

## **READING ADVENTURE PACKS: A PILOT PROGRAM PROMOTING FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN CHILDREN'S LITERACY ATTITUDINAL DEVELOPMENT.**

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### ***Abstract***

*This pilot study explored the effectiveness of the Reading Adventure Pack (RAP) with students from classes K to 3. The RAP contained books and a variety of activities that promote the skills of literacy. It involved a pre-RAP and post-RAP student and carer questionnaire. The children's questionnaires revealed positive attitudes towards the RAP while the carer's reports were ambivalent. The study found that the mother was the carer most involved in the literacy development of the children in the home.*

### ***Introduction***

Research shows that literacy development commences well before children start school (Neuman et al. 2003). Family literacy involves the extended family and encompasses the ways that reading materials are used in the home (Mayfield 1999). The early literacy skills that are learnt by a child in the home environment are carried with him/her to school and may partially predict the success that he/she will have in learning to read (Rush 1999).

In general it has been found that class and family may be a stronger predictor of general school achievement than measures of differences of the school environment (Cairney 1998). Specifically, children from low-income families tend to achieve lower scores on tests of reading comprehension than do the children from higher socio-economic families (Nixon & Comber cited in Carrington 2001) and children from lower socio-economic homes tend to fall into lower reading age-levels than do the children from upper socio-economic homes (Rush 1999).

These findings suggest that the economic conditions of the home could influence the kind of reading materials in the home and the manner of usage of that material. In other words, the economic conditions of the home could influence the nature of the reading environment that shapes both the development of children's early attitudes toward reading and the early pre-reading literacy skills that children carry with them to their first years of schooling. This suggestion is reinforced by a recent study from New Zealand which suggests that children's reading achievements are strongly influenced by a combination of home factors that include the reading resources of the home, parental education level and parental involvement (or non-involvement) in the children's home reading (Gerritsen 2003). It could be argued that all three factors involve an economic component.

A number of research studies suggest that it is extremely difficult for some low-income families to resource their children's early literacy needs (Comber et al. 2002). While it appears that most families are aware of the importance of the home literacy environment (Makin & McNaught 2001) and the need for reading resources, too many homes with children are without books and in too many homes adults do not read to children (Minkel 2002).

With the realisation that family members can positively contribute to early literacy development there has been a plethora of programs and initiatives in recent years designed to support and encourage family participation in children's literacy education (Cairney & Ruge 1998). There are many pamphlets, booklets, and family information programs, both charitable and commercial, which are readily available to inform parents of the necessity of a print rich environment (see for example Cairney 1998, Mcfann 2001, Minkel 2002, Rolton 2001, Neuman & Celano 2001).

Australian government agencies also have policies and programs to educate and inform parents about early literacy development. However it would appear that all these initiatives, including the government programs, are largely dependent upon homes having their own access to reading resources (NSW Dept of Education and Training 2003). Unfortunately it would also appear that, for a variety of reasons, sections of the community lack access to home literary resources (Comber et al. 2002). In part, this pilot study is an attempt to explore what happens in the home when resource materials are supplied.



In the USA some early literacy initiatives and programs failed because of the lack of available support services that provided take-home books or home educational resources (Cairney et al. 1995). However there were some programs that did provide a range of literacy materials such as tote bags, books and story tapes (Mayfield 1999, Farris 1987) and anecdotal evidence seemed to indicate that these programs were effective (Barbour 1999).

Currently within Australia, at least one program has provided take home educational literacy resources for kindergarten children (Victoria Teachers Credit Union 2002). Developed at the Allansford and District Kindergarten it included a plastic box containing a storybook, a taped version of that book and other activities related to the theme of the story. While there is anecdotal evidence about the effectiveness of reading packs (Barbour 1999), research examining the effectiveness of the reading backpacks could not be found.

Since reading attitudes can affect reading performance (Garrett 2002), one means by which reading packs could influence reading development is to enhance their enjoyment of reading and the sense of achievement in reading. However, it has been suggested that the study of children's attitudes to reading in their early years has received little attention (Wang 2000). Wang (2000) found that a child's personal experience, confidence and success (or otherwise) with books and reading, particularly at the initial stages, were directly related to his/her attitude towards reading.

