

EARLY INTERVENTION: THE CITY OF SALISBURY'S ABC 30&3 PROGRAM

ABSTRACT

The City of Salisbury Library Service runs a family literacy program called *ABC 30&3*, which promotes the vital role parents play in the development of their child's early literacy skills. Throughout the program we show parents and caregivers how to share books, language and music effectively and regularly with their children, and in doing so it is anticipated that young children will be better prepared to start school and less likely to fall behind in reading and writing.

ABC 30&3 is targeted to specific at-risk sections of the community, in areas where reading may not be a regular activity in the home. In particular, the program targets suburbs that feature poor results in the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC).

Running since 2011, the program has recently expanded and developed further to form part of the *Early Intervention* response in Salisbury Council's *Regional Public Health Plan*.

This paper will be based on research methodologies of a qualitative nature, and include the following: literature review, primary research undertaken through conducting the program under discussion, and use of primary data sources including Australian Bureau of Statistics and Australian Early Development Census. Results from a small sample group of surveyed program participants are used for program evaluation purposes.

Research demonstrates that the earliest stages of a child's life shape their future: the level of cognitive, emotional, social, and linguistic skills they develop in their early years will determine their adult behaviour.

When parents and caregivers share stories, songs and play with their young children, the benefits are long term. These benefits include development of language skills, motor skills, bonding between parents and children, and the development of literacy skills that will serve as a strong foundation for school learning.

While our library's family literacy program does not include the capabilities for a longitudinal study to track these long term benefits in the lives of our participants, we believe our work contributes to a culture of learning and a love of reading in the home. Program evaluation, and feedback from families involved indicates the resources we provide, and knowledge we share is supporting these families in providing their children with a solid foundation for lifelong literacy.

This paper presents the underpinning research and values, and demographic information that inform our library's *ABC 30&3* family literacy program. Through this program we are contributing to a culture that values literacy and lifelong learning, supporting local families in developing their child's early literacy skills.

PAPER

The City of Salisbury Library Service operates across five library branches, and runs an extensive outreach program. A key focus of the service's programming is early literacy: helping to develop a love of reading and early literacy skills.

One of the programs run by the service is *ABC 30&3*, a family literacy program developed with early intervention in mind. By reaching out to members of the community that may not be regular library users, *ABC 30&3* promotes the vital role parents play in the development of their child's early literacy skills, and how the library can assist them in this role. Major outcomes of the program include ensuring families are able to sustain reading to their children at least 3 times per week, with at least 30 books in the home, and creating a strong link between families and their local library. Throughout the program we show parents and caregivers how to share books, language and music effectively and regularly with their children, and in doing so it is anticipated that young children will be better prepared to start school, and have developed what can be a lifelong love of reading.

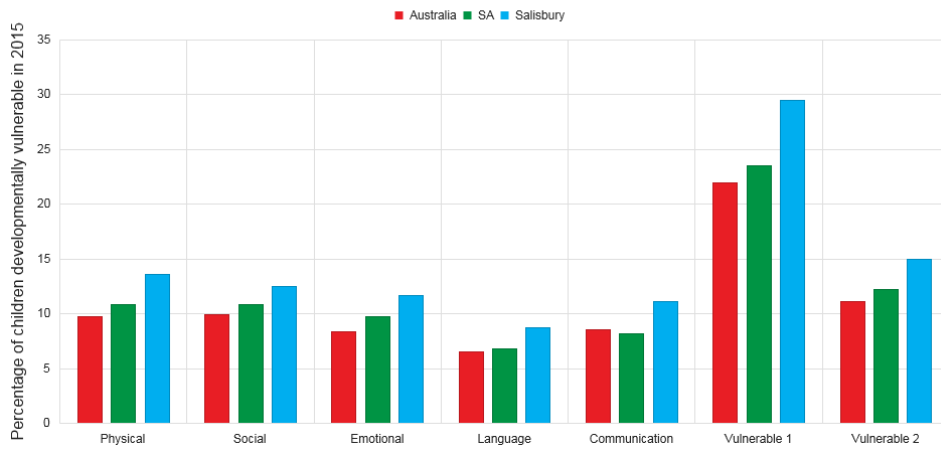
About the City of Salisbury

Located 25km north of Adelaide, the City of Salisbury is one of the largest council areas of metropolitan South Australia. There are thirty one suburbs within Salisbury, and within these suburbs reside people from all walks of life.

