

## Children's reading won't go to the dogs!

In 2008, Lake Macquarie City Library launched an innovative program that uses the calming nature of dogs to help struggling readers.

The BaRK (Better Reading for Kids) program is a new initiative where a Delta Pet Partners Dog is paired with struggling readers for one school term to help the children gain confidence with their reading skills.



*Toby the BaRK dog*

Lake Macquarie City Library identified a gap in the delivery of meaningful, library-based activities that can improve literacy outcomes and reading confidence for primary aged children (7-12 years). The BaRK Program complements work being done in local schools to address literacy and self-esteem issues. It promotes reading outside of school times, and the library as a fun, social place free from criticism, with helpful staff.

While similar programs have been running in the United States for many years, Lake Macquarie seems to be one of the few libraries in Australia using therapy dogs to promote children's reading practice and skills. Community Programs Coordinator, Jo Smith, said BaRK allows struggling readers to express themselves to their canine reading companion in the knowledge that they are not being judged.

"Children who have difficulty reading need practice where they feel safe and accepted, without the fear of criticism or judgement," Ms Smith said.

"The golden retriever, Toby, is a wonderful dog. He is very placid and the kids love to pat him and have a chat, then read to him. They enjoy their reading, without fear of being embarrassed by their mistakes or the speed at which they read. The non-judgemental environment allows them to grow in confidence."

Each school term, four children practise their reading skills in the BaRK program. Children are referred to the library from local schools in the area. The success of BaRK is dependent on building partnerships and relationships between the library, teachers, parents, carers, and Delta volunteers.

Feedback after our first year of BaRK has been extremely positive. Participants have achieved substantial improvements in both reading skill and confidence as reported by parents and teachers. Currently, BaRK operates from Windale Library, an area of high socio-economic disadvantage in Lake Macquarie. We are hoping to gain sponsorship for the program to expand it across the Library Service and LGA.

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## Sweet/Suite for seniors

Libraries have long striven to market themselves to children as fun happening places through StoryTimes, craft session, visiting presenters and other event programs, but in 2007 the Grenfell Public Library decided to focus on the other end of the age spectrum with a four-event "Sweet/Suite for Seniors" aimed at older members of the community. Children have access to school libraries and have a range of online and other recreational options but for seniors information and recreational resources may be more limited and the public library is an accessible and familiar option.

The "Sweet/Suite for Seniors" consisted of:

- a Dinkum Oz Entertainment Morning of Australian verse, music and comedy items by a professional presenter
- the Seniors Week Morning, Tea including prizes and musical entertainment
- a Travel for Seniors Information Morning with a local travel agent
- Magical May Morning featuring a professional conjurer/magician

held on Tuesday mornings at approximately three week intervals. Each event included a generous morning tea provided by the Friends of Grenfell Library.

The program aimed to market an image of the library as an institution which values and welcomes older members of the community, and actively seeks to meet their needs. In a broader sense the program portrayed the library as a concerned and active community player, and stimulated presentation of the library in the local media. At a practical level it reminded non-members within the target age group of the location and scope of the library and provided an opportunity for interaction with library staff.

The program was most successful with lots of positive feedback from both attendees and the broader community. Attendance ranged from 31 to 74, with perhaps as many as twenty people attending all four events. Non-members attended, particularly the Seniors Morning Tea, and people sat on to chat indicating appreciation of the opportunity to socialise. Extensive coverage including pictorial material in the local paper kept the library in the 'public eye'. As something new for this library, it was a marketing winner.

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