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**Making a difference:
Findings from Better Beginnings a family literacy intervention program**

Caroline Barratt-Pugh and Nola Allen

Abstract

Since 2005, *Better Beginnings*, an early intervention, statewide family literacy program developed by The State Library of Western Australia, has provided thousands of families with strategies and resources to promote and support book-sharing from birth. This paper reports on the key findings of an independent longitudinal evaluation of the program's impact on parents / carers approximately one year after they were introduced to the *Better Beginnings* program.

Parents/carers were asked about their book sharing practices, beliefs about the importance of sharing books, and library membership and participation in related library activities. Responses from the participants strongly indicated that the program was well received and had a significantly positive impact on the child, other family members and the participants. The evaluation also raised a number of issues, which have implications for further development of the program.

IMPLICATIONS FOR BEST PRACTICE:

Develop ongoing partnerships with community health services and other relevant organisations to increase the program's reach and build sustainability.

Provide high quality resources, including age-appropriate children's books and concise and practical information on book-sharing, that encourage families to start sharing books from birth.

Provide continuing professional development and training for library staff to effectively deliver the program.

Conduct regular rhyme and story sessions to provide families with opportunities to actively engage in book-sharing and other early literacy practices.

Regularly evaluate the program to measure and report on its effectiveness and to identify gaps in service delivery and areas of need.

Promote libraries as "family-friendly places" and raise awareness in the community about library services and resources that support early literacy development.

Introduction

Developed by the State Library of Western Australia, the *Better Beginnings* family literacy program was launched in 2005 and is currently delivered statewide to thousands of families with new babies. In this paper we focus on the outcomes of the program for parents/carers involved in *Better Beginnings*. We start by reporting how *Better Beginnings* impacted on decisions about book sharing and what parents/carers actually did when sharing books with their baby. Then we examine the impact of *Better Beginnings* on parent/carer beliefs about the importance of early reading and confidence in sharing books. Finally, we describe changes in library membership and attendance at *Better Beginnings* library activities.

There is a wealth of evidence from national and international studies that show a significant connection between family literacy practices and school literacy achievement (Gee, 1996; Luke, Comber, & O'Brien, 1996; Moll, 1994; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). In addition, research suggests that children who are not familiar with the text-based literacy practices used in more formal educational settings, may be disadvantaged and 'at risk' of poor literacy outcomes (Thomson, 2000). In response to this concern, a number of family literacy intervention programs have been developed over the last decade with the aim of bridging the gap between home and school.

Many of these early literacy intervention programs, (including *Better Beginnings*) are based on substantial evidence from research into early literacy learning. This research suggests that literacy learning begins at birth, as the baby is inducted into family and community literacy events (Gillen & Hall, 2003; Landry & Smith, 2006; Sulzby & Teale, 1991). In particular, shared book reading, songs, rhymes and language play, from birth, supports later literacy development in more formal school contexts (Hall, 2001; Moore & Wade, 1997, 2003; Whitehead, 2002).

However, although interaction through shared book reading clearly provides opportunity for literacy learning, it is the quality of shared-book reading that impacts upon the extent and type of learning that occurs (Senechal & LeFevre, 2001; Senechal, LeFevre, Thomas, & Daley, 1998). Encouraging interaction through active engagement with text has been identified as one way of introducing children to

sophisticated language forms, new vocabulary and concepts of print (Bus, van Ijzendoorn, & Pellergrini, 1995; van Kleeck, 2003).

Increased frequency of shared book reading, routinely reading, re-reading a book, as well as giving children individual attention through one-to-one interaction during shared book reading, have all been found to potentially increase interest and enjoyment of books (Kassow, 2006; Kuo, Franke, Regalado, & Halfon, 2004). Fostering children's ability to choose books and develop favourite books has also been identified as an important aspect of early literacy development (Wilkinson, 2003).

Research suggests that all experiences that parents/carers have with their children start and evolve from their beliefs, guiding action and reciprocally shaping further action (Sigel & McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 2002). Beliefs about the importance of book-sharing and having the confidence to enact beliefs through shared literacy practices have a significant impact on children's growth and development in early literacy (Baker & Scher, 2002; Senechal & LeFevre, 2001; Snow, et al., 1998).

In addition, being able to confidently access appropriate books for children enables parents/carers to build resources and become familiar with books that have the potential to support early literacy. Citing evidence from several early literacy intervention programs Bundy (2004), argues for the key role of public libraries in supporting early literacy development, through the provision of a wide range of resources specifically aimed at promoting early literacy.

