



Independent Evaluation *of the* **Read to Me - Out of Home Care** Program

Dr Grant Banfield
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Acknowledgements

I acknowledge that this evaluation was conducted on the Lands of the Kurna Nation. I acknowledge the Kurna Peoples' rich cultural heritage as well as their ongoing spiritual and emotional connection to country. In paying respect to their ancestors, Elders, and the young generations, I recognise the history of the Kurna Nation commenced long before colonisation. I acknowledge that the Kurna Peoples' sovereignty was never ceded and the task of building mutual respect from an understanding of history is critical to the future of this country we all share.

Furthermore, I am extremely appreciative of the time, energy and support all participating people and organisations gave to me though the evaluation process. All were welcoming and strongly supportive of the evaluation. My thanks are extended to the various care workers who created space to talk to me in their busy and complex professional lives. But, probably most of all, I am appreciative of the carers who put themselves forward to be 'interviewed' by a stranger about something that mattered deeply to them: the wellbeing and literacy development of the children in their care.



About the Author

Grant Banfield worked for over 35 years as a research and teaching academic at Flinders University in South Australia. His areas of expertise are the philosophy of science and ethical approaches to educational practice. He has written extensively on their applications to both social science research and educational evaluation. Upon his retirement, he continues this work as an adjunct academic at the University of South Australia's Centre for Research in Educational and Social Inclusion.

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Raising Literacy Australia

Raising Literacy Australia (RLA) is a not-for-profit organisation committed to enriching children's lives through literacy. It promotes and helps to develop early childhood literacy right across Australia.

RLA supports families to read, talk, play, and sing with their children from birth through bespoke targeted programmes. This is achieved by providing books, resources and activities to nurture the development of young children, providing information for parents to encourage rich home learning environments.

In 2020, RLA celebrated its 15th birthday. Over this time, it has established picture book libraries in vulnerable communities, created new picture books for its literacy programmes, gifting over two million books to South Australian families.

RLA aims to nurture children's literacy development and help to establish a love of books.

Vision

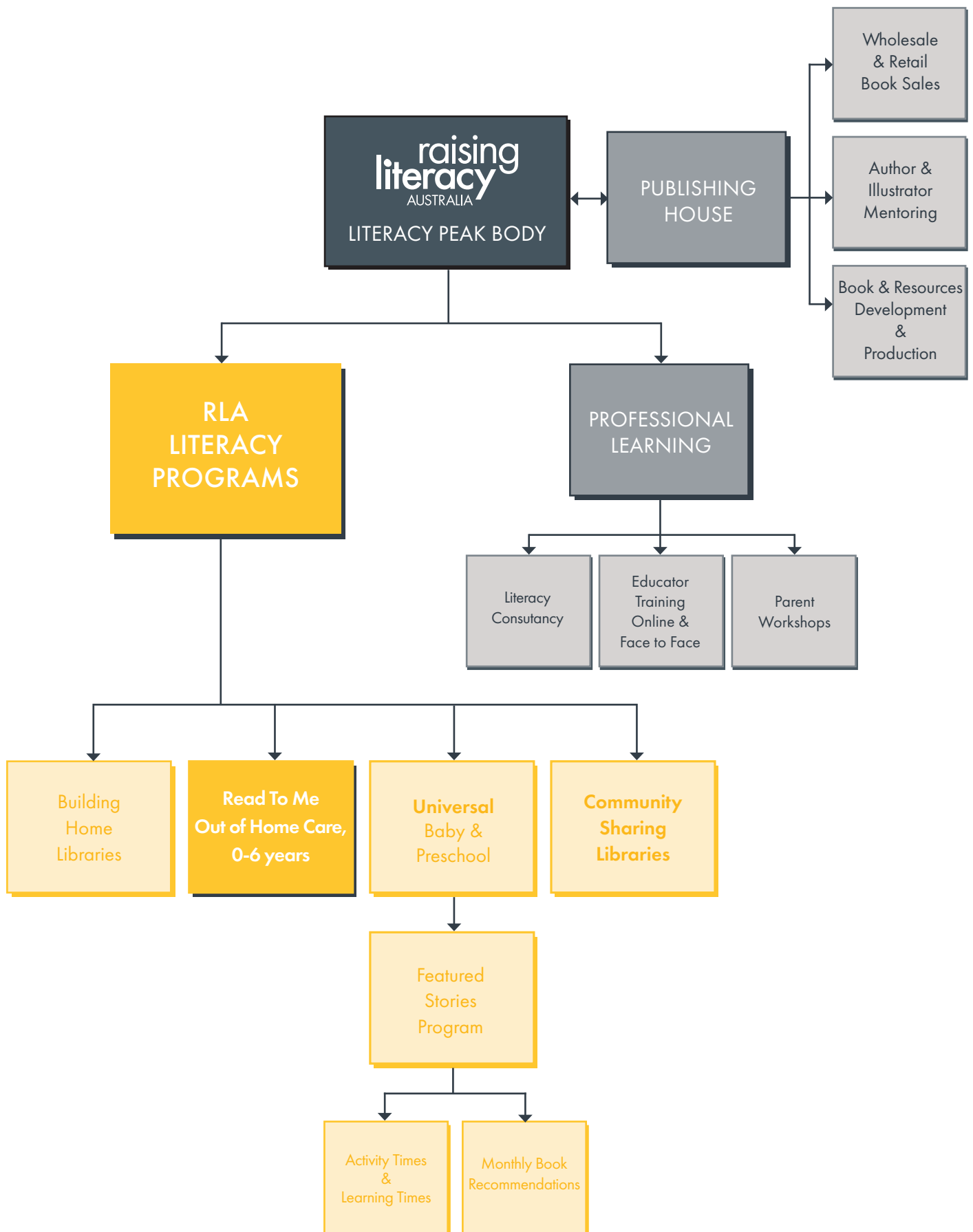
Enriching children's lives through every day literacy practices.

Mission

To support families to improve engagement between adult and child right from the start through reading, talking, singing and playing every day.

Raising Literacy Australia

Programmes and Services





Executive Summary and Key Findings



The first five years of a child's life are crucial to the healthy development and ongoing learning into, and through, adulthood. Preschool years are foundational to the development of language and the capacity for a literate engagement with the world. Research is clear that a stimulating home literacy environment that includes the active sharing of books between family members cannot be understated.

Read to Me – Out of Home Care (RTM-OHC) is a Raising Literacy Australia (RLA) book gifting program directed to supporting the language and literacy development of South Australian children (between 0 and 6 years) under the Guardianship of the Minister for Child Protection. It is one of a range of children's literacy programmes and professional learning initiatives developed by RLA. All programmes and services offered by RLA rest on an extensive body of research that shows exposure to a home literacy environment of active book sharing in the first five years of a child's life is crucial to their healthy development and ongoing learning.

The RTM-OHC programme involves the gifting of an initial start-up pack of age-appropriate books and carer resources to children in care. Every three months after that, reading packs with new

books are sent. Pack distribution is organised through the Department for Child Protection with RLA having no direct contact with carers or children.

This evaluation was tasked with assessing the effectiveness of the RTM-OHC programme against its stated aim:

To build the learning capacity, oral language, and literacy development of children in out-of-home care via the provision of portable, age appropriate, literacy resources to children 0 to 6 years.



In assessing the effectiveness of the RTM-OHC programme, data was gathered from programme 'end-users' and analysed within a realist intensive-extensive methodology. Evaluation findings were determined from the views of programme 'end-users' set against specific evaluation objectives.

