%	1%

Whilst the proportions who had attended sessions were small (with the exception of Story Time in 2009 and 2010) many of those who had attended sessions had found them to be useful, although satisfaction in 2008 was lower, most likely reflecting the developmental levels of the then very young children. The mothers' ratings of library-based activities as 'useful' or 'extremely useful' was 55% in 2008, rising to 84% in 2009 and 91% in 2010.

In their open-ended comments on the sessions many of the mothers expressed satisfaction and enjoyment of the activities:

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- *I found Rhyme Time excellent. I wish it was every week.*
- *The staff are so good, so friendly. (Mothers, 2010)*

- *Combine nursery rhymes and songs; better now she can do the activities properly and see the link with the stories.*
- *I think they're great, they're just long enough that the kids don't get bored or restless. The lady who does it up here interacts with the kids really well. I'm glad the library runs it. (Mothers, 2010)*

Some mothers however, voiced concerns about the suitability of the sessions for their child, or reasons why they were not able to attend.

- *[The sessions] are at inconvenient times.*
- *Still too young to go to Story Time; he wouldn't sit still.*
- *It depends on who is organising it.*
- *My husband is the main caregiver and he felt uncomfortable going to Rhyme Time as it was all women and their babies. (Mothers, 2010)*

- *Work fulltime, so cannot attend session.*
- *She goes to day care on that day.*
- *Have not been as it clashes with uni timetable. (Mothers, 2010)*

It is clear that, whilst many mothers found the Rhyme Time and Story Time sessions useful and enjoyable, there were some issues affecting attendance that included the mothers' and children's commitments outside the home particularly as the children grew older, the skill of the individual presenters and some social issues, such as the inclusion of fathers as primary care givers. Nevertheless, some of the mothers provided suggestions for improvements that could make the sessions more effective.

- *Maybe if they had age-appropriate sessions. A story and session that a 3-year-old is interested in isn't going to hold the attention of an 18-month-old, and vice versa.*
- *Maybe more physical space, I stopped [going] because it was quite busy and when my son started to crawl he was getting into everyone else's way.*
- *There should be more information from the library about their sessions. Better advertising. (Mothers, 2010)*

The mothers were also asked about the nature of their contact with the librarians on their visits to the library. In 2008 half, or just under half of the mothers who attended the library had received help from librarians, with only a small proportion perceiving that the question was not applicable, and around one half had not received assistance from a librarian. However, by 2010, over half of the mothers saw this assistance as not applicable, most likely because they were already familiar with the library and its facilities. Further, at this time, over one quarter of respondents were given information about *Better Beginnings* and just under one quarter were shown where the age appropriate books were located.

Librarian assistance

Type of assistance	Yes		No		NA	
	2008	2010	2008	2010	2008	2010
Encourage you to take out library membership for your toddler	41	8	49	21	10	71
Show you where age appropriate books were	47	23	46	15	7	62
Show you the library facilities	41	16	50	20	9	64
Promote the <i>Better Beginnings</i> library activities	51	29	41	24	8	47

NOTE: All Values shown in the above table are percentages (%)

It appears from the documented perspectives of the mothers who took part in the surveys and case studies from 2007 to 2009, that for the most part the *Better Beginnings* program was developing well and its influence on the mothers' home literacy practices with their young children in addition to their



use of the local public library was sustained and extended over this time.

However, some limitations of the mothers' data collection were identified that had the potential to limit conclusions. Firstly, the proportion of the 2007 survey participants, who were available to take part in subsequent surveys and interviews, decreased over the four years of the study to 28% by 2010, despite many efforts by the research team to contact them. Given the highly transient nature of young families, particularly in the four communities that were studied, this was not unexpected. Nevertheless, it is possible that the mothers who remained in the study were not typical of the general population of mothers and babies in Western Australian communities and this needs to be taken into account when interpreting results. A second limitation concerns the interpretation of the mothers' and children's literacy behaviours as these were reported by the mothers in the surveys and interviews and not directly observed by the researchers.



