

## Meerilinga Podcast – Positive Childhoods

Season 2 Episode 1 with Nola Allen

### Belynda Smith

Welcome, welcome everyone to Meerilinga's Positive Childhood Podcast. This podcast is recorded on the land of the Whadjuk Noongar people. I'd like to respectfully acknowledge their connection to land, waters, and community, and their elders, past and present; and of course, their parents. I'd like to honor First Nations people everywhere in the spirit of reconciliation.

Secondly, *Positive Childhoods* is produced as part of the Children's Week celebrations in WA. It's funded by the Department of Education and Lotterywest, so thank you to those funders.

And thank you so much to educators, parents, and anyone else listening in today. We really appreciate everything it took for you to tune into this podcast. We know how hard it is to find time in your busy day, and we really acknowledge your efforts for supporting the needs of your children.

I'm Belynda Smith, I'm a parenting facilitator with Meerilinga's Parenting Service. I'm really passionate about meeting the needs of parents so that we can help families and children to thrive.

Meerilinga is a not-for-profit organisation and registered charity. We promote the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: working with children, their families, early childhood professionals, planners and the community to raise the status of children in WA.

The 2022 Children's Week theme is "All children have the right to a standard of living that supports their well-being and healthy development." So that's what we're going to focus on today.

Now I am thrilled to welcome our beautiful guests today. Nola Allen has worked in the library and education sectors for about 40 years. Specialising in services for children and families, so she's a perfect guest for us! She was actually the program coordinator at the State Library of WA for the Better Beginnings Family Literacy Program from 2004 to 2013, and in this role, she collaborated on the initiation, development, and implementation of this award-winning state-wide literacy initiative, which promotes reading and book sharing with children from birth. So many of you will probably know *Baby Ways*, which Nola had a big hand in. With a special interest in the fields of children's literature, literacy and reading promotion, Nola has co-authored two children's books, one of them *Baby Ways*, and writes for professional journals and publications. Nola is a long-standing committee member of the Children's Book Council of Australia and a past CBCA awards judge. She's recently worked as a research assistant, for

ECU, on an early literacy initiative, and she currently consults to local governments and libraries on community publishing projects and library programming for families and young people.

I am thrilled to have Nola here. Welcome, welcome. Nice to have you here!

**Nola Allen**

It's lovely to be here, Belynda. Lovely to see you.

**Belynda Smith**

Thank you! So, do you want to tell us a little bit about, you Nola? The kind of work you've done, [and] a little bit more about the projects you've been involved with?

**Nola Allen**

Well, this, yes, as you say, I'm nearly 40 years involved in children's work and with libraries. I started initially with the Education Department, and I was working with advisory teachers in building school library collections that supported the primary school curriculum. From there I moved into public librarianship and worked with local governments – again as a children specialist librarian. Planning programs with families in the community and then being very hands on delivering story times, and running book clubs, and getting to know the families in in my local community. From there I moved into working with the State Library of WA and again kept my focus working with families and children but devoted a lot of my time again in looking at book selection. Looking at books for children from birth right through to the teenage years and I did a lot of work training Public Library staff across the state here in WA, which is where we first met!

**Belynda Smith**

That's where we first met!

**Nola Allen**

That was such a fantastic experience and because, as you know, there are very, very small libraries in small country towns – quite remote and isolated – so it's wonderful to have that experience meeting those library staff and trying to support them. So that was a big, a big focus of my work.

Around 2003 I was working with a wonderful, inspirational person, Sue North, who had been picking up on a lot of the research around early brain development and also looking at work that was happening in the UK, and particularly in the USA. It's around libraries and their work in early childhood and supporting families with young, young children. Sue and I started to work together and piloted a program that eventually became the Better Beginnings Family Literacy Program which is still being delivered to this day.

**Belynda Smith**

It is huge, isn't it!

**Nola Allen**

It is!

**Belynda Smith**

Doesn't it reach sort of like 97% of children in WA, is that right? Huge numbers, such a big impact.

**Nola Allen**

It does, it does. It's so exciting to see how the program has grown and developed over the years – that was one of the initial concerns that we had. When you start a program like this, the hope is that it will be sustained, it will continue for it to actually have an impact. And it certainly is still being delivered across WA through public libraries, but in partnership, which is a key feature of the program, in partnership with Community Health and with the Education Department. And it's been a wonderful program that still is very, very important to me. And I've still, even once I left the state library and after being coordinated for the program for a number of years, I've been working with ECU who from the inception of the program were evaluating the impact of Better Beginnings. So, I was able to see the program from different points of view as a research assistant. Talking to parents with young babies, talking to child health nurses, talking to library staff, and kindergarten teachers on what the program meant to them. And of course, always looking at improvements: where the program needed to be adapted or changed or expanded. To this very day it's still very close to my heart.