The Better Beginnings Family Literacy Program

Better Beginnings, an early intervention, statewide family literacy program aims to provide positive language and literacy influences for young children through encouraging parents to read to their new-born baby. Funded by The State Government of Western Australia, local governments and Rio Tinto, the program is based on strong cooperation between health professionals and public libraries. *Better Beginnings* is introduced to parents /carers by the community child health nurse (CCHN) at the 6-8 week health check. The CCHNs present and share a

reading pack as part of the *Better Beginnings* program and to talk about the importance of sharing books and accessing early literacy resources and activities through the local library. The program consists of:

- A *Better Beginnings* handbook and training module, developed to support librarians and community child health nurses working with the program;
- A reading pack for parents/carers of young babies, containing a quality board book, a nursery rhyme frieze, pamphlets about the value of reading to children and ways of sharing books, a list of first books for babies and toddlers and information about local library resources;
- Baby Rhyme time and Story time sessions and workshops for parents / carers usually conducted at local libraries;
- Outreach Story time Boxes that contain a rich variety of literacy resources for children and their families, for use in public libraries and loaned to community agencies
- Family resource centres in libraries, which provide interactive early childhood learning spaces, plus parenting resources including early childhood language and literacy information; and,
A website providing information about Better Beginnings and free access to literacy databases.

The program

The study

The *Better Beginnings* pilot program conducted in 2004-2005 was independently evaluated by Edith Cowan University in one urban and one rural community in Western Australia. Building on the pilot study findings, Edith Cowan University undertook a longitudinal evaluation between 2007- 2010, as the program was delivered to almost 90% of parent/carers with new babies across Western Australia. The longitudinal evaluation took place in four communities (remote, rural, urban and inner-city) in Western Australia. Its aims were to explore:

- the impact of *Better Beginnings* on parent/carer book sharing practices.

- the impact of *Better Beginnings* on parent/carer confidence in sharing books and beliefs about early reading.
- parent/carer library membership and attendance at *Better Beginnings* library activities.
- professionals' perspectives of and involvement in *Better Beginnings*.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collected across four years consisted of:

- One pre-program and three post-program surveys of parents/carers with new babies in four communities (remote, rural, urban and inner-city).
- Follow-up semi-structured case study interviews with a cross section of 40 parents/carers selected from the 1st post-program survey data.
- Semi-structured interviews with librarians and community child health nurses involved in the *Better Beginnings* program in the four communities.
- Semi-structured interview with the *Better Beginnings* program coordinator at the State Library.

The findings reported in this paper are derived from a content analysis of the pre-program and first post-program survey responses, including those given to open-ended questions. The pre-program survey was completed by 300 parents/carers before they were introduced to the *Better Beginnings* program and given the Better Beginnings reading pack. This took place at the community health clinic, where parent/carers had taken their baby for her/his 6 to 8 week health check. Out of these 300, a total of 177 (59%) parents/carers participated in the post-program telephone survey approximately one year after receiving the *Better Beginnings* program information and reading pack.

The term 'mother' is used in this paper to refer to all *Better Beginnings* participants because they all identified themselves as the mother of the baby. The term 'child' is used, where appropriate, to indicate the growing maturity of the baby.

Findings and discussion

The impact of Better Beginnings on book sharing practices

Number of mothers sharing books with their baby.

In the pre-program survey data 51% of mothers reported that they did not share books with their baby. A large majority of mothers who completed the post-program survey (85%) reported that since receiving the *Better Beginnings* reading pack they read to their child. Although the increase in the number of mothers sharing books with their child could be due to several factors, including the increasing maturity of the baby, comments made by the mothers suggest that *Better Beginnings* did have some influence on their decision. Comments included:

- *If I didn't get the pack, he might not even own a book.*
- *Encouraged me to be consistent and read early.*
- *Gave me a tool straight away to use.*
- *Have a better understanding of child development, wouldn't have started reading until he was older.*
- *I tell story Vietnamese, but start read book English after get pack from clinic.*
- *I didn't read to him before getting the pack.*

These data suggest that receiving the *Better Beginnings* reading pack motivated mothers who were not reading to their baby to start sharing books. For a small number of mothers the book in the *Better Beginnings* reading pack was the first book their child had received and the only book in their home. In addition, the reading pack encouraged mothers who were already sharing books to continue reading with their baby. Thus, mothers were asked to comment on their use of the reading pack, including how they used the gift book, the nursery rhyme frieze and the information pamphlets.

