

# Communities for Children Conference

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## Introduction

Literacy has been identified as a key issue within the Cities of Salisbury and Playford, and a grounding in literacy and related matters in early childhood has long been documented as critical to the establishment of sound life-long learning for any member of a community, and unfortunately more so for some of our residents.

Initially, under the auspices of the University of SA Northern Adelaide Partnerships, the Salisbury and Playford Libraries were brought together to discuss the public libraries role in information literacy. This led to much discussion and eventually in early 2005 a unique partnership, called the Libraries for Learning Partnership – Northern Adelaide was formed and signed off with a MoU, between Playford, Salisbury + Gawler LGA's, TAFE, University of SA, DECS library services and PLS. One of the objectives was to focus on early childhood literacy and a number of forums with local early childhood service providers and researchers were held. The forum participants wanted to ensure that when children started school, they did so ready to take advantage of the learning opportunities presented. In simple terms this means that they have actually touched a book, learnt how to turn pages, and actually understand that the words on the page tell a story. We know that some children never experience this, and as a result many do not enter tertiary education and are not able to get the jobs being created in the industries in the north mainly around defense and telecommunications.

These forums also identified that Salisbury and Playford libraries were the appropriate locations to develop a co-ordinated approach to community education, and house early childhood resources.

After undertaking research, and with their knowledge of the demographics of the local community, the libraries decided to develop an innovative and exciting project under the 'Lapsit' umbrella. What made it innovative was the decision to focus on trying to get federal funding, to work with the University of South Australia and their students in the Bachelor of Early Childhood (MBCE)

Education Program, to take the program out into community spaces, rather than deliver it within the confines of the branch libraries, and to develop specific types of kits that would be made available for loan to community playgroups etc. And basically we were encouraged to think big

The project has been funded by a Sustainable Regions grant, which was available through the Australian Federal Government, with the emphasis being on the need for the project to continue once funding is completed. Therefore the focus has been on developing a sustainable way of accessing, promoting and delivering the program. Sustainable Regions grants, which I might add are no longer available, were developed to assist those LGA's that are most disadvantaged in terms of the SEIFA index. In SA, Salisbury and Playford were designated as one region.

## **Socio Economic Profile of Salisbury and Playford**

### **Playford**

- 30 km north of CBD
- Amalgamations – 2 LGA's (Cities of Elizabeth and Munno Para in 1997)
- 35 Suburbs
- Council Operating budget \$37.6 million
- 2 Libraries - 50,868 members
- Library budget - \$2.2m (includes \$450k from State Government through PLS)
- 1 home library vehicle
- 1 mobile library vehicle

### **Salisbury**

- 12-24 km north of CBD
- No amalgamations
- 31 Suburbs
- Council Operating Budget \$80 million
- 5 Libraries - 62,926 members
- Library budget \$ 3.83m (includes \$890k from State Government through PLS)
- 1 home library vehicle

### **SEIFA index of disadvantage**

The Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage is derived from attributes such as low income, low educational attainment, high unemployment, jobs in relatively unskilled occupations and variables that reflect disadvantage rather than measure specific aspects of disadvantage (e.g., Indigenous and Separated/Divorced).

High scores on the Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage occur when the area has few families of low income and few people with little training and in unskilled occupations. Low scores on the index occur when the area has many low income

families and people with little training and in unskilled occupations. It is important to understand that a high score here reflects lack of disadvantage rather than high advantage, a subtly different concept.

Playford	885.6	(lowest)
Salisbury	943.7	(third lowest)
Burnside	1089.0	(highest)

## **A Lapsit Session**

A Lapsit session involves caregivers sitting with their child in their lap in a group session. Ideally each adult has a copy of the resources used in the session. Whilst Lapsit is specifically designed for children under 2 years of age, the Salisbury/Playford model also caters for older pre-schoolers with a selection of older children's picture books included in the kits.

