

# HOW THE PRAMS STARTED JAMMING

RONI SNITCHER

Librarian, Sea Point Library

Roni Mira Snitcher completed a teaching degree before qualifying as a librarian. She worked at the reference desk of the National Library for several years before ascending to children's librarianship with which she is in her fifteenth consecutive year at the Sea Point Library.

We live in a digital age, with our beloved books slowly being relegated to a far second behind cellphones, DVDs, laptops and television. Too often do I see people old enough to drive coming in to my library to apply for their very first library card.

What if you had a library card from before you could walk?

What if you were surrounded by books from the earliest of ages?

Would this make a difference? Let me tell you my story.

Noa started visiting the Sea Point Library regularly with Lizzy, her nanny, when she was

eight months old. When Lizzy filled out the application forms for their membership my colleague Najma exclaimed: 'This is a famous baby!' She had recognised the name of Noa's daddy Craig,

a well-loved fashion designer. I will admit, Noa's outfits were interesting, but she herself was an interesting infant. Lizzy made a point of being with us every Wednesday morning when the children from Ellerton School came from across the road for story time. There at the back of the rows of kids were Noa, Lizzy and one or two other babies, noisily distracting us.

And so it continued until the end of August 2007, when an important event occurred that would bring about far-reaching changes.

At the time of the World Congress of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) in Durban I decided to treat myself to a few days in my old home town. The topic was *Libraries for the future: progress, development and partnership*.

I loved learning about best practices in libraries in other parts of the world. Thinking back on the sessions I attended, the one that was probably the most memorable for me addressed social inclusion: how can public libraries embrace the challenge of reaching out to serve all people in their communities: The right to read!

Teresa Brook (Public Library Services, The State Library of South Australia) mentioned the term pram jam and my imagination took flight. Her talk was entitled *Public libraries and their communities: South Australia reads*.

Pram jam? Pram jam? My mind raced. Lizzy, Noa, the others, what is that? I have

one! I have the makings of my own pram jam. Dear reader, the rest is history.

I returned, invigorated, to my precious Lizzy and we explained things to each other as we always do in our relationship.

Nanny Sara started coming every Wednesday with Terry, and when they befriended people pushing prams, they invited them.

I confess, once or twice I stopped people in the street nearby to invite them to attend as well, as we needed infants in prams for our newly named *pram jam*. The Ellerton children changed days and Wednesdays at the Sea Point Library became *pram jam day*. Rainy days proved equally popular to the sunny ones.

Terry fascinated me. He was so unlike my son at that age. He sat still for a long while, deeply focused on the book before him. The other boys were like that too. This was a new generation of babies and gone was the hyperactivity I was expecting. In fact, they looked at me with wide open, appreciative eyes.

I worked out that four months is the optimal age to start, although of course younger and older is marvellous as well.

I was so touched when a young couple arrived with their week-old son to attend our reading. This was the place they felt it important to be during paternity leave.

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### Practical hints

Following are some tips as to what material brings forty babies and their caregivers to attention:

Never far from my elbow on pram jam days are picture books, one line to a page, with the following memorable verses:

- 📖 Row, row, row your boat ...
- 📖 Old Macdonald had a farm ...
- 📖 Five little ducks went swimming one day ...
- 📖 If you're happy and you know it ...
- 📖 The wheels of the bus go round and round ...

Soon I was in an isiXhosa class learning how to click and with instructor Jurina's help, I had the words and music and advice from a musical nanny to learn off by heart the enchanting

- 📖 Umoya = The wind
- 📖 Sifikil'e-zibukweni = We have come to the dam
- 📖 Imfene Emqolombeni = Baboon in a cave.

I like to spend an hour engaging with the babies so the early ones have a feast and there is something for latecomers as well.

Speaking of feasting ... don't you know there is to be no eating in the library? Are you breastfeeding under that blanket?

We have a musical feast as well when kindly musicians offer to play music to accompany our beloved songs.

The pram jam phenomenon is spreading from library to library.

I wish for every library to have one. This is my earnest plea.

The benefits of reading are exponential and I want all children to have this early advantage.

I thank my lucky stars for the help and inspiration that came my way from South Australia, where early reading is sponsored by government and newborns receive a free kit and many other incentives to be at the library often.

Terry and Noa are the best of friends and are well over the age of three now. They

have paved the way for the forty plus babies who attend my pram jams every week and I have no doubt that they will excel in all reading-related activities for the years to come. Terry and Noa have been comfortable inside the library before taking their first steps and will love libraries throughout their lives.

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The Pram Jam in action



◀ Roni Snitcher's pram jam is a roaring success. Seen with her is Lizzy with little Noa who always attended the story-telling sessions on Wednesday mornings