The present pilot study (described below) is an attempt to support and improve children's attitudes to reading and involve members of the family in the children's reading by supplying reading resource material. It was developed after a visit by one of the authors, Gill, to the USA where she saw an early literacy program in action. On her return, and with the assistance of Fisher, they set up a literacy program, similar to that of Barbour (1999), using packs of stimulus material that they entitled *Reading Adventure Packs* (RAP). As there was only anecdotal evidence available outlining the results of the Barbour program (1999), this pilot study was set up to ascertain the effectiveness of the literacy pack approach within the Australian environment. The RAP program involved the collection and organisation of literacy and educational resources for the children. Students borrowed the resources from the school to take home on a rotational basis. Before the system was set in place, parents were invited to participate and given information about how they might assist their children with the program.

The resources within the packs (listed below) were meant to provide a positive literacy experience for the children and to contribute positively toward them developing attitudes towards reading. The RAP was designed to involve family members in the child's home reading experience as well as to provide



enrichment for the classroom literacy program. It was not meant to replace teacher organised homework reading.

The following research questions guided the study.

### **Research Questions:**

1. Who within the family is involved in the children's home reading?
2. What is the children's attitude to reading before the implementation of RAP?
3. What is the children's attitude to RAP?
4. What is the carers' attitude to RAP?
5. What is the carers' perception of the children's response to RAP?

### **Research Method**

#### **Subjects**

The subjects in this study constituted a cohort of thirty-three students from two primary classrooms, a K-3 class of thirteen students from a NSW School and a Grade One class of twenty students from a Victorian School. The first school is small and located in a semi-rural area, though a variety of socio-economic levels were represented within the student body and most students came from middle-class homes. Almost a quarter of the second school's population received the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and approximately the same proportion were English as Second Language (ESL) students.

#### **Reading Adventure Packs**

A total of six *Reading Adventure Packs* were made, each pack based on a particular but different theme. Following is a list of contents for each *Reading Adventure Pack*:

- a soft toy indicating the theme of the *Reading Adventure Pack*
- a 'Note of Explanation to Carers' about the *Reading Adventure Pack*
- a 'Contents List' outlining what the *Reading Adventure Pack* contained
- an 'Instruction Sheet' for using the *Reading Adventure Pack* and its many activities
- a variety of literacy activities associated with the pack theme and catering for the age group of Kindergarten through to Grade Three children. Activities included four or more storybooks, craft activities,



jigsaw puzzles, colouring sheets, Dot-to-Dot pictures, games, videos, worksheets, puppets, CDs and writing books.

- all associated materials needed for the completion of the activities in the *Reading Adventure Pack* e.g. a lead pencil for writing in the Scrapbook and scissors for the craft activities.

The students borrowed the resource packs to be taken home on a weekly rotational basis.

### **Procedure**

The roles of teachers and carers in the use of the RAP were carefully scripted (roles can be obtained from the authors). Prior to any material being taken home, carers were asked to attend an information night about the study. They were informed about the nature of the study, its aims, and the joint roles of carers and teachers. They were invited to join the study and complete a permission form and an anonymous questionnaire entitled 'Carer Survey about Home Reading', (see Appendix 1).

In class the participating children completed an anonymous, Pre-RAP questionnaire, (see Appendix 2), of ten items related to reading attitudes. These they scored on a three-point Likert scale. Happy and sad faces represented the two extremes on this scale.

On completion of the program two final questionnaires (Post-RAP) were distributed and completed by carers and children. The Post-RAP carer questionnaire, (see Appendix 3), examined aspects of carers' involvement with the RAP and their perceptions of the children's usage. The Post-RAP children's questionnaire, (see Appendix 4), involved eight items that sought the children's attitude toward the RAP program itself. All four questionnaires pertaining to each child were coded so they could be entered into the computer as a single case.



## Results

### Participants

Thirty-three children, aged five through nine years-of-age, and their carers were involved in this study. Table 1 indicates the spread of ages and sex of students.