**Belynda Smith**

Yeah, and I can say as a parent who had experience of that program in my children's early lives, it was really powerful. And that was as someone who already loved books. I can only imagine that for families who didn't have that relationship maybe with books and didn't have a lot of books in their home, to receive those free books and have that support to bring that to their children's lives is really powerful and wonderful.

**Nola Allen**

I think some of the some of the comments and the feedback that we received from parents, I think there was one quote from one parent saying, "If we hadn't had Better Beginnings, we would have had a silent house."

That whole notion of having that first book to give to your baby. And just to support parents and to say, you know, this is something that you can do with your child from the very beginning. That was really a very critical aspect of the program: to empower and to provide parents with tools,

because we know that parents are their child's first teacher, so we were very keen to keep reinforcing that through the program.

**Belynda Smith**

Yeah, so it's really practically helpful, but it's also such a joy, isn't it? Sharing books with little ones!

**Nola Allen**

Yeah, exactly.

**Belynda Smith**

So, you're bringing all this joy to all these families

**Nola Allen**

Yes, that's right at the top of the list, I think for me too.

**Belynda Smith**

So, I'm really curious about how the better Beginnings initiative and the *Baby Ways* book particularly because that's a book I was reading to my son when he was in my belly. And I remember he was sort of my 'stunt baby', when I would go and give talks and things with this beautiful baby sitting there gloriously reading *Baby Ways*!

What are the facets of early literacy for those listening in? What are the parts of a child's development that books are tapping into and that reading together is working with.

**Nola Allen**

Perhaps using *Baby Ways* as an example – and again I was very privileged to be in that position when we were looking at this first pack to give to families. Looking at the books, and particularly board books which are there for those baby hands to start holding and feeling and for babies to start sort of sucking on and withstanding a lot of love.

Again, I was working with another wonderful colleague of mine who I still work with to this very day, Margaret Kett. We spent a lot of time and knew a lot about the children's publishing industry, but through the pilot we the books that we were using in the pilot were mainly published in the UK, So, while they were wonderful in themselves, they often reflected the northern hemisphere, so you may have had little babies playing in the snow. But also, some of the terminology that was being used and we were very, very keen to look at producing a baby board book. Believe it or not, there weren't a lot being published way back in the early 2000s for very young children that actually reflected that diversity, that reflected their family that they were brought up in. The neighbors on this street. You know, who hey play with down at the local park. That was uppermost in our minds.

And so, and I think once again that's such an important feature of connecting children and families with books, is that representation. Seeing themselves and seeing that a book is quite integral and important in their lives.

There were other features that we knew would be sure fire winners. We wanted the book to have a simple text. We wanted it to be rhyming and have a great rhythm. We knew that repetition was really important, not just from that early brain development aspect, but also helping parents to remember, and children to remember, the words and help them join in. And to participate.

We wanted to incorporate lots of fun sounds and noises so that you can encourage people to be funny, and to be silly, and that enjoyment aspect. There was a lot of alliteration in some of the words that we used – so you know those important beginning sounds and ending sounds. All of those little building blocks that we knew were very important leading up to building children literacy skills. We knew babies loved looking at baby's faces.

**Belynda Smith**

They really do, yeah.

**Nola Allen**

And so, with your *stunt baby*, he would have been doing exactly what we hoped he would be doing. Looking at those beautiful faces. And then of course the fact that at the very end of the book, you have that lovely surprise-

**Belynda Smith**

The mirror, yeah.

**Nola Allen**

And that baby that's reading the book becomes a part of the book. They're right there with all of those other babies.

**Belynda Smith**

It's so interesting because it's such a simple little book.

And yet, I can hear the profound thought and intention and care and research base and everything that's gone into it. And that's why it's lasted. That's why it's still so powerful and important for so many families and babies. Because it really meets a need there.

**Nola Allen**

Still to this day, I still get – and Margaret – we still get comments and feedback from parents. My daughter now has friends who have had their own babies and she'll send me photographs and say, "Look, my friends just received this pack and look at them looking at baby ways"

And I've become a grandmother recently, which has been very exciting.

**Belynda Smith**

Congratulations!

**Nola Allen**

So, I'm actually sitting down with my little grandson at five months and sharing *Baby Ways* with him and watching him to interact with the books. It's been an absolute joy.

Better Beginnings in 2020 delivered its one millionth birth pack – of course now there's two more touch points with the program: there's sing with me pack that is given to families with children at two years of age, which reinforces a lot of the thinking around rhymes and singing. And then there's a kindergarten packed with children starting school. And again, there's a gift book in each pack, and information and resources for families.

