



Department of Culture and the Arts
Government of Western Australia

State Library of Western Australia

Dr Brian Gordon
Principal Research Officer
Inquiry into the Adequacy of Services to Meet the Developmental Needs of
Western Australia's Children
Standing Committee on Community Development and Justice Committee
Legislative Assembly
Parliament House
Perth WA

27 February 2009

Dear Dr Gordon

**Inquiry into the Adequacy of Services to Meet the Developmental Needs
of Western Australia's Children**

Please find attached a Submission to the Inquiry into the Adequacy of
Services to Meet the Developmental Needs of Western Australia's Children
from the State Library of Western Australia for the Standing Committee's
consideration.

I would be happy to provide further information to the Committee should it be
required.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Allen
CEO & State Librarian

Submission to the Inquiry into the Adequacy of
Services to Meet the Developmental Needs of
Western Australia's Children:

Better Beginnings

Family Literacy Program

State Library of Western Australia

1. Introduction

- i. Early years research has shown that seventy five percent of brain development occurs in the first three years of life. Being read to from birth helps children to develop essential pre-literacy skills needed to learn to read, and learning to read is the single most important factor in school success. Early exposure to books and stories substantially contributes to success in early literacy.
- ii. With this background and recognising a gap in current services geared towards early literacy, the State Library of Western Australia (State Library of WA) has taken the lead by developing *Better Beginnings*, a family literacy program that targets children aged 0 – 3 years. *Better Beginnings* recognises the early years research and best practice and focuses on working in partnership with families and communities to support children's early literacy and learning.
- iii. *Better Beginnings* addresses both the social and cognitive development of children by providing parents with support and materials to read to their child and social opportunities at their local libraries.
- iv. The State Library successfully maintains a series of interagency relationships through the *Better Beginnings* program and has done so since 2005. While the State Library of WA would continue to build on these partnerships, there are some benefits for the proposed Office for Early Childhood in coordinating and resourcing the delivery of programs for 0-3 age group across Western Australia. The immediate benefit would help to reduce duplication of service delivery, encourage in kind support, and raise awareness of services geared to this age cohort across the state.
- v. The overview below details how *Better Beginnings* is working to meet the developmental needs of Western Australia's children. Representatives from the State Library of WA would be willing to appear before the committee to discuss any aspects of this submission.

2. Overview of Better Beginnings

- i. *Better Beginnings* began as a pilot program in January 2004, aiming to support parents as their child's first teacher. By providing each newborn child in the pilot communities with a 'tool kit' of resources (containing a gift book, colourful nursery rhyme frieze, poster, booklist and information about reading to babies) the pilot was able to provide parents with the information they needed to give their child the best possible start in literacy development. The fully evaluated pilot commenced in six Western Australian communities (3 metro and 3 country) and in September 2004 was extended to another five. The pilot proved successful in not only improving literacy development, but also in raising awareness of the importance of reading to children. In 2005, the State Library of Western Australia received funding from the State Government and Rio Tinto WA Future Fund (RTWAFF) to roll out *Better Beginnings* state-wide. Currently the program reaches 89% of newborn Western Australians.

3. Interagency and intergovernmental cooperation

- i. *Better Beginnings* is an excellent example of an integrated programme with early years, community, health, and library services working together, building a comprehensive, on-going and sustainable model for early literacy that supports parents and their young children, promotes connectedness between families and their communities, and encourages an ongoing relationship between families and libraries.
- ii. One of the strengths of *Better Beginnings* is the interagency cooperation required to deliver the program. Funding partners, Rio Tinto and the State Government are just the first step in the partnerships needed to make the program a success. The Department of Health shows in kind support for the program as the community child health nurses are delivering the majority of kits to parents at either the first home visit or the six week check up. Local Governments provide both financial and in kind support through the purchase of the gift book and delivery of the program throughout the WA public library system. Community child health nurses and librarians work closely to ensure the success of the program and look to the State Library of WA for guidance, training and support.
- iii. Public libraries provide 'community hubs' where families are supported with practical strategies to build the confidence of adults in sharing stories and language with their children. Libraries provide parenting information, children's books and a range of resources that promote early literacy. They also run Rhyme Time and Story Time sessions and workshops which provide parents with the opportunity to share nursery rhymes, action songs and simple picture books with their babies and children. For many parents these sessions introduce them to rhymes and stories that provide young children with the skills that form an essential basis for learning to read.
- iv. Story kits containing books, puppets and other resources are provided to participating libraries by *Better Beginnings*, and are available for loan from the library to child care centres, playgroups, kindergartens and other community groups serving babies, toddlers and their families. These help to build relationships between the libraries and the borrowing organisations.
- v. Public libraries and various community groups have been able to leverage off *Better Beginnings* in order to obtain other funding for additional services to the 0-3 year olds in the communities across WA. This funding has been used to provide support for parents through information sessions, establishing family reading centres and linking resources and outreach programs targeting the 0-3 age group.
- vi. *Better Beginnings* has also developed relationships with a number of community organisations such as Ngala, Playgroup WA and the Smith Family Literacy Links program, offering and providing mutual support to extend to hard-to-reach families.

4. Delivery of *Better Beginnings*

- i. The gift of a book is just the first step in *Better Beginnings*. Community health nurses present the 'toolkit' to the parents during either the first home visit, or at the newborn's six week check up. With ongoing funding *Better Beginnings* aims to reach every newborn Western Australian regardless of location, race or socioeconomic background. Currently the program reaches 100% of the Metro area and 75% of the regional areas as a result of ongoing support from local government support. It is anticipated that as of June 2009 the State Government will absorb the cost of the gift book, removing the cost from the local governments and ensuring universal participation in the program.
- ii. The kits are provided to the community child health nurses by the local libraries, who monitor stock and order the kits from the State Library of WA. This encourages the relationship between the community health nurses and the libraries, and provides opportunity for librarian to make links with the health network in order to arrange parent information sessions for the families in their community. The libraries participating in *Better Beginnings* coordinate and run regular Rhyme Time sessions for babies and parents, and Story Time sessions for toddlers, combined with occasional parent information sessions.
- iii. Training and support for both librarians and community nurses is provided formally and informally by the State Library of WA.

