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**Rock & Rhyme: Development and Implementation of an Early Childhood  
Development Program at the State Library of Tasmania**

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**Abstract**

“We were brand new, didn’t know anything, were terrified and had to sing!!” (Carnevale, 2006)

This paper focuses upon the professional development opportunities that establishing an early childhood development program offer to a new librarian. The skills that were learned through the development and implementation of this program were invaluable. These included the establishment of good working relationships with existing staff, the opportunity to experience the entire process through every step - from the initial idea and pilot program to the implementation on a state-wide basis – project planning, funding issues, training of staff, overcoming resistance, not to mention overcoming fear of public performance.

Rock & Rhyme is a pre-literacy program for babies from the age of 0 to 24 months. It is a half hour session which includes songs, rhymes, board books, musical instruments and lots of actions.

## Introduction

“By establishing and conducting a program exclusively for babies you demonstrate to their adults how important they and their children are to you and the public library” (Marino & Houlihan, 1992, p.2).

Rock & Rhyme is an award winning, early childhood development program for babies aged from 0 to 24 months. The program was developed at the Launceston City Library branch of the State Library of Tasmania in early 2004, when it was identified that there was a gap in the pre-literacy services offered at the library. Rock & Rhyme is a half hour session which includes songs, rhymes, board books, musical instruments and movement. It “...is an interactive program: you are not performing but rather sharing rhymes and songs with the babies and adults who come...”. (Marino & Houlihan, 1992, p.2)

## The State Library of Tasmania

The State Library of Tasmania is comprised of a network of 47 public lending libraries, the State Reference Service, Heritage Collections, Archives Office of Tasmania, Adult Education and 66 Online Access Centres around the state. In addition, a virtual library is currently being developed. The State Library plays a key role in the development and delivery of information literacy programs throughout Tasmania. It provides a library management system for public schools and selected State Government agencies, a state-wide integrated online catalogue for all collections, digital preservation services for the Tasmanian community and web resource portals, as well as reference and public library services and programs.

## Development of the program

Rock & Rhyme was developed at a time when there was a strong political focus on early childhood literacy, at both a State and Federal level. State Library staff identified an opportunity to offer enhanced services specifically targeted to the pre-literacy age group. Thus it was decided that a program would be developed and if successful, implemented throughout the state. This program complemented another award winning State Library early childhood literacy program - *Babies Who Read, Succeed!* (State Library of Tasmania, 2005). Both programs support State Library strategic directions of

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developing opportunities and improving library services and access for specific groups as well as working with the community and other organisations.

Extensive research of other existing pre-literacy programs was undertaken to determine the structure and content. The Canadian Parent-Child Mother Goose Program (The Parent-Child Mother Goose Program, 2006) was the main influence and inspiration for the staff developing the program.

### **Description of program**

A typical Rock & Rhyme session is up to thirty minutes long and is delivered by two people, a combination of staff and / or volunteers. The session takes place in the main body of the library and participants sit in a circle, so that everyone can see and interact with each other. Ideally babies sit in the carer's lap, however this is not always possible as babies who are mobile like to explore! The leaders use teddy bears to demonstrate actions and movements like bouncing, clapping hands and cuddling.

Rock & Rhyme sessions run at a fast pace and include lots of variation in tempo and content due to the short attention span of babies. For example, moving from a spoken rhyme, to a 'bouncing' song, to a board book. This helps to maintain babies' interest. Every session starts and ends with the same songs which helps build an association in babies' minds, establishes a routine and 'gives the program a sense of continuity' (Marino & Houlihan, 1992, p.12). Each song or rhyme is repeated numerous times which assists with language learning. Applause after each song and rhyme is also essential; it helps to develop babies' motor skills and makes everyone feel good!

Additional resources may be used during Rock & Rhyme sessions. These include musical instruments, a felt board with felt characters for telling stories and large display sheets so that everyone can view the words of the songs and rhymes. New resources, such as books and DVDs, are put on display for parents to borrow after a session. At the end of each session the parents are given a sheet with all of the day's songs and rhymes to encourage use at home.

