



Promising Practice Profiles

Project title	Immunisation Storytime
Project practice	Collaborative partnerships to engage “hard to reach” families in early literacy activities
Project undertaken by	Frankston Library Service (Melbourne, VIC)
Start date	September 2006
Focal areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early learning and care • Creating Child friendly communities • Families and children’s services working effectively together
Program	Communities for Children
Issue	<p>There is increasing evidence that reading to babies and preschoolers is an essential first step to literacy. There is also evidence to suggest that families with low levels of literacy are less likely to have books in their home and to read aloud to their own children.</p> <p>Frankston Library Service has conducted weekly Preschool Storytimes for many years as one strategy to promote parents and carers reading regularly to their young children. However, the families who attend these sessions already use the library service. Indeed, some parents can remember coming to Storytime sessions when they were children. The Library service looked for ways to reach those families who did not currently use the library and who may not understand the importance of reading to their children.</p> <p>Families with low participation rates in mainstream services are often described as “hard-to-reach”. In this project it was determined that vulnerable families may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • culturally and linguistically diverse families; • families disadvantaged through economic, educational or social situations; and • families where a child and/or parent has a disability. <p>As part of it’s Dive Into Reading early intervention program, the library wanted to develop a strategy which would address the needs of “hard to reach” families who currently did not want to or who were not able to access traditional preschool library services.</p>
Program context	<p>Frankston Library Service is a free public library serving a population of approx 120,000. About 6.4% or 7,500 of the population are between 0–4 years, and 9.6% or 11,100 are between 5–11years. In 2006, 8.9% of Frankston City’s population were from a Non-English Speaking Background (NESB) country, compared to 22.0% in the Melbourne Statistical Division. Frankston City’s SEIFA score for 2006 was 997. The areas with the lowest SEIFA index scores (i.e., areas of highest disadvantage) were: Frankston North (832); Frankston Central (921); and Seaford (East) (947). See http://www.frankston.vic.gov.au/About_Frankston_City/Community_Profiles/Other_Demographic_Information/index.aspx</p> <p>The Dive Into Reading Program is an early literacy intervention program for 0–5 year olds and their parents and carers developed and implemented by Frankston Library Service. Activities such as parent information and storytime sessions are coordinated in familiar, non-threatening environments within the</p>

local neighbourhood and through existing community groups and service providers, including: Maternal & Child Health Centres; new mothers groups and playgroups; Community and Neighbourhood Houses; and educational institutions including kindergartens and schools.

The goals of the Dive into Reading are to:

- encourage parents and carers of 0–5 year olds to share books and read regularly to their children;
- reduce the impact of disadvantage and improve the capacity and confidence of parents and carers of 0–5 year olds by providing them with skills and resources to read to their children;
- enhance the development of children’s early literacy skills and reading readiness;
- enhance positive interactions and connections between parents and their babies; and
- provide fun, interactive environments for parents, carers and babies to encourage optimal learning and development.

As part of the Dive Into Reading Program, Immunisation Storytime is specifically targeted at “hard-to-reach” families who do not use any of the library services and may not be aware of the benefits of reading to their babies. The strategy practice is based on a collaborative partnership between Maternal & Child Health (MCH) Nurses, Council Immunisation staff and the Children’s Librarians. The rationale of the strategy is to utilise the universal nature of the early childhood immunisation program to enable the Children’s Librarians to have contact with parents of babies as young as 8 weeks.

Immunisation Storytime specifically aims to:

- make contact with “hard-to-reach” families;
- make contact with parents of very young babies in a familiar environment and with the support of the MCH nurses;
- role model effective reading skills;
- give advice on suitable reading materials; and
- raise awareness of the findings from recent studies on brain development and reading readiness.

Practice description

Immunisation Storytime is an ideal way to connect with families with very young children. Government legislation requires children to be vaccinated before attending childcare or being enrolled in school. All children between the ages of 8 weeks to 4 years in the municipality are provided with the childhood immunisation service. The presence of the Children’s Librarians at immunisation sessions affords a ready avenue to engage hard to reach families. After having received their baby’s immunisation, all families are required to wait for a 15 minute period and the librarian is able to move about and entertain the parents and children by reading books and answering questions. In this safe environment, with no need for commitment and a friendly face to distract from the recent immunisation, the librarian is seen as approachable and helpful. Families that would not ordinarily visit a library are taking up the opportunities offered through this strategy, as they are able to see for themselves the interest of their own baby or toddler in the books and library resources.

The Librarians explain that they visit the Immunisation Sessions to talk to parents about reading to their babies and toddlers and highlight the current research about developing early literacy. Parents are encouraged to ask questions and are shown appropriate books to use with babies. Parents are subsequently invited to join their babies and toddlers in the library Dive into Reading Program and to participate in the Tiny Tots and Preschool Storytimes.

Key strategies

Immunisation Storytime involves 3 key strategies:

- reading to toddlers and preschool children with parent and carer participation;
- one-to-one dialogue and interaction with parents in regard to child literacy and reading development; and

- professional partnership between a number of professions involved in child development service provision.

