



Dolly Parton's Imagination Library Program

National Impact Report February 2021 – May 2023

The impact of the Imagination Library on
Australian children and their families



Executive summary of findings

- Children on the Imagination Library are being read to more often, for longer duration and have more books in the home compared to Australian children not on the program.
- Caregivers who read daily or more at baseline were 8 times more likely to still be reading daily or more 12 months after being on the program.
- The Imagination Library increases the use of reading techniques known to be beneficial for language acquisition and development.
- The Imagination Library increases caregiver confidence and enjoyment.
- 90% of caregivers reported spending more quality time together as a family with books.

Background

The Social and Economic Costs of Illiteracy

Poor literacy is associated with dropping out of school, decreased work productivity, lower earnings and welfare dependency (Goldfeld et al. 2011) and is linked to crime, poor health outcomes and social isolation (World Literacy Foundation, 2018). Reading failure presents enormous social and economic challenges worldwide because without the ability to read or write, many illiterate people become trapped in a cycle of poverty with limited opportunities for employment or income generation (World Literacy Foundation, 2018).

Neurological research has shown that most brain development occurs within the first three years (Li et al. 2021) and is a key predictor of education. In Australia, 1 in 5 children start school unprepared for learning (AECD 2021). In some communities, this is as high as 1 in 3 children (AECD 2021) However, there is evidence that regardless of income, children from “language rich” home environments can bridge the word gap that puts them behind their peers when they start school. (Hart & Risley, 1995)

What can be done to break this cycle?

“Helping children become excited about learning and making sure that they don’t enter school already behind their fellow classmates is extremely important for addressing illiteracy.” Put simply, ‘caregivers can combat illiteracy early by reading with their children’ (World Literacy Foundation, 2018).

There is well established evidence that shared book reading, defined as a caregiver reading with a child, is beneficial to the child’s language development and pre-literacy skills. (Dowdall et al. 2021, Fletcher et al. 2008). Along with shared book reading, the number of children’s books in the home has also been shown to be associated with children’s language and further literacy outcomes (Chen & Ren, 2019). A study conducted in 2015 found that, when the child was two years old, both the frequency of shared book reading and the number of books in the home combined with other home literacy variables were significantly associated with the child’s vocabulary skills at the age of four years (Kim et al. 2015). An earlier study by Debaryshe (1993) found that the age of onset of shared book reading was the strongest predictor of oral language skills in two-year-olds.

These findings indicate early access, the number of books in the home and the adoption of shared reading with a caregiver can have an important impact on a child's early development.

How does the Imagination Library promote early literacy?

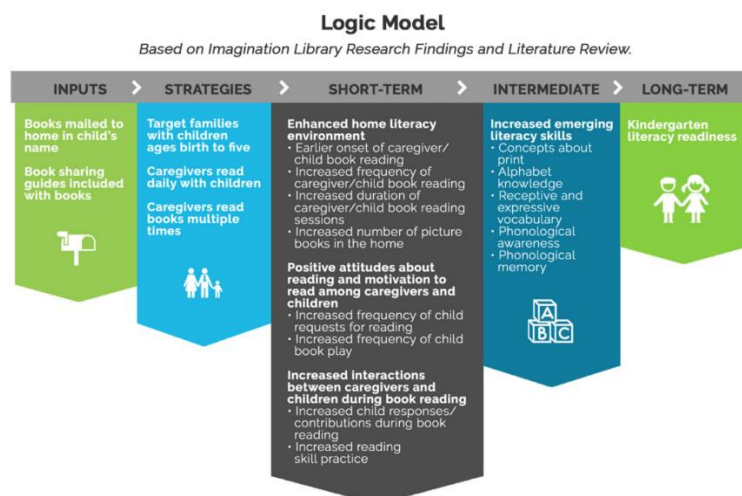
Dolly Parton's Imagination Library is a global book-gifting program which provides one age-appropriate, culturally sensitive, book a month, from birth to five years, (N=60 books) delivered to the mailbox addressed to the child (Conyers, 2012). These books are chosen by a book selection committee comprised of academics, early educators and speech therapists with each book accompanied by a tip sheet which guides caregivers before, during and after reading to maximise the impact of the reading session. The program has been delivered in Australia since 2014 by United Way Australia and is currently being offered in over 400 locations nationally. By providing books directly into the home the Imagination Library promotes shared book reading and helps to break the cycle of illiteracy.

