

Feelix Library Story mornings: Approaching new literacies and working with families to further develop these experiences.

**Louise Curtin BA Dip Ed, Dip Special Ed., Manager Feelix Library Vision
Australia**

Feelix Library aims to approach new literacies in a number of different ways.

- Language literacy;
- Braille literacy;
- Tactile graphic literacy;
- Experiential literacy;
- Socio/ emotional literacy;
- Conceptual literacy.

Family centred practice is used at Vision Australia because this really allows individuals in the family to take the approach that most suits their child. They are with the child many more hours than professionals can be. At Story Events we model ways to help their child learn and introduce them to braille, tactile formats and extended tactile experiences for their child who is blind or has low vision. This then extends to greater reading of books in the home and interactive experiences and language around the story.

Our Story Mornings use a Family Centred Coaching model to support families in arriving at the goals that are vital to them. It is about capacity building for children and families.

“-Coaching builds the knowledge, skills and abilities of the coachee to be able to function without the ongoing support of a coach. Rather than

create dependency, the coach helps the coachee discover what he or she already knows and thus can do, shares new information and ideas, assists the coachee with developing the tools that are necessary to achieve desired outcomes, and helps the coachee generalize the reflections and resulting actions to new and different situations.” (Rush & Sheldon 2011).

Our work with families in Feelix Library follows a collaborative rather than an interventionist approach.

In the last 7 years Feelix has been running Story days and mornings for children and their families. They are run on weekdays and Saturday mornings. The whole family is invited to attend. Sometimes extended family members come also. At these events the story is read by an author or our patron to enhance the enjoyment of the story for everyone. Afterwards families and children engage in the experiences of the story that have been carefully planned by the Feelix staff. Morning teas follow where the foods are often those that appear in the story.

It is important to say at this point, that all families in the metropolitan areas of Sydney Melbourne and Brisbane are invited to these events. Groups or individuals are not selected. Families attend voluntarily and there can be children ranging from 6 months to 7 years attending. So activities are planned to cater for wide needs.

Some of the stories that have been celebrated are: *“We’re going on a Bear Hunt”*; *“The Three little Pigs”*; *“The Very Hungry Caterpillar”*; *“Can we lick the Spoon, Now?”*; *“The Elephant and the Bad Baby”*; *“Looking for Crabs”*; *“Is the Spaghetti ready?”*; *“This Old Man”*; *“What’s the time Mr. Wolf?”*; *“Mrs Honey’s Hat,”* and *“Fancy That.”*

At these events, grass went “Swishy swashy” when children walked through it, real pigs squealed and grunted and houses of straw and sticks were knocked down, chocolate cakes were mixed and bowls licked and many other experiences.

Connecting the story with real life experience has long been recognised as vital for children who are blind or have low vision. But these events also give children opportunities to:

- experience rollicking rhythmic language which they begin to store;
- have fun hands on learning experiences with siblings and peers;
- share braille and tactile books with their parents;
- engage with new children, people and experiences in a very open way;
- learn about simple vital concepts through a variety of mediums, auditory, tactile and play.

Creative approaches like this, are taken by the families themselves, with their children. The Felix staff just provide the opportunities for this to occur as reflected by the previous comments on using a coaching model. This allows empowerment for parents. At a story morning a father of one of our members was heard to say to another dad, “Now I get why all this stuff is important,” as his daughter engaged in the activities of “What’s the Time Mr. Wolf?” These responses occur because there are babies through to 6-7 year olds attending and parents can observe the various ways children respond according to age and vision condition. Parents get a view of the continuum of learning and development, and it is a source of support especially when discussion occurs from parent to parent.

Stories for the very young with simpler experiences are included in these mornings for the younger child and for children with additional disabilities. These mornings are

about what children can do, and what is achievable. At other times longer stories with far more complex ideas are read so that there is a balance for our Felix members.

The objectives of these days is to impart new learning for all involved, and give concrete guidelines to develop families capacities in supporting early literacy.

How are the literacies of language, braille, tactile formats, experiences, socio-emotional experience and concept developed within the frameworks of a Felix story morning?

LANGUAGE:

Spoken Language and reading aloud carries meaning for children through intonation, speed of diction, lyricism and humour. Onomatopoeic sounds help develop sometime re-occurring patterns. Regularly occurring words surround a very new word which the child often commits to memory and wait for it to happen again in the story. The craft of a good children' story is very canny. Language patterns are deliberate to allow the child to remember little bits and repeat them. These words are often then used in their language outside of the story telling sometimes by parents and sometimes by the child. So language literacy is on the move.