1. Reading to parents babies and toddlers

During the immunisation sessions, the librarians model the following techniques when reading to children:

- talking to the children about the story and the pictures;
- using appropriate emphasis and varied voices to highlight the story and make it interesting; and
- meeting the children at their level (e.g., sitting on the carpet with them).

Parents are encouraged to ask questions about suitable books and strategies to engage the children in reading sessions.

2. One to one dialogue and interaction with parents in regard to child literacy and reading development

Children's Librarians use communication and interpersonal skills to engage with individual parents and act as a "support" rather than an "advice giver" to the parent. This better enables the parent to ask for help and to feel less anxious about not knowing how to read to their baby. One specific technique that the Children's Librarians use is to hold open an appropriate child's book while talking with a parent and baby. In this situation, babies often take the lead and look intently at the book. Parents are often surprised by their baby's response and see immediately the interest raised by a book. Parents are encouraged to read to their babies at home and to participate in the library Tiny Tots Sessions. The Tiny Tots Storytimes are seen as an important next step after the Immunisation Storytime session as they allow parent to make and continue a relationship with the Library.

3. Professional partnership between Librarians and Maternal and Child Health Nurses

The library is one of a range of children's services offered by council and there is a philosophy of cooperation in both the provision of services and cross promotion of resources. A defining element of Immunisation Storytime is the collaborative partnership forged between the Frankston Council's Immunisation staff, Maternal and Child Health nurses, and the Library Service.

In addition to the participation of librarians at immunisation sessions, MCH nurses tell parents about the benefits of reading to their babies, reinforcing the message of the overarching Dive into Reading program. The Librarians are also invited to attend the new mothers groups the MCH nurses facilitate to read stories and provide information about reading and library programs. The library provides each new parent a library bag containing reading tips for parents and information about the library services and sessions. All babies under 12 months receive a free board book.

In summary, some of the key ingredients are:

- creating a collaborative partnerships with the local Immunisation Service;
- providing library resourcing in a non-library venue;
- encouraging parent participation and interaction;
- staff being supportive in their approach (rather giving out "advice"); and
- providing a complimentary information bag and informing parents of library storytime sessions.

Research base

Dorothy Butler's 1980 text, *Babies Need Books*, was a landmark publication encouraging parents to read to their babies and toddlers. She argued that scientific research was showing that by the age of four approximately half of an individual's ultimate intelligence was formed (Butler, 1980). Emerging neurological studies through the 1990's evidenced critical periods, including during the first year, (McCain & Mustard, 1999) when a child requires appropriate stimulation for the brain to establish the neural pathways that are required to achieve specific developmental tasks including attachment,

emotional regulation and language development (Espinosa, 2002; Klass et al., 2003; McCain & Mustard, 1999; Oberklaid, 2005).

While much of the early research on the benefits of reading to babies was initially based on observation, increasingly scientific research validates the practice and reinforces its importance as an essential first step to literacy (CCCH, 2004). Hewer and Whyatt (2006) concurred with McCain and Mustard's argument that "the parent's engagement and responsive conversation during shared reading creates an environment for the child to receive the meaning of the story and the pictures, laying the foundations for future language and literacy development" (p. 112).

Children's author and literacy advocate, Mem Fox (2001), argued that the quality of interactions between parents and their babies, including story reading, lays the foundations for a child's educational experience and social adjustment. Indeed, reading to babies and toddlers is associated with contributing to the quality of the parent-child relationship and early literacy intervention programs which provide supportive modelling to parents have the potential to in turn enhance perceived parenting capacity (Hewer & Whyatt, 2008; Oberklaid, 2005; Seden, 2008).

Fox (2001) argued that because the early years of life are so critical to a child's development the first day of school is too late for a child to begin to read. Reading to a baby or toddler exposes the child to a greater vocabulary and to the link between the written and spoken word (CCCH, 2004; Espinosa, 2002; Klass et al., 2003; Straub, 2006) and children need to hear a thousand stories read aloud before they begin to learn to read on their own (Fox, 2001).

Espinosa (2002) stated that "children's exposure to and interest in literacy experiences are influenced by the adults who care for them" and "parents who believe their children are interested in reading are more likely to provide abundant print related experiences" (p. 38). However, there is a growing consensus in the literature that while parents and carers with low literacy levels often have an absence of books in the home, the provision of books to such families may in itself be insufficient to increase reading aloud activities (Hewer & Whyatt, 2008; Klass, 2003; Oberklaid, 2005). Providing comprehensive and contextually relevant and supportive early literacy intervention has been shown (Espinosa, 2002; Hewer & Whyatt, 2006; Oberklaid, 2005; Seden, 2008) to increase shared reading activities (i.e., parent/child reading). Some of the key strategies of such interventions can include: developing partnerships between service providers to provide literacy and pre-literacy activities in universal health and community settings; training other child development professionals to promote reading aloud in parallel to their service provision; modelling and/or training parents in reading techniques; and building an atmosphere in which reading is experienced by parents as well as children as an enjoyable experience (CCCH, 2004).

