

Family literacy: the Gosford City Library program



Even people who can read may not necessarily function in a literate way. They may not know how to find information in books or other sources. They may not know how libraries work. We call these skills information literacy and, as librarians, we work to instil it in our users.

In public libraries, this concept is being dramatically expressed in the introductory sessions to the internet.

There are, however, library services that have been around for decades: the storytimes, bookmobile and homework help services which encourage young people to use the library. Some libraries are now expanding these services into sophisticated programs, targeting children from babies to young adults and encouraging parental participation which enriches the literacy experience for everyone involved. Those adults who can read but are not literate in the fullest sense are ripe for library help when their children become interested in books and reading and when they begin school. But the most effective way of improving family literacy is to start when the child is very young. Family literacy programs in libraries can build skills in the par-

ent as well as the child — 'a fun journey of discovery with infinite treasures along the way,' according to Heather Fisher, who began the very successful family literacy program at Gosford City Library on the Central Coast of New South Wales.

Heather presented a paper on the Gosford program, titled *Family literacy: the hidden need* at last year's biennial ALIA conference in Adelaide. The full paper is available in the proceedings to be published shortly. Together with her book, *I can do that!: programs for children, teenagers and their families* (published by Gosford City Council), the paper provides a wealth of ideas for libraries to encourage reading and regular library use from the time children can sit up. Indeed, Heather's earliest reading program, for parents with children under eighteen months, is called 'LapSit', a program of story and book discovery designed to welcome 'the youngest sector of the community into the full life and service of the library'.

The programs outlined in Heather's book have ideas and activities for all ages. Some libraries have a 'Welcome new baby' package and a parent pack with games and a list of library resources.

Toddler tales and more structured group activities for preschoolers at the library are described, with attention paid to the concentration span of the different age groups. A holistic approach involving reading, art, play, music and movement is encouraged.

After-school clubs and holiday time programs for 5-12 year-olds are described. At Gosford library these programs have included cartooning, clowning and creative writing workshops, junk instrument music time, cross-word mania and a library scavenger hunt. Ethnic story telling and celebrating Chinese New Year are other ideas. Science in the library workshops have involved talks about rocks and fossils and sessions on using a microscope.

Heather's book offers a wide range of library activities for teenagers from mystery nights to tutoring for driving tests, beginner's guides to car repair, to walking tours of ghost sites, the art of drumming, sixty minutes with an author, drama and creative writing workshops, and a program, offered at Manly Library, on stress management for students in senior classes at high school. Manly and Camden libraries have also offered HSC lectures tying school courses with resources in the library.

Many of these ideas were gathered on a study tour of Canadian and American libraries in 1996, after Heather won the Marjorie Cotton Award for Children's Librarianship, awarded by the ALIA Children's and Youth Services section.

Since then she has developed a family literacy program at Gosford, which is part of the Reader's Digest 'Get ahead' program, developed by that publisher and the State Library of New South Wales [see p 11].

Her conference speech described the program in detail. The optimum number of participants per session is fifteen adults with their children. A two-hour session was held once a week for seven weeks, with the first 15 minutes devoted to ice-breaking tea and biscuits. The course outline was:

Week 1: Your child is the expert. Presenter asks the participants why they have come to the course, outlines the program and describes child learning issues: for example, how a child learns, what is easy and what is hard, using fun and games for learning reinforcement.

Weeks 2-6 concentrate on reading techniques, the relationship between reading and writing, comprehension, spelling and resources which can include card games, pen and paper and guessing games.

Week 7 session is taken by the children's librarian and looks at how the library can support the participants as they progress.

Specially chosen facilitators, the library as the venue and strong, constant coordinating are important factors for the success of this program. Further details can be obtained from the Gosford City Library or the State Library of New South Wales Public Libraries Branch. ■

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