“The foundations of learning to read are set down from the moment a child first hears the sounds of people talking, the tunes of songs, and the rhythms and repetitions of rhymes and stories. Children who have not been regularly talked to, sung to or read aloud to from birth find life at school much more burdensome than they otherwise might.” (Mem Fox, 2001).

Repetition in language for the young child who is blind or has low vision carries importance. Practice is vital and young children do this naturally by asking for the same story over and over. This is no accident, they like the known in all its modalities-how dad's voice changes; how the illustration or tactile format is recognizable, how the words stay the same, and woe-betide anyone who tries to change their order. Children repeat language patterns as they turn a page or run their fingers over the braille. This is sometimes called Approximation, "Children who are blind or have low vision should also be allowed to approximate reading and writing without being told that their responses are incorrect" (Koenig & Holbrook 2002).

High frequency words are remembered (and later read) much earlier than low frequency ones. Children's literature uses these with the occasional tricky word and this is the one that requires more processing. Often what helps this processing is onomatopoeia, alliteration, metaphor and repetitive pattern. This is important for all young readers, and for very young pre-readers they may recognise that word is longer and has a very different pattern, but registering that is vital for meaning.

In reading aloud at our story mornings we practice the following to help embed the meaning of the story.

1. Unfamiliar words should be pronounced less fast than consistent words.
2. Words that carry the meaning are emphatic.
3. Closure in a sentence needs to be identified by the voice. For example- "And Hairy MacLary From Donaldson's dairy!"
4. Pay attention to the punctuation - it allows the story to be very clear.

We ask all these skills of our readers.

BRAILLE LITERACY

Every Felix books has braille concurrently with the print. Story mornings such as “What’s the Time Mr Wolf?” and “Can we lick the spoon now?” are books for a younger child. We endeavour to have multiple copies of each book so families turn the pages with their child and the child investigates the braille. The aim of course is for the child to understand that the braille dots carry the meaning of the words in the story.

Children practise book-handling skills and pretend reading skills. Low vision children might pour over the illustrations in books.

Families see children who have had some years experiencing Felix kits and observe how they use the books. They may have begun tracking skills and pretend to tell the story to parents or brothers and sisters.

Families see in a very relaxed atmosphere how their child might be able to gain literacy skills by engaging in the experiences and language of the story represented by the braille.

Children and parents have an opportunity to interact with the same book because it is print and braille concurrently. The parents are conceived as the experts by the child as they are able to interpret the meaning for the child. This is an important role as the child will want to emulate the expert eventually. If this can happen as early as possible in a blind or low vision child’s life this allows them the same experiences.

The importance in embedding auditory memory skills for our children is obvious. It is often misconceived that reading is just a visual activity. However a considerable amount of what is read hangs in the short- term memory for interpretation.

Phonology uses this sound memory application in reading- same shape same sound “Felix flummoxed furiously”. However meaning is mainly divulged by the words around a word - or in other words, by the lexicon. Reading after all is about understanding, not decoding. Fluency in retelling the story is an important step in early literacy.

TACTILE GRAPHIC LITERACY

Visual images carry a great deal of meaning in storybooks and textbooks for students. Tactile graphic skills are vital for a child who is blind. Each Felix kit has a small tactile handbook that tells a story related to the print story.

At the story events some children prefer to hold the tactile book while they listen to the story. Families will turn pages with them and help them investigate the tactile symbols which tell a simpler version of the spoken story. Often the tactile lexicon is a new literacy for parents too, but with use they become more intuitive for parents.

“Children with vision impairment and other disabilities often benefit from using symbols to represent or events in their daily life” (Koenig & Holbrook, 2002)

Often tactile symbols are repeated on the pages if the language of the story repeats. Regularly occurring symbols are used. For example, for elephants leather trunks only are used, for bedtime a simple braille bed with a piece of blanket sewn across, for a person a small rope doll rolled with wool. In this way children can feel the pages and tell their own story. This encourages children’s memory to recall the events of the story and sometimes the language of the story.

Up until recently many of the very young books did not include a tactile book as it was thought that a hands- on object was enough for the very young child with vision

loss. However families have requested them for the very young and report that their babies really respond to these books.

We run Tactile Book production mornings with our families. It has been noticed that families that attend are often those who come along to the book mornings.