Table 1: Age and sex of students attending the two schools

| Age   | Victorian School |        |       | NSW School |        |       | Grand Total |
|-------|------------------|--------|-------|------------|--------|-------|-------------|
|       | Male             | Female | Total | Male       | Female | Total |             |
| 5     |                  | 1      | 1     |            |        | 0     | 1           |
| 6     | 10               | 9      | 19    |            | 1      | 1     | 20          |
| 7     |                  |        |       | 2          | 4      | 6     | 6           |
| 8     |                  |        |       |            | 5      | 5     | 5           |
| 9     |                  |        |       | 1          |        |       | 1           |
| Total | 10               | 10     | 20    | 3          | 10     | 13    | 33          |

### *The reading environment of the home*

It is not surprising that all of the carers who responded to the initial questionnaire indicated that they felt that the development of literacy skills were important to their children. Twenty-seven of the thirty-three carers took time to pen comments suggesting that children's literacy was "a basic skill that they need for life", a "resource for life", "a skill that they need for the rest of their life" and "crucial for life as they get older".

Notwithstanding these comments, the home reading resources were varied (see Table 2). One home indicated that it did not have any children's books, four homes reported that they did not have adult reading books, ten homes did not buy magazines and seven homes did not buy newspapers. What is more, six homes from the Victorian School indicated that they did not have access to a public library (see Table 3). It is uncertain whether this was because existing libraries were too far away or because the carers had not sought membership of a library.

Table 4 indicates that within the home environment, mothers are most likely to assist the children's reading – either in supervising the exercise or by actually reading to their children. Thirty homes indicated that mothers were involved in assisting the child's reading, nine homes indicated the father's involvement, two homes indicated the involvement of grandparents and in four homes siblings were involved in their sisters' reading. While the questionnaire did not explore the family relationship between primary carers and the children, the



scope of the results suggested that in two homes, grandparents may have been the primary carers, and in one home it was the father who acted alone. Thus in the thirty homes that contained mothers, all thirty mothers were involved in some way in assisting the reading of their children. In eight homes, both the father and mother were, in some way, involved in their children's reading development (see Table 5).

Table 2: Carers' reports of home reading resources

|             | Various Books | Magazines | Newspapers | Children's Books |
|-------------|---------------|-----------|------------|------------------|
| Do not have | 4             | 10        | 7          | 1                |
| Have        | 29            | 23        | 26         | 32               |
| Total       | 33            | 33        | 33         | 33               |

Table 3: Carers' report of access to a public library

|                    | Victorian School | NSW School | Total |
|--------------------|------------------|------------|-------|
| Do not have access | 6                | 0          | 6     |
| Have access        | 14               | 13         | 27    |
|                    | 20               | 13         | 33    |

Table 4: Carers' report of family involvement in child's reading

|        | Mother involved | Mother not involved | Father involved | Father not involved | G'parent involved | G'parent not involved | Sibling involved | Sibling not involved |
|--------|-----------------|---------------------|-----------------|---------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| Male   | 11              | 2                   | 5               | 8                   | 1                 | 12                    | 0                | 13                   |
| Female | 19              | 1                   | 4               | 16                  | 1                 | 19                    | 4                | 16                   |
| Total  | 30              | 3                   | 9               | 24                  | 2                 | 31                    | 4                | 29                   |

Table 5: Carers' report of Father's and Mother's involvement in reading to child

|                     | Mother not involved | Mother is involved | Total |
|---------------------|---------------------|--------------------|-------|
| Father not involved | 2                   | 22                 | 24    |
| Father is involved  | 1                   | 8                  | 9     |
| Total               | 3                   | 30                 | 33    |





### ***Sex and the child's reading habits prior to RAP***

Prior to the use of the *Reading Adventure Packs* (RAP), girls reported a higher involvement in reading than did the boys. They had a slightly higher weekly frequency of reading than did the boys. They were more likely to have been independent readers than were the boys and they were more likely to have initiated the reading episodes than were the boys.

### ***Carers' involvement in RAP***

Table 6 clearly indicates yet again that the mother was the carer most involved in the children's reading. Twenty-five out of thirty mothers supervised the use of the RAP's and in only four homes neither the father nor mother was involved. It is possible that in two of these situations grandparents were the prime carers and hence they may have been involved. In only one home were both the father and mother involved. Despite their involvement, thirty-one carers within the thirty-three homes felt that the RAP involved too much of their time (see Table 7).