## **A Lapsit Kit**

A Lapsit kit contains 9 identical folders each containing 2 board books for babies and a series of rhyme and songs sheets including opening and closing rhymes. Some kits include finger puppets in the folders as well. As the facilitator of the group uses one of the folders, a CD of popular nursery rhymes is the only item separating their folder from the others.

The kit also contains picture books for preschoolers and a big book. As there are sometimes older children present at playgroups, this ensures they are catered for as well. Additionally, the Lapsit program can be delivered effectively to groups of preschoolers who are already facing early literacy issues. The balance in materials helps to provide a non-patronising session.

While the kits provide numerous resources, the facilitator is only limited by their own imagination. We have seen many examples of facilitators who bring extra resources available at their centres to the Lapsit session thereby enhancing the atmosphere and the content of the session. This includes the creation of name games, the inclusion of other toys including building blocks, and the use of musical instruments.

## **The Lapsit Model**

The Lapsit program has been designed to assist caregivers and key specialists in helping children develop reading readiness skills necessary for them to commence school from a position of advantage rather than disadvantage. Every year, fourth year early education students from Uni SA are placed in playgroup and preschool sites around Playford and Salisbury where over a period of weeks they train key people in the delivery of a Lapsit session. This empowers local groups to deliver an effective program in the longer term, relying on the libraries primarily for resources rather than the delivery of the program itself. The program is then delivered to more families than the libraries would otherwise be able to reach on their own.

While all public libraries in SA offer literacy based programs in their branches, our Lapsit model is all inclusive as it also targets non-library users. It is an outreach program that creates opportunities for shared literacy activities between parents and their very young children, raises awareness about the benefits of such activities and promotes the role of libraries to families who are infrequent users or non users. However, sometimes a public library can be a daunting and somewhat bureaucratic place to visit for families with low literacy levels so playgroups and other community based centres can offer a comfortable, familiar and non threatening environment.

Apart from the literacy benefits for the children, Lapsit has provided the trained volunteer facilitators with new skills, and helped adults with literacy problems as they read along with the group.

### **Pilot Project**

To help us build a sustainable program, a pilot program was run in March 2006 over four sessions for caregivers and their young children in 22 groups across 19 sites such as pre-schools and child parent centres. The Lapsit resources (that is board books, songs, rhymes, finger plays and puppets) were introduced and used by the participants, with the university students taking on the role of group facilitator.

Library staff developed 19 kits that were in constant use across the 19 sites. The university students working in groups of 3 or 4 delivered the sessions. The student evaluation formed part of their formal feedback and the Lapsit program was included as a major assignment. The feedback on the kits was used to develop a further 31 kits so that we now have 50 kits in total which is enough for a site to be running Lapsit all year round.

The pilot provided very useful information about how to deliver Lapsit in the community, that playgroups provided the right type of environment for the project, and that the kits were well received and useful.

Formal evaluation about the program and the Lapsit kit was obtained from the students, site directors and parents and all of the feedback was constructive and very positive.

### **How Lapsit benefits families in real terms**

After each program delivery, UniSA students are required to collect feedback and other data about the experiences of the participants and the impact on the families. Over the years, strong themes have emerged in the data collected as well as evidence of consistent benefits to families throughout Salisbury and Playford.

Families that did not incorporate reading into their daily life prior to participating in the Lapsit program have often flagged their enjoyment of

*learning how to read and sing to their child as one of the things they enjoyed the most. This is assisted by the students providing valuable tips and information as well as positive behaviour modelling for parents. One parent even stated, "I think my daughter appreciated seeing that it was 'normal' for children to sit down and read a book with their mother or father. She has only seen it on videos prior to the lapsit program."*

Many families say that they incorporate reading to their children to a greater degree into their daily life as a direct result of participating in the Lapsit program. For some parents, it is their child who increasingly requests more books to be read at home after participating in the Lapsit program. Seeing for themselves as their child participates and enjoys books and reading demonstrates to the parent the immediate benefits and validates the reasons why they have been encouraged to do so.

