

## Growing better beginnings

Professor Fiona Stanley OAM, Director, Telethon Institute for Child Health Research and former Australian of the Year, recently stated in the documentary *Risking Our Kids* that, "in Australia, one in four 5-year-old children are not ready for school".<sup>1</sup> The 2008 Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth report *The Wellbeing of Young Australians* states that "children up to the age of five who have had limited exposure to printed language and who have not been read to as a child have increased risk for reading failure and general poor school performance".

There are strong links between literacy, school performance, self-esteem, and life chances. Poor literacy skills are linked to lower education, earnings, health, and social outcomes.

This evidence provided the impetus in 2004 for the State Library of Western Australia to develop Better Beginnings, which, with the support of the Rio Tinto WA Future Fund and Western Australian local governments, has provided Western Australian families with a proven successful family literacy initiative. Since its inception, the program has delivered over 70000 reading packs and free books through public libraries

and community health centres to families with babies across the state and more than 42000 parents and children have participated in rhyme and story sessions in libraries and other community settings.

With the ultimate goal of raising literacy levels throughout Western Australia, the program has had a significant positive impact on parental early reading practices, attitudes, and beliefs. Eighty five percent of mothers surveyed as part of the ongoing evaluation of the program by Edith Cowan University reported that they read to their child after receiving their Better Beginnings toolkit, while only 14% reported doing this beforehand. After being involved in the program, 62% of mothers said that their confidence in sharing books with their child had increased and the average number of books in the home increased from an average of 15 to 49. For the full report, go to [www.better-beginnings.com.au](http://www.better-beginnings.com.au)

In August this year, the Rio Tinto WA Future Fund accepted a proposal from the State Library to fund a pilot program to extend Better Beginnings, building on and embedding the program's effective strategies to provide support for four- and five-year-olds when they begin school.

The State Library will work with public libraries and the Department of Education and Training to make the link between

home and school, recognising the importance of teachers and parents working together to promote literacy. This extension to Better Beginnings will provide:

- **Reading Packs** with age-appropriate picture books, audio CDs, and supporting materials to encourage emergent literacy skills of children aged four and five, delivered through kindergartens and pre-schools. Libraries will provide delivery points for children not in formal education settings.
- **Literacy Backpacks** of books, audio CDs, literacy skill development games, and literacy resources for families to borrow from libraries.
- **Shared Reading and Read Aloud Book Sets** at libraries and schools to support joint reading and promote shared parent and child reading.
- An **Information Literacy Online Package** to introduce pre-school aged children and their parents to effective and safe online search skills and resources; and
- An **Indigenous Liaison Officer** to work with relevant agencies and communities to deliver targeted strategies and resources to support the specific requirements of Indigenous families, particularly those in regional and remote communities.

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These strategies have been developed recognising that parental involvement is vital to a child's success at school and targeted strategies and resources designed to support shared reading between parents and children are very effective. Over the next year, the program will target almost 9000 four- and five-year-old children through a trial in selected remote, regional, and metropolitan communities. This pilot will provide WA with a fully integrated early literacy program, bringing together education, health, and libraries, for a sustainable and valuable investment in the future.

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#### References

(2008). *Risking Our Kids*, ABC TV, 7th October 2008. [Documentary].

(2008). *The Allen Consulting Group Report Card: The Wellbeing of Young Australians*. The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth. 74.

## Cooperation leads to open doors to early literacy

Thanks to librarians' typical cooperative nature, three early childhood literacy specialists from Seattle USA will be visiting libraries in Victoria, SA, NSW, and Tasmania in October this year.

Noise Guy, Charlie Williams, who toured Australia in 2007, was delighted with the warm Aussie reception and sang our praises to his Seattle colleagues. In early 2008, Seattle-based James Thomas sent an email on ALIA CYSS e-list to gauge interest in a series of workshops on early childhood literacy. Several libraries responded.

In Tasmania, Launceston Library and East Tamar-Launceston Communities for Children submitted a successful funding grant application to the Tasmanian Early Years Foundation. We notified Dr Thomas and started planning. Several months later, Dr Thomas informed us that the other libraries had pulled out. Rather than hand back the funding, a desperate email was sent to the e-list explaining the situation and begging other libraries to support the proposed tour. And they did! Within a few weeks, and with the support of the State

Library of New South Wales, State Library of Victoria, and State Library of South Australia, the tour was back on track.

The workshops will provide proven techniques and current information for using with young children. The presenters are:

- Shannon Schinagl. As well as being a children's librarian, Shannon performs with Sound Safari Theater, the company owned by Charlie 'The Noiseguy' Williams.
- Dr James Thomas, a children's librarian and former library science professor at Texas Woman's University has authored/edited over 24 books on services to children and those with disabilities.
- Nancy Stewart, an award-winning keynote speaker and presenter at numerous early childhood conferences

For information about a workshop in your state, please contact Robyn Burns [robyn@wev.vic.gov.au](mailto:robyn@wev.vic.gov.au) (Victoria), Teresa Brook [brook.teresa@saugov.sa.gov.au](mailto:brook.teresa@saugov.sa.gov.au) (South Australia), Alexander Mills [alexander@ashfield.nsw.gov.au](mailto:alexander@ashfield.nsw.gov.au) (New South Wales).

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