**Belynda Smith**

You've touched a little bit there on what made *Baby Ways*, so great for little ones. Do you want to go into a little bit more around for the parents and caregivers listening, and early educators listening; what makes a great book, for each age group? So that's kind of the earliest babies; what about for 2–3-year-olds or for 4–5-year-olds? What makes a great book for them?

**Nola Allen**

I think a lot of the same qualities that we've just been talking about with *Baby Ways*. Looking at the language in the books. Research shows that the vocabulary and the language that's used in picture books is much richer than the everyday conversations that sometimes we have with our children. Sometimes it's very directional speech, you know, "let's go to the park" or, you know, "put your Teddy bear back in the box". When you start reading certain picture books you are introducing really interesting words that you wouldn't necessarily be using in everyday speech. I've got a couple of favourites here – apologies to our listeners because you won't see some of these books, but this will just encourage you to go to your local library or your book shop to hunt them down.

**Belynda Smith**

I can see *Mr Magnolia* there, that's one of my favourites!

**Nola Allen**

Some of these are tried and true favourites published back in the 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s; but they're withstanding the test of time. There's this wonderful rhyme; you know "*Mr Magnolia* has only one **boot** and two lovely sisters who play on the **flute**, but *Mr Magnolia* has only one boot". That repetition, that rhyme, for two and threes, and four and five's rhyme encourages them to start also anticipating. When you're reading a book like this, you can hesitate before you turn the

page and see if they might be able to guess the word, which they often do. And there's such a sense of satisfaction when you already know the answer.

**Belynda Smith**

Yes, 100%, yes.

**Nola Allen**

And that's what you're trying to do the whole time, I think reinforce such a positive experience with the book. That's again part of this whole notion when we're looking at early literacy skill development, we're wanting children to feel comfortable and familiar with books so that when they start school and there are books all around them, it's-

**Belynda Smith**

They already know which way to hold it, which by the pages turn all of those pre-literacy skills.

**Nola Allen**

That's right.

And then in the English language, they know that the text goes from left to right because as we've been reading to them over the years, as they're getting a little bit older, sometimes we run our finger under the lines of the text.

They're very subtle things. And we're probably doing all of these things intuitively, but sometimes it's really good to just stop and be really mindful and thinking, "oh, OK, this is something that I know to do", but by pointing to a word – and then again with *Mr Magnolia* when you get to the word "and Mr Magnolia has only one **boot**", because that words being repeated over and over, you point to that word. And then your child at two, three, four, five, is recognising that those funny marks on the page, they're the reason that you're making that sound, saying that word.

And for them when they start their own writing, or they're starting their own scribble or drawings and you can encourage them to make up their own stories because they've scribbled something and those arks on the page do mean something to them. You can have some fun making up these stories that they're starting to write.

I think, Belinda, when we're talking about picture books in particular, we're talking about visual literacy.

**Belynda Smith**

Which is so important now and becoming more and more.

## **Nola Allen**

Isn't it? And I think, you know, we're surrounded in such a visual world, but you know how we really interpreting those images? What's being communicated from them? Are we, are we being critical of the images that we're looking at?

Well, from these very first— I sort of call picture books like this little portable art gallery's because you know you're exposing children to art in its finest form. I've always felt picture books are most exquisite form of imagery for young children to see. In all variety of media and mediums, they're seeing information conveyed through the pictures.

I've got another very old favourite in front of us, *Rosie's Walk* by Pat Hutchins. Which is sort of, very mannered illustrations. Beautiful bright colours. It's only 32 words in the text, it's virtually 1 long sentence, but the pictures tell the story.

And again, for a young child, a pre-reader who can't read the story, but starts looking at the story that's being told in those pictures and picking out the details. *Rosie's Walk* has so much in it, from the shapes and the buildings that you can talk about, to this great story of what's happening with the fox that's following this wonderfully oblivious Rosie the hen. She's walking around the farm and there's a wonderful joke that's being told in this as well. But those picture books, there are those that are integrated beautifully with the text to form that whole and tell the story. There are those that convey emotions and feelings that the text doesn't necessarily convey, but those images do. So, it's making that really strong emotional connection with children. And then there are the books that have these wonderful jokes in them.

Another wonderful favourite...

## **Belynda Smith**

Oh, I don't know this one. That's exciting.

Nola Allen

*Oh no, George.* Which again, you know, it's at its 10th anniversary. But it's so funny and, gosh the number of books about dogs these days.