Time was a significant factor in carers' comments about aiding their children's reading. For example one carer wrote "I believe it is important, however it doesn't get done every night." Another said, "I try when I can." In addition, three comments implied that the time needed to supervise the packs was a problem for carers. For example, one carer wrote that, "it would be more helpful if the packs came home on weekends [as] I'd have more time to spend." A second carer suggested that the packs would not "take up too much time if a little was done every day." Finally, yet another carer claimed that "in addition to their take-home readers I found it [supervision of the packs] too much for one night."

It is not so surprising therefore, that not all of the carers saw advantages concerning the RAP. The carers of fifteen children (nine female, six male) considered that the packs were of no great benefit to their children's literacy development. What is more, the carers of fifteen children (eleven female, four male) felt that the packs and their associated information had not enhanced their understanding of their children's literacy needs.

On the other hand, fifteen of the thirty-three respondents to carers' post-RAP survey took the time to write more favourable comments about the packs. One carer wrote, "I think that they are fantastic." Another wrote that "we enjoyed having the packs." Yet another wrote "my child thoroughly enjoyed the reading pack."





Table 6: Father's and Mother's involvement in supervising RAP

|                           | Mother does<br>not supervise | Mother supervises | Total |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|-------|
| Father does not supervise | 4                            | 25                | 29    |
| Father supervises         | 2                            | 1                 | 3     |
| Total                     | 6                            | 26                | 32    |

Table 7: Carers' report of their feeling about time involvement in RAP

|                                            | Male | Female | Total |
|--------------------------------------------|------|--------|-------|
| Carer felt RAP involved too much time      | 12   | 19     | 31    |
| Carer willingly made time to devote to RAP | 0    | 1      | 1     |
| Total                                      | 12   | 20     | 32    |

### ***Carers' responses to RAP***

According to the reports of the carers, thirteen children (ten female, three male) enjoyed the writing book; thirteen children (eight female, five male) enjoyed the worksheets; nineteen children (eleven female, eight male) enjoyed the games, fourteen children (ten female, four male) enjoyed the books and finally, seventeen children (eleven female, six male) enjoyed the soft toy.

### ***Carers' perceptions of the over-all value of the RAP***

Carers of sixteen children (seven male, nine female) indicated that the RAP promoted the daily reading of their child. Carers of sixteen children (five female, eleven male) reported that they considered that the RAP had contributed to their child's reading development. The carer of only one child (a male) felt that the RAP detracted from their child's outside playtime.

Results indicated that the carers of girls were more likely than the carers of boys to report that their children demonstrated a positive change in attitude toward reading as a result of using the RAP. In the perception of carers, eighteen of twenty girls as opposed to six of twelve boys showed positive changes in attitude toward reading as a result of the RAP activities.

### ***Children's pre-RAP attitude to reading and post-RAP attitude to RAP***

Prior to the introduction of the *Reading Adventure Packs*, the children in both schools were given a questionnaire of 10 items related to their attitude to

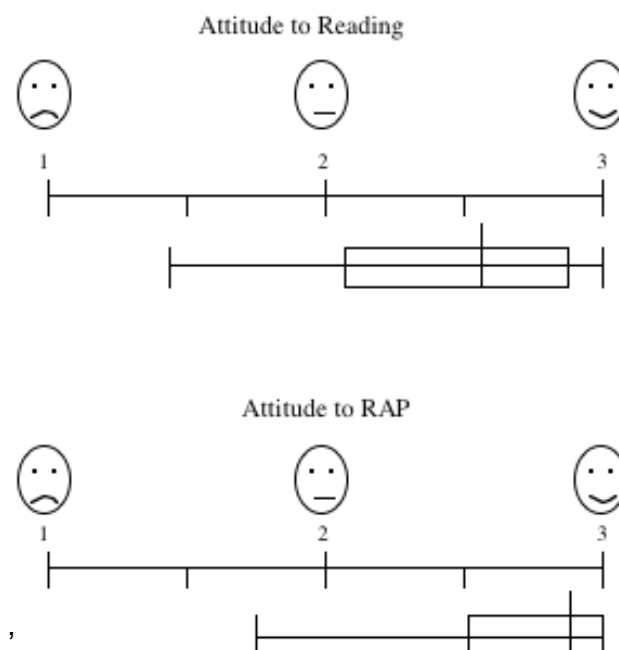


reading. Following their use of the packs, each child was given an 8-item questionnaire related to their attitude toward the packs. Each questionnaire was set against a three-point Likert scale in which the limits of the range were determined by happy or sad faces (see Figures 2a and 2b).