EXPERIENTIAL LITERACY

Tying meaning to language is very important for literacy. Hands on experiences from the story make the language of the story more meaningful. “Swishy Swashy, swishy swashy” from “We’re going on a Bear Hunt” makes more sense when a child goes through the long grass and hears the sound the grass makes against their bodies. The next time that story is read the parent can then draw their child’s attention to that word and even it’s shape if the child is ready for this. Here is a view from a young blind woman expressing her gratitude to a friend about true experiential learning,

“In college I had a friend who worked at a science museum, and he took me there for an insider’s view. I particularly remember two things he showed me. When we got to the museum, he told me to hold out my hands like a cup because he was going to put something in them. So I did what he asked, and he poured a bunch of fleshy things into my hands.. I had no idea what they were. Then the objects in my hands began to wriggle and squirm like mad, and I exclaimed to my friend “What in the world is this?” He laughed and said he had given me a handful of worms.” (Tonia Valletta, 2004).

During story mornings we have hand washed socks, lifted up rocks in simulated rockpools, mixed cakes, cracked eggs and trudged through mud in order to extend the meaning of stories. For the “Three Little Pigs” children knocked down the house

of straw and a house of sticks to clarify the meaning of the story. Then they investigated the old brick shed to emphasize why the wolf could not blow that down.

Planning these events requires the use of real materials. Our recent Bookweek event was with the story “Fancy That” and real chicks were there for the children to hold and watch, and the words “Took Took” from the hens, and “Cheep, Cheep” from the chicks becomes more relevant to the children.

Such experiences are stored and transferred to tell their own stories or used in other books and allow the child better interpretation.

SOCIO-EMOTIONAL LITERACY.

At story mornings very early role-modelling begins. Children hear and see what another child is brave enough to attempt and admiration occurs. A very young child will sit close to an older child and model their book handling behaviour. They may hop into a rocking trough when they hear the laughter of another child engaged in the activity. At the “What’s the time Mr Wolf” morning children shared the same water tub and washed socks together. Parents and staff enriched the activity with descriptive language about what the children were doing.

Regular families begin to turn up to each session. Children recall each other and it becomes easier to do things together or alongside a known other person. Names are used regularly and it is noticed that parents regularly talk to their child about the other children in the room and what they are doing. This seems to develop a sense of safeness in the experiences, which also allows parents to openly discuss things with others attending.

Parallel play is often the norm however some co-active play experiences occur especially when gross motor equipment is used-holding bell ropes, the rocking saucer for the sea, and washing up after “Can we lick the spoon” provided lots of co-operative activity.

During a particular morning the shops set up for the Elephant and the Bad Baby gave children between 5 and 6 years, an opportunity to become shop keepers exchange tokens and hand over bought items. The storyline spring boarded this activity. Parents were very surprised at the language used in the activity and the manner in which the children showed an understanding of the exchange of goods. The children took turns at shopkeeping and this play went on for over 30 mins.

The activities of the story mornings are often planned around doing things together or offering children experiences that they may have not experienced and give auditory and tactile feedback.

CONCEPTUAL LITERACY:

Hands on experiences and conceptual literacy go hand in hand. However it is necessary to always consider spatial relationships when endeavouring to lead a child to braille literacy. In our tactile handbooks there are many pages about up the hill and down the hill, upstairs and downstairs, inside and outside a concrete object, along the road or towards the forest and so on.

Activities at our mornings might include jumping in and out of a hoop or under and over a rope or putting the shopping in and out of the basket. The activities are paired with the story read and parents take these ideas and use them at home .

Sometimes it is assumed that children with vision loss will absorb these concepts but they do not unless practised in a concrete fashion. Parents need support in providing this day to day, but in play activities they see how to achieve this and we attempt to provide experiences and activities to consolidate concepts and allow qualitative experience for children. Which is more spiky the fish's skin or the prawn's whiskers? This was a matter we discussed on our Story morning of "Looking for Crabs".

Giving a child a collection of concepts will allow them much greater opportunities for success when the time comes for them to begin to read braille. If a parent says "next to" or "at the top" or "in the middle" the child will be able to follow instruction in a more informed way.

Saturday story mornings have begun to be attended by more families now. Both parents are more able to come and overall the atmosphere is far more relaxed. With this in mind more story mornings will occur on these days. Providing a very relaxed environment for everyone with a greater range of people to interact helps the events really work and allows attainment of our goals for these events. These goals are to provide enriched story-reading mornings that begin to develop vital skills for children who are blind or have low vision on the road to literacy.

References.

1. Braille Monitor. NFB. April 2004, Vol 47 No. 4. P233.

2. Early focus. Working with Young Children Who Are Blind or Visually Impaired and their Families. 2nd edition. Fiona L. Pogrud & Diane L. Fazzi, Eds. AFB Press 2002. Koenig and Holbrook P161.
3. Reading Magic. Mem Fox. 2001
4. The Early Childhood Coaching Handbook. Dathan D. Rush. M'Lisa Shelden. Paul Brookes Publishing Co. 2011. P9