

# Health literacy in ECEC

## for a healthy future

Holistic development and learning starts with healthy bodies and minds. In this article, the authors of the *Little Aussie Bugs* book series, **Dr Ruth Wallace** and **Dr Amelia Ruscoe**, write about the growing need for health literacy in ECEC to set children and their families up for a positive future.

The World Health Organization (WHO) tells us that health literacy has an important influence on health (2017). Teaching health literacy promotes good health throughout life and reduces health inequities. Health literacy has often been assessed among adults (Osborne et al., 2022), but the WHO has called for a fresh focus on health literacy for children, particularly in the early years (Okan, 2019).

### What is health literacy?

Health literacy is someone's ability to access health services and understand information about health. The environment where people live, work and play can significantly influence health literacy and how they engage with health services and systems (AIHW, 2022). Borzekowski (2009, p. S284) described health literacy as 'not just the ability to read [but] a set of skills that involve recognising, processing, integrating, and acting on information from a variety of platforms.'

### Health literacy in early childhood

We know that birth to five years is when optimal growth, development and learning are most important for children. Children who start to learn about being healthy in early childhood lay strong foundations for education, employment and health throughout their lives (Center on the Developing Child, 2023). ECEC services are the perfect place for children to start learning health literacy skills (Okan, 2019), which can reduce any disadvantage they may face that can inhibit their growth and development (Blair & Raver, 2016).



Providing young children with health information builds their interest in health and wellbeing, and encourages them to understand and use this information. There is a growing need for age-appropriate, culturally relevant and socially supported health literacy resources for young children (Borzekowski, 2009). The WHO (2017, p. 26) describes very young children as 'potentially vulnerable'. This means that as a group, they can be more engaged and productive as learners and healthier if they develop good health literacy skills. The *Early Years Learning Framework (V2.0)* wants children to have a strong sense of their own wellbeing (Learning Outcome 3) (AGDE, 2022), and Article 6 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN, 1989) states that 'Children have the right to live a full life ... and develop healthily.' To this end, as very young children start to develop their own opinions and form their own understanding of the world around them, they also become aware of their own health and wellbeing (Broder et al., 2020).

Parents and carers play an important role in helping young children learn health literacy skills, which can lead to good health in adulthood. Current government data shows 9% of people surveyed do not have good health literacy skills. People with long-term health conditions or less education tend to have more difficulty navigating the healthcare system (AIHW, 2022). Younger people are also more likely to have difficulties understanding health information than older people, and this lower health literacy is linked to poorer health (AIHW, 2021). Young children can be important ‘agents of change’ by taking part in health literacy programs in their ECEC services’ curriculum, and then taking that learning beyond the centre and sharing it with families and communities (Okan, 2019).

### Building health literacy from the ground up

Launched in 2022, the *Little Aussie Bugs* storybooks are a good example of resources developed to support early years educators to grow young children’s health literacy skills. A cross-disciplinary team of nutritionists, early years educators, health promotion experts, clinicians, illustrators and literacy experts developed these high-quality educational materials to promote healthy habits during the preschool years (ages two to four years).

The books are designed to support educators to deliver important public health messages by engaging in dialogic book talk with very young children. Use of a shared vocabulary and simple, repeated phrases in the books encourages educators and children to pause and talk about healthy habits and to create playful routines and rituals that are underpinned by powerful health messages. Inclusive main characters based on well-known Australian animals have been designed to appeal specifically to young children. The books also incorporate supporting characters, namely the ‘ugly bugs’, which are bad for health, and ‘power bugs’, which are good for health, to help children form healthy habits. Notes for educators, highlighting learning activities to engage children in learning about health, are also included.

The *Little Aussie Bugs* books keep young children talking about healthy habits in their day-to-day experiences. These discussions extend into their family homes. Children’s engagement with simple, interactive stories also helps them develop literacy and oral language skills, and supports socio-emotional growth and regulation (Fellowes & Oakley, 2014).



• When We Are Sick

• When We Are Hungry

• My Healthy Teeth

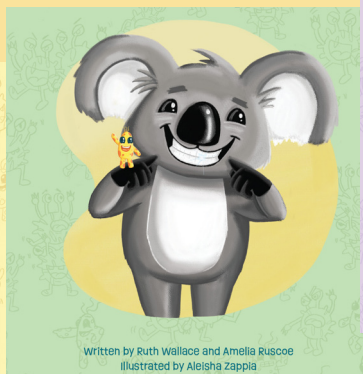
• My Healthy Tummy

Feedback from educators who have used the books shows that they and the children at their centres find the books and characters engaging, and that children understand and can repeat the health messages. Educators provided examples of how children engaged with the books, characters and learning activities:

*The children really understood the ‘try it, you’ll like it’ [advice]. We have used this during some of our mealtimes when children are being fussy about their foods.*

*The children were far more excited than usual to wash their hands, and I found I didn’t have to remind as many children as usual to wash their hands after using the toilet.*

'Inclusive main characters based on well-known Australian animals have been designed to appeal specifically to young children.'



## Conclusion

Health literacy is an important skill that educators can use to support children's development and the health and wellbeing of themselves and their families. Building health literacy from the ground up, using resources such as the *Little Aussie Bugs* books, provides early years educators with the tools they need to share important health messages while also supporting children to develop literacy and language skills—a 'win-win' situation for children and educators alike.

**Educators interested in obtaining a free set of books should email [littleaussiebugs@ecu.edu.au](mailto:littleaussiebugs@ecu.edu.au), supplying their name and address details.**

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