Key Findings:

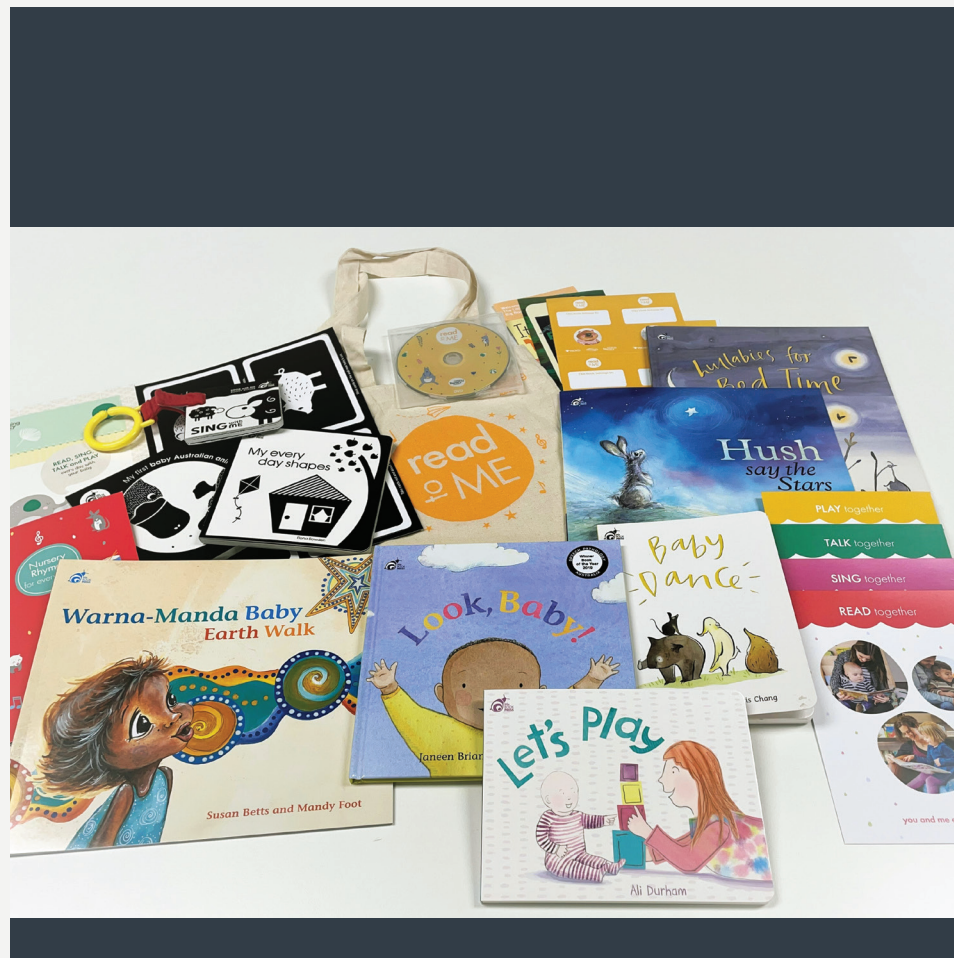
The evaluation data is clear that RTM-OHC programme is effective against its stated aim. It:

- Offers literacy resources to children in OHC that are age appropriate and developmentally appropriate. The direct delivery of its resources to children is a significant factor in encouraging not only book ownership but also the building of personal and portable libraries.
- Raises and reinforces carer awareness of the importance of regularly engaging in multiliteracy activities with their children. It is successful in increasing carer knowledge of the developmental benefit of reading, showing carers how imagination and curiosity are expanded through

reading, and building carer capacity to identify quality literacy sources for children.

- Increases the frequency and quality of meaningful literacy time shared by carers and children by (i) facilitating carer capacity to read with their child and (ii) developing a child's reading confidence through the nurturing of

a sense of belonging and self-worth. The supply of RTM-OHC literacy resources free to all identified OHC families, irrespective of need, is important in overcoming barriers to children's literacy development presented by socio-economic disadvantage and the stigma of charity.



Introduction

Research shows that quality early childhood education and care affects children's development and learning. There is consensus that process quality, such as the quality of staff-child interactions and developmental activities, is the primary driver of gains in children's development.

(Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2018: 13)

The first five years of a child's life are critical for their health, development and learning.

The first three years, before most children enter formal education, are most critical.

This is when brain, physical, language, social, emotional and cognitive development is fastest.

Department for Education 2021: 18)

The research literature is clear: the learning achieved in the early years of a child's life is critical to their future health, development, and general wellbeing (Zubrick et. al. 2009). The years before formal schooling are foundational to the acquisition of language, development of literacy, and the capacity to engage with school (Forget-Dubois et. al 2009) and the world (Hart & Risley 2003). It is recognised that the provision of a stimulating home literacy environment incorporating the active sharing of books between family members is crucial (Cohrssen & Niklas 2016; Farrant & Zubrick, 2011; Niklas, Cohrssen, & Tayler 2015). However, the opportunity for learning and development emerging from a stable and stimulating home literacy environment is not afforded to all children (Hoff 2012). This is seen no more starkly than in the challenges faced by children in out-of-home care (AIHW 2022).

It is within this context that RLA developed, as part of its suite of literacy programmes (see Figure 1), the RTM-OHC programme. As a targeted book gifting and literacy intervention, the aim of RTM-OHC is:

To build the learning capacity, oral language, and literacy development of children 0 to 6 years of age in out-of-home care via the provision of portable, age appropriate, literacy resources.

To support the language and literacy development of children in foster, kinship, and residential care, literacy start-up kits and quarterly reading packs with carer support materials are distributed to families through the South Australian Department for Child Protection (DCP). Where appropriate, RLA also collaborates with other government and non-government organisations involved in the support of out-of-home care families and children.





This independent evaluation of the RTM-OHC programme was tasked with assessing the extent to which RTM-OHC was effective in meeting its stated aim. It employed an extensive-intensive methodological design involving the analysis of data from annual carer surveys and end-user qualitative interviews (see the Methodology section for details).

Methodology

The methodological framing of this evaluation follows a realist approach (Maisuria & Banfield 2023; Pawson & Tilley 1997; Westhorp 2014). It specifically employs a three-dimensional model of realist evaluation comprising: 'Context', 'Mechanism', and 'Vantage Point':

