



## **“Felix” the start of a journey to literacy**

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### **Abstract**

*Young children need to be stimulated to respond, explore and understand the world they live in. Understanding ‘stories’ can create opportunities to imagine the world beyond their immediate experience. Literacy facilitates learning - adequate language, social, independent life skills and work skills are enormously heightened if children are literate. Children who are blind or have low vision can miss vital experiences due to the lack of visual stimuli and the opportunity to learn by observation and mimicry. These children need alternative paths to stimulate the process of becoming literate.*

*Vision Australia’s Felix Library consists of 550 plus specially designed kits containing Braille and audio storybooks along with toys and tactile objects that help bring the magical world of the stories to life.*

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has drafted the following definition:

"Literacy' is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society."

Understanding the relationships between written letters and spoken sounds, or phonics, children need to be taught the sounds individual printed letters and groups of letters make. Knowing the relationships between letters and sounds helps children to recognize familiar words accurately and automatically, and "decode" new words<sup>1</sup>.

So how do we develop literacy skills in children who are blind?

### ***Improving literacy in children who are blind or have low vision***

Young children need to be stimulated to respond, explore and understand the world they live in. Understanding 'stories' can create opportunities to imagine the world beyond their immediate experience. Literacy facilitates learning - adequate language, social, independent life skills and work skills are enormously heightened if children are literate. Children who are blind or have low vision can miss vital experiences due to the lack of visual stimuli and the opportunity to learn by observation and mimicry. These children need alternative paths to stimulate the process of becoming literate.

Picturing the storybook characters we know and love isn't so simple for young children who are blind or have low vision.

The alternative has to be tactual and the Vision Australia Feelix Library is the very first step for very young child on the path to literacy.

Vision Australia's Feelix Library consists of 550 plus specially designed kits containing Braille and audio storybooks along with toys and tactile objects that help bring the magical world of the stories to life.

It is a unique resource targeted specifically at giving very young children (birth to six years) who are blind or have low vision the opportunity to experience storytelling with material suitable to their development and needs. The books are provided in braille and tactile formats and are also accessible to print readers. Furthermore we find that the kits are a great way of exposing children to braille, tactile and language experiences that develop their story

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<sup>1</sup> National Childrens Literacy website. <http://www.child2000.org/lit-tips.htm>

telling and literacy skills. Feelix library members are then just as 'ready to read' as their sighted peers when they start school at six years of age.

### ***What is Feelix?***

The Braille Book Project, known as *Feelix*, is a borrowing library of picture books that have been made accessible for the first time to children who are blind or vision impaired so that they can have fun with the same stories as their friends and siblings.

Each storybook kit contains the original picture storybook annotated with braille, an audio CD or tape of the story, some tactual aids to help the child enter the world of the story and a little handbook with tactile graphics so that children can tell the story to themselves or others.

The aim of *Feelix* is to give young children who are blind and vision impaired equal access to picture storybooks and a chance to develop important pre-reading braille skills while having fun with books.

### ***Feelix Kits***

Despite the young age of Library members, Feelix kits aim to provide independent access, including:

- a case designed for young children to open and explore themselves
- audio and tactile materials that provide children with the opportunity to independently familiarize themselves with the story
- a small tactile handbook that is safe, sturdy and designed to encourage children to search for tactile clues to tell their own story

Feelix kits allow children to share their experience with their parents, siblings and peers.

Feelix books break down the 'fear' of braille as a written medium. Families begin to realize that braille is not only accessible for their child but for them too if they wish to learn.

Tactile books and hands-on materials are universal in their application to the story's meaning. The themes of the stories are designed to meet the developmental stages of a child's life. Families need only to indicate what their child's needs are in order to receive developmentally appropriate material.

Presently there are 550 story kits available in the Feelix library. The borrowing period is three weeks which does not include delivery and return time. Kits are sent by 'free post' to families in padded postbags for braille materials.

## **Global access**

A collection of Vision Australia's Feelix kits are also available with the audio and print elements in languages other than English. At present, Vision Australia kits are offered in Chinese, Vietnamese, Turkish Arabic and Somali to enable non-English speaking parents the opportunity to participate with their children who are blind or have low vision.

