

# THE FUTURE OF READING

## Early childhood literacy – *Bongo's big day out*

The local community of Bankstown is one of the most culturally diverse Local Government Areas (LGA) in the country – 36% of residents are born overseas and almost a third are from non-English speaking backgrounds; almost one quarter speak another language and English not well or not at all. These cultural factors create great challenges in terms of teaching literacy, challenges that are magnified by relatively low levels of educational attainment, compared to the Sydney region.

Against this backdrop, the Bankstown Library and Information Service set up a working group, the Baby Steps to Literacy Group, to help address the early childhood literacy needs of the local community. The Group, comprising community groups from Bankstown and State Government agencies, developed a picture book for babies and toddlers, *Bongo's Big Day Out*. This book links literacy and everyday Bankstown life, a seemingly simple resource that encourages parents in Bankstown to incorporate early childhood literacy practices into their day-to-day lives. Research used in supporting the project proposal included data from the 2006 Census question, "How well does the person speak English?" Further, the data indicated an increasing trend in the LGA of people who have English as a second language, and who spoke English not well or not at all.

Linking literacy with day-to-day life is recommended by many literacy experts including the Australian Scholarships Group and author Mem Fox.

Theories of child development support the practice of exposing newborns to books as part of play, rhymes, and educational play. They are beneficial to the newborn and to the parent, providing valuable bonding and shared, fun learning experiences. *Bongo's Big Day Out* was designed to encourage positive parent-child interaction through the repeated shared activity of book reading. Children and parents learn to associate books with their lives, thus forming a strong link and one of vital importance in early literacy. The local playgroups and community groups were canvassed for the need of a resource to encourage early childhood literacy and for the subject matter and content of the literacy book.



The character of Bongo was already known by library users as Bongo is an orang-utan who is the mascot for Bankstown's Lapsit program. Bongo attends all lapsit sessions and a bigger than life-sized Bongo is prominent at the Summer Reading Club's presentation evenings. And yes, one of our intrepid library staff is inside the orang-utan suite at many of the library events. Within the book, Bongo is seen at places of local interest such as the library (of course!), the park, the post office, the airport, the train station, fire station, at playgroup, the river, with Grandma, the lake, and the Friendship Gardens. Simple statements describing Bongo's location helps the child start to recognise letters and sounds, and associate these with recognisable landmarks.

As part of the awareness campaign, the library held a competition to name the book in conjunction with the community groups, and the winning entry was *Bongo's Big Day Out*. The book was launched at the Bankstown Library in June 2009 by the Mayor, Cr Tania Mihaluk, and guests included Nadia Wheatley, well-known local children's book author, and childhood expert Dr Leonie Arthur from the University of Western Sydney.

Following the book launch, the demand for lapsit has increased at all Bankstown library locations, resulting in sessions conducted on a regular basis. Our larger branches are holding double lapsit sessions to meet the increased demand. The Library also held a double lapsit session at the Children's Festival in September 2009. And the library's Community Access team has developed a one-off lapsit taster the help meet the increased demand.

The book is distributed to new parents participating in the Bankstown Community Resource Group early childhood programs, Baby Health Centres, playgroups, and all Library Literacy programs. In addition, at the Bankstown Children's Festival "Welcome to Babies" 200 newborns and their families were provided gift bags from the library that included the *Bongo's Big Day Out* book and other library merchandise. The project set the initial print run at 3000 with facility for further copies to be printed depending on local demand.

Feedback from the community has been very positive. Bongo is becoming an even more recognisable symbol for the children, as the local community groups have adopted Bongo as a mascot as well as appearing at children's library events. The publication of *Bongo's Big Day Out* has provided a simple literacy tool for the community and also reinforces Bongo with the local area and with the library.

**Robyn Owens**  
Library Services Coordinator  
robyn.owens@bankstown.nsw.gov.au

Currently reading *Memoirs of Hadrian* by Marguerite Yourcenar

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