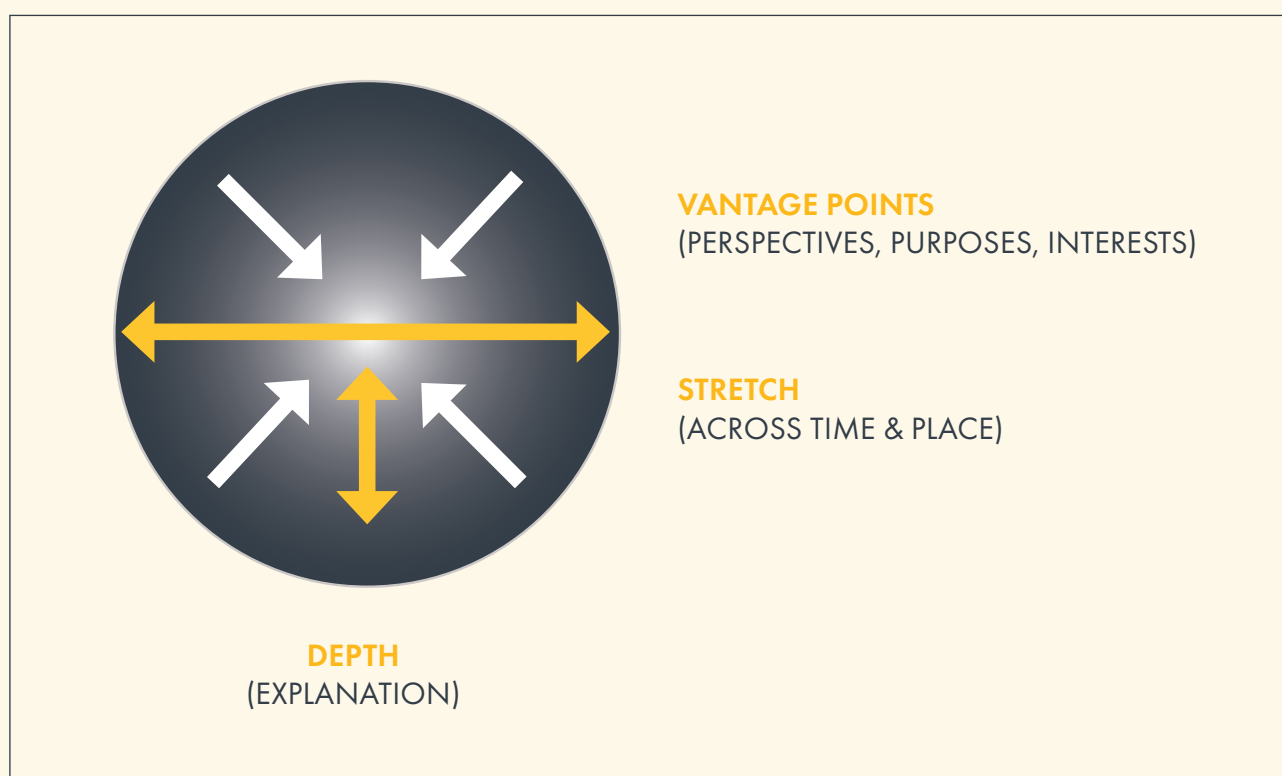


Figure 1: 3D Model of Realist Evaluation

In the 3D Model of Realist Evaluation, the dimension of 'Context' refers to change across time and place (Coldwell 2019; Greenhalgh & Manzano 2021). It recognises that what works at one time and in one place might not work in the same way, if at all, at other times and in other places (Pawson (2013). The causal influence of context in mobilising

the capacities of people, cultures, and organisational structures to realise desired outcomes comes to the fore. Methodologically, this demands the use of a range of context-sensitive data gathering methods – both extensive (across time and place) and intensive (at a particular time and place) (Sayer 2010, 2000).

Next, the dimension of 'mechanism' evokes the idea of depth: that the world around us is layered and aspects of it are not immediately obvious to us. Table 1 presents a realist view of depth. It describes three domains where mechanisms sit at the deepest level, experiences at the surface, and events in between.

Domains	Explanation	Application to Book Reading
Experiences	What is taken in through human senses.	A child's sensory (including emotional) experience of reading a book.
Events	What actually happens at a particular time and place	Events describe the actual reading of a book at a particular time and place. They comprise the physical, cultural, and social contexts that afford the opportunity for a child's meaningful book reading.
Mechanisms	The innate powers and capacities of things generating events and experiences of them.	The web of nested mechanisms (eg: cognitive, behavioural, developmental, cultural, and societal) working 'out of sight' to make some reading events and experiences possible for some children and improbable or impossible for others.

Table 1: Domains of Depth Reality

'Experiences' sit at the surface of things. These are what are taken in through the senses. They are immediate and obvious. Events represent the coming together of experiences: where and when things happen. Underlying 'Events' are 'Mechanisms' which can be straightforwardly described as the powers (capacities, potentials) of things in virtue of their nature. For example, human beings have the capacity for language, reflexivity, and a literate existence. But mechanisms do not exist in isolation. To realise such capacities engagement with people and social institutions like

family and schooling is required. Because a child has the capacity to read does not mean they will learn to read. As the Literature Review section discusses, the mechanisms of social disadvantage, for example, may counteract the capacity or potential to read. Mechanisms do not work in a simple cause and effect relation. They exist in contextual, nested, relations. Finally, 'Vantage Point' draws attention to broader value-laden questions of purpose and perspective. To the question of purpose, it asks: 'who is an evaluation for?' and 'what interests does it serve?'

To the question of perspective, it asks: 'whose opinions are to be sought?' and 'what theories are to inform the evaluation?'. 'Vantage Point' makes it clear that realist evaluation does not reject values. Rather, they are to be taken seriously to bring 'background to the foreground' (Rog 2012).

The three-dimensional dynamism suggested in Figure 2 informed the data gathering and analysis of this evaluation. The continual movement between question of why, where, when and for what purpose are also obvious in the objects of this evaluation.

	Object Statement
Aim	Build the learning capacity, oral language, and literacy development of children in out-of-home care via the provision of portable, age appropriate, literacy resources to children 0 to 6 years.
Objective 1	Provide quality age appropriate literacy resources directly to children, to enable them to build their own home library that belongs with them wherever they reside.
Objective 2	Raise carer awareness about the importance of reading, talking, playing, and singing with children every day.
Objective 3	Increase the frequency of 'together time' between carer and child through meaningful book sharing.

Table 2: Evaluation Objects

Note that Appendix 2 details the analytical framing used to operationalise these statements and to systematically determine key findings.

RTM-OHC is supported by a range of on-line and face-to-face professional learning opportunities for care workers. However, the evaluation was tasked with only considering the delivery of the programme and the quality of its resources from the perspective of 'end users': 'carers', 'care workers', and 'managers'. The term 'carer' is

used to refer to a foster or kinship parent. Where relevant, the term 'foster carer' or kinship carer' has been used. No children in the evaluation were in residential care.

The term 'care worker' is used to describe professionals directly supporting, and in immediate contact with, foster or kinship families. Again, where relevant, the terms 'foster care worker' or 'kinship care worker' have been employed. Finally, 'manager' is used to describe government department senior

managers, case managers, and project officers who work at a distance from families but have programme oversight. It is acknowledged this last category does not strictly represent an end-user. However, their inputs provide valuable contextual and vantage point perspectives. Informed consent was sought and obtained from all evaluation participants (see Appendix 1). To maintain participant anonymity, the above descriptions of care and professional roles are used throughout the report.

An intensive-extensive methodological approach (Jackson & Kolla 2012) was employed triangulating data from

1. qualitative interviews,
2. relevant primary and secondary documents,
3. annual carer survey data, and
4. a review of relevant research literature.

Table 3 details this approach and its connection to the 3D Model of Realist Evaluation.

Method	Type	Detail
Interview	Intensive	15 semi-structured interviews (Brönnimann, 2021; Smith & Elger, 2014) were conducted with carers, care workers and managers. 3D Model: Context and Vantage Point.
Document Analysis	Extensive & Intensive	Analysis of publicly available primary (RLA newsletters, reports, and web-site material) and secondary (relevant public policy along with government and non-government reports) documents. 3D Model: Context and Vantage Point.
Survey Analysis	Extensive & Intensive	Analysis of annual carer surveys (2018, 2020, 2021, 2022). 3D Model: Context and Vantage Point.
Literature Review	Extensive	Review of relevant research literature on the theory and practice of early language and literacy development via book reading in home learning environments. 3D Model: Depth.

Table 3: Intensive and Extensive Methods

Literature Review

Realist evaluation places explanatory theory at the centre of its concern (Chen, 1990). This section of the report reviews the research literature on the complexities of out of home care (OHC) in relation to the theory and practice of the literary development of young people. It provides depth context to the discussion of evaluation data presented in the next section.

Research consensus exists in recognising the learning that occurs in the early years of life is critical to future health, development, and general wellbeing. The years before formal schooling are foundational to the acquisition of language, development of literacy, and the capacity to engage with the world. In this context, the provision of a stimulating home literacy environment that includes the active sharing of books

between family members cannot be understated (Cohrssen & Niklas 2016; Niklas, Cohrssen, & Tayler 2015).

Children in OHC are most vulnerable in this regard due to the adverse social and personal circumstances into which they are thrown. They often carry histories of trauma, abuse, and neglect (Bromfield, Gillingham & Higgins 2007) that leave them not only in states of poor health (Maclean et. al. 2016) and with issues of attachment (Carballo et al., 2019; Evans et. al 2017; Russell, Trew & Higgins 2021; Trew, Russell & Higgins 2020). One effect of ongoing lived-complexity and social disadvantage is educational underachievement (Kaarla & Hilamo 2017; O'Hare et. al. 2023).

