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Library Success story... Moreland's BookStart Kit program

Genimaree Panozzo, Moreland community relations librarian

A love of reading is one of the most precious gifts that you can give to a child. It is never too early to begin reading to babies to foster that love and develop this essential life skill. The Moreland BookStart Kit program, launched in August 2000, has had outstanding success in encouraging parents to read to babies with more than 2000 kits already distributed.

Moreland's BookStart Kit program is modelled on a scheme initiated in Birmingham in 1992 by the Book Trust in co-operation with Birmingham Library Services, South Birmingham Health Authority and Birmingham University School of Education.

Moreland's BookStart Kit program is a highlight of the successful Moreland Reading Project; the project itself inspired by another British source — the National Reading Campaigns. Launched in late 1999, the Moreland Reading Project is a celebration of reading which aims to develop a community culture in which the importance of reading is valued and acknowledged. The project's central framework is a thematic calendar of activities and programs highlighting the message that reading is one of the great pleasures of life. The project provides a focus for community groups to promote their own reading related activities.

The BookStart Kit is distributed to every newborn Moreland baby in co-operation with the maternal and child health nurses. The nurses present the kit on their first visit to parents.

The kit, complete with calico library bag, features:

- a board book;
- a sixteen page booklet *Reading is forever: how to develop your child's reading skills and have fun together* published by the library (also available free to all Moreland residents, schools and centres);
- a select list of parenting resources held by the library including videos and websites;
- a list of recommended board books for babies under twelve months and from twelve months to two years;
- a library brochure;

- a colourful invitation for babies to join the library stapled to a membership form;
- a leaflet on playgroups by Playgrouping Victoria; and
- a leaflet on the Moreland Toy Shed.

Where possible, a bilingual board book is provided for LOTE speakers. A leaflet on reading to children produced and translated into ten different languages by the Free Kindergarten Association (FKA) Multicultural Resource Centre, is also included where appropriate in the Kit.

In order to reinforce the reading message in the BookStart kits, Moreland's library service commenced rhyme-time sessions for babies under eighteen months in February 2002. The sessions last for twenty to thirty minutes and consist of nursery rhymes, finger rhymes and songs. After the sessions, library staff are available for any questions or advice on reading to babies. The rhyme-time sessions at Moreland have been an outstanding success with numbers ranging from fourteen to seventeen babies for the first session at each library and have since resulted in some 'pram jams' at sessions due to their popularity.

An evaluation survey was undertaken of parents who had received a BookStart Kit up to March 2001. Results from the 300 respondents found that thirty-five per cent of parents began to read to their babies for the first time as a result of the kit while sixty per cent began reading to their babies more often. General feedback from parents was very positive with many praising the concept and providing useful advice for the future development of the program. Copies of an evaluation report of Moreland's BookStart produced by the then Moreland Reading Project officer Nicole Wiseman in May 2001 are available by e-mailing gpanozzo@moreland.vic.gov.au

A number of other library services have implemented, or are planning to implement, similar BookStart schemes and I hope that Australia may follow the United Kingdom lead, and with sponsorship, establish a national rollout of this worthwhile project. Given the Birmingham research, there seems no better project to give children a good start to education and life skills. ■