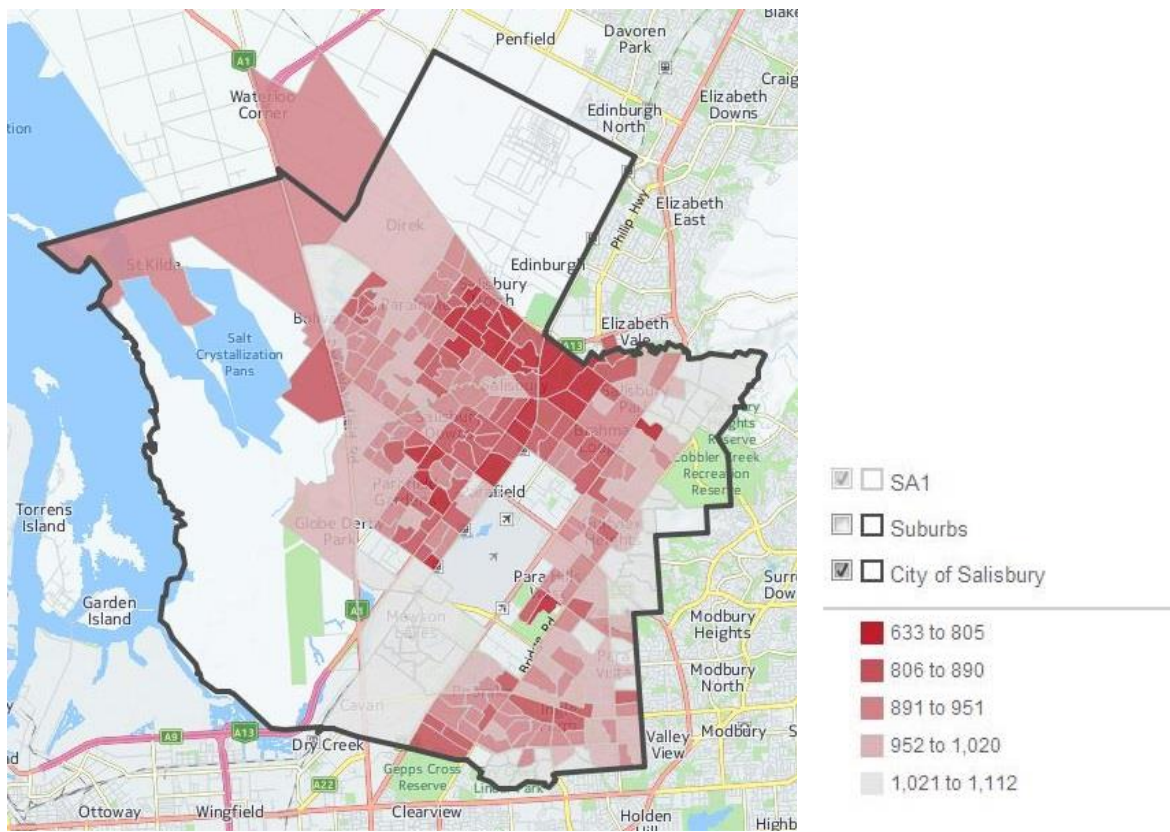
The City of Salisbury is a highly diverse community. 2011 census data reveals more than 27% of Salisbury residents were born overseas, higher than the greater Adelaide average of 25.3%. A number of areas in particular attract new arrivals, with some suburbs in Salisbury having over 30% of the population born overseas. Of these residents born overseas, high percentages are new arrivals. This cultural diversity varies greatly throughout the City: while some suburbs will have as little as around 5% new arrivals, others will have upwards and over 30% (Profile id - Social Atlas, 2016a&b).

While there are some suburbs within the City of Salisbury that are relatively affluent, there are pockets within the council area that perform poorly against socio-economic indicators. The Socio-Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA) ranks areas of Australia according to advantage and disadvantage, looking at factors such as employment, income, and education levels. There are some suburbs within the City of Salisbury that rank higher than the national average in terms of advantage. Yet there are others that rank in the lowest 5% of advantage (Profile id – Community Profile, 2016a). 7.3% of Salisbury’s population is unemployed, higher than the state average of 5.8% (Profile id – Community Profile, 2016b). 34.6% of the City of Salisbury's population has a schooling level below Year 11, compared to the Greater Adelaide average of 28.2% (Profile id - Social Atlas, 2016c). This disadvantage is also reflected in the Australian Early Development Census, where Salisbury has a higher than average ranking of developmentally vulnerable children (Australian Early Development Census, 2016).