Interviews with the Community Child Health Nurses and Librarians (2007-2010)

Over the life of the research project (2007-2010) four sets of interviews were conducted with the community child health nurses and librarians. In these interviews they described their roles in the *Better Beginnings* program within their own communities, their views of its implementation, the challenges and successes they had observed over time, and areas for future development. The issues that are outlined below emerged from discussions between these professionals and the researchers during the project.

Aim of the program

In the early interviews, in general the librarians and community child nurses saw the aim of the program as supporting parents to share books with their baby. However, as their involvement in the *Better Beginnings* program increased, their views of the program appeared to broaden. By 2010 the child health nurses and librarians talked about the overall aim of the *Better Beginnings* program, in terms of a cooperative approach to providing positive language and literacy influences for babies and young children through support for their parents. They also mentioned the role of *Better Beginnings* in promoting library use and resources as part of 'life long learning'. One of the child health nurses saw *Better Beginnings* as an early intervention program.

Contents of the Reading Pack

Over the 4 years of the project the contents of the Reading Pack changed somewhat on the basis of feedback from the mothers and professionals involved in the program. In 2006 *Better Beginnings* had begun to commission and publish board books to meet the needs of a wide range of families and to replace the original board book purchased from the UK. *Baby Ways*, a board book based on a collection of photographs of babies who attended a community health clinic, was published in 2006; and *Let's Go Baby*, a specially commissioned lift-the-flap book was published in 2008. The original height chart, which was found to be difficult to use with young babies, was replaced by a nursery rhyme frieze and the original DVD was replaced with *It's Rhyme Time*, a booklet that contained a DVD (The Little Big Book Club, 2006). In addition, the *Better Beginnings* logo was established and used on all resources and promotions. During these years the *Better Beginnings* web site was developed in

order to offer families information about sharing books with babies and young children, in addition to appropriate books for this age group, and to offer free access to electronic books via the internet.

From the start of the program, librarians added a library membership form to the Reading Pack. This was seen as a most important addition, as it became apparent that many mothers had not realised that library membership was possible for their baby. Some child health nurses also added various items of information to the pack, including the Department of Health leaflets *Talking Together* and *Yarning Together* that complement the *Better Beginnings* materials.

The librarians have always been extremely positive about the importance of the Reading Pack, seeing it as a means of helping to develop literacy from an early age. They saw the Reading Pack, put together by library staff, as central to the program with the potential to help parents and children interact around 'written and spoken words' and they reported that it was generally very well received as a gift by the mothers of young babies. A number of the librarians were aware that for some mothers it was the first book their child had received and not something that they would have purchased for their baby.

Similarly, the child health nurses were highly positive about the content of the Reading Pack in terms of the gift book and the nursery rhyme frieze. Some particularly appreciated the limited amount of text in the gift book that made it more accessible to the children of parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and those with limited literacy skills. Over the 4 years there was growing recognition of the potential of the book and frieze for various aspects of child development, such as oral language and social and emotional development, as well as early literacy. Presenting the Reading Pack as a 'free gift' was also seen as important, as it potentially gave access to the materials to all mothers with a new baby.

Although the *Better Beginnings* Reading Pack evolved over a number of years, in 2010 the librarians and community health nurses identified the need for further development. In particular they identified a need for a variety of books and other materials in the packs to better cater for the needs of families who had multiple births or subsequent children, so that the same book was not given to more than one child in a family. In addition, they saw a need for modification of the information in the pack to address these needs and those of parents from culturally and



linguistically diverse families. One of the child health nurses pointed out the need to tailor the Reading Pack to the needs of Aboriginal families in her community.

Delivery of the Reading Pack to the mothers

Over the four years the librarians assembled the *Better Beginnings* Reading Packs, which were either delivered to the health clinic by a librarian or were collected by a child health nurse. Initially, in some communities there was a degree of confusion and lack of knowledge amongst the child health nurses about the contents of the Reading Packs such as who assembled them, where they were kept and who delivered them. However, as the librarians and child health nurses became more involved in the program over the four years of the research project, they developed stronger relationships, with the result that by 2010, these issues had been largely resolved.