Public libraries are available and free to all individuals and families and the majority of municipal libraries provide story time sessions for preschool children and increasingly "Tiny Tot Sessions" for babies from birth to 2 years. These libraries have children's materials and librarians have expertise in selecting appropriate materials and in reading aloud to children yet not all families feel comfortable to use them. The use of primary health professionals, in particular child health nurses, to play an active role in the promotion of reading to children has been shown to be an effective strategy with "hard-to-reach" and marginalised families (Hewer & Whyatt, 2006; Klass et al., 2006).

Outcomes

The desired outcomes of the Frankston Library Service's Dive into Reading program have been greatly enhanced by the specific strategy of Immunisation Storytime. The strategy has made an impact on a range of stakeholders:

For parents—

- increased awareness of library programs that target families with young children
- learning new ways to interact with their babies
- increased usage of the library picture book and board book collections

For the broader community—

- greater awareness in community of the benefits of reading to babies

and preschoolers

For service providers—

- increased levels of collaboration as a result of the cooperation between the Librarians and Maternal and Child Health Nurses in implementing the strategy.

Evidence of outcomes

A qualitative evaluation of the Dive into Reading Program (of which Immunisation Storytime is one strategy) is currently being undertaken utilising the “Most Significant Change” model. With the exception of library usage, the evidence available at this point is primarily parent opinion and is presented below (under each outcome area) as illustrative story based case examples.

- *Greater awareness of library programs that target families with young children*—In 2007, the Children’s Librarians spoke to 634 parents at the Immunisation Storytimes and promoted the Tiny Tots Storytimes. The Librarians encourage parents to attend the regular Tiny Tots Storytimes with their babies. Attendance at these sessions builds an ongoing relationship between the families and the Library. Parents have described their experience of the program through evaluation forms. One parent said: “I wouldn’t have thought the library catered for kids this young if I hadn’t seen (immunisation) storytime.”
- *Increased use of the library picture book and board book collections*—The Library Service keeps statistics of membership and book borrowing. Over 300 babies have been joined into the Dive into Reading program during the 18 months (July 2006–December 2007). From July 2006 to June 2007, 24,708 Board Books and 66,254 Picture Books were borrowed, a significant increase on the previous 12 month period.
- *Parents are learning new ways to interact with their babies*—The following are quotes from those parents who have attended the Tiny Tots Storytimes after talking to the librarians at immunisation sessions:
 - “My child has really enjoyed storytelling, he now turns pages at 12 months old and sometimes grabs books and sits on his own looking at the pictures.”
 - Attending the Tiny Tots Storytime has “inspired me to sing more often at home and read more because I can borrow library books.”
 - “As a result of Patrick and I coming to Storytime, it has encouraged reading books at home.”
 - “At home, my daughter will happily sit for an hour reading her books on her own.”
 - “My 1 year old has a great attention span, loves to turn the pages of books, and loves certain pages, which we read in detail.”
 - A parent reported that attendance at Tiny Tots Storytime “had taught us better interaction with the baby and ways of doing it”.

Many parents report that they now use reading to settle their baby. Feedback from families shows an increased awareness of early literacy strategies:

- *Greater awareness in community of the benefits of reading to babies and preschoolers*—One parent who attended an immunisation session reported that she would never have thought of reading to her 2-month-old baby if she had not spoken to one of our librarians. The whole family including her husband and the older siblings now take turns to read to the baby and it is a great tool for settling the baby.
- *Increased collaboration between the Librarians and Maternal and Child Health Nurse*—The librarians have developed a working relationship with the Maternal and Child Health Nurses and the Council immunisation staff. The MCH nurses are supporting the message of early literacy in their consultations with parents. Likewise, inviting the librarians to talk to new parents groups is now an integral part of all new parents programs. The Council immunisation staff also willingly hand out promotional material about the Library Children’s Programs.

Policy analysis

Partnership and comprehensive intervention

Immunisation Storytime, and the Dive into Reading Program (of which Immunisation Storytime forms one strategy), provide an illustrative example of contemporary practice in the promotion of reading aloud activities and in early literacy intervention approaches. In particular, the strategy recognises that library services need to think creatively about how they may work in partnership with other child development professionals and community groups to better engage with “hard-to-reach” families who traditionally have not used municipal library services. The strategy also outlines specific practice elements associated with effective intervention including modelling reading techniques and providing one on one parent contact and support.

The program provides a prime example of the benefits of whole-of-community approaches to service delivery with the establishment of intersectoral collaborations between Council Immunisation staff, Maternal and Child Health Clinics and the local Library service to encourage use of a free community facility to enhance early learning and literacy experiences of infants and young children. A more formal evaluation of program outcomes will provide the evidence needed to more fully establish the benefits of this innovative approach to meeting the early learning needs of children.

Replication of implementation of evidence based practice

The Immunisation Storytime approach is a low-cost, readily replicable approach by public libraries in collaboration with their Maternal and Child Health colleagues and local councils.

Project evaluations

A qualitative based external evaluation is currently being undertaken using the “Most Significant Change” model.

Project related publications

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More information

More information on the Immunisation Storytime Project and *Promising Practice Profiles* can be found on the PPP pages of the Communities and Families Clearinghouse Australia website at <http://www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/ppp/ppp.html>.



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