Percentage of children developmentally vulnerable in 2015



(Australian Early Development Census, 2016)



(Profile id – Social Atlas, 2016d) Note the darker the shade on the map, the higher the level of disadvantage

Early Literacy: The Research

The City of Salisbury's *ABC 30&3* is a family literacy program, designed to foster a love of reading, and to encourage regular reading and literacy activities in the home. Family literacy programming can be defined as 'literacy activities involving at least two generations' which address 'literacy for children...literacy for parents, and guidance for adults on how to encourage the literacy skills of their children or young relatives' (Train, 2006, 292). In regards to literacy itself, this involves more than reading books and the program takes a wide definition. As Susan Hill (2012, 3) states,

Literacy is reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing and involves the knowledge and skills required to engage in activities required for effective functioning in the community.

The need for children to develop early literacy skills, and the role that families play in this development is widely acknowledged. Research demonstrates that the earliest stages of a child's life shape their future: the level of cognitive, emotional, social, and linguistic skills they develop in their early years will determine their adult behaviour. When parents and caregivers share stories, songs and play with their young children, the benefits are long term. These benefits include development of language

skills, motor skills, bonding between parents and children, and the development of literacy skills that will serve as a strong foundation for school learning. In her influential book 'Reading Magic' (2001, 13) Mem Fox explains the pivotal role parents play in their child's literacy development:

The foundations of learning to read are set down from the moment a child first hears the sounds of people talking, the tunes of songs, and the rhythms and repetitions of rhymes and stories. Children who have not been regularly talked to, sung to or read aloud to from birth find life at school much more burdensome than they otherwise might. In particular, learning to read becomes a major stumbling block rather than a surprising delight.

Research has shown that a literacy rich home environment - where children are read, sung and spoken to regularly, and have access to a wide array of reading and listening material is vital for the development of literacy skills. Children who begin their formal education with higher literacy skills are likely to continue to perform well (Griffin & McCardle, 2013, 27). While a higher income does not necessarily equate to a literacy rich home environment, there is no doubt that living with economic disadvantage creates a number of barriers to overcome. There are suburbs within Salisbury where levels of education and employment are well below the state average, and it is in areas such as these that children are vulnerable and at risk of not developing to their full potential. Rosemary Chance (2010, 9) explains that economically poor adults are likely to have 'inadequate education', and can find

themselves in a cycle of failure, isolation and welfare, where 'this poverty of experience is then transmitted across generations'. Low levels of literacy are included in this cycle of disadvantage. Briony Train (2006, 296) identifies the following as barriers to a literacy rich home environment:

- When parents don't enjoy reading, or weren't read to as a child, they may not appreciate its importance, rather seeing it as a chore
- When parents have low basic skills, they lack confidence in supporting their own child's literacy development
- A lack of early language and reading experiences results in a comparably lower understanding of the spoken and written word
- During periods of economic hardship, health or housing problems, or unemployment, reading simply does not take priority

It is certainly not assumed that all families living in a lower socio-economic area do not provide supportive reading and language environments for their children. Yet there is a recognised connection between achievement and social position.

Evangelou, Brooks, Smith and Jennings (2005, 24) explain that 'disadvantage begins early and has a cumulative effect. Consequently, the chances of breaking the cycle of poverty and deprivation are considerably reduced as children get older.

When children enter primary school, despite early indications of potential, poorer children tend to fall behind'. As the City of Salisbury's *ABC 30&3* is designed as an early intervention family literacy program, it is focused towards the suburbs within the City of Salisbury that fare worse socio-economically. These are the areas that will

benefit most from improved early literacy, where generational disadvantage needs to be broken. As Talan (2001, 12) states, 'family literacy is an investment in the future'.

Developing Early Literacy Skills: The Principles and Frameworks that Inform ABC 30&3

Early intervention family literacy requires a considered and nuanced approach to program design and delivery. There are a number of factors that go in to creating a successful early intervention program and these include:

- Involving two or more generations
- Avoiding stigmatising, and labelling families as 'problem'
- Be locally driven, based on consultation and involvement with the local community
- Be culturally appropriate and sensitive to the needs of families

(Evangelou & Sylva, cited in Hill, 2012, 58)

The City of Salisbury's *ABC 30&3* program is structured around the widely recognised framework of the *Six Early Literacy Skills* - a core set of skills children need to develop as a foundation for reading and school readiness. Each weekly

session of the program focuses on a selection of these skills, and how parents can incorporate their development into daily family life. These six skills are defined as:

- Letter Knowledge:
The ability to recognise, name and understand letters
- Phonological Awareness
The ability to identify and manipulate sounds, to hear and play with the smaller sounds in words, especially through rhyming
- Vocabulary
The ability to know the names of things
- Concepts of Print
The ability to understand how print and books work. This includes the direction of print, the understanding that words tell a story, and that pictures match words.
- Narrative Skills
The ability to be expressive through language, to describe things, to tell a story, and recall things in order
- Print Motivation
Children who enjoy books are more likely to want to learn to read and keep trying even if it is hard.