Generally, the child health nurses gave the Reading Packs to the mothers of babies at the time of the 6-week health check, which they particularly appreciated as there were no health resources to be given out at this time, and the Reading Pack was free. Over the four years, there was increasing flexibility of distribution and access to the reading packs, as they were given out at various community sites that included libraries, maternity hospitals, mothers groups and schools. By 2010, both the librarians and child health nurses were generally satisfied with distribution by the child health nurses at the 6-week health check. They felt that as most mothers in the target group attended this health check with their babies, most received the pack. However, an ongoing concern amongst some professionals was that, as some of the mothers who might benefit the most from the health check and the Reading Pack did not attend the 6-week check, these mothers might not have received the pack and related contact and advice.

Over the time of the research project the presentation of the pack by the child health nurses varied from active engagement around the resources and discussion about individual aspects of the pack such as library membership, to simply handing over the pack. Active engagement around the Reading Pack often included some advice about how to sing songs and rhymes and read to a baby (some child health nurses gave demonstrations) and the importance of these activities for the baby's development. Further, many introduced the mothers to the *Better Beginnings* library activities - Baby Rhyme Time and Story Time. In some communities interpreters were used at

the health check, including at the presentation of the Reading Pack, and sometimes visits to the library were arranged to help parents take out membership. Some of the child health nurses felt that *Better Beginnings* gave mothers an incentive to visit to the library.

The role of the library

During the four years, the centrality of the library in sustaining the *Better Beginnings* program became evident. The perceptions of most librarians changed from seeing themselves initially as distributors of the Reading Pack and information, to seeing themselves as key to the development of the program. It appeared that *Better Beginnings* had become integrated into job descriptions and part of core practice, rather than an add-on task. In addition some libraries identified a designated *Better Beginnings* contact person. In some libraries this responsibility led to changes in book buying policies and library membership drives. Nevertheless, one librarian argued that it was important for everyone in the library to have knowledge of *Better Beginnings* in order to direct parents to an appropriate librarian and give information about library membership.

All of the libraries involved developed *Better Beginnings* activities and library 'spaces' for families. By 2010, all the librarians and child health nurses interviewed talked about the great importance for social, language and literacy development of the Baby Rhyme Time and Story Time sessions at their community libraries, which after the Reading Pack, are the main elements of *Better Beginnings*. In addition, some of the child health nurses saw the potential for some mothers to overcome social isolation through library membership and activities.

Although there were significant developments in library-based activities and despite great enthusiasm for these activities by some of the professionals involved, some factors were identified that had the potential to inhibit attendance of the target age group, and the variation in the frequency of sessions and number of participants from library to library. Some factors affecting participation in these events were perceived to be cultural and linguistic, and the timing of sessions that did not fit into parent schedules, particularly as mothers returned to work and many children attended various forms of childcare, and took part in a range of organised activities. The need for more and better publicity about the activities was also identified, alongside ways of making carers other than mothers, such as fathers and grandparents, particularly from Aboriginal and Culturally and

Linguistically Diverse families, feel welcome and involved.

The availability of parent workshops at the libraries seemed to have declined over the four years of the research. This may have been partly because, as reported in 2008, the workshops had been integrated into the First Mothers' group sessions, which were organised by child health nurses and included presentations from speech pathologists and allied health professionals. Further, exchange of venues for *Better Beginnings* events was seen as a positive initiative. Librarians attended community and government sessions such as First Mothers' groups in order to introduce and deliver *Better Beginnings* activities, whilst community professionals attended local libraries to support parents with young children and promote *Better Beginnings*.

Training of professionals for *Better Beginnings*

Training for the librarians developed over the 4 years on the basis of identified needs. In 2007, training was undertaken at the State Library by the *Better Beginnings* team, or at local libraries. During the following three years, several librarians asked for more information about a number of practical aspects of the program and for examples of practice. They also identified a need for information about ways of working with Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse families and networking with other librarians. Training evolved to take account of these needs. Delivery developed from a print-based handbook to an integrated approach including face-to-face, hands-on modelling and experiences, web-based information and sharing of practice.