### **Aims of the program**

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The aims of the program are: to develop pre-literacy skills in children through song, rhyme and storytelling, to encourage parent / child interaction, to decrease feelings of isolation for parents, to create a positive and enjoyable learning environment and to make libraries friendly places to visit.

### **What's happening now?**

Rock & Rhyme is currently offered at nine libraries around the state and participation in the program is growing quickly. It is offered on a weekly or twice-weekly basis, depending on the patron demographics. Some libraries currently offer three or more sessions a week, due to a high demand in the area. Outreach sessions are also offered to young parents in disadvantaged areas and these sessions are well attended. Libraries are still intimidating places for many people and outreach services like this one are striving to overcome this.

### **Outcomes of the program**

The benefits of the program have included: an increase in the use of resources and services in libraries offering the program; social networks developing between the parents and carers, for example, they stay and chat in the library well after the session has ended; and more and more staff and volunteers are offering to take part in the program. It has contributed to a better working environment for staff and a more pleasant place to visit for general library users – no one ever complains about hearing *Twinkle twinkle little star* being sung in the library. It has also placed increased focus upon the value of programs for children in libraries.

Attendance is growing in all libraries offering the program, more fathers and grandparents are participating and the increased sharing of Rock & Rhyme resources has helped build better relationships between library branches.

Since its inception in 2004 Rock & Rhyme has won educational awards. These include:

- Learning Together Awards for Educational Excellence – Northern Branch 2005
- Learning Together Awards for Educational Excellence – State Award 2005

**The future**

Rock & Rhyme will expand into many more libraries around Tasmania, more staff will be trained in the running of the program, the rhyme booklet may be published and there will be an extension of online pre-literacy services. Evaluation of the program's progress will occur over the next 12 months to allow assessment of resources and direction. Programs like this are a reminder that providing quality services for children is a building block to ensure that libraries remain relevant into the future.

**Professional development opportunities**

Participating in projects provides invaluable opportunities to develop professional skills. Participation can be at any level, from managing a project to being a team member; the skills that are learned here can be built upon and applied to a variety of work situations.

“Employees... must now take control of their own career development, adopt a more entrepreneurial attitude and use their organisations as a resource in order to ensure their future employability” (Moodie, 2004, p. 31).

This entrepreneurial attitude includes being open to trying career paths that you weren't expecting, such as children's services. Children's services are often not seen to be “proper librarian work”, but the skills learnt here are applicable in many situations. It doesn't matter *where* you learn it, it matters *that* you learnt it. Children's librarianship has all the elements that you find in any professional librarianship position.

“A serious lack of knowledge about children's librarianship, including its intellectual content and importance, was identified by Fenwick as a major hurdle to its advancement” (Bird, 2002, p.18).

Children's programs such as Rock & Rhyme can provide opportunities to develop skills in areas as diverse as: project management, promotion and marketing, budgeting, training, staff and time management, team building, collaboration with external organisations, reporting, public speaking and negotiation. It was invaluable to experience the entire process including successes and failures through every step: from initial idea and implementation to establishment on a state-wide basis.

### **Project Planning**

Working with experienced team members to create a project plan is a useful learning experience. For a new librarian, project planning skills are developed during the creation of a program. Experiencing the step by step processes such as setting milestones, meeting deadlines, task allocation and consultation with stakeholders is vital. Because, as much as we hate to say it, you can't learn everything from books!

One of the most important things that we learnt during the planning stage is that it is essential to maintain an element of flexibility. Initially, it was decided that each of the sessions would follow a theme. It soon became apparent, however, that this was too restrictive and that babies don't care about themes (Marino, 2003). Several sessions had been fully planned with themes but after this realisation a more flexible delivery was adopted.

### **Managing staff and volunteers**

The set of skills involved in managing staff can be acquired during participation in a project of this type. Rock & Rhyme involves professional and non-professional staff including librarians, library technicians and volunteers working together towards a common goal.