(Williams, Spry & Hill, 2012, 144)

In addition to the above framework, *ABC 30&3* design and delivery is guided by an overarching set of key early literacy concepts and principles:

- Reading for pleasure

One of the major aims of the program is to help children to develop a love of reading, so that they will seek out books and the written word for pleasure, and to learn new information with enthusiasm and confidence. Research shows that reading for pleasure is linked not only to high levels of literacy, but also to increased general knowledge, and a sense of empathy and understanding of other cultures and human experiences (Clark & Rumbold, 2006, 8).

- The central role of family in literacy development

A child's family environment is critical to their early development. Buell, Gamel-McCormick & Unger (2010, 164) explain that 'the core of literacy development begins with oral language' and that 'the literacy development of young children is heavily dependent on inputs from family environments'. Families shape their children's literacy development, which in turn shapes their schooling experience.

- There are different pathways to literacy

All children develop differently, and can follow a different path to literacy (Hill, 2012, 10). A parent who struggles to get their child to sit still for the entirety of

a book reading, can still incorporate literacy development into daily life through many other means.

- A non-prescriptive approach

Early literacy is not about a child learning to read early, it is about developing a core foundation before their formal school years start. *ABC 30&3* is not about prescribing parents with set tasks that they must complete with their children. Rather, the program aims to show parents and caregivers a number of ways that they can share a love of reading with their children, and incorporate early literacy development into everyday life.

- Cultural inclusion

Salisbury has a very diverse community, which is reflected in the families attending *ABC 30&3* sessions. *ABC 30&3* is often run in groups that consist largely of English as Second Language families, so resources are used that are either bilingual, or easily adapted to the particular group.

- A non-judgemental , non-stigmatising approach

Despite the fact that the *ABC 30&3* program is targeted towards areas of socio-economic disadvantage, no assumption is made that parents attending sessions are not already reading to their children. Any hint of judgement or condescension is avoided carefully. Rather, the program is delivered in a style seen to 'add-value', and to help parents build upon what they are already doing at home with their children.

About ABC 30&3

The Salisbury Library Service started *ABC 30&3* in 2009, running the program approximately two to three times per year, until 2015. In 2015, the library service was asked to expand the program, in recognition of the fact that this early intervention program meets key objectives of our council's Regional Health Plan. Instead of running the program once a term during school terms one, two and three, the program is now run several times per term across the course of the year. The expansion of the program has allowed the library to develop stronger relationships with existing community contacts, and also get to know a wider section of the community as we source parent groups and playgroups to run the program in. The team running *ABC 30&3* also took the recent expansion of the program as a chance to evaluate and re-design elements of the program, ensuring we are offering families the best and most relevant program we can.

How the program runs

ABC 30&3 is run at a playgroup or parenting group for four weeks. A staff member from the library's Community Learning and Outreach team visits the group at their usual time and place of meeting, and each week they focus on one or two of the Six Early Literacy Skills. Sessions involve group discussions on what people's favourite books are to read as a family, reading and singing together as a group, and sharing ideas and advice on how to make reading a more enjoyable and regular activity at home. In the final week of the program, the group meets at their nearest library

branch. This final session is run in a similar style to the preceding weeks, simply in the new space of the children's area of their local library. The staff member encourages any parents who aren't library members to join up, and reiterates all of the resources that are available for their family to use; with the use of their local library, families can sustain regular reading in the home with a regular turnover of books. At this final session parent evaluation is also taken.

Throughout the course of the program families receive a kit containing books, a CD, and a puppet. Families are given one of these resources each week, which relates to the early literacy skills that that session has focused on. Having resources to take away not only ensures that families on low incomes have access to books in the home, but that what the parents learn in the sessions is able to be replicated at home.

Program style

Each session is slightly different, designed to be flexible and adaptable to group size and dynamics. Before a program begins at a new site, the library team member running the program liaises with staff or volunteers responsible for the program or parent groups. Through this discussion, a sense of the group's individual makeup is gauged: numbers, age of children, cultural backgrounds, any areas of identified need, group energy (for example are they a quiet group that needs a lot of encouragement) and how big a role literacy activities have already been playing in

the group. Many of these aspects too will also become apparent to the program facilitator during their first week of the program. With these elements in mind, the facilitator is able to take the basic framework of the ABC 30&3 program, and adapt it to suit the particular group. Different groups will respond and engage with the program in different ways, so no two programs are exactly alike.

