

Award-winning program makes storytime fun for ASD kids

Libraries are as much about the sessions they hold as the books they possess and in this article **KYLIE CARLSON** talks about how she worked to ensure that the storytime sessions in her library met the needs of the local community.

One of the first things I noticed when I started as Branch Manager at Mill Park Library was the enthusiasm and dedication for delivering storytime. I was completely in awe of my branch staff and the way they managed the large crowds at each session, seemingly without breaking a sweat and always with a huge smile on their face.

One other thing I noticed was a particular mum struggling to settle her son in the crowd. He wouldn't sit on the mat, or follow the actions the other kids were doing, and when the singing started he would cover his ears and retreat into his mum's lap.

My heart sank as I saw how uncomfortable they were, remembering the similar experiences I had with my two boys at community events and shopping trips. It wasn't until they were later diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) that I fully understood why my boys couldn't cope with programs



Kylie Carlson and her City of Whittlesea Access and Inclusion and Citizen of the Year award for 2018

like storytime, so I understood how this mum might be facing a similar journey.

I distinctly remember meeting her gaze and giving her a knowing, encouraging smile. I approached her after the session and asked if she was okay. She explained that her son found the storytime sessions quite overwhelming, and how she was desperate to have him attend but felt embarrassed that he wouldn't participate like the other children.

This became an opportunity for me to create an alternative program for families with children who don't enjoy the noise and high energy storytimes we usually conducted; an alternative program that would cater for this mum, and other families who were at risk of social isolation or felt there was nowhere suitable for their children. I enlisted the expertise of my colleague Helen Lightbody and together we developed a storytime model that responded to the needs of children who displayed signs of distress or anxiety at our regular storytime sessions.

We were aware that children with ASD need concentrated exposure to various forms of literacy, media and text in order to help develop their reading and language skills. We were conscious of these needs and did not advertise the program at first; we let word of mouth and staff referrals build a small group of no more than ten children. This ensured we were able to meet the particular needs of each child.

[Sensitive Storytimes](#) ran weekly and were similarly structured to our other storytime sessions but included sensory materials and picture exchange communication system cards (PECS).



Children participating in a Sensitive Storytime

Sensitive Storytimes provide a controlled environment for children with ASD and their families to participate and enjoy the session as much as a neurotypical child enjoys a regular storytime. They ensure social interaction for children and families and have provided a much needed networking opportunity for parents and carers experiencing similar journeys.

I contacted AMAZE (the peak body for Autism in Victoria) about the work we were doing in this space. After observing a session and meeting with us, they sought to develop a more formal resource to highlight Sensitive Storytimes. AMAZE received a grant from the Newmans Foundation and developed an online teaching resource for all librarians to learn how to run their own Sensitive Storytimes.

As a result of working closely with AMAZE and through community feedback, I then developed an Inclusive Storytime Model at Yarra Libraries, which is run in conjunction with separate Sensitive Storytime sessions.

We introduced visual schedules, sensory tents, fidget toys, ear muffs and visual timers into our regular storytime sessions – Rhymetimes and Pre-school Storytimes. We've also included some of these practices into our code clubs and after school activities as part of our inclusive

practices. This has helped families and children who might be ASD (those not diagnosed or not wanting to disclose their diagnosis) feel included and able to participate in all regular library programs.

For my family and for many families, true inclusion is having these practices embedded into regular programming and regular environments. That's what true inclusion looks like, and that's what we are aiming to achieve. 🌱

Editor's Note: The author of this piece, Kylie Carlson, was awarded City of Whittlesea Access and Inclusion and Citizen of the Year award for 2018 for her work in inclusive practices and innovation in programming for libraries.

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