Changes in book-sharing practices

Over two-thirds of the mothers who reported reading to their child after receiving the *Better Beginnings* reading pack, recalled the name of the gift book. Of these the majority reported that they and their child liked the gift book. Several mothers commented on the high quality and the durability of the gift book. For example, one mother commented:

I thought it was fantastic. First of all you had every colour in there, you had every size of baby in that some were a bit skinny, some were real plump. They all had happy faces. They were all doing something that was naturally a baby and they all looked at you... and the fact that my son actually sat on my lap for the whole minute and a half and just flicked through the faces, flicked through all of them and when he got to the end he just held it and giggled and laughed at himself (looking at the mirror) so I thought that was a really good first session.

Almost a third of mothers who read to their child reported that they read books recommended in the *Better Beginnings* 'Book Suggestions' pamphlet, ranging from 1 to 20 books, the average being 4 books. Several of these mothers commented that they had kept the pamphlets and looked for the recommended books. The mothers, who had read the recommended books, acquired them from a range of sources, including the library (13%) friends (14%), bookshops (6%), families (5%), and supermarkets (3%). Several mothers revealed that they were not aware of the range of books available to babies and young children, and others commented that they were not sure, before receiving the pamphlet, which books were appropriate for young children. In addition, almost half of the mothers reported that they used the nursery rhyme frieze from the reading pack, stating that their child enjoyed the rhymes.

Over two thirds of mothers reported that they found the 'Tips for Enjoying Reading with your Baby' pamphlet to be either extremely useful or quite useful. However, some mothers reported that they found reading it to be difficult; others whose first language was not English reported that they could not read and /or understand the pamphlets.

In order to explore the relationship between the tip sheet and reading practices, mothers who completed the post-program survey were asked about ways in which they shared books with their child. We asked them to indicate to what extent they had implemented each suggestion on the tip sheet. Almost all mothers indicated that they found a comfortable place to sit (96%), held the book in the child's visual range (97%), and let the child hold the book (97%). Mothers also reported that they read stories aloud with expression (97%), and while reading pointed to the pictures and named or described them (95%). Two-thirds of the mothers (67%) moved their finger

under the words while reading to their child and over half (59%) asked questions about the pictures. Most also reported choosing books with rhyme and repetition (89%), and re-reading the story their child seemed to enjoy the most (95%).

Many mothers may have used these practices regardless of their involvement in *Better Beginnings*. However, these practices mirror the tips in the pamphlet, and evidence from comments made by mothers suggests that some had adopted the practices after reading the 'tips' pamphlet. For example:

The reading tips, like letting the baby hold the book and...moving your finger under the words, I'd never have done that before.

[Gave me] knowledge to read to young children and information for parents to follow.

It was great getting information on how to educate your child. Being a first time mum it was good advice.

Guide for us knowing how to start reading books. Didn't think to do so, so young.

This evidence suggests that the 'gift' book was well received and the pamphlets were influential in guiding some mothers to adopt certain practices for sharing and choosing appropriate books. However, success in gaining the child's interest and enjoyment in sharing a book is an important factor in whether mothers repeat the activity (Whitehead, 2002). In addition, the choice of book may also influence the level of engagement for both parent/carer and child (Wilkinson, 2003).

Number of children's books

It appears that as mothers became involved in sharing books with their child this may have influenced the number of children's books in their home. After receiving the *Better Beginnings* reading pack, mothers who read to their child reported an increase in the number of books in their home appropriate for reading to their child, the average being 49 books. Interestingly, data from the pre-program survey indicated that the average number of suitable books in the home was between 15 and 20 books, with 44% of respondents indicating there were no books suitable for reading to their child in their home at that time. This increase could be explained by the greater choice of books for older children, the child's growing maturity, and the

mothers' perception of the best age to start reading. However, once again unsolicited comments made by mothers who read to their child indicated that *Better Beginnings* did have an impact on their decision to read more books:

In the beginning I would never thought of reading to my kids, I can't read very well. But the nurse showed me it's good, now I like to give them books, hard [board] books and cloth ones to play with and share.

I have started buying books, after getting the pack I have a better idea of what's good.

I ask for books for presents now, you know birthday, Christmas I can give his nana the sheet with the names on [book recommendation pamphlet].

As the number of books increase, it is likely that reading and sharing books becomes increasingly part of ongoing family literacy activities and that children see books as an integral part of family life, as evidenced in the following section.

Frequency of reading and other adults involved

Over two-thirds (70%) of the mothers reported that *Better Beginnings* had changed how often they read to their child, commenting that they now did so more often. Two thirds of mothers who read to their child after receiving the *Better Beginnings* reading pack, reported that they read to their child on a daily basis, mentioning that shared reading was now part of a daily routine. In contrast only 23% of pre-program survey participants reported reading to their child each day.