In 2008 the librarians commented that they had found their training helpful and practical and that it had reinforced their knowledge of early literacy. Further training was seen as a means of sharing ideas and maintaining enthusiasm for the program. By 2010 only one of the librarians indicated that she had not received initial training, and she felt a need for training to help her understand the written documentation she had been given. The other librarians had received training a number of years previously. Of these, only one had taken part in recent training, and only one indicated that she felt the need for further training. A librarian in a remote community reported that she had access to 'training files and folders' but felt she needed some form of interactive or 'face-to-face' training. Another librarian commented on the usefulness of targeted training that she had received at the State Library about facilitating Baby Rhyme Time.

Child health nurse attendance at training sessions seemed to be sporadic throughout the four years. In 2007 none had received specific training in *Better Beginnings*, although two had attended training for Let's Read. However, several commented that they were comfortable in their understanding of *Better Beginnings* and were aware of the benefits the program offered to families. By 2010, all those interviewed had attended an introductory session for *Better Beginnings*. Over the four years, those who had attended training saw that it 'supported and reinforced' their child health role, and the perceived value of the training concerned information about the delivery process. They did not feel the need for further training.

Given that the aim of the *Better Beginnings* program, which is 'to provide positive language and literacy experiences for babies and young children' is now perceived as a core element of the work of librarians and child health nurses, it is interesting that as a group, the majority felt little need for further training in the area. Nevertheless, there seems to be a clear need for specific training especially for staff new to the program, particularly for those in regional and remote communities.

Liaison of professionals involved in the program

In 2007 a number of initial difficulties in liaison between some library and health staff in terms of logistics, time allocation and communication were identified. The child health nurses talked about their lack of knowledge about the program and its coordination at the library. In some communities the high turnover of library and health staff led to a breakdown in communication, at times causing friction between the two government departments. Some child health nurses did not feel it was their responsibility to liaise with the librarians or to sustain the program; others felt it was too time consuming.

However, by 2008 the professionals who were interviewed reported that many of these issues have been resolved. Librarians commented on the importance of collaboration and developing harmonious relationships with a range of community organisations involved in promoting early literacy. In particular liaison with child health nurses was seen to be crucial to the success of the program. Some library staff expressed a need for more opportunities to meet with child health nurses to discuss the program. Several child health nurses also talked about the importance of building relationships with library staff and collaborating to promote and deliver *Better Beginnings*.



Throughout 2009 and 2010 liaison between child health nurses and librarians appears to have become well established. In addition, members of both groups of professionals had become part of early childhood community committees that contained a range of other professional and community representatives. Thus, they were broadening relationships with other professionals, such as speech pathologists, childcare professionals and related professionals involved in other early literacy programs. This liaison was seen as a means of extending and sustaining the *Better Beginnings* message through support for early literacy.

Nevertheless, even in 2010 there was still little or no contact between the child health nurses and librarians in some communities. There was a suggestion that programmed meetings of librarians and health nurses might have the potential to help prevent problems from occurring, although it was noted that such meetings could involve issues of time and staffing.

Linguistic and cultural diversity

From 2007 there were calls in a number of communities for more resources that represented and could be used with Aboriginal and culturally and linguistically diverse families. Some librarians also asked for training on ways of including and engaging families from different ethnic backgrounds in the program, and others mentioned the need for bilingual story-tellers. Both librarians and child health nurses talked about the difficulties of encouraging some of these families to join the library and take part in the Baby Rhyme Time and Story Time activities. Over the following three years a number of initiatives were developed to find ways of creating a more inclusive approach to *Better Beginnings*. These included: employing library staff who spoke the dominant community language; purchasing dual and/or community language books and books that represented family and community diversity; and presenting Baby Rhyme Time and Story Time at community events. Making direct links with other organisations in the community that support Aboriginal and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse families had also been attempted.

During 2010, child health nurses and librarians in some communities reported a particular need for *Better Beginnings* as more families who might not have had books at home were moving into the community. These families included Aboriginal families and particular groups of English as Additional Language speakers, including refugees. The child health nurses explained how they were able to use the Reading Pack with these mothers.

There was though some concern that *Better Beginnings* was not reaching some of these families, due to language differences and non-attendance at the 6-week and later health checks. Further, whilst some individual librarians were highly pro-active in producing and sourcing materials for these families, this was not universal. Some libraries had few such resources and some librarians did not see a particular need for them.

