



*Anna and Anna:
Sacred Heart Primary
School student Anna
reads to volunteer Anna.*



READING BUDDIES

The Reading Buddies program for primary school children has become a well known and valued service at the St Albans Library in Melbourne's western suburbs, encouraging reading, building literacy skills and helping to boost self esteem and communication skills.

After the school day finishes, St Albans Library quickly becomes a hive of activity for children, teens and families, with a large number of children with low levels of literacy using our library for their after school entertainment. In response, we looked for a way to engage them that would encourage reading, build literacy and provide an alternative to computer usage.

Most exciting for us has been the enthusiastic involvement of the children in the program. One young boy, a regular at the library who frequently speaks with staff to ask for 'more computer time', was heard to ask fairly early on into the program, 'whether Reading Buddies was happening that week as he wanted to read'.

How does it work? By meeting the need for literacy support with activities that are inviting, fun and a little bit special, where children and families naturally gather.

From staff ideas, reports on similar programs, and a whole heap of enthusiasm, Reading Buddies was formed. The basic idea: to provide children with a chance to read to an 'adult' in English.

Four to six volunteers, ranging from community members to high school students undertaking their community service hours, sit with children as they read. Meanwhile, a staff member interacts with children in the library, and manages the flow of children into the children's area.

As more children got involved, we added a second staff member and a small activity to keep children interested while they waited to read. After reading, each child records the titles read that day on their reading record, eagerly adding them up as they progress towards a small prize after every five books.

With 18.9% of St Albans' residents identifying as speaking English not well or not at all, Reading Buddies provides much needed English literacy support, which many of the children at the library are unable to gain at home.

Shortly after starting the Reading Buddies program, we were surprised to find that not only were primary school children coming along to read, but a number of Vietnamese mothers were bringing their preschool aged children along as well, as they want their children to learn to read in English but do not consider their own English skills strong enough to teach them.

Not only has Reading Buddies provided much needed literacy support, it has also provided an atmosphere of acceptance towards all children within the library. As a result, some groups in the community who have been difficult to engage with in the past are now visiting the library in family groups and joining in the activities. Started in 2010, Reading Buddies runs in selected blocks once or twice a week after school on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. During 21 sessions in early 2014, 409 children, 77 teenagers and 69 adults attended, with 1,468 books or chapters of books read.

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