Managing this diverse range of people requires a variety of approaches to ensure team cohesion. Team members need to be clear on their roles, priorities and the processes of the program to achieve objectives. Clear guidelines help to maintain enthusiasm and dedication. Managers also need to identify and address gaps in knowledge (Klasen & Clutterbuck, 2002) and to ensure that, when working with a diverse group of professional and non-professional staff, everyone's learning needs are met. In the case of Rock & Rhyme, training was held for everyone involved throughout the state, including staff in the smallest of country libraries. As a result, these libraries have embraced the program with open arms.

Experiencing good management practices, including recognising the value of training will benefit you not only in future endeavours but in all workplace communication. Even if you aren't actively managing, these principles assist you in your daily interactions.

**Public Speaking/Singing**

The mention of public speaking brings out feelings of dread in many people; the mention of leading a group in singing can be enough to make their knees shake. Participation in a program such as Rock & Rhyme is a great opportunity to overcome these fears. “The babies will think you sound beautiful, even if you don’t – or even if you only know one tune!” (Marino & Houlihan, 1992, p.3) and the carers are too involved in their babies and their own singing voices to care about your performance. One of the new library technicians who leads sessions on a regular basis was inexperienced in running group sessions and lacked confidence in this area. Through leading sessions she has discovered a new ability and actually enjoys it!

Public speaking and, more specifically, speaking to groups is something that will occur over and over throughout the career of a librarian. From training staff, to running tours and making presentations at conferences; these skills can be utilised in a variety of situations. And what more sympathetic and responsive audience is there to practice on than babies.

**Promotion and marketing**

As with any new project implemented in an organisation, Rock & Rhyme had to be marketed to an audience. Many types of promotion were used including contacting community groups with appropriate clientele such as nursing mothers groups; interviews on local radio; and posters and flyers in the library. The target audience for this program was well defined and marketing was directed accordingly.

Volunteers and staff proved useful in promoting the program, as they publicised it to their friends and family in the community on a personal level: money can’t buy word of mouth promotion. Attendance is growing in all locations as babies’ carers perpetuate this word of mouth endorsement.

Good promotion is an essential element of a successful program. It comes in many forms and all of these should be utilised where possible, keeping in mind that your enthusiasm for the project is the best promotion of all.

### **The new librarian and the importance of finding a friend**

Like most new librarians we encountered problems when entering the workplace. Participating in a new program can go a long way to easing the transition period both for you and your team members.

One of the major problems encountered was that current staff members had been in their positions for so long, they were unable to put themselves in the shoes of a newcomer. This manifested itself in various ways, from assuming that we knew how to do things because “that’s the way it’s always been done”, and therefore we should *know* that that is how it is done, to overwhelming us with information about every detail of a task.

To overcome this, it is essential to find a friend. If your organisation doesn’t assign you a mentor, either formally or informally, initiate it!

“Having a mentor is highly likely to increase your performance. It is also highly likely to increase your ability to network...a mentor will often have many useful contacts and knowledge of job opportunities, and may also be in a position to speak highly of a mentee to the appropriate people.” (Klasen & Clutterbuck, 2003 p. 45)

Mentors within the State Library have been invaluable to us; providing us with support, clarifying goals and procedures, being approachable and open to all questions no matter how dumb they seem, and providing an objective perspective when everything seems overwhelming. When a new person joins Rock & Rhyme they are always teamed with a more experienced session leader in an informal mentoring structure. This mentoring culture ensures that the new person becomes competent and confident in all aspects of the program.

### **Working with other generations**

Our situation within Tasmania is unusual, in that for over ten years librarianship courses were not offered in the state. In order to gain a qualification people had to either study by distance education or move interstate. This resulted in a low yield of librarians over this time. Consequently the work force has remained relatively static

with a high median age, especially when “Librarians are markedly older than the average for Australian occupations. 60 per cent are 45 or older... Only 14 per cent are under 35” (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005, cited from Australian Library and Information Association).