Australian studies show that children placed in OHC are more likely to be diagnosed with a mental disorder (Green et al., 2020), and more likely to attain below average reading and numeracy attainment (Maclean, Taylor, & O'Donnell 2017; Laurens et al., 2020) than their peers. Such results are reproduced in international studies (Font & Kennedy, 2022; Gypen et al., 2017). According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW 2022a, 2022b) evidence that shows children living in OHC are more likely than their peers (i) not to meet national benchmarks of literacy and numeracy and (ii) have diminished prospects of educational success. The importance of effective early intervention in the language and literacy development of OHC children is obvious.



In a comprehensive review of the research literature on children’s early language and literacy development, Hill, Foster, and Ward (2014) instructively frame the theoretical underpinnings of the field as comprising five broad disciplines:

Theories	Behavioural Psychology	Developmental Psychology	Sociocultural	Systemic Functional Linguistics	Sociological
Theorists	Thorndike (1932)	Piaget (1936)	Vygotsky (1992)	Halliday (1975, 1978)	Freire (1996)
Prominent Researchers	Durkin (1996)	Clay (2005, 2001)	Esteban-Guitart & Moll (2005); Bruner (1986)	Derewienka & Jones (2012)	Taylor (1991)
Pedagogical Goals	Prepare children for formal reading skills instruction	Support children’s cognitive construction of literacy	Support children’s social construction of literacy	Understand how language changes in different contexts	Enable social participation and develop democratic citizenry

Table 4: Major Theories used to Understand Language and Literacy Development (Modified from: Hill, Foster, and Ward, 2014: 17).



Hill, Foster, and Ward (2014) insist that grasping the range of theories explaining literacy development is vital to the planning and delivery of early literacy programmes. Significantly, they acknowledge the importance of appreciating the reciprocal relation between brain development and a child's literacy development.

However, in recognising the foundational importance of brain development to language and literacy growth brings attention to the potential contributions of fields of inquiry beyond neuroscience: psychology, cultural studies, and sociology. From a scientific realist perspective, this is to be expected. The structure of scientific inquiry (represented in its various disciplines) correspond to the real structures and working mechanisms of the world. Just as the world is emergently layered so is disciplinary knowledge of it. The scientific understanding of language and literacy development can be represented as follows:

Science	Natural	Social				
Discipline	Neuroscience	Psychology		Cultural Studies		Sociology
Sub-Discipline		Behavioural	Developmental	Micro	Meso	Macro
	Emergence	----->	----->	----->	----->	

Figure 3: Realist Emergence

Figure 3 serves to introduce the idea of emergent literacy. Originating in the early work of Marie Clay (1966), it has typically been employed to describe children's early language development before schooling (Connor, Morrison & Slominick 2006; Makin 1998; Sulzby & Teale 1985, 1996; Teale 1982; Teal & Sulzby 1986; Whitehurst & Lonigan 2017; and Yaden, Rowe & MacGillivray 2000). It pushes

beyond the developmental psychology view of 'reading readiness' that there is a point in time when a child is ready to learn to read. Emergent literacy however, stresses that literacy is learnt before formal instruction. But, like behavioural and developmental approaches, emergent literacy suggests that literacy development takes place within the child.

In contrast, a realist conception of emergence also acknowledges language and literacy as cultural and social achievements. They are realised not just in and through the individual child but emerging from and, in turn, acting on a child's experiences and daily relations with the wider world. For example, in a child-parent literacy engagement, the parent and their relation to their child changes as the child's

literacy develops. The parent, adult, or carer learns about the child and, in turn, also learns about themselves – and vice versa.

The sociology and social science literature not only deals with context and the mechanisms of power (e.g.: adult-child and teacher-learner relations) that structure it. It also recognises that the child is positioned as an active agent who comes to the learning environment with existing funds of knowledge (González, Moll & Amanti 2005; Moll 2000; Moll et. al. 1992; Riojas-Cortez 2001). The variability of literacy environments such as the home, school and community settings are understood to shape the construction and enactment of language and meaning in significantly different ways. Acknowledging the important role of multiple literacy environments in the formation of personal and social identity requires the enactment of pedagogies for multiliteracies. (Cope & Kalantzis 2015).

To summarise, a multiliteracy approach to reading, learning, and language development must be contextually driven. In realist terms, it is depth-emergent and recognises literacy as a social achievement occurring within ‘nested’ relations (Pegoraro Schull et. al. 2021). This insight

has particular importance for understanding the complexities of children’s literacy development in out-of-home care environments – including the adult-child reading relation.

The importance of adult-child book reading to the early development a child’s language and literacy capacities has been long recognised in the literature (Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan 2002; Bus et. al., 1995; Scarborough and Dobrich, 1994). Demir-Lira et. al. (2019) note that benefit of early parent-child book reading for children’s vocabulary is consistently reported in the literature with the results of their research showing

“... positive relations between early parent child book reading and children’s later language and literacy outcomes. We also found that parent language during early book reading interactions was linguistically more complex than parent language during non-book reading interactions provides a possible mechanism for these relations. Thus, our findings offer a potential explanation for the success that interventions encouraging parent-child book reading have had in increasing language skills and school achievement.”

Storybook reading, where the adult talks to the pictures and about the story content with the child, is recognised as significant in this development. It is stressed that adult talk can, and should, extend beyond the printed story content to contextualise and to facilitate the child’s social construction of literacy (Lever and Se éne échal, 2011; Reese and Cox, 1999). This can include other activities such as singing, craft and gameplay (Hassinger-Dass et. al. 2016). Adult scaffolding is central to sociocultural and sociological approaches (see Table 4).

It must be noted that OHC caring comes with significant challenges. In their report to the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, Jones and Sharp (2021) note that 92% of carers they surveyed indicated they had faced challenges in some form during their time as a carer. The responses received were diverse but included the challenge of balancing the child’s needs and those of their own, attending to official documentation requirements, and satisfying departmental processes which they felt restricted their ability to make appropriate decisions about children in their care. Given the complex health and behavioural issues exhibited by many children in care, these challenges are unsurprising.

Forty-six per cent of children in the care of the census respondents needed support with learning difficulties, attachment issues (44%) and mental health difficulties (40 per cent). While a smaller proportion of children needed support with grief or loss, 36 per cent of children still required this. Ten per cent of children in the care of the census respondents had a physical disability and 12 per cent of children had other support needs.
(Jones & Sharp 2021: 65)

In an interview study of South Australian foster carers (Delfabbro, Taplin, & Bentham 2002), it was found that a source of carer frustration rested in negotiating the foster care system and getting adequate system support. More recently, the Australian Institute of Family Studies and the Indigenous-led consultancy organisation, Murawin, noted the following:

Previous research and government inquiries point to systemic challenges for carers in their relationship to government service systems. Described challenges include excessive bureaucracy, poor communication, high turnover of caseworkers and feelings of exclusion or disrespect experienced by carers.
(AIFS & Murawin 2022)

Data Presentation and Discussion

The broad aim of this evaluation was to determine the success of RTM-OHC in supporting the literacy needs of children in OHC. It was to do this by asking program end users the extent to which the programme:

- Provides quality age appropriate literacy resources directly to children, to enable them to build their own home library that belongs with them wherever they reside. **(Objective #1)**
- Raises carer awareness about the importance of reading, talking, playing, and singing with children every day. **(Objective #2)**
- Increases the frequency of 'together time' between carer and child through meaningful book sharing. **(Objective #3)**

The following is structured by these three objectives.



Objective #1: Provide quality age appropriate literacy resources directly to children, to enable them to build their own home library that belongs with them wherever they reside.

