

# Building a Reading Culture from Birth

**Dolly Parton's Imagination Library** delivered by United Way Australia

## Why Early Literacy Matters

In the first five years a child's brain builds the foundations for learning, wellbeing and success – long before they start school.

**Shared reading between parents and children is one of the most powerful, low-cost ways to strengthen these foundations.** It's a proven protective factor against developmental vulnerability, helping children start school ready to thrive.

Literacy is not only an educational outcome – it's a social determinant of health and economic participation. **Strengthening early literacy reduces intergenerational disadvantage and drives better outcomes in education, employment and wellbeing.**



## The Challenge

**10 X**

more likely to be developmentally vulnerable if not read to at home<sup>1</sup>

**30+**

books at home at age 2-3 linked to higher NAPLAN scores in reading and numeracy in Year 3<sup>2</sup>

**1 IN 3**

Australian children do not meet Year 3 reading benchmarks<sup>3</sup>

## Imagination Library – Read. Learn. Succeed.

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (Imagination Library) is a proven, scalable initiative that builds early literacy and strengthens families from birth.

- One high-quality, age-appropriate book delivered monthly to every child from birth to age five
- Builds a home library of up to 60 books, fostering daily reading habits
- Includes tip sheets to help carers engage with the book to drive language development
- Wrap-around engagement activities support and connect families to other services in the community

- Place-based approach with strong collaborative support from councils, libraries, educators and health professionals
- Funded through mix of local government, philanthropy, local business and state government

Delivered at the most powerful moment in a child's development, the Imagination Library transforms homes into places of learning and connection.

1 Pham, C., Downes, M., Guo, S., Jahan, F., De Silva, S., O'Connor, E., Gray, S., Priest, N. & Goldfeld, S. (2024). Measuring vulnerability and disadvantage in early childhood data collections: Phase Two. Centre for Community Child Health, Melbourne, Victoria. <https://doi.org/10.25374/MCRI.26300749>

2 Yu, M. & Daraganova, G. (2015). Children's early home learning environment and learning outcomes in the early years of school (LSAC Annual Statistical Report 2014 – Chapter 4). Australian Institute of Family Studies

3 Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. National Results. <https://www.acara.edu.au/reporting/national-report-on-schooling-in-australia/naplan-national-results>

# The Evidence

Groundbreaking global research by United Way Australia and Macquarie University show that children in the Imagination Library have a significant head start in their lifelong learning journey.<sup>4</sup> They have more books, greater interest in reading and a stronger reading culture in their family home:

- Children enrolled in the Imagination Library in Australia were **9x more likely** to be read to 4 or more days per week compared to children not in the program.
- In Australia, caregivers who read daily from birth were **5x more likely** to still read daily at age 3, and their children showed stronger early literacy skills.
- Caregivers were **7x more likely** to count images, **8x more likely** to describe images and **4x more likely** to let the child hold the book compared to caregivers not in the program.
- The **number one benefit** reported by caregivers in Australia was that their children enrolled in the Imagination Library developed a strong love of books and reading.

Book-gifting from birth is a proven investment in children's futures.

## A Proven Return on Investment = 1:10

Independent analysis by Dandolo Partners (2025) found that every \$1 invested in the Imagination Library returns \$10 in long-term benefits to government and society through improved literacy, reduced educational intervention costs, and stronger workforce participation.

## What your support can provide:

It costs just \$9 a month, or \$108 a year, for a child to receive a new book and reading resources every month, delivered to their home.

| Contribution    | Impact of your support                         |
|-----------------|------------------------------------------------|
| <b>\$5,400</b>  | 50 children enrolled for 12 months             |
| <b>\$10,800</b> | 100 children enrolled for 12 months            |
| <b>\$27,000</b> | 250 children enrolled for 12 months            |
| <b>\$54,000</b> | 500 children enrolled for 12 months            |
| <b>Custom</b>   | Large or small, every donation makes an impact |

4 Galea, Claire Melanie Anita (2025). The Impact of shared book reading on children and their Families: insights from Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. Macquarie University. Thesis. <https://doi.org/10.25949/30123745.v1>



## Tamworth: A Community of Readers

**The Tamworth Local Government Area demonstrates what's possible when a whole community invests in reading from birth.**

**Since 2019, 98% of children residing in the Tamworth Local Government Area have been enrolled in the Imagination Library.**

Health nurses introduce parents to the program shortly after birth, libraries manage enrolments, and families are connected with local literacy events. This simple, collaborative model has transformed the Tamworth Local Government Area into Australia's largest real-world example of early literacy success – and a model that can be replicated statewide.

### Jody's Story: Tamworth Parent

Jody Peters saw a remarkable change in her children's love for reading after enrolling her two younger sons, Leon and Kinnon, in the Imagination Library. Jody reflects on how her younger children have developed strong literacy skills at a much earlier age compared to her older two children. Leon adores the Baby Book Time sessions at the local library, and Jody is amazed by Kinnon's growing vocabulary, crediting the program for giving them a head start in learning.

Jody strongly believes that the early exposure to books has given her younger children an advantage, setting them on a path to literacy far earlier than her older children, who did not have access to the program.

**Together, we can give  
every child the best start.**



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