The post-RAP questionnaire was labelled 'Attitude to RAP' and exhibited a reliability of 0.78 and had a median measure of 2.93. With a lower quartile measure of 2.50, this scale suggests that more than three quarters of the children indicated a positive attitude toward the reading packs. What is more, the upper quartile measure coincided with the maximum measure of 3.0 indicating that at least one quarter of the children had scored all items of the 7-item scale on the maximum Likert value.

It is interesting to note the apparent difference in distribution of the two scales as displayed in Figures 2a and 2b. The authors acknowledge that these two scales measure different entities and similar results could be obtained from attitudes to ice cream, or cartoons. However it does indicate that a future study, with a more appropriately designed instrument, should be undertaken to see if the use of the packs does produce a short-term change in attitude to reading.

Figure 2a, 2b Box plots for the scales 'Attitude to Reading' and 'Attitude to RAP'



In summary the study found that:

- all carers indicated that they saw literacy development as being very important to their children and that reading was more important than playing;
- mothers were the family member most involved in children's out-of-school reading;
- access to home-reading resources was varied;
- girls were more likely to initiate reading, more likely to read independently and more likely to read more often than were the boys;
- children were quite positive about RAP;
- some carers felt that RAP was too time consuming and not all felt that it was helpful in encouraging their children to read daily;
- carers gave a varied report on those components of the RAP that were attractive to their children.

## **Conclusion**

It would appear that the children's reactions to the RAP differed from those of their carers. The results suggest that most of the children were enthusiastic about the RAP while the carers were more ambivalent. Thus, it would appear that the intention of involving carers in their children's reading was only partially successful. This does not mean that the development and use of the RAP was a failure, nor does it mean that the campaign to involve carers should be abandoned. However it does mean that future RAP packs should be designed in such a way as to minimise carer-supervision. One-way of achieving this goal could be to ensure that all activities and games are self-correcting with less carer intervention required. In addition, the components of the RAP packs could be augmented to allow them to appeal more strongly to boy's unique literary preferences and needs. For example, a boy's only pack could include texts geared to boy's interests including CD computer activities that integrate literacy skills with games.

The study also found limitations in the instruments employed. Future questionnaires should be designed to make data-entry into the computer straightforward e.g. a four-point scale.



Very Happy

Happy

Sad

Very Sad



While a post-RAP children's questionnaire should examine their attitude toward the RAP itself, the questionnaire should repeat the pre-RAP reading questionnaire to see if there is any short-term changes in attitude toward reading.



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## APPENDICES

Appendix 1 *Pre-study* Carer Survey About Home reading

Appendix 2 *Pre-survey* Child

Appendix 3 *Post-study* Carer Survey About Home reading

Appendix 4 *Post-survey* Child





## Appendix 1

### Pre-study Carer Survey about Home Reading

1. What reading materials are in your home? Circle the answer.  
a. Books                      b. Magazines                      c. Newspapers                      d. Children's Books                      e. other
2. Does anyone read to your child at home? Circle the answer.                      Yes/No
3. Who is the person who reads most often to your child? Circle the answer.  
a. mother                      b. father                      c. grandparents                      d. siblings                      e. other
4. When does this reading mostly happen? Circle the answer.  
a. weekends                      b. mornings                      c. evenings                      d. other
5. How many times a week does this reading occur? Circle the answer.  
a. less than once                      b. 1-3 times                      c. 3-5 times                      d. more than 5 times
6. Does your child like to read: Circle the answer.  
a. independently?  
b. to someone else?  
c. with help from someone?
7. How interested is your child in reading? Circle the answer.  
a. always initiates the reading of a book  
b. has to be reminded to read a book  
c. sometimes initiates the reading of a book
8. Do you have access to a public library? Circle the answer.                      Yes/No
9. If you answered "Yes" to the above question, how often do you go to the Library?  
Circle the answer.  
a. weekly                      b. monthly                      c. rarely                      d. other
10. How do you feel about homework reading? Circle the answer  
a. It takes up too much time from the child's day when I think they should be outside playing after school.  
b. It is necessary for my child to advance consistently and therefore I make the time available every night.  
c. I don't have the time to devote to such daily activities due to other pressing family matters.  
d. Other
11. Do you see literacy and reading as important skills for young children to master?  
Yes/No. Why/Why not?