5. Evaluation of *Better Beginnings*

- i. Since the programs inception Edith Cowan University has independently been conducting a longitudinal study of the impact of *Better Beginnings*. The most recent results from this study were launched by Minister Hon John Day MLA on February 17 2009 at the State Library of WA. The study revealed the following:
 - a. Eighty five per cent (85%) of mothers reported that since receiving the *Better Beginnings* toolkit they read to their child. Only 14% of parents/carers reported reading to their child before they received the *Better Beginnings* toolkit.
 - b. After being involved in the *Better Beginnings* program sixty two per cent (62%) of mothers reported that their confidence in sharing books with their child had increased.
 - c. Over three quarters of the mothers (79%) reported that *Better Beginnings* had influenced their beliefs about the importance of sharing books with their child. Of these (96%) now felt that sharing books with their child was very important.
 - d. Before involvement in *Better Beginnings* over half the mothers (56%) commented that their child was not at all interested (38%) or not very interested (18%) in books. After involvement 94% of mothers indicated that their child was very interested (74%) or quite interested (20%) in sharing books.
 - e. Those mothers who reported their child's increased interest in books also reported an increased enjoyment in sharing books (82%).

- ii. The study also revealed the *Better Beginnings* program has had a significant influence on early literacy practices:
 - a. After receiving the *Better Beginnings* toolkit eighty four per cent (84%) of mothers reported that they read to their child. Where as before receiving their toolkit almost a third of mothers (28%) thought that their child was too young to be read to.
 - b. Over half of the mothers with older children reported that as a result of *Better Beginnings* they read more frequently to their older children.
 - c. Mothers also reported an increase in the number of children's books they had and the amount of time they spent reading with their child after being involved in *Better Beginnings*.
 - d. Seventy per cent (70%) of the mothers surveyed reported that *Better Beginnings* had changed how often they read to and communicate with their child and how often others read to their child (60%).

- iii. Some of the quotes collected (see below) indicate the impact the program has had on parents, and demonstrate the importance of the messages delivered with the *Better Beginnings* packs.
 - a. 'I always felt stupid reading to her. Now I know it's the right thing to do', 'made me a bit more confident'
 - b. 'I always felt funny reading to him before, but now I know I am doing the right thing'
 - c. 'If I didn't get the pack he night not even own a book'
 - d. 'Encouraged me to be consistent and read early'
 - e. 'Have a better understanding of child development...wouldn't have started reading until he was older.'

- iv. The longitudinal nature of this study will give not only Western Australia, but Australia as a whole a clear indication of the impact early literacy programs like *Better Beginnings* can have on a child's future. It is anticipated that it will have significant impact on literacy levels across the state, particularly in relation to school readiness, but also beyond.

6. Meeting the National Agenda

- i. Since its inception *Better Beginnings* has supported the COAG focus on early childhood development and child care. *Better Beginnings* serves as a proven model that will strengthen Western Australia's agreement to focus on early childhood development and child care as a key area of reform. In addition to this *Better Beginnings* is anticipated to have an impact on Western Australia's Australian Early Development Index (AEDI). The results from the Edith Cowan University longitudinal study have already shown the impact the program is having on parents, resulting in greater awareness of the importance of early literacy, and it is anticipated that the impact of *Better Beginnings* on school readiness will be evident once the original recipients are measured against the AEDI.

- ii. With the AEDI in mind there are plans to expand *Better Beginnings* by providing a second kit aimed at children aged three should funding be made available. The expansion of the program will ensure the continued involvement of parents as their child's first teacher, and build on the strengths of the original program.

7. Meeting the Needs of all Western Australian Children

- i. *Better Beginnings* has successfully overcome the geographical constraints to reach the remote, regional and metropolitan areas of Western Australia through its links with health professionals and the State's public libraries. Delivery of resources through the State Library of WA network and subsequent delivery of packs through community child health nurses and the local libraries ensures the program has a wide reach and, as every newborn child receives a pack, the delivery of the program is not impacted by socio economics.
- ii. Every effort has been made to ensure culturally appropriate resources are provided to each community. The gift book 'Baby Ways' was devised, written and produced by State Library of WA featuring photographs of culturally diverse Western Australian babies. This has increased the appeal of the gift book for children and parents alike, as they are able to identify with the images knowing they are from families like their own.
- iii. There have been gaps identified in the program, and efforts are currently underway to ensure *Better Beginnings* is reaching our Indigenous and non English speaking families, especially new arrivals. There are plans to translate much of the literature provided in the packs, as well as to develop books specifically for these families.

8. Conclusion

- i. State Library of WA has identified and addressed the need for an early literacy program, through *Better Beginnings*. Recognising the importance of the first three years of a child's life the program provides parents with the tools needed to help their child develop a love of books, language and learning. With ongoing funding *Better Beginnings* will continue the good work demonstrated in the program evaluation. The proposed expansion of the program will provide continuity, ensuring the connection between children, parents and the community is enhanced.
- ii. State Library of WA would welcome an interagency working group focusing on meeting the needs of Western Australia's children and has demonstrated, through *Better Beginnings*, an excellent ability to develop and maintain relationships within the community. An interagency approach to supporting this age group would provide opportunities for development and support for many programs that would not be possible otherwise.