

Meeting the needs of learners with low literacy skills

In a library context, there are many challenges associated with learners, both young and old, who have low literacy skills. These learners may require a higher level of support and encouragement to enable them to effectively access library services, and can be reluctant to attempt new or difficult skills in an open library environment. However with support and appropriate provisioning, they can become skilled library users who enjoy and learn well within a library setting.

Causes of low literacy skills

There are a wide variety of reasons that could be behind a learner having literacy skills which are lower than expected. They may have:

- Failed to learn some fundamentals of reading such as decoding skills or the use of context to determine meaning, and understanding throughout their primary years
- Missed critical or extended periods of schooling
- Learnt English as a second or additional language
- Other learning difficulties, or a disability such as a visual or hearing impairment which made learning to read and write a challenge
- Acquired a brain injury later in life, which has impacted upon their ability to learn new skills and perform pre-existing ones
- Problems with attention, concentration or behaviour which hinder their learning.

Low literacy and associated issues

In a primary school setting, these learners are supported through programs such as reading recovery. However, once they reach secondary school and are still having difficulty reading, they can begin to fall through the educational cracks as they become more adept at evasion strategies which can include avoiding questions in class, failing to make eye contact with the teacher and engaging in disruptive behaviour. Some learners also begin to show higher levels of absenteeism from school. In adolescence, peer group pressure and the importance of image can make problems with literacy highly embarrassing. In some cases, young people may choose to leave school early or move to an alternative learning environment such as TAFE. They may avoid settings such as libraries altogether, believing them to be places where a literacy problem will be all too apparent.

Library support

Librarians can be vital sources of support for young people with literacy difficulties but it should be remembered that there will be a vast difference in skill level between learners with literacy problems. Being approachable in manner, while recalling that learners with literacy difficulties need constant repetition and encouragement over an extended period, can be extremely beneficial.

Library layout and presentation

To the extent that librarians have control over the layout and information presented within the library itself, there are a few considerations that can be helpful for a low literacy learner:

- Keep written material simple, clear and well presented
- Promote reading material which appeals to a wide range of interests
- Provide materials such as magazines, newspapers and low text but high interest for older learners with low literacy levels
- Use pictures, photos and graphics to enhance meaning around the library, linking visual prompts with simple, consistent text
- Provide examples of wordless books or picture books which can be used for multiple purposes, such as Graeme Base's *Animalia*.

Technology

- There are a number of computer programs which are becoming more widely used by learners with lower literacy skills, making it easier for a learner to access information without being able to necessarily read all (or any) of the text. Examples include *Browsealoud* and *Dragon Naturally Speaking*. Information services such as the Independent Living Centres in each state and territory can be additional sources of information about technology to support low literacy learners.

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Better Beginnings: Family literacy program



A partnership between the State
Library of Western Australia,
Rio Tinto WA Future Fund and Local Governments

Early years research shows that learning to read is the single most important factor in achievement at school and that an early exposure to books and stories substantially contributes to success in early literacy.

Responding to this evidence, in 2003 the State Library of Western Australia developed Better Beginnings, an early intervention family literacy program targeting children aged 0–3 years. Focusing on working in partnership with families and communities to support children's early literacy and learning, a significant strength of the program has been the ability of the State Library and the Western Australia public library network to reach parents, caregivers and children, providing a unique asset in providing resources and professional expertise to foster the emergent literacy skills of children.

Better Beginnings has been designed using a strong collaborative approach capitalising on the shared goals of health and library professionals in reaching and communicating with families of young children. Through