The success of the Lapsit program is in its impact on both parent and child. Data collected shows us that the program does demonstrate the importance of reading and sharing books with young children to parents and results in a change in reading habits in the home. But the program impacts immediately on the child as parents see over a short period of time that their child becomes more willing to sit still for stories, will attempt to read books themselves, participates more willingly in group activities, demonstrates improved general concentration, assists in some speech problems, may become more interested in books than toys, and become more communicative in other ways in daily life. With these and so many other benefits recorded over the last 4 years, it is evident that when parents see directly the benefits of reading to young children that they are highly likely to adopt positive reading habits in the home. Without the participation in the Lapsit program, some parents may never have acknowledged the importance of reading or felt confident or empowered enough to read more to their child.

### **Some comments from the Pilot Project:**

- *Lapsit is exactly the kind of thing our parents are needing. The pilot project has re-vitalised our playgroup."* (Kindy Director)
- *"Lapsit is a unique way for children to build relationships with teachers early in life."* (UniSA Student)
- *"Excuse me. I want to live here all the time."* (3 year old after participating in a Lapsit session.)
- *"Lapsit has provided me with valuable real life experience."* (UniSA Student)

- *“Site staff and parents are full of praise for the leadership, management and enthusiasm demonstrated by the student facilitators, and we are looking to further develop this project as an ongoing feature of the ECE program”.* (UniSA staff member)
- *“Lapsit was well received by the parents and director. They can’t wait for a more permanent program to be established.”* (UniSA Student)
- *“It was great watching my child interact in a group session for the first time.”* (Parent)
- *“This has been the most practical thing we have done at Uni. during our studies.”* (UniSA Student)
- *“My three year old is very quiet but when we’d come home after the sessions he would try to sing the songs to me and would pick up books more often”.* (Parent)

### **The Development of the Lapsit Program**

As the desired outcomes of the model are for parents to become more aware of how important it is in their child’s development to undertake simple literacy activities such as sharing a book or singing nursery rhymes; and that there is also an increased awareness of public libraries and the excellent range of resources they have for families, we have developed the following components:

- Each library service now has a staff person responsible for early childhood resources and programs, with an outreach/publicity focus;
- A pool of 50 Lapsit kits has been developed and is housed in 3 of the 7 libraries. Community groups, playgroups, preschools etc are eligible for “lapsit” membership and can borrow 1 kit at a time. Staff from both library services have worked together to develop the cataloguing, borrowing and membership guidelines so that the service is seamless for the customer. A copy of each folder in the kits has also been placed in the University of SA library to enable the students to be able to see what is in each kit.
- Each library service has Family Reading Centres which house parenting information, baby board books, appropriate toys, and individual Lapsit kit folders. Patrons are encouraged to browse the collection, and take their time to determine what information they need.
- The Lapsit program for Salisbury and Playford has been named **“Books R4 Babies 2”** and a marketing plan is currently being developed.
- Lectures on the ‘Books R4 Babies 2’ Lapsit program are delivered to Bachelor of Early Childhood Education 4<sup>th</sup> year students at the Magill Campus of the University of SA. This gives students background to the

program, skills and an understanding of the demographic in readiness for their own involvement in the program.

- A training DVD has just been developed to assist students in delivering the Lapsit program. The DVD provides footage of students facilitating Lapsit sessions, liaising with kindergarten directors, preparing resources to enhance the program and other background information essential to successful student participation.

## **Conclusion**

The Books R4 Babies 2 Lapsit program is proving to be a valuable and successful way to build the communities capacity to address issues of early learning and literacy. It partners Salisbury and Playford Libraries with the University of SA, but engages hundreds of children, parents, caregivers, kindergarten and other early learning staff. It demonstrates in real terms the important role the parent or caregiver has in supporting young children by exposing them to books, language and reading as well creating for them an environment that nurtures and stimulates their emotional growth and brain development.

It is the partnerships and working relationships between all organisations that gives Lapsit its power and momentum, but it is the people in the community who embrace the program and it's principles who as a result breath new life into their family relationships and children's futures.