Feelix kits are centrally produced and widely distributed through Australia with potential for global distribution should the organisation so choose.

## **Feedback**

The Feelix Library conducted an Evaluative Survey to investigate how the story kits were being used, so that it could be established whether the objectives set for the library were being met.

The survey took the form of a questionnaire that was posted or emailed to families. Some surveys were completed by phone. Questions on the survey were decided by the working party that has been established since the inception of the Feelix Project. This includes Early Childhood workers and braille teachers as well as the production team. The questions aimed to glean whether the members and their families were feeling more comfortable with the braille and tactile formats and whether parents could see recognizable changes in the way their children approached and understood books.

Before discussing the results of this survey it is important to consider what we predicted families to say. In setting up the Feelix Library there were primary objectives set. It is fair to say that it was expected that all or most of these were being met.

These objectives were:

- To increase awareness of the need for books for young children and babies with a vision impairment.
- To encourage more storytelling in families with a vision impaired child as a necessity
- To develop book handling skills, turning pages, scanning for braille, finding the front and back pages, sharing a book with another person.
- To develop over time, an ability to attend to a story - this listening is usually enhanced when a child can hold something that relates to the story.
- To encourage language development via the copying of words and rhyme in a simple story, to retell their own story.
- To encourage tactual investigation by providing interesting tactual books and "hands-on" materials related to the story.
- To extend the imaginative world of the story to a child with a vision impairment by providing real life "hands-on" material to help them re-create the story for themselves.
- To encourage children to want to listen to stories.

- To develop independent storytelling skills using any of the materials in the kit.
- To familiarize the whole family to the braille code and support them in seeing it's potential for their child.

### ***An Evaluation of the Feelix Early Childhood Braille Book Library Four Years on.***

"How exposure to Braille through the Feelix Library encourages Literacy: an evaluative study"

This Library has become a resource greatly valued by our members and their families as well as their Early Childhood Educators. It is unique in providing children in this age range with a rich supply of print and braille stories with tactual books and hands on materials that relate to the story. Production continues to keep up with our growing membership.

The responses of families to the questions on the survey are interesting and very important, many of these are used to provide information about the results.

The following aspects of the Feelix Library were investigated:

- currency of borrowing;
- increased interest in story books;
- curiosity about braille;
- use of tactile books; whether objects help maintain interest in the story;
- any changes in the way their child uses the kit;
- observable benefits since borrowing;
- changes in the handling of tactile materials;
- connection of real life experiences they have had with stories.

### **The Results**

#### **CURRENCY OF BORROWING.**

Regular:	83%
Occasionally:	10%
Infrequently:	7%

Comments were largely about late returns. This is largely managed by keeping communication lines open, fines are not imposed one or two phone calls are usually all that is required.

#### **INTEREST IN STORY BOOKS INCREASING.**

A lot:	37%
Somewhat:	39%
Hardly:	10%
None:	14%

A regular comment here was that with low vision their child had an established love of story books. Of the 24% who registered none or little interest it was always stated that their child was too young. In the first 2 categories families reported an increase in being read to.

#### **CURIOSITY ABOUT BRAILLE.**

Always:	16%
Frequently:	9%
Sometimes:	34%
Never:	41%

The responses always and frequently came from families where the child had no vision. Also 20% thought their child too young and 7% too impaired to show an interest in braille yet.

#### **USE OF TACTILE BOOKS.**

Always:	23%
Frequently:	9%
Sometimes:	18%
Never:	50%

Again these results are a reflection of the very young members of our library and those with multiple impairments. The tactile books seem to appeal to children who have been regular borrowers, they are an "acquired taste". About 15% seem to prefer this book to the picture book- this could be interpreted as a pre-braille step. It is interesting that English as a second language children seem to like them too. Of the 21% who said they used them always, children were described as using them to tell their own stories.