Evidence for the Imagination Library literacy intervention

Research has shown that children enrolled in the Imagination Library are read to more frequently and for longer durations than those children not enrolled on the program (Funge et al. 2017, Ridzi et al. 2017). A study by Samiei et al. (2015) found that children who participated on the program were also better prepared for kindergarten. Research has also shown that caregivers with children on the program reported that they demonstrated an increased love of reading (Funge et al. 2017) and improved family communication styles (Ridzi et al. 2014) as a result of being on the program.

Aim of report

The aim of this report is to evaluate the impact of the Imagination Library on children and their families in Australia. The Dollywood Foundation developed a program logic model which outlines the short-term, intermediate and long-term goals of the Imagination Library. This report will use both quantitative and qualitative approaches of measurement to evaluate the short-term and intermediate goals from the logic model.



Methods

Survey delivery and response rate

The report analysed data from optional surveys sent to caregivers before receiving the Imagination Library, after receiving the program for 6 months, and after 12 months of being on the program. To inform the data, each response is matched to an individual caregiver-child for each survey. A total of 249 baseline and 12-month follow-up surveys were completed. N=134 caregivers completed baseline and 6-month surveys and N=92 completed all three surveys (baseline, 6 and 12 months). Data was collected from the 1st of February 2021 through to the 10th of May 2023.

Results

Caregivers

At baseline, the median age of caregivers at time of survey completion was 31-35 years, with a maximum of more than 50 years. 97% of caregivers completing the survey identified as female and 12% of caregivers reported a language other than English as their primary language. The majority of caregivers responding to the survey indicated they were not working and were either on leave or engaged in home duties at both baseline and 12 months. Approximately 50% of caregivers reported that their highest level of education was a university qualification at both baseline and 12 months.

Children

Of the N=249 children, 53% were male and 2 children were identified as having a disability. At baseline 35% were attending some form of early learning activities which increased to 70% by 12 months with 37% attending one day a week at the 12-month survey. The average age at baseline was 8.4 months (SD 10.4), the average age at the 12-month survey was 18.6 months (SD 10.6, maximum 47 months).

Logic Model – Enhanced home literacy environment

Earlier onset of caregiver / child book reading

The average age caregivers reported commencing reading to their child was 2.5 months (SD 2.8). This is earlier than the average onset of shared book-reading in Western, English-speaking countries, which usually occurs at 6 - 9 months, and is significantly earlier than the 22 months reported by Leech et al. (2021).

I recommend the program to all new Mums I come in contact with as it helps build a child's imagination and vocabulary –Imagination Library caregiver.

Reading frequency with the primary caregiver

After receiving the Imagination Library for 6 months, 71% of children were being read to 6 or more days a week which was maintained through to 12 months of being on the program. This is higher than a large Australian study (N~1,000,000) of children that found 60% of children were read to 6-7 days in the last week aged between 0-2 years (AIHW). There was a statistically significant increase in the frequency of shared book reading between baseline and the 12-month survey ($p<0.05$) and those caregivers who read daily or more at baseline were 8 times more likely to read daily or more

at the 12-month survey compared to those who did not read daily at baseline (OR 8.0, 95% CI: 43 – 14.6).

Monthly books are a great reminder to keep reading especially if it's fallen out of regular routine – Imagination Library caregiver.

Reading frequency with someone other than the primary caregiver

Caregiver responses demonstrated that the proportion of children being read to by someone other than the primary caregiver increased from 74% at baseline to 83% at the 12-month survey with the median frequency being 3 – 5 days a week.

I love the program it encourages me to find the time to sit and read to our son and encourages his older sibling who is autistic to be involved with reading as well. I also encourage his dad to read to him at his house too –Imagination Library caregiver.