This objective focusses on the quality of the RTM-OHC literacy resources. Age appropriateness is identified as a key indicator of quality which, in turn, is taken to encourage children to develop a portable home library. For children in OHC, book portability is taken as an essential element in their ongoing literacy development.

However, underlying age appropriateness and portability is the issue of a child's enjoyment of books and motivation to learn. As such, three analytical categories were identified: Reading Enjoyment, Age Appropriate Books, and Portable Libraries (see Appendix 2). These are presented below with samples of intensive and extensive data for each.

Reading Enjoyment

Survey data collected since 2018 has consistently shown that carers believe their children enjoy the RTM-OHC books. 97% of carers indicated either 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree' in response to the statement, 'My child enjoys the Read to Me Books'.

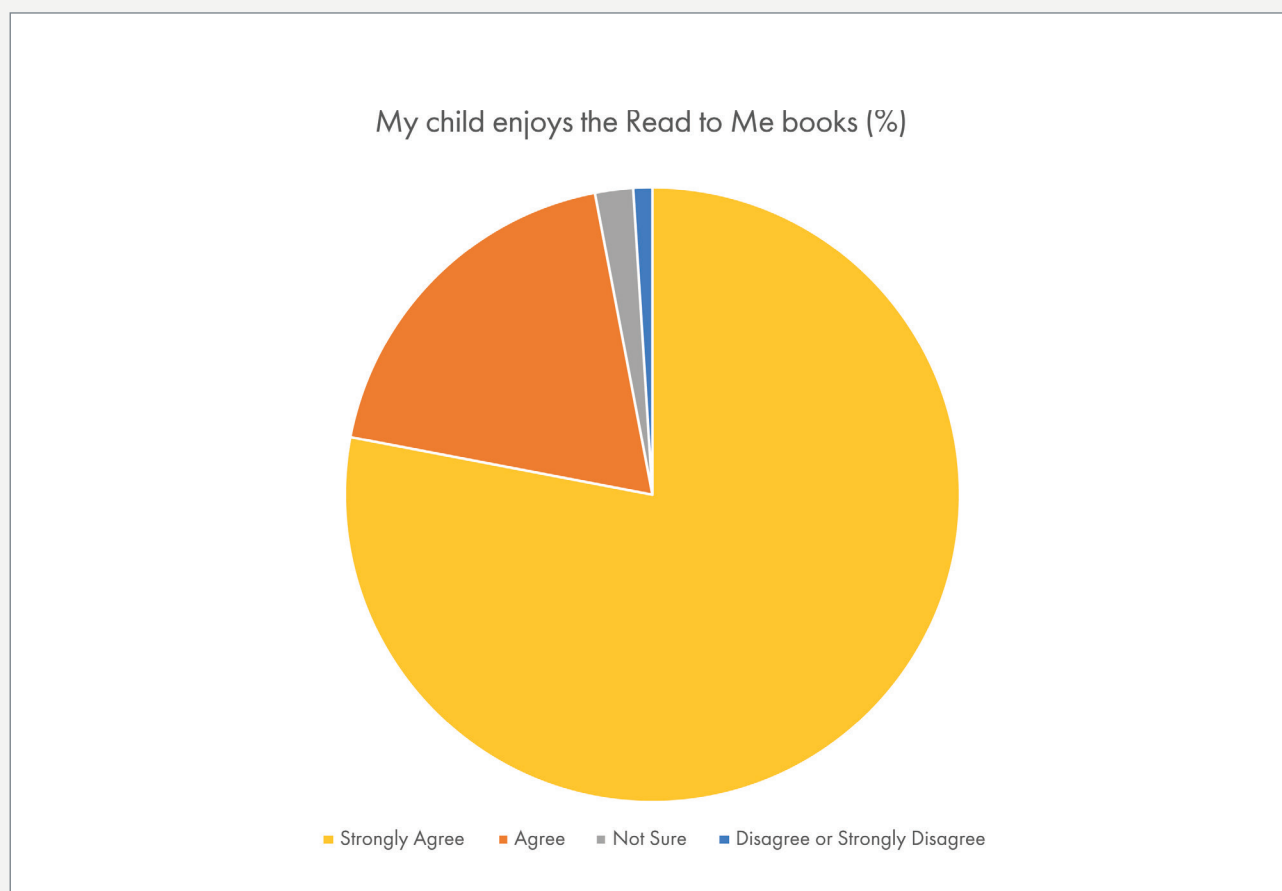


Figure 4: Survey Responses 2018 -2022: My child enjoys the Read to Me books (%)

The yearly breakdown indicates a consistency of positive responses to the statement:

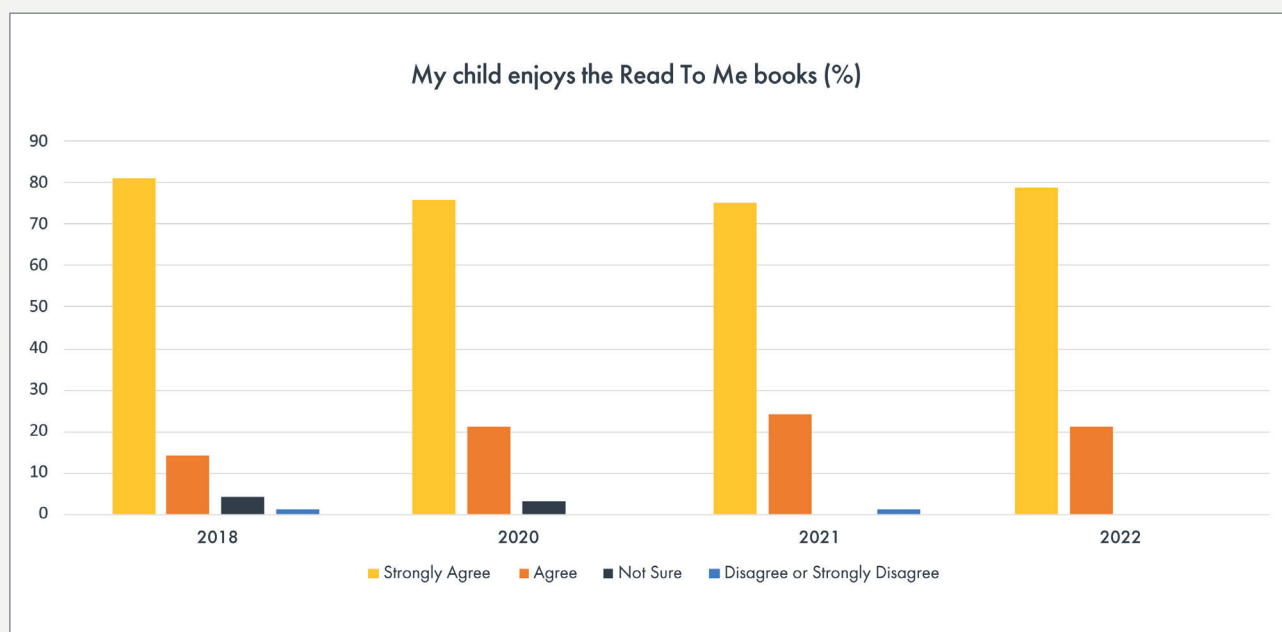


Figure 5: Survey Responses 2018 -2022: My Child Enjoys the Read to Me Books (%)

Qualitative data gathered from kinship and foster carers supports the survey data. A typical response:

This is a wonderful initiative and has helped my three children to really get excited about books and reading. **Foster Carer**

The following care workers are more expansive and explain the importance of books being sent to the child in the mail and addressed to them.

The boys get their packs while they are at day-care. When they arrive home, I say to them 'look at what arrived in the mail today'. They are so excited. It is just like getting a present from Santa. The programme is Christmas. We sit and open the

packs together. They pick out the ones they want me to read to them. They have their own bookcases. A place to put their books that is their place.