In early 2001 the State Library identified this looming shortage of qualified staff as a future planning issue and, in conjunction with the University of Tasmania, developed the Graduate Diploma of Information Management, offered for the first time in 2003. From our personal observations, the introduction of this course has reduced the median age substantially. This has introduced a new challenge for everyone involved, with Generation X and Y workers entering a predominantly Baby Boomer workforce. Different generations are looking for different outcomes (Moodie, 2004) and this affects the way they work.

Generational differences were highlighted when preparing for a Rock & Rhyme session. One of the Baby Boomer volunteers needed specific instructions when it came to practising *Hickory Dickory Dock*, asking “how many beats are there to the bar?” Whereas our attitude is “whatever works best”.

“There are four generations [working] in libraries, with big gaps in approach and communicating style.” (Whitmell and Associates. 2004, p.7) It is important to be aware that these differences exist, and to accept that not everyone thinks the way that you do. Although there is a lot of literature about the different needs and learning styles of the different generations, never assume that there is a one size fits all answer to working together. Look for the strengths and weaknesses in the individuals that you work with and be aware of your own; this is how good teams are built.

### **Establishing yourself in a team**

Participation in a completely new program puts all participants on an equal footing; no one is sure of the rules because there are literally no rules. This provides the opportunity to build relationships based on shared experiences. All input and ideas are valued, and hidden or unusual skills are found, for example, making felt creatures or playing the ukulele. The fact that Rock & Rhyme is such a positive, happy program

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helps to facilitate communication within the team. Singing together and making fools of yourselves is a bonding experience!

Participating in a program such as Rock & Rhyme helps break down barriers and proves your worth to the team and to the organisation. It can greatly assist in building bridges between library technicians and librarians, as many day-to-day tasks can isolate the two positions. Rock & Rhyme is a program that is based upon your skills and interests rather than qualifications. Librarians and library technicians can participate equally. Increased interaction between staff members greatly enhances morale and fosters better working environments.

People always admire individuals who are willing to do something that most people think is a bit scary, especially singing in public. This demonstrates that you are a “good sport” and are willing to have a go at anything that is thrown at you.

#### **Resistance to change**

Like all new employees we were keen to make a good impression and accepted any work that was offered, which proved to be a real advantage with the implementation of this program. As a new librarian everything is change. This meant that we weren't thrown by the challenges of a new program. Long standing staff members can be resistant to new programs and change, and at times dislike moving out of their comfort zone, even though people who work in libraries are generally more comfortable with change than people in other professions. The library is an ever changing environment, one that ideally is constantly adapting to the world around it. It is imperative to maintain a flexible and open attitude to the change that we will inevitably encounter.

“The most effective technique for overcoming resistance to change is by encouraging participation in the decision making, problem solving and planning processes.” (Bryson, 1999 as cited in Sanders, 2004, p.15) This is how resistance to change is overcome within Rock & Rhyme. Libraries are encouraged to take ownership by adapting the program to their needs and involving all staff members in the processes of implementation and maintenance. This has been essential to the success of Rock & Rhyme.

**Conclusion**

It is important to view all your experiences not only as a stepping stone towards your future goals, but also as a way of clarifying what your goals might be. In an ideal world we would all be able to walk into the job that we dream of while we're studying. The reality is that the market dictates where we start out and it is up to us to determine where we end up. It is important to see everything as an opportunity. You may think that your life ambition is to be a metadata cataloguer but without experience in other areas you may never know that you actually love pretending to be a teapot in a room full of excited children!

Programs such as Rock & Rhyme ensure that libraries serve children as 'patrons of today', not just as 'patrons of tomorrow' (Burton, 1998, as cited in Brown, 2004). It is essential to create an environment that they, the children and the carers, want to continue to participate in and be involved in; this in turn continues to ensure the future of libraries as an important and relevant community space.

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