You know when I was talking about books that reflect you and your family. So many books about dogs for families that have dogs, they'll connect immediately with George because George is our main character and he's the dog. But, for children reading the story, George's friend Harris is going out.

*"Will you be good, George?" asks Harris.*

*"Yes," says George. "I will be very good."*

## **Belynda Smith**

Oh dear.

**Nola Allen**

And he's so earnest, isn't he?

*"I hope I'll be good," George thinks.*

And then we just look at the expression on George's face.

*George sees something in the kitchen. It's cake. "I said I'd be good," George thinks. But I love cake! What will George do?*

**Belynda Smith**

I think so many little toddlers and pre-schoolers will see themselves here too. Where they don't quite have the brain development to be able to control those impulses. So, there's something really powerful about that, you're seeing your everyday experience in terms of A dog that you might have but also your lived experience of "oh dear".

**Nola Allen**

Absolutely, and you get this wonderful story that toddlers will absolutely delight in. And then there's just this this resolution that's so satisfying.

I just think they're very, very excellent picture books. They deliver so much more. We think about perhaps the learning, the fact that children are recognising their first, you know, recognising letters that they're going to eventually be writing their own letters, or the information that they're getting from books. But I just keep coming back to the fact that we want to make it so much pleasure and enjoyment and for the parent too and for the carer too, because I think you can't really fake it when you're reading with children

It's important that you're imparting just how much you love this, too.

**Belynda Smith**

I've got a couple of questions for you that I get asked when I talk about early literacy, one of them is what do you do when a two-year-old, halfway through the story gets up off your lap and wanders away?

**Nola Allen**

I've seen it at story times, and I see parents getting really frustrated or embarrassed or upset. Their child's not doing what they're supposed to do, but you've got to recognize it's a two-year-old or even a four-year-old and there are other distractions going on. Maybe they're not feeling that happy that day.

To force them to stay or to get really upset with them is doing you a disservice as well as them. Recognise that they need a break. So, get up with them and just wander off if you're in a library. The session will just keep running. That's fine. The library staff see it happened all the time, and they expect it.

For them, it's not a big deal at all. You can go off, sit down somewhere in the library, and play with some toys that might be nearby. Just have a chat. "Why are you feeling like this?" Or you know, "should we go and have a drink?" To try and force them to sit when they're not ready or they're not happy it's working against what that whole activity is really all about.

**Belynda Smith**

And then the other end of the spectrum is what about when they want to read the same book 25 times in one morning. Is that a good thing, Nola?

**Nola Allen**

(Nola Laughs) Well, I would say yes, but I don't have any toddlers anymore. And I'm not wanting to rush out the door because I've got a million things I have to do. But I certainly remember that feeling.

Maybe there's a way there's a trade-off that you can have and say I think *this* but why don't we why don't we read this when we get back. There could be other strategies that that you might be able to pull out.

It's funny, Belynda, one of the things when I was researching and talking with some child health nurses, they would say to me, "Oh yes, *Baby Ways*, some parents have said that book drives them mad."

**Belynda Smith**

Because they have to read it 73 times in one day!

And, you know there's an important reason for that, and that's, as you said earlier, repetitions. That's what babies and toddlers are all about, that's how they're learning. But for us, it can be a challenge.

**Nola Allen**

Oh, it can.

It was interesting, I watched a good friend of mine many years ago. Her little toddler when he'd get sort of very upset or grumpy and her automatic reaction: she would just drop what she was doing, and she'd just grab a book and just sit down with him. And somehow that would just calm him down. I learned a lot just by watching what she did because probably in a way too was helping to calm her down as well.

**Belynda Smith**

Absolutely, yeah.

**Nola Allen**

And so, it just brought the tempo down. And that's what reading books can do.

### **Belynda Smith**

We're getting on for time, so I really want to ask you about community books because that's been another of your passions, do you want to tell us a little bit about that?

### **Nola Allen**

Recently, since leaving the state library, I now consult to libraries generally, working with Public Library staff around children's programming and early literacy. I've also started work with a number of local governments on community publishing. I first came across it when I was working on Better Beginnings – a work that was being done in Victoria, which was really interesting. I've sort of adapted the notion a little in that I've worked with local governments, City of Wanneroo, with their early childhood officers, they run, *It's All About Play*, a learning through play program and they deliver it through their libraries. They wanted to document *It's All About Play*, how it reflects each of their libraries and their communities.

I was very lucky to be invited along through an *It's All About Play* session I went to at Clarkson Library We went and were lots of dads who were coming along to that session, it's called "On the Go". We had the children and the families, we looked at the artwork that they were making during these sessions. It was a very physical play session: Playdough, all of these different play stations in the library, and lots of interaction between fathers and their young ones. Playing together, talking together, learning together. Then I would listen to the way they spoke and things they were saying to each other. And I took some of that language and made a very simple rhyming text. And had a wonderful photographer come in to take beautiful photographs of the activities and then I designed it and put it all together into a book.