Foster Carer

As far as the quality of the books, I have only been getting good feedback. They are saying: "Keep them coming". The kids love it that they get a package in the mail. They look forward to that. **Kinship Care Worker**

And, as a kinship carer put it:

My child is excited to get books in the mail and this helps motivate them to read and seek out previous ones.

These represent a consistent message from the interviews of the joy children experienced by receiving a gift in the mail. As numerous interviewees explained, a child living a transient life comes to value something that they identify as theirs. As one kinship carer confided:

When the books arrive, he takes them away to his room and won't let me anywhere near them. They are his. After a while he will bring them out and we'll read them together. But he lets me know they are his. He loves them and guards them.

The message from carers and care workers conveyed in interviews is that with the development of a sense of book ownership comes a motivation to read.

Age Appropriate Books

Age appropriateness as a factor contributing to the quality of the RTM-OHC books was registered strongly by carers and care workers. It was consistently raised in interviews. One example:

I think the age appropriateness of the books they select is spot-on. Of course, some books interest them more than others. It might be the storyline that captures their attention. The books are well chosen in terms of how they can engage children. The stories are interesting. They are relatable to them – age appropriate. You can talk to them about how the story might unfold. This makes the books really good for speech development. **Foster Carer**

This carer was a professional teacher. They describe how easily they engaged in a storytelling approach to reading:

“I know quality and these books are quality. Their storylines are engaging. Their pictures are inviting to the imagination. This makes them easy and fun to play with”.

Furthermore, interviewees emphasised the relation between child engagement and developmental appropriateness. This was understood as especially important for children in OHC – as the following reveals:

What I appreciate is that the books are always engaging for the kids. They are attractive. They have flaps that open. One of my daughters has ADHD and her reading age is below where it should be. She has only ever read with us. The books are fantastic for this. The other daughter has a neurological disorder and reading is a real struggle for her. But she loves it when we read to her. For us, what is important is that the kids have access to quality reading materials. **Foster Carer**

Also,

There are different sizes of books. I love that. There is variety. The books are topical and colourful. It's not just about the words on the page. The books themselves are captivating. Even for our youngest, who struggles to read, the books engage her. She doesn't realise that her literacy is developing. But it is. And she loves it. **Foster Carer**

As the above two carers note, for children who live complex lives framed by disability and disadvantage, books can be sources of enjoyment and opportunities for learning. The second carer continues:

The books are robust. They are not flimsy. They are books for a lifetime. In this way we can teach our children to look after their books properly. To put them on the library shelf and care for them. The kids have their favourites, and they keep on bringing them out again and again. As a parent that is wonderful to see. And the grandparents are into it as well. They read to our kids. When they go visiting granny, the first thing they do is pack their books. **Foster Carer**

Book durability was reported by carers to be significant in teaching children to look after books. This serves to develop a sense of book ownership and encourages the child to not just build a library but to take that with them wherever they reside.

Portable Libraries

The transient nature of OHC – and that of short-term care in particular – means that continuity is a vital factor in maintaining a child's reading and literacy development. As previously noted, carers report that the RTM-OHC program encourages children's ownership and collection of books. Amongst foster carers it was recognised that books could be one of the few possessions a child has.

We are short term carers. The children come with no possessions and the books are often their first nice possession with their name on. They often have not had a story read to them. They proudly take all their books with them to their forever homes or back to their own home.
Foster Carer

We own lots of books, but our foster daughter doesn't. I like it that she will have many books to take with her when she moves to her long-term kinship care.
Foster Carer

Read to Me is such an amazing program, recently one of our babies was reunified with her birth Dad and it was great to be able to send her with a big bag of books.
Foster Carer

Finding:

The RTM-OHC literacy resources are seen as not only age appropriate but also developmentally appropriate for children in OHC. The fact that books are delivered directly to children is a significant factor in encouraging not only book ownership but also the building of personal and portable libraries.



Objective #2: Raise carer awareness about the importance of reading, talking, playing, and singing with children every day.

Where the focus of the first objective rests on the books and literacy resources, the second centres on the carer and their awareness of the multidimensional benefits of reading. As an empirical baseline to carer awareness, the evaluation took the existing survey data on the relationship between the RTM-OHC programme and child-carer reading frequency. The results are presented in Table 5 below. It shows that over the period of the four surveys, there was a 50% increase in carers who read to their child multiple times a week. Those who seldom or never read to their child was reduced to a negligible number.

Reading/Frequency	At Least Once a Week	Once or Twice a Week	Seldom or Never
Before Receiving Reading Packs	58%	37%	5%
After Receiving Reading Packs	88%	11%	1%

Table 5: Survey Responses: Comparison of Reading Frequencies Before and After Receiving RLA Reading Packs (2018, 2020, 2021, and 2022)

To draw out specific factors underlying the general baseline data, the evaluation identified three analytic themes: knowledge of the developmental benefit of reading, how imagination and curiosity are expanded through reading, and the capacity to identify quality literacy sources for children (see Appendix 2).

Developmental Benefits

Of course, everyone knows that reading is important. Don't they? Who wouldn't say this? But, to be honest, since our child has been receiving these books we've seen how important it is. Developmentally she's behind other kids. Now her vocabulary

is improving. So is her awareness. Like, we might read about insects and the next day she will point to ants and butterflies in the garden. We then talk about them.

Foster Carer

Comments of this kind linking developmental gains made by their children through engagement with RTM-OHC resources were typical in both surveys and interviews. Through interviews, carers expressed in various ways the general idea that 'everyone knows' the developmental importance of reading. However, using the resources made it obvious.

This included thinking about the long-term benefits of reading – especially negotiating the schooling system:

Whether you are a short term or long-term foster carer the Read to Me books are a connection between you and the child. For our kids, who will have many challenges throughout their lives, being literate is going to help them through all those challenges. Books open possibilities. Even if you think of just getting through the school system. If they haven't got the basics, they are going to be further disadvantaged.

Foster Carer

A case manager made this observation:

I don't have anything to do with the actual work of carers and I have nothing to do with the reading packs. But I have asked colleagues who work with families. Some know of the books. They don't have anything to do with the reading that happens, or doesn't happen, in the home. But they do think there is a range of enthusiasm amongst carers about reading. It must be understood that, for some families, life is just so chaotic. Books and reading are simply not on the radar.

This is a cautionary tale that was noted in the Literature Review. It brings to attention the possibilities of not just the development of carer capacity but also that of literacy learning generally in OHC environments. The case manager illuminates the real-life complexities and structural challenges that are deep-real contexts in which the RTM-OHC programme operates.

Imagination and Curiosity

Carers and care workers regularly made the point that books and the packs were important vehicles for encouraging child curiosity and building awareness of the world around them. For example:

The quality of the books is fantastic. They introduce her to other cultures. They widen her ideas beyond just herself.

Foster Carer

[Through the Read to Me books, my boy] is learning how books work – starting at one end and finishing at the other, and how to turn pages. But, more than this, they encourage a life-long love of reading and learning.

It's good for concentration and school readiness. You can get a lot of life messages through books. Therefore, you learn about the world around you, different people, and the different ways they live.

Life awareness. Foster Carer

Quality Awareness

As noted, some carer interviewees were professional educators and possessed a working knowledge of literacy education as well as book quality. Invariably, they considered the RTM-OHC books to be of high quality. They saw benefit, not necessarily for themselves but, for other carers in being exposed to the books. In their opinion, bringing them to an awareness of quality would facilitate discriminating book choices. For example:

As a teacher, I am aware of the value of books and what is a quality children's book. These books are quality. They would be great for parents who aren't educators and might not necessarily know what a quality children's book is. They can then be more discriminating when they buy books for their children.