Communication

Keeping in contact with families has been a key issue in the sustainability of *Better Beginnings* throughout the research project. Whilst there has always been a procedure for child health nurses to pass on contact details of the mothers to the library, not all were familiar with the procedure and it was seen as both time consuming and an issue of confidentiality. Initially contact forms were provided to health nurses for distribution to mothers when they received the Reading Pack. The forms were to be completed and either left with the child health nurse or taken to the library by the mother, so that a database of family contact details could be established and used to inform parents of library events. Some libraries used these details for sending out birthday cards to babies and reminding the parents of appropriate library activities.

However, this procedure did not occur consistently across communities, with the result that many libraries received details of the number of Reading Packs given out, but no contact details of the families who had received them, so that follow up information sent out by the library was limited to those who had joined the library and who were automatically on the database. In some communities the DVD was not included in the pack, but was used as an incentive for parents to visit the library, as they were told that they would receive the DVD when they visited/joined the library.

Nevertheless, in 2010, with more universal availability of the internet, some of the child health nurses and librarians suggested using email as a more efficient and less intrusive means of communication, although parents would still need to provide details of email contact. The availability of some form of parent contact details by the library appears to be most important in informing the target group of parents about library events, such as Baby Rhyme Time, Story Time and workshops, and inviting them to take part.

Making a Difference: The report of the evaluation of the Better Beginnings family literacy program

The perspective of the program co-ordinator

The information in this section is based on that provided in interviews with the co-ordinator of the *Better Beginnings* program.

The developing role of the *Better Beginnings* co-ordinator

There was a high degree of change in the role of co-ordinator as the *Better Beginnings* program developed from a pilot program in 2005 that involved the mothers of young babies in six metropolitan and regional communities. By 2010 the role included not only responsibility for the overall co-ordination of the *Better Beginnings* program that is the focus of this report and is now called '*Better Beginnings 0-3*', but also responsibility for *Better Beginnings +*, a pilot program aimed at children between the ages of 4 and 5. Her key role in *Better Beginnings 0-3* has involved maintaining partnerships with public libraries, organising training, delivering the program, reinforcing links with a range of other agencies, and strengthening the networks within the program. Each year until the end of 2010 she was highly involved in securing funding. This has now been assured for the next four years, following the announcement, in December 2010 by the Minister for the Arts, that State Government funding (\$6.8million including \$2.8million from the Royalties for Regions initiative) and funding by Rio Tinto (almost \$1million), has been committed to *Better Beginnings*.

By 2010 a large percentage of the co-ordinator's time was devoted to establishing the new *Better Beginnings +* pilot program. The team always had a vision of *Better Beginnings* as addressing literacy from birth to 5 years, but recognised the need to focus on the early years in the initial stages. The co-ordinator saw the interface between the *Better Beginnings 0-3* and the *Better Beginnings +* programs as a continuum, with *Better Beginnings +* reinforcing the aims of *Better Beginnings 0-3*, and building on its foundations. *Better Beginnings +* is mainly directed at helping parents build and develop their children's literacy in enjoyable reading interactions and ultimately in helping children achieve a smooth transition into school.

The development of *Better Beginnings*

The co-ordinator explained that by 2010 the *Better Beginnings 0-3* program was available to most mothers and their babies in Western Australia. Overall participation by local government was 84%, with 10 small country local government councils joining

towards the end of the year. She saw the encouragement of membership of the program by the remaining local government councils as high priority.

By 2010, there were some changes in the delivery of *Better Beginnings 0-3* in particular communities as a result of the introduction of the *Better Beginnings +* pilot program that was being trialled in 25 diverse communities, some of which were in regional and remote areas. In approximately half of these communities the *Better Beginnings 0-3* book program was offered through schools. The remaining *Better Beginnings +* communities offered the 0-3 program through their community councils and through health department staff. During the year other remote communities also became involved in *Better Beginnings 0-3* through the agency of a community child health nurse and library staff, when they made visits to remote communities, usually in relation to the Closing the Gap program, and promoted *Better Beginnings 0-3* on these visits. This led to requests for *Better Beginnings 0-3* Reading Packs for distribution in these communities.