### **Belynda Smith**

Marvellous. Absolutely gorgeous.

### **Nola Allen**

The lovely aspect of this, of course, is that the copies of books are given to the families. The libraries have copies of the books for other families to look at.

I've done similar work with City of Swan. They run a drop-in centre "Coffees and Cuddles" at Ellenbrook library for their families. The Community health nurse comes in other service providers, it's a very diverse community.

It can be challenging for mums in particular to be able to meet, so it's a way that they can interact. And so, we created a book around that.

Then, most recently I've worked with the City of Armadale on "Proud Children". They run a program called *Learn English Through Storytime*, or 'LETS'. And we had families from five or six different cultural, linguistic backgrounds come along to these sessions, weekly sessions, and

we talked about different concepts, but we also incorporated their language and recognised their family language in the book.

**Belynda Smith**

Gorgeous, they're just fabulous. I didn't know about those. It's wonderful.

**Nola Allen**

It's been such an exciting project to be part of and again families seeing themselves in in books and saying their language in books; it's very special.

**Belynda Smith**

If you had to pick just a few key concepts, like three main ideas, in all your years of experience of doing this work, if you distil it down, what's some really key ideas for parents and early educators to take away when they're thinking about sharing books with young children?

**Nola Allen**

I think keep joy, and enjoyment, and pleasure uppermost in your mind. Share that love that you have of the book with the children that you're with. Be genuine about it, and children will recognise: the person that's so important to me loves this, I think I'm going to love this too. And to me, that's an absolute foundation.

I think join the local library. It's free. If you want to build your own library, you can try before you buy. You can go to storytimes, rhyme times, they're all free. And then start seeing a host of other things there. And try and have a little collection of books at home, just keep them in a in a basket nearby. One's that perhaps aren't too precious that you want your toddler to be able to pick up whenever they want.

**Belynda Smith**

Gorgeous.

For each of the podcasts that we produce in this series, we're not to ask five quick questions to finish up. So, here's your five quick questions, Nola, what's the book you loved most as a child?

**Nola Allen**

It's *Black Beauty*.

**Belynda Smith**

Oh gorgeous.

**Nola Allen**

I went through a very horsey stage; I think when I was in sort of maybe about 9-10 and it's had a very emotional connection to me. It was it written in the first person, it's quite a moving, touching book.

**Belynda Smith**

Beautiful. What helps you to have a sense of well-being?

**Nola Allen**

I love listening to music and I do like just being outdoors and connecting to nature.

**Belynda Smith**

What's your happiest childhood memory?

**Nola Allen**

Growing up with a next-door neighbour and playing just freely. We had at that time sort of like bushland nearby. Just going off beginning of the day, exploring, making up games and just being so free and it was very happy times.

**Belynda Smith**

And then, what's your favourite outdoor place.

**Nola Allen**

Galup Lake Monger, which is just near where I live

It's just a wonderful place to walk around to connect with nature, but also it just has such a wonderful community feel there. I see little children learning to ride their bikes, you see families pushing prams, and it's a lovely, lovely spot.

**Belynda Smith**

And finally, complete this sentence: to help them thrive children need:

**Nola Allen**

Someone to love, and guide, and support them, and to share and talk about and read lots and lots of books together.

**Belynda Smith**

So finally, how can listeners learn more about your work or get in touch with you if they'd like to.

**Nola Allen**

It I can give you the contact details.

[Note: these contact details are available in the notes for this podcast episode]

And can I also just say it's well worth looking at the Better Beginnings website.

**Belynda Smith**

Yes, it's wonderful, isn't?

**Nola Allen**

It has excellent recommended book lists and reading lists, it's got a Book Finder, great information, literacy tips, monthly literacy tips. Probably the other thing to look at for parents with older children, if you're looking for great book recommendations, go to the Children's Book Council of Australia website. They feature the best of Australian children's and young adult publishing in their awards every year, so it's well worth looking.

**Belynda Smith**

Thank you so much. It's been absolutely gorgeous having a chance to talk books with you, Nola.

And I really appreciate listeners for being here listening as well. If you'd like any more information about Meerilinga, or if you'd like to get in touch with Nola, you can contact us at Meerilinga at [mycf@meerilinga.org.au](mailto:mycf@meerilinga.org.au) or visit our website at [www.meerilinga.org.au](http://www.meerilinga.org.au).

Thank you.