## Appendix 2

### Pre survey Child

Age in years: **5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10**

**Boy/Girl**

1. How do you feel when it's time for reading class?  
  
2. How do you feel about starting a new book?  
  
3. How do you feel when you read a book at school?  
  
4. How do you feel about reading instead of playing?  
  
5. How do you feel when someone reads to you at home?  
  
6. How do you feel about doing homework reading?  
  
7. How do you feel about getting a book for a present?  
  
8. How do you feel about reading different kinds of books?  
  
9. How do you feel about reading in your spare time?  
  
10. How do you feel about reading your schoolbooks?  
  



## Appendix 3

### Post-study Carer Survey about Home Reading

1. *What was your response to the literacy materials brought home in the READING ADVENTURE PACKS? Circle the answer.*
  - a. They contain too many activities to be completed in the allocated time.
  - b. They contain sufficient material to be completed in the allocated time.
  - c. They don't contain enough material for the allocated time.
2. *How would you rate the interest level your child showed with regard to the READING ADVENTURE PACKS? Circle the answer.*
  - a. showed great interest      b. showed slight interest      c. didn't show any interest
3. *Who was involved mostly in using the READING ADVENTURE PACKS with your child? Circle the answer.*
  - a. mother      b. father      c. grandparents      d. siblings      e. other
4. *Who else was involved in using the READING ADVENTURE PACKS with your child? Circle the appropriate answer/s.*
  - a. mother      b. father      c. grandparents      d. siblings      e. other
5. *When did the READING ADVENTURE PACKS mainly get used? Circle the appropriate answer/s.*
  - a. mornings      b. evenings      c. other
6. *What content/s of the READING ADVENTURE PACK did your child appear to enjoy the most? Circle the appropriate answer/s.*
  - a. soft toy      b. books      c. games      d. worksheets      e. writing in the book
7. *How helpful have you found these READING ADVENTURE PACKS to be in encouraging your child to develop a greater love of reading? Circle the answer.*
  - a. My child already had a great love of reading prior to using these materials.
  - b. My child doesn't seem to have shown any change in his/her attitude towards reading.
  - c. My child has shown a negative attitude change towards reading since using these materials.
  - d. My child has shown a very positive attitude change towards reading since using these materials.
8. *How have you felt about these READING ADVENTURE PACKS being part of the homework reading? Circle the answer.*
  - a. It takes up too much time from the child's day when I think they should be outside playing after school.
  - b. It was helpful in getting my child to read every day.
  - c. I don't have time to devote to such daily activities due to other pressing family matters.
  - d. Other
9. *Has your attitude changed towards literacy since your child has participated in the READING ADVENTURE PACKS?*

Yes/No.      Why/Why not?



## Appendix 4

### Post survey Child

Age in years: **5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10**

**Boy/Girl**

1. How do you feel when you read the *Reading Adventure Pack*, at home, for homework reading?



2. How do you feel about all the things in the *Reading Adventure Pack* that you can play with or do?



3. How do you feel about reading now that you've been taking the *Reading Adventure Packs* home?



4. How do you feel when it's time, at home, to read the *Reading Adventure Pack*?



5. How do you feel if someone reads a book to you from the *Reading Adventure Pack*?



6. How do you feel when it is your turn to take the *Reading Adventure Pack* home for the week?



7. How do you feel if someone in your family wants to read the materials in your *Reading Adventure Pack*?



8. How do you feel about reading your *Reading Adventure Pack* instead of playing?