As mentioned in a previous section of this paper, there is an overarching set of early literacy principles that inform how we run the program. These include the importance of a non-prescriptive approach, the fact that there are different pathways to literacy, and above all the idea of reading for pleasure. While always remaining professional, program facilitators are careful to keep sessions relatively casual and informal. There are of course key messages to be covered each week, but information is presented in a conversational manner that invites discussion and input from the group. While there have been occasions when *ABC 30&3* has been run at groups where it is clear that very little reading happens at home, there are other groups where most of the parents are more informed on the benefits of reading to their children. In any case, anything that may be perceived as patronising or talking down to parents is carefully avoided.

The program is presented to parents as something that adds value to their family's existing reading and literacy activities: helpful resources, discussion and tips that they can add to what they are already doing at home. If parents are already highly invested in their child's early literacy development, the program gives them a chance to share this with their regular playgroup or parenting group and be validated.

Ultimately, the program is aimed for parents within the group who may need a little more encouragement and incentive to read to their children at home more. By presenting the program in a 'value add' manner, all parents should feel respected and encouraged.

Program Evaluation

A parent evaluation form is offered at the end of every four week program to gauge the value of the program to the participants and to help facilitators improve the program from site to site. Each site comes with its own set of challenges such as:

- Resistance to someone “preaching” to them about reading to their children
- Language and low literacy barriers
- Differing behavioural expectations within our culturally and linguistically diverse groups
- General disruption to playgroup routine
- The differing nature of each group from site to site, and even week to week.

Playgroups by their very nature are fluid, and group dynamics can vary

The information gathered from the parent evaluation form allows facilitators to uncover any of the challenges, such as those listed, and gives parents the opportunity to report honestly on their perceptions and experiences of the *ABC 30&3* program, for example;

- *What did parents like or dislike about the program?*

- *How much change have parents seen in their children?*
- *What would parents change about the program?*
- *How suitable are the resources?*
- *Are parents more likely to use the library to increase the number of resources at home?*

The feedback gained in the 2015/2016 period indicates that parents value their own learning the least and are highly child focused in the context of learning. For most families the balance of activities on offer has been highly favourable. While the changes in parent behaviour are varied, the program has predominantly led to an initial change in routine and the initiation of language and literacy based activities. Almost half the families surveyed in the 2015/2016 period experienced increased parent/child engagement which is an important outcome of the *ABC 30&3* program. About half of the participating parents surveyed felt more confident about reading/singing/saying rhymes with their child as a result of the program. Most of the parents surveyed value what the library has to offer and intended to increase their access to resources with the help of the library.

Anecdotal evidence by way of meaningful parent conversations has helped to add a back story to the factual information gained from standard evaluation forms and statistics. One of the library staff facilitating *ABC 30&3* had this to say about a recent program:

During Term 1 of 2016 I facilitated a program with a TAFE English as a Second Language (ESL) class. It was a wonderful cultural mix of women who

came from Afghanistan, Burma, Myanmar and Vietnam. The program fitted well into the class structure and they are now using their personal copies of Dear Zoo as part of their class readers. The ladies would often bring their children (due to an onsite crèche) and it was a joy to see how much they all gained from the program. This has now opened a new direction with another ESL class participating in ABC 30&3 on a recommendation from the TAFE teacher. It really shows how family literacy can be applied in many different contexts and the value that can be abstracted from running such a rewarding program.

A recent multiple births playgroup was a new challenge and offered insight into managing literacy amongst larger families:

On average I had about 6 families attend each multiple births session. The parents opened up and said how lovely it was to be able to experience the library in their own space as up to then they had had some negative experiences of libraries as new parents. The direct result of this interpersonal engagement is the connecting of families with their local library. The nature of ABC 30&3 allows the facilitator to get to know the families quite well and I think it is important that we can give the families the support they need to make use of what their community has to offer.

Culturally diverse groups: responding to a changing community

As previously mentioned, the growing Salisbury community is a highly diverse one, with a high percentage of the population born overseas, many of whom are new arrivals. The new arrival and culturally and linguistically diverse families within the Salisbury community present challenges when delivering early literacy programs.

Families:

- Often present with little or no English speaking skills
- Are often physically and emotionally isolated due to language and transport barriers
- Are fluent in their first language and as such may have excellent literacy skills that need to be transferred into an English speaking context
- Are rebuilding or establishing their lives and as such family and personal literacy is often a secondary concern to providing for their families by way of housing and income
- Lack social confidence when attending learning environments where their own language and culture is not predominant

The *ABC 30&3* program endeavours to address these needs by responding to opportunities with flexibility and adaptability. Ongoing evaluation of the *ABC 30&3* program in light of this emerging community has led to a revision of resources (based on individual sites) to include bi-lingual stories and culturally