Foster Carer

Indeed, this view was confirmed in survey responses and in interviews with non-education carers:

I have a lot of books and a wide range of books around the home. But I think a lot of the Raising Literacy books I wouldn't have chosen. They cover things I wouldn't have thought of. So, they have enabled me to get a lot more out of reading to him. They have brought to my attention things that I wouldn't have thought of.

Foster Carer

I love the variety in the packs, they are books I wouldn't usually choose myself. I absolutely enjoy them!!

Foster Carer

Despite the importance of being alert to the cautionary tale that not all OHC families are in positions to prioritise book awareness, evidence exists that the RTM-OHC programme has a positive effect of reinforcing and, in some cases raising, the literacy awareness of carers.

Finding:

The RTM-OHC literacy resources are effective in reinforcing and raising carer awareness of the importance of regularly engaging in multiliteracy activities with their children. Effectiveness is considered to relate to increasing carer knowledge of the developmental benefit of reading, showing how imagination and curiosity are expanded through reading, and building the capacity to identify quality literacy sources for children.



Objective #3: Increase the frequency of 'together time' between carer and child through meaningful book sharing.

The third evaluation objective focusses on carer and child in relation to meaningful book sharing. This captures the idea of 'together time'. Not only does the objective direct evaluative attention to the frequency of together time, but also to the extent to which RTM-OHC facilitates both carer capacity and child confidence in building 'together time' relationships. The identified analytical categories are: 'Together Time' Frequency, Carer Capacity, Child Confidence, and Relationship Development (see Appendix 2).

'Together Time' Frequency

Baseline survey data strongly indicate that RTM-OHC packs encourage carers to spend more 'together time' with their children. Over the four surveys, 85% of respondents reported that they 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree' with the statement: 'Receiving the RTM-OHC book packs has meant I spend more 'together' time with my child/ren'.

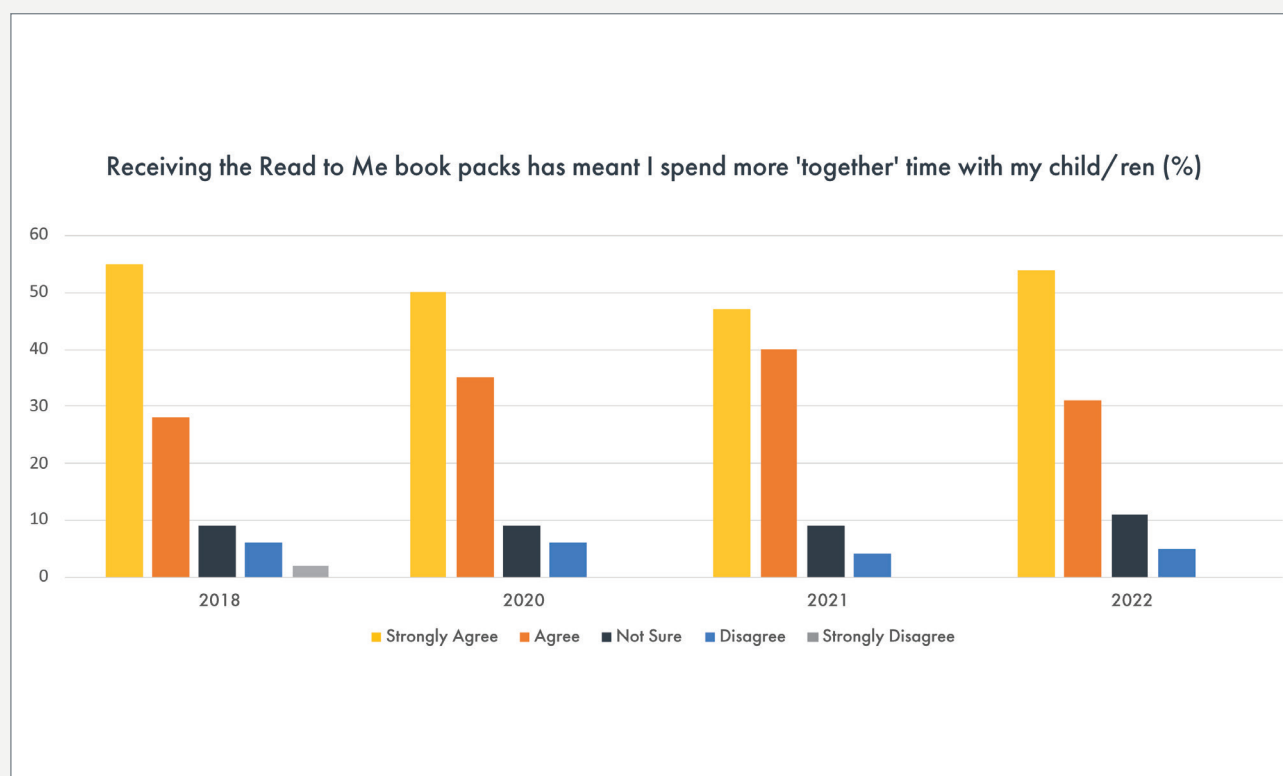


Figure 3: Survey Responses: The Read to Me book packs has resulted in more 'together time' with children.

Qualitative data gathered confirms the positive survey responses. Two typical responses:

The Read to Me books are fantastic. My foster son gets very excited to receive them. It definitely makes us read more often. I have been amazed how easy it has been to get into a routine of reading. He rushes to get a book before bed and sits on our laps to have it read to him. **Foster Carer**

It is a way of building relationships. There is nothing like sitting together, opening a book, sharing the story and the pictures. **Kinship Carer**

Even some carers who indicated the RTM-OHC resources did not encourage more reading and 'together time' were positive:

Although the Read to Me books haven't meant we spend more together time, they give us much more variety in what we read and means we read books we wouldn't have normally. Reading is our quiet bonding time, our relaxation. My daughter loves reading, her second word was 'book'... after 'cat'. We absolutely love getting the packs and the effort that has gone into them, they're like having Christmas every 3 months! **Foster Carer**

This foster carer reveals the importance of quality behind frequency. It is clear from the evidence the RTM-OHC resources are considered by carers to be of high quality and material quality translates into relational quality. As another carer succinctly put it: "We just love reading time".

Carer capacity

Data shows a general agreement amongst carers that the RTM-OHC packs help to develop a confidence in reading with their child. Some stressed that seeing the literacy development of their child that came from their efforts fostered a 'can do' attitude:

The program is a powerful way of showing carers the importance of developing children's literacy and giving them the message that they can do it. **Kinship Carer**

According to some care workers, the emergence of a 'can do' factor was related to the regular supply of RTM-OHC packs.

I think that having new books regularly coming helps carers. There are different books, and the kids don't get bored with just one. It encourages the carers to keep reading to the

kids. It's a fantastic programme. It's a great bonding experience for the kids and carers.

Kinship Care Worker

Our carers might not think of going out to buy books for their children. To have them delivered every few months is good. A lot of the times I have reports from my carers that the books are relevant to what is happening in the lives of children and family. One carer mentioned a book about the importance of being with a parent of a family and she used this to help the child to understand and work through their situation.

Kinship Care Worker





The books are fantastic. We all love receiving them. We definitely wouldn't be able to afford them otherwise.

Kinship Carer

That the packs are made free to all, irrespective of identified need, was noted by care workers and managers as important in avoiding the stigma of charity.

Child Confidence

Child confidence was understood by carers to have many sources. One regularly noted factor was the feeling of security. Carers and care workers reported that the RTM-OHC packs were important in developing a child's sense of belonging and importance:

This is a fantastic way to help the children when they are coming into care. For them to get mail addressed to them at our house has meant so much and made them feel "home".

Kinship Carer

I think this is a fantastic programme. A lot of our children are developmentally disadvantaged right from the word go. In the families I work in, a lot of the children who are seven years of age haven't been to more than a couple of weeks to school. Our children are behind right from the start.