It is notable that almost three-quarters of mothers who read to their child after receiving the reading pack, indicated that the child's father now also read to the child, 23% on a daily basis. In the pre-program survey data less than half of the participants (42%) reported that the father read to the child and then only 3% read on a daily basis. In the post-program survey data, 72% of mothers who had more than one child reported that siblings read to their child.

Interestingly, 70% of mothers reported that since using the *Better Beginnings* reading pack their child's interest in books had changed. Of those, almost all (94%) reported that their child is now very interested or quite interested in books. Almost 60% of these mothers reported an increase in how often their child requested a book to be read to them. Many comments emphasised this, for example:

He tries to turn the pages by himself... Loves the noises... sounds and touch it's all chewed, he loves it, it's a favourite.

My daughter likes to get books herself, when she brings books to me I read it until she moves away.

She'll want three [books] in a row, likes to flick the pages to get ahead.

It's a bedtime routine now, won't settle until I read to her.

The impact of Better Beginnings on beliefs about early reading and confidence in sharing books.

In the pre-program survey, almost two thirds of mothers reported feeling confident about reading to their child. However, after being involved in the Better Beginnings program, over half of all those who completed the post-program survey (62%) reported that their confidence in sharing books with their child had increased. A variety of comments illustrated this growth in confidence:

I always felt stupid reading to her. Now I know it's the right thing to do.

Made me a bit more confident.

Increased confidence in reading to X. knowing that it is something that everyone else does.

In addition, over three quarters (79%) of the mothers who completed the post-program survey reported that *Better Beginnings* had influenced their beliefs about the importance of sharing books with their baby. The majority of these mothers (96%) felt that sharing books with their baby was important, as illustrated in the following comments. Some also commented on additional benefits they believed were gained from shared-reading:

I didn't think books were important for babies, but now... well she responds...really value books and reading time.

Didn't understand I should be reading to her as a baby, now believe its very important.

Always had a strong belief I would read to my child, but surprised how much my baby enjoyed the book.

It helps bonding, you know builds a relationship.

I was worried about his language... now read more and more and can see progress.

I think it helps... turning pages, opening and closing, all those book things they need to know.

Clearly these findings need to be interpreted with caution, given that a number of factors may account for mothers' increase in confidence and practices. However, from the evidence presented above, it is possible that the *Better Beginnings* reading pack helped some mothers to become more confident about book sharing, and this in turn led to an increase in reading. As a consequence the child had more opportunities to become involved in book sharing, with more adults, which may have fostered an interest in books and led to the child initiating some of the book sharing sessions.

Impact of Better Beginnings on mothers' library membership and attendance

Mothers were asked if the *Better Beginnings* program had changed their opinion that babies can join the library at any age. Over three-quarters (83%) of mothers reported that they had changed their opinion; several commented that they did not know babies could join the library or they had not thought about taking out library membership for their baby. Others reported that they had not realised there were resources in the community that provided literacy support, giving the example of Baby Rhyme time at the library.

Since receiving the *Better Beginnings* reading pack, over a quarter of mothers (28%) reported that they had become library members. The new library members reported that they were likely to visit the library on a monthly basis (38%), a fortnightly basis (29%) or a weekly (12%) basis. The others reported that although they had taken out library membership they found it hard, for a variety of reasons, to visit the library. Others mentioned their concern about books being chewed or damaged by their child. However, over 60% of mothers who were new library members reported they had started borrowing books for their child after receiving the *Better Beginnings* reading pack.

Almost a quarter (23%) of mothers reported that they had taken out library membership for their child after receiving *Better Beginnings* reading pack. Of those who had taken out library membership for their child over half reported that their child goes to the library once a month, 13% reported that their child goes once every two weeks, and almost a quarter reported that their child goes to the library once every week. The difference between the weekly visits by the mother and child, suggests that some children go to the library with another adult.

For those mothers (38%) who were already members of the library prior to receiving the *Better Beginnings* reading pack, over a quarter (27%) reported going to the library more often after receiving *Better Beginnings*. In addition, over a third of mothers (35%) who were members of the library reported that their child borrowed more items after receiving *Better Beginnings*.

In the post-program survey, less than a quarter of the mothers reported that they attended the Baby Rhyme time (10%) or Story time sessions (17%) at the library, and only a small percentage of mothers had attended Parent Workshops (9%). However, mothers who had attended these sessions, found them to be either extremely useful or quite useful (Rhyme time 66%; Story time 67%; Parent Workshops 32%). Positive comments made by mothers included:

I enjoyed it. It was very useful as well.