Increase in reading duration

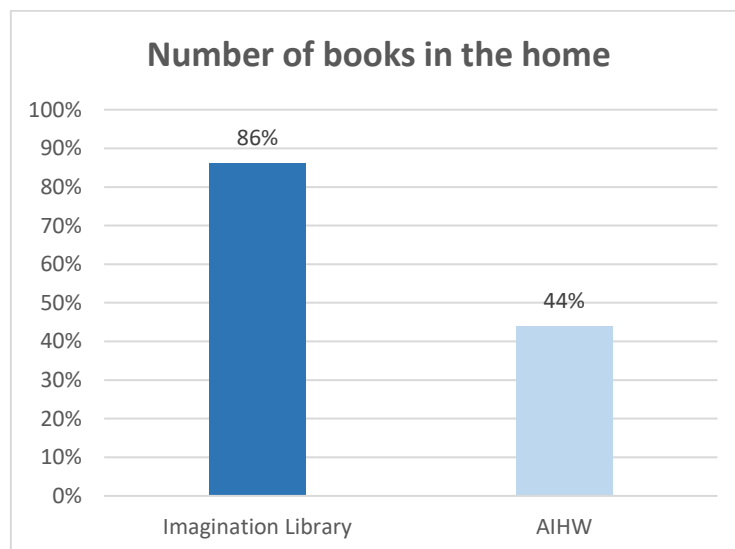
The average time spent reading remained stable from baseline to 6 and 12 months at approximately 13 minutes per sitting. The proportion of caregivers reading for 10 or more minutes a day increased from 40% to 47% from baseline and 6 months. This is higher than the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC, N~5,000) which found that only 35% of children were read to for more than 10 minutes a day between 0-1 years.

Our son and his older sister love checking the mailbox for the new monthly book. We read that book on repeat for weeks, then it becomes a part of our rotations –Imagination Library caregiver.

Number of books in the home

86% of children had 25 or more books in the home after 6 months on the program which is nearly double that of a study conducted on nearly one million Australian children which found only 44% of children had more than 25 books by 2 years (AIHW).

If it wasn't for the program, I probably wouldn't even read to my kids as much as I do, and they wouldn't have this many variety of books to be interested in –Imagination Library caregiver.



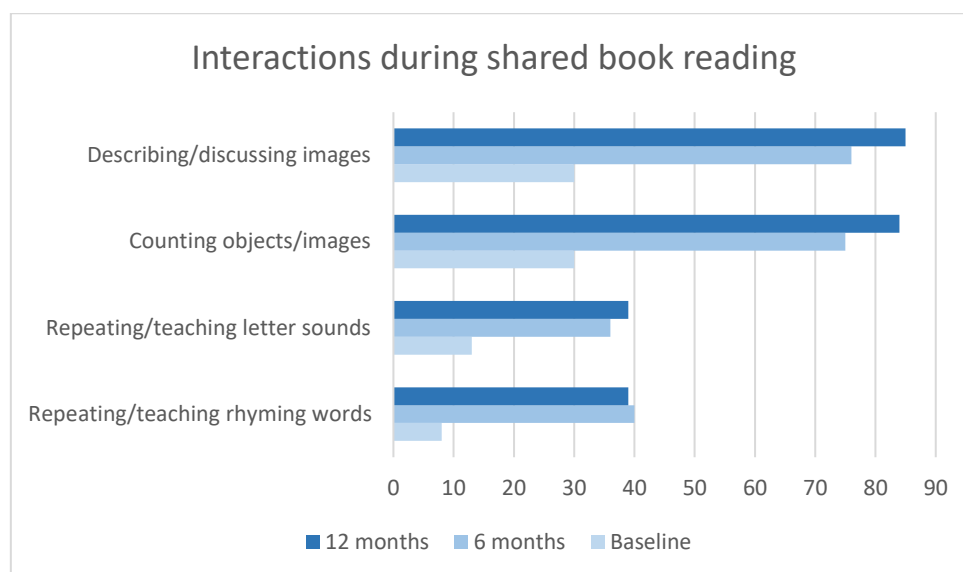
Logic Model – Increased interactions between caregivers and children during book reading

At 6 months 80% of caregivers reported that the tip sheets were useful for guiding their interactions which remained stable after 12 months.