#### **OBJECTS HELP MAINTAIN INTEREST IN THE STORY.**

Always:	32%
Frequently:	36%
Sometimes:	22%
Never:	10%

Parents report that questions about the "hands-on" materials further the child's interest in the story. Noisemakers are often generalized to the wider world –e.g. the child will associate "mooing" every time they hear the word cow. It is also reported that a significant number play separately with the items, and have not yet made the connection of the items with the story.

#### **CHANGE IN THE USE OF THE KIT.**

The most widely expressed change was "more interest in books". A number of families mentioned that their child can now listen and hold the tactile materials or book, which previously was not possible. Page scanning for braille is becoming more regular. Sitting still to listen is also an area that has changed among some families. More investigation of tactile materials was also reported.

## **OBSERVABLE BENEFITS.**

These are taken direct from family comments and the readings reflect %of the whole group that commented about this.

More interest in books:	47%
Copying language:	7%
Listening to whole story on CD:	14%
Interest in reading:	14%
Associating looking and reading together	7%
Turning pages:	3%
Extends understanding to other stories:	3%
Wants to join other libraries:	3%
Uses Feelix cases better:	10%
Independent use of tape player/CD to access stories:	3%
Now connects tactile things to stories:	14%
Discriminates preferred stories:	7%.

## **CHANGES IN HANDLING OF TACTILE MATERIALS.**

Once again figures reflect the % of families who made comments of this nature.

No change:	10%
Better management of cases:	7%
Uses for imaginative play:	18%
Connecting tactile materials to story:	22%
Increases mood and concentration for listening:	10%
Becoming more able to return materials:	30%.

## **CONNECTING STORIES WITH REAL LIFE EXPERIENCES.**

Yes:	43%
No:	29%
Child too young:	28%

Examples given are: listening to seashells, recognizing farm animals, identifying sounds that real animals make, looking in rock pools, connecting everyday activities like teeth brushing with stories they have had.

### ***Conclusion:***

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn from these results. Firstly, children with low vision and children with no vision use the Feelix kits in different ways. It was always expected that interest in braille would be less among families with a low vision child, however many families commented that their child had become "aware" that it was there. Also it said something for people who couldn't see. Further, families have shown far more interest in the braille code some asking for braille information sheets to help decipher the stories. Some parents have commented that the correspondence of the braille to print format helps them to understand and decipher the braille more easily.

Secondly, we have had a significant increase in membership of children in their first year of life, 20% of the library comprises children in this age group.

This is a different and very positive trend-because these new members will be borrowers for the maximum period of six years. This group seems to enjoy the story telling experience, but is less interested in the other materials. This appears to change with regular borrowing. In sending kits to these members, great care is taken to send appropriate stories and materials.

It is evident that interest in storybooks and listening to stories has increased among our members - this was a major objective. It was also anticipated that tactile materials would help maintain listening ability and understanding. This has proved to work more than 50% of the time.

The use of tactile books among the members varies according to age and individual preference. The 21% of families, who report that their child loves them to tell their own story, is sufficient to warrant their continued inclusion in these kits.

The "hands-on" real life materials clearly assist in aiding a child with a vision impairment to maintain an interest in a story. About 70% of families indicate their regular use during or after the story. Until the connection is made by the child between the objects and the content of the story, it is expected they would only be related to as playthings.

The Feelix Library is a resource for young children with a vision impairment, to develop early literacy skills and in particular braille literacy skills. With extended borrowing children learn to use the kits to suit their needs and develop early reading skills very effectively. They show evidence of being able to attend for longer, and retell stories to themselves using either the books or tactual materials. They become more independent in book handling skills and in searching for braille and print. They begin to associate reading with understanding a story. Parents observe numerous behaviours that indicate this - children can now look and listen concurrently; some children extend their information to other stories; children will search for preferred stories; children are scanning for braille during story reading. All these skills are basic pre-requisites on the road to becoming to be literate.

There are noticeable differences in the two groups of children who are borrowers from the Feelix Library i.e. those who have very little vision and those who have some usable vision. It is expected that awareness of braille skills will encourage the families of the very young child who may potentially be a braille user sometime in the future. Removing the fear of using braille as a medium is a vital part of the Feelix Library's goal. It is expected that with continued borrowing families will become more open to the information offered them.