From 2007 to 2010 *Better Beginnings 0-3* remained generally unchanged in format, with public libraries conducting it as part of their core service. This involved librarians packing and distributing the Reading Packs, usually to the community child health centres, and conducting library-based Baby Rhyme Time, Story Time and parent information sessions.

As part of the continuing process of evaluation regular reviews were made that included reference to the Edith Cowan University evaluation reports. Plans were in place for a review of the Reading Pack components in 2011 as part of a 0-5 continuum linking the *Better Beginnings 0-3* and *Better Beginnings +* programs.

Training for librarians

The co-ordinator pointed out that training in *Better Beginnings* was regularly available for new public library staff, often delivered 'on-site' in the libraries by members of the *Better Beginnings* team. As the program was well established, in 2010 training was generally on a 'needs' basis for both continuing and new staff. A planned new initiative for 2011 was an online training package developed to provide training for librarians in all communities. The team was also considering setting up forums of interested stakeholders, in particular library and health workers, and also early literacy professionals from a range of



fields. Another innovation was the *Better Beginnings* wiki that was being increasingly used to communicate information and experiences between public libraries.

The co-ordinator identified as high priority the further development of the *Better Beginnings* website as a primary source of information for professionals and parents. It was planned to incorporate the wiki in order to provide tools for library staff to deliver the program. Access would be available to community child health nurses, teachers and community workers, as a source of literacy information.

Sustaining the program

As the co-ordinator explained in 2010, gaining State Government funding for the following four years would allow consolidation and provide an opportunity for the *Better Beginnings* team to expand. Several new initiatives were in the planning stage. Based on the results of the evaluation of the *Better Beginnings+* pilot program, there would be a roll out of a *Better Beginnings* (0-5) program to link *Better Beginnings* 0-3 and *Better Beginnings+* from 2011 to 2014. There would also be a strong focus on building the program in regional areas with the funding from the State Government Royalties for Regions initiative.

As there was evidence in 2010 that the program was seen by many local governments as part of their core service the *Better Beginnings* team planned to develop this leverage across all local governments. The co-ordinator also saw the program as being sustained through community recognition of the program, with new parents becoming aware that they would receive 'a yellow bag' and book for their baby. In addition, the *Better Beginnings* State Manager would oversee and establish strategic liaisons to ensure the continued efficient delivery of the program and its expansion into regional and remote areas. The team hoped to continue the supportive partnership with Rio Tinto, who provided not only financial support, but also links with their community partners such as the Kulunga Research Institute.

Developing links with other early literacy family programs

The *Better Beginnings* team had been working with The Smith Family to ensure compatibility between the Let's Read and *Better Beginnings* programs. Ngala was overseeing the delivery of the Let's Read program in selected metropolitan communities and there were plans to develop the program in Port Hedland and

Karratha. The co-ordinator saw Let's Read as a possible link between the *Better Beginnings* 0-3 and *Better Beginnings+* programs.

A long-term aim was to increase *Better Beginnings* involvement in culturally and linguistically diverse families. The *Better Beginnings+* team was working with the Little Big Book Club in developing and delivering New Arrivals packs to cater for linguistic diversity that would be trialled at Dryandra Primary School. The team was also working with the Gowrie group in the Manning area.

The future of *Better Beginnings*

In 2010 the co-ordinator saw the program as becoming a 0-5 literacy program through the consolidation of *Better Beginnings* 0-3 and the roll out of *Better Beginnings+* across the State. The team planned to address areas of need identified in this evaluation. They also planned to establish a community publishing initiative with KIDS' OWN publishing, a Melbourne based independent publishing group that uses community content to create quality children's books. These books could include community content for English as an Additional Language and Indigenous groups, thus providing children with access to books that feature their own community group. The co-ordinator explained that such books could be powerful in creating personal identity through reading, and be compatible with the State Library's aim of representing Western Australian stories.

There were also long range plans for a 6-9 year-old program and the possibility of an adult reader development program, both arising from needs identified in the Edith Cowan University evaluations. These would be addressed by building liaisons with groups already working in primary and adult education and investigating future roles that public libraries could develop, that would complement their existing work.

Better

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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