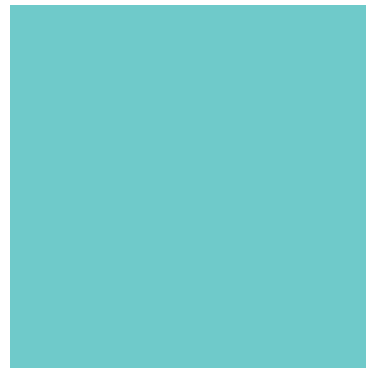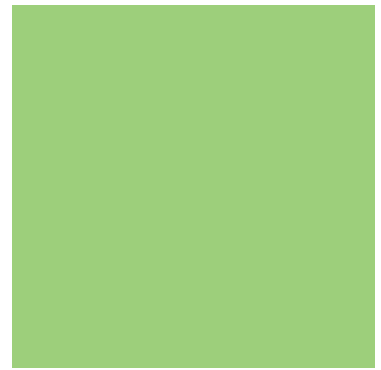Australian **Library** and
Information Association

ALIA Public Libraries Advisory Committee

EARLY LITERACY FRAMEWORK AND STRATEGY FOR AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC LIBRARIES

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1 ABOUT LIBRARY SERVICES FOR FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

Families have traditionally been heavy users of public library services. These services are free, accessible, local and informal.

Families have borrowed from libraries' collections of books, DVDs and other print/online materials. They have participated in baby, toddler and children's rhyme, song and storytelling sessions, and parents/caregivers have sought advice from library staff about sharing books with their infants.

While other early childhood professionals acknowledge the importance of reading as part of the learning experience, only libraries open up a world of books, a lifetime's supply of free reading materials and other resources. Public libraries are the only government-funded agency available to children from babyhood, providing year-round, free access to resources and services that support reading and literacy.

Libraries are the only government-funded agency providing free literacy resources to parents of 0 to 4-year-olds and they are one of the few agencies, along with maternal and child health services, helping parents to be their children's first teachers.

The most active period of human brain growth and development is from birth to three, and libraries employ specialist children's and youth services staff to help parents/caregivers give their children the best start by sharing books with them.

Although this framework and strategy is designed around Australian public libraries, there is clearly a leadership role for State and Territory Libraries:

- They are best placed to monitor and measure the impact of strategic initiatives on public library services.

- They collate and disseminate information to public libraries through their networks.

- They provide proactive encouragement and support for national projects.

- They create professional development opportunities for public library managers and staff.

- They broker state and national partnerships to build sustainability.

- They advocate for the role of libraries in providing vital support for early literacy.

- They lobby for state and federal funding for early literacy services in public libraries.

2 THE PURPOSE OF THIS EARLY LITERACY FRAMEWORK AND STRATEGY

The purpose of this national early literacy framework and strategy for Australian public libraries is:

- To define the special role of public libraries in early literacy.

- To raise the profile of the important role that public libraries play in pre-school learning both internally (with library staff) and externally, with the public, government and especially funding bodies.

- To gain formal recognition from government and other agencies providing early childhood support and services, resulting in the inclusion of public library representatives in high level state, territory and local government planning for pre-school children.

3 THE SPECIAL ROLE OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES IN EARLY LITERACY

By providing services for families with young children, public libraries are investing in future library users. State and public library participation in early literacy:

- Early literacy advice and encouragement direct to parents — new parents' visits to libraries with the maternal and child health service; visits to crèches, kindergartens, community language centres; parent advice at the desk eg booklists

- Activities for parents and/or children to encourage early literacy — Children's Week events, Children's Book Week activities; Reconciliation Week storytimes

- Early literacy programs for parents and children — community publishing, baby bounce, Auslan baby bounce, toddler time, storytime, bilingual storytime

- Advocacy — promoting the need for early literacy — outreach to community groups, the Reading Hour and National Simultaneous Storytime

- Training for professionals and/or parents — training for library staff and family day care, childcare centre, playgroup staff and maternal and child health nurses; training and support for volunteers

- Resources for professionals and/or parents — collections of board books, picture books, CDs, DVDs, databases eg Tumblebooks, Intrepica; parenting books and magazines; book bags for babies; tips for reading with very young children; resources for playgroups

- Information sharing events and connections — liaison programming with the Council, early literacy working groups in some Councils; hosting and participating in children's forums

- Research into early literacy

- Gaining external funding for early literacy initiatives.