So, simply receiving a book as a present in the mail is positive. It's not the academic side of things but the feeling that "This is something I have got. This is for me".

Kinship Care Worker

Others simply expressed it as 'happiness' and feeling 'special':

The little boy in our care loves receiving his parcel in the post. Thank you for bringing happiness to his life.

Foster Carer

Our son loves getting the books in the mail. It makes him feel very special. **Foster Carer**

Furthermore, the delivery of book packs to families free of charge was seen as encouraging the possibility of increasing carer capacity. The issue of affordability was consistently raised.

For example:

As a first-time foster carer to a 3.5mth old a year ago, I was keen to read to her and have a selection of books. But this was an added expense. When I learnt of these resources it was a huge help. **Foster Carer**

Relationship Development

The evaluation data is clear that, for many, RTM becomes part of family routine.

It is a great day when the Read to Me books arrive in the mail. If I know they are in the letterbox I ask my grandson to come and check the letterbox with me so he can find them. Then we have to play pass the parcel with the package. After bath time, we have to read them all before he goes to bed. It's a great program and very appreciated in our house. Kinship Carer

The physical contact between carer and child in the act of reading was stressed consistently as a vital aspect of enabling relationship development. For example:

Read to Me is such a worthwhile program. My grandson will go and get books to read, he loves them so much. Reading is more than just reading, it's the contact and cuddle time that is important too. Kinship Carer

I love that my grandchild receives these books. It truly fosters a love of books. Children learn to read on the laps of parents and grandparents. Kinship Carer

I think it is great. It brings me and my boy special time together. Kinship Carer

The RTM-OHC packs were reported to extend 'together time' to other family members like siblings:

They both choose the books but usually [the older 9 year-old brother] will read. He will read it to his [younger] brother and they will look at the book together. They might each have a book. Sometimes they share the pictures they like. Then they might swap books. They get a lot of fun from it. Foster Carer

My seven year-old is devastated she no longer gets the books and her older brothers are disappointed they missed out on the scheme all together. Reading is so important for all kids it would be great if it was expanded to include all children. The big kids do enjoy reading the books to the babies though and opening their packs for them. Foster Carer

Finding:

The RTM-OHC programme increases the frequency and quality of meaningful literacy time shared by carers and children. It facilitates carer capacity to read with their child and develops a child's reading confidence by nurturing a sense of belonging and self-worth. The supply of RTM-OHC literacy resources free to all identified OHC families, irrespective of need, is important in overcoming barriers to children's literacy development presented by socio-economic disadvantage and the stigma of charity.

From Another Vantage Point

To conclude the presentation and discussion of data, the following excerpt from an interview with two senior government department managers ('M1' and 'M2') involved with the distribution of RTM-OHC resources is offered. Their positions afford them a vista, or 'Stretch' (see Methodology Section, Figure 2), to contextualise the evaluation data and reinforce its findings. Theirs is an inter-agency and global project management perspective. While their views go beyond the strict objectives set for this evaluation, their views say something about the quality of the macro-organisational relationships RLA has developed that make RTM-OHC possible, viable, and effective.

Interviewer: Can you say something about what you know of Raising Literacy Australia and the quality of the relationship you have with it?

M1: Our relationship works very well. We have an open relationship. On the occasion an operational issue might arise, we work really closely with them to resolve it.

M2: Not long after I started in my current role, I got the chance to go to Raising Literacy Australia and see the setup there. And that just reinforced for me the passion the people there have for the products that they put in the packs. I just can't say enough about the quality they put into the packs and the way they go about it.

Interviewer: Please expand on what you mean by quality.

M1: The quality is excellent. I'm impressed. You can tell the level of detail and consideration that goes into selecting the books. It's not just how the books and materials are presented. I can tell a lot of effort goes into ensuring that key learning is done through the materials and the way it is delivered.

M2: As an ex-teacher and someone with a passion about literacy, I was thrilled to find out that we were involved in helping children. [Our RLA contact] is also very good at sharing

feedback that they get. We live a little bit through our contact. It speaks to the relationship that has been developed with Raising Literacy Australia. I am very proud to be involved with the programme. It is one my joys.

M1: We don't have any contact with young people. But we know, because we've been in the environment long enough to know the importance of children reading as soon as possible. From the feedback that we have seen, we know this is an important programme. Our carers and children embrace it. We are really proud to be part of it and to do our small little bit. We will continue to always do the best we can to ensure that the partnership and the programme is a success.



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Appendices

Appendix 1. Participant Interview Consent

Appendix 2. Analytical Framing

Appendix 1



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Reading Literacy Australia (RLA) - Participant Interview Consent

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this evaluation by agreeing to an interview. RLA has engaged the services of educational researcher, Dr Grant Banfield, to conduct an independent evaluation of the effectiveness of RLA programs in meeting the literacy needs of children. A vital component of the evaluation will comprise gathering information via conversational interviews with representatives of service organisations and parents/carers about their experiences with specific RLA programs. No organisation or individual will be identified in any subsequent report prepared by Dr Banfield.

All participants will receive a list of general questions prior to the interview to enable them, if they wish, to prepare for their interview. An interview will take no longer than 30 minutes and be conducted at a place of the participant's choosing.

To register your consent to an interview with Dr Banfield, please read, complete, and sign the following:

I, _____ have read the above information and have had any questions about it answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this evaluation on the understanding that

- I may withdraw at any time without prejudice
- The interview will be audio-taped for de-identified transcription and
- Upon completion of the evaluation the audio file will be destroyed.

Participant signature and date

Interviewer signature and date

Appendix 2

Analytical Framing: Aim and Objectives

Aim: Build the learning capacity, oral language, and literacy development of children in out-of-home care via the provision of portable, age appropriate, literacy resources to children 0 to 6 years.

- (i) Learning Capacity
 - Dispositional (love of, and increased interest in, books).
 - Skills (motor e.g.: turning pages; cognitive e.g.: manipulation of words and meaning; nurturant i.e.: flow on related to craft, singing etc.).
 - Creativity (development of imagination observed in, for example, play, and story making).
 - Understanding (application of words and concepts from books to life and family situations).
 - Confidence (self-confidence and developing independence).
- (ii) Oral Language
 - Developing vocabulary.
 - Associating sounds with things and words with objects.
- (iii) Literacy i.e.: Life Literacy (capacity for living)
 - Reading the word and reading the world
 - Acting in, and making sense of the world (engagement, concentration, disciplined to tasks).

Objective 1: Provide quality age-appropriate literacy resources directly to children to enable them to build their own home library that belongs with them wherever they reside.

- (i) What is Quality?
 - Books and Library (age-appropriateness, robustness, appealing, variety, culturally appropriate).
 - Packs and Activities (attractive, engaging, relevant).
 - Programme Design (delivers quality e.g.: linking reading with activities; measures quality i.e.: the surveys)
- (ii) Quality Enablers and Barriers
- (iii) Analytical Themes
 - Reading Enjoyment
 - Age Appropriate Books
 - Portable Libraries children every day.

Objective 2: Raise carer awareness about the importance of reading, talking, playing, and singing with children every day.

- (i) Attitudinal Change (a quantitative change in parental attitude to reading, talking etc. to their child).
- (ii) The mechanisms of change, or no change.
- (iii) Analytical Themes
 - Developmental Benefits
 - Imagination and Curiosity
 - Quality Awareness

Objective 3: Increase the frequency of 'together time' between carer and child through meaningful book sharing.

- (i) Meaningful (i.e.: quality) sharing:
 - Positive child-parent relation.
 - Focused attention to books and reading.
- (ii) Frequency (i.e.: quantity) of sharing.
- (iii) Analytical Themes
 - 'Together Time' Frequency
 - Carer Capacity
 - Child Confidence



GUESS
HOW MUCH

I LOVE YOU

Sam McBratney
illustrated by
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