

PLACE-BASED IMPACT IN ACTION

How communities are wrapping around children and families

United Way Australia's Imagination Library is more than a book-gifting program — it's a catalyst for collaboration across health, education, and community sectors.

Across Australia, councils, libraries, early-years services, and local organisations are working together to help every child start school ready to learn.

BUILDING BONDS FROM BIRTH (JUNEE, NSW)

In Junee, the *Baby on a Mat* initiative shows how the Imagination Library connects families to a network of care from birth. Every fortnight, new parents gather at Junee Library for Baby Bounce sessions that foster early literacy and bonding.

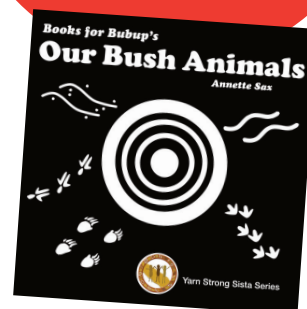
Babies are enrolled onto the Imagination Library by the local Child and Family Health Nurse (CFHN) at the one-to-four-week developmental check. When enrolling, families are gifted a beautiful book by Aboriginal creator Annette Sax, published by Yarn Strong Sista, *Our Bush Animals*. The book uses Aboriginal symbols and patterns to share traditional stories. Nurses report that the gift of a book has helped to build their relationship with parents, particularly in families where a gift is culturally significant.

Partners including the Junee Community Centre, Junee Library, and the Murrumbidgee Local Health District provide early childhood development guidance and health advice — ensuring families receive holistic, wraparound support.

The local CFHN builds rapport with families, leading to greater engagement with developmental (blue book) checks. These regular sessions not only build literacy but also reduce social isolation, helping new parents feel confident and connected within their community.

"It's more than books — it's connection, reassurance, and a safe place to learn together."

Junee parent participant



INTEGRATED FAMILY SUPPORT (ACACIA RIDGE, QLD)

Acacia Ridge was Australia's first Imagination Library site, launched in 2013 through a partnership between United Way Australia, the Benevolent Society, and the Queensland Department of Education. The program is embedded in the Benevolent Society's Early Years Centre, linking book-gifting with daycare, playgroups, and parent education. Parents receive the same books used in Centre sessions, learning how to make reading part of everyday family life.

The program connects families to early-intervention and case support services, helping parents become their child's first teacher and strengthening trust between families and educators.



READING ACROSS GENERATIONS (BENALLA, VIC)

In the rural town of Benalla, a school-based program has been woven into the delivery of the Imagination Library creating a beautiful, intergenerational partnership between students and families. In Benalla, the Imagination Library is more than just a book delivery program, it's the centre of a whole-of-community effort to support children's early literacy and build a love of reading from the very beginning.

Students in the *Hands-on Learning* program at Benalla College design and decorate handcrafted book boxes for local families — joyful creations featuring *Bluey*, *Spot*, and *The Rainbow Fish*. These boxes give children a special place to keep their growing home library, while giving teenagers a sense of pride and purpose.

It's a powerful example of how a community can rally around its youngest citizens and turn reading into a shared local identity.



INCLUSION AND CONNECTION (CUMBERLAND, NSW)

In Western Sydney, United Way partnered with Cumberland City Council, Cumberland Libraries, and EarlyEd to create inclusive, language-rich story time sessions for parents and carers.

Council provided a community space, and the library service and EarlyEd, who specialise in early intervention and accessible story time sessions, facilitated an interactive story time. UWA provided translated information sheets on how to engage with books and reading if a language other than English is spoken in the home. A morning tea after each session allows parents to connect with early-intervention specialists and library staff — fostering belonging and early literacy in equal measure.



**"It opened doors
— not just to books,
but to people and
services we didn't
know were there."**
Parent, Cumberland

TOGETHER, THESE COMMUNITIES SHOW WHAT'S POSSIBLE WHEN EARLY LITERACY IS EVERYONE'S BUSINESS.

United Way Australia invites partners across all sectors to help scale these place-based successes — ensuring every Australian child starts school ready to learn.