



Intergenerational and family learning and literacy

The family is a hub of influence where values, aspirations, skills and behaviours are shared through a whole range of activities that members engage in together. Families' attitudes to learning and literacy are intergenerational, with the skills of one generation shaping the next.

The development of literacy begins well before a child starts school. And once a child begins school, it needs to be practised and reinforced at home.

It is difficult for adults with poor experiences of school and learning to model lifelong learning behaviours with their children and grandchildren. It is also very difficult for adults with low literacy to support their children with literacy development.

PARENTS ARE 'FIRST TEACHERS'

Research shows that the years from birth to the age of two are critical years for establishing a strong foundation for learning. Parents and caregivers have an active role in developing a child's 'pre-literacy' skills. Reading stories to children, encouraging them to build their vocabulary and language, and developing their recognition of letters and sounds are all steps that take place before the child can learn to read and write.

However, for parents and caregivers taking a child through these stages can be a challenge if they have low levels of literacy themselves.

AUSTRALIA HAS A SIGNIFICANT LITERACY PROBLEM

Surveys show 44% of Australian adults don't have the literacy skills they need to cope with the demands of everyday life and work. When adults in a family experience these problems they have consequences for the children and their ability to participate at school. Parents and other adult relatives who struggle with literacy are less likely to be able to support children in their education. This can perpetuate an intergenerational cycle of disadvantage.

The Australian Early Development Census (2015) shows that 15.4% of five year old children starting school in Australia are developmentally vulnerable or at risk in their language and cognitive skills.

Children from most socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, very remote Australia, Indigenous families and children with a Language Background Other Than English (LBOTE) are the most developmentally vulnerable.

SUPPORTING PARENTS THROUGH ADULT LEARNING

Becoming a parent is often the catalyst for adults to reengage with learning. Initiatives that boost adult literacy have a positive flow-on effect to health, welfare and employment as well as to children's education..

EXAMPLES OF FAMILY LEARNING PROGRAMS

Successful family learning programs understand and support the role of parents and extended families as 'first teachers'. A range of programs are offered throughout Australia that approach the issue from different angles.

Adult and community education programs in neighbourhood settings range from:

- informal classes that embed literacy in class activities
- formal adult basic education or foundation skills courses
- literacy help in small groups to one on one tutoring.

Other examples include:

- public library programs that support parents as 'first teachers' such as State Library of Western Australia's Better Beginnings Family Literacy program
- parenting and early learning programs such as the Brotherhood of St Laurence's HIPPY program and The Smith Family's "Let's Read!" program
- community wide literacy programs such as 'Read, Write Now!' in WA or Literacy for Life's 'Yes I can' program in New South Wales.

LEARN MORE

Adult language, literacy and numeracy

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