By comparison with other service providers, including Council children's services, playgroups, kindergartens, childcare centres, government and non-government early literacy initiatives, only libraries provide all five of these aspects to their service:

- Physical space that can be shared by other organisations

- Programs — rhymes and stories

- Resources — books, CDs, DVDs, reading lists

- Activities and events, both regular and one-off

- Early literacy focus and expertise.

Libraries are more than simply service providers to library users, they are 'active connectors' for families and other agencies. They actively connect:

- Organisations operating in the early childhood sector

- Parents/caregivers with resources

- Parents/caregivers and their children, through the reading experience

- Parents/caregivers with other service providers, especially where families are from diverse cultural backgrounds and don't know about the help and support that is available until they discover the information at their library.

This role as 'active connectors' is something all public libraries can recognise, value and expand upon.

4 FRAMEWORK: LIBRARIES AS EARLY LITERACY 'ACTIVE CONNECTORS'

4.1 PARTNERSHIPS

Public libraries have a history of partnerships with other organisations engaged in education, training, leisure activities, social networking, informal learning and technology. Partners include other Council branches as well as external agencies.

- Library managers know how to achieve mutual benefit based on combined strengths, expertise and communication networks.

- Libraries don't compete, they collaborate, expanding their capacity by providing facilities and opportunities for other early childhood and parenting service providers.

- Libraries are active participants in partnerships, both hosting and participating.

4.2 PROGRAMS

- Library programs and events provide opportunities for parents/caregivers, whatever their literacy level, to connect by sharing books with their children.

- Connection is not only about activities within the library, it is also about outreach, with library staff delivering services to the wider community.

4.3 PEOPLE

- Early literacy is something that involves all the library team, not only the children and youth services specialists. Literacy is transmitted across generations, with parents playing a vital role in developing their children's reading and literacy skills. Many services delivered by public libraries are intergenerational.

- The skills required go beyond a knowledge of children's literature into an understanding of early childhood development.

- It is important to allocate time and resources to developing and delivery services for pre-school age children and for library staff to have access to professional development (PD) relating to this area.

- Libraries can provide PD sessions for people from other agencies and library staff can participate in PD provided by partner organisations.

5 STRATEGY: EVERY PUBLIC LIBRARY AN ACTIVE CONNECTOR

This strategic framework builds on what public libraries already do and provides the opportunity to create a stronger focus on early literacy.

AT A BASIC LEVEL, EVERY PUBLIC LIBRARY SHOULD:

- Carry out a local family needs analysis

- Provide resources — picture books, parenting books

- Enable PD access for appropriate staff

- Hold regular storytimes

- Bring community partners together

- Record and report early literacy achievements

- Include responsibility for early learning in at least one member of staff's role statement

AT THE OPTIMUM LEVEL:

- Early literacy features in every library plan

- PD offered to other agencies

- Library invited to other agencies' PD sessions

- Promoting resources and making them widely available eg bulk loans for kinder

- Outreach for vulnerable, hard-to-reach, non-library users

- Actively creating programs

- Baby bounce/rhyme time as well as storytime activities

- Parenting support and being active in the space eg programs for teenage mums

- Participating in academic and other research

- Collaborating (real/online) with other libraries locally/nationally about the development of resources and programs

- Actively involved in the reading and literacy debate

- Participating in the provision of early literacy incentives (free DVDs, books, other materials) as a public library membership 'bonus'

6 IMPLEMENTATION

This framework and strategy has been developed by the ALIA Public Libraries Advisory Committee (PLAC). PLAC is made up of representatives from the state-based public library associations, territory libraries, LINC Tasmania and Public Libraries Australia.

Communication and implementation will be carried out through PLAC members' own networks, which cover all 1500 public library locations across Australia.

7 MEASURING THE IMPACT

If this framework and strategy is adopted by Australian public libraries, there is the potential to monitor and measure its impact in a number of ways.

- Public libraries can benchmark their performance against others serving communities with similar profiles.

- We can identify how many public libraries include early literacy in their strategic plans and monitor the increase over time.

- With funding for academic research, we could look at the impact on school readiness by focusing on a few communities.

- ALIA can continue to profile libraries achieving success in this area through its various programs and communication channels.

This document is an updated and summarised version of the ALIA PLAC Early Literacy Framework and Strategy 2011, which is also available on the ALIA website http://www.alia.org.au/node/184/public-libraries.