I found Rhyme time excellent.

I wish it was on every week.

Good fun, everyone has a sing and dance.

Mothers also commented on the reasons why they hadn't attended the library sessions, or had only been once or twice to the sessions. In particular, several mothers mentioned time-related issues such as "*They're at inconvenient times,*" "*I'm working so I don't have time*" "*They're in the middle of sleep time*" and "*I'm too busy to go to the library.*" Comments were also made about the age-appropriateness of the sessions, including "*I feel he is too young at the moment*" and "*Still too young for Story time; he wouldn't sit still.*" Mothers also mentioned location issues such as "*Parking is a nightmare, a lot of construction going on*" and "*I don't like the area*

where the Library and Clinic are situated.” Several mothers also explained that they were not aware of these sessions but would like to have attended with their baby.

Clearly, the librarians play a major part in the *Better Beginnings* program. One of their roles is to promote the *Better Beginnings* program and encourage parent/carers to take out library membership, use the early childhood resources, and attend the Baby Rhyme time, Story time sessions and workshops. We asked the mothers who had attended the library after receiving the *Better Beginnings* reading pack about their experience of the library. Over half of these mothers reported that when they visited the library, the librarian promoted the *Better Beginnings* library activities, giving information about times and content of sessions, and 47% of mothers reported that the librarian showed them where the age-appropriate books were housed. Almost half of the mothers who visited the library reported that the librarian encouraged them to take out library membership for their child, and these mothers reported that when they visited the library the librarian showed them the library facilities. For example:

X has taken over running the sessions. She is really friendly and she feels like someone I know now. She is great every time I come in.

Joined library when I got the pack, I go regularly and love the library, the librarians are great, really helpful, show me where to get books for x.

The staff are good, always so friendly.

Library membership is an important part of the *Better Beginnings* program, because it gives families access to a range of resources and the potential to use the library as part of a ‘lifelong learning’ journey. *Better Beginnings* library activities provided modelling of book sharing, the opportunity to choose appropriate books for their young child, and access to other literacy resources.

Summary and conclusions

From the evaluation findings and comments by participants, it is evident that the *Better Beginnings* program was overwhelmingly well received by the mothers in this study. The findings also demonstrate that the program positively influenced mothers’ book-sharing practices with their baby by reinforcing or extending their confidence.

and beliefs about the importance of reading aloud to and sharing books with children from birth. For many mothers this led to an increase in the number of appropriate children's books in the home and in the frequency of book-sharing by the mother and other family members. These outcomes also appeared to have a cumulative effect as mothers reported an increase in the child's request for a book and interest in sharing books. Thus, the gift book acted as an incentive for shared reading and the pamphlets provided scaffolding about sharing books, as well as useful information about appropriate books for babies.

The *Better Beginnings* program also provided a catalyst for over 25% of mothers to take library membership and attend some of the *Better Beginnings* activities. For many mothers, taking out library membership for their baby, visiting the library for books and resources specifically for babies and participating in literacy activities were relatively new experiences. Early involvement in library activities has the potential to increase access to resources as children mature and independently view the library as a source of information and learning opportunities. In addition, this may lead to library membership for subsequent children within the family, taking early literacy practices into the next generation.

The evaluation also raised several issues, which warrant serious consideration and further investigation about the impact and sustainability of *Better Beginnings*. The first issue is related to reaching those mothers who do not attend a health clinic for the 6-8week health check and those mothers who receive the reading pack but are unable to access its contents because of low literacy skills or limited English. The second issue is about ways of maintaining and extending book sharing practices as the child matures. Many mothers commented on the need for advice about ways of supporting ongoing literacy development. The third issue is about encouraging library membership and enhancing *Better Beginnings* library activities in terms of promotion, availability and delivery. This includes ways of alleviating the fears some mothers had about their children's 'care' of library books. At the time of publication the State Library of Western Australia has begun to address these issues in a number of ways. These will be outlined in the final report of the *Better Beginnings* evaluation (Barratt-Pugh, Rohl, Statkus, 2011).

Better Beginnings appears to have an important ongoing role to play in encouraging and positively influencing the early literacy practices of parents/carers with babies and young children. In the words of one mother interviewed as part of the study, the program's value is clear, "[It introduces] us to rhymes and stories that we can do daily at either bathtime or bedtime. Maybe we would have a silent house without it".

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