The tip sheet is incredibly helpful for knowing what types of questions I should be asking at different stages of the books –Imagination Library caregiver.

The proportion of caregivers using and repeating rhyming words during reading time increased 5-fold from baseline to 6 months (8%-40%) and remained stable after 12 months. The proportion of caregivers repeating / teaching letter sounds nearly tripled from baseline to 6 months (13%-36%) and increased further to 40% at 12 months. The proportion of caregivers counting images / objects doubled from 30% to 75% in the first 6 months of being on the program and then increased to 84% after 12 months on the program. The proportion of caregivers describing / discussing images more than doubled from 30% to 76% in the first 6 months of being on the program and then increased to 85% after 12 months on the program. The proportion of caregivers discussing the plot increased in the first 6 months from 8% to 30% and then stabilised at 12 months.

This is a great program to encourage parents to read to their youngest and cultivate them into a book reader –Imagination Library caregiver.



Logic Model - Positive attitudes about reading and motivation to read among caregivers and children.

Among children

At the 12 month follow up survey, 87% of caregivers reported that their child responds when they point to something in the book. Caregivers reported that 69% of children indicated they would like to be read to more than 3 days in a week and 91% of parents reported that their child was interested in books. The program also increased independent book play, with 76% of parents reporting their child engaged in book related play three or more days a week.

Our daughter is only one year old I feel reading to her increases her sense and abilities to have a creative mind as she grows, she has her own personality already and doctors say she is very advanced

for her age, and I do believe some of that comes from me reading and exploring new adventures and books with her. It helps me find comfort in these books that she loves so much. When we get a new book, she gets excited in her own ways – thank you we love them –Imagination Library caregiver.

I like that the books have Australian content and themes that encourage emotional literacy – Imagination Library caregiver.

Among caregivers

After receiving the Imagination Library for 12 months, 92% of caregivers said that reading was more enjoyable for them. Similarly, 95% of caregivers agreed that they felt more confident to read to their child after receiving the Imagination Library, and 88% of caregivers said they felt more connected to the child because of reading Imagination Library books.

Thank you so much for allowing my daughter and I the opportunity to read more books together, not only is it good for her education but it allows us to bond over the books and we relate to parts of the book with different things in life –Imagination Library caregiver.

It helps me to be more in contact with my child and help him to enjoy time by us reading together and his understanding growing day after day, making voices, acting so I know his imagination is growing more and more –Imagination Library caregiver.

After 12 months, 83% of caregivers reported that the importance they place on reading had increased since receiving the Imagination Library and 90% reported spending more quality time together as a family reading because of receiving the books. After 6 months 70% of caregivers reported that they actively looked for books for their child which increased to 80% after 12 months on the program.

Awesome. A great collection of books. We thought he would prefer the more basic books, but he loves the longer ones, so now we go to the library we get longer ones too –Imagination Library caregiver.

The Imagination Library books are a fun way for us to continue to develop a love of reading as a family –Imagination Library caregiver.

Logic Model – Emerging literacy skills

N=23 children were 3 or more years at the time of the 12-month follow-up survey.

After receiving the books for only 6 months, 71% of children over three years of age demonstrated that they could follow instructions which increased to 77% after 12 months on the program. After 6 months approximately 50% of children could make letter sounds and after 12 months 81% of caregivers reported the child's vocabulary had improved. After 12 months 40% of children could recall rhymes however only 21% could name letters. 90% of caregivers reported that the child's interaction during reading time had increased.

Our son looks forward to receiving his books in the mail. When he gets them, he runs upstairs with excitement to read. He also engages with his little sister to join in the book and will point things out to her in the story –Imagination Library caregiver.

Conclusion

Children on the Imagination Library are being read to more often, for longer duration and have more books in the home than the average Australian child. These findings along with the early onset of shared book reading are encouraging as they all support the child's language and early literacy skill development. Nearly all children were interested in books and over 50% demonstrated emerging literacy skills after being on the program for 12 months. Caregiver interactions increased across all reading techniques, and they reported feeling more connected to the child, more confident to read and spent more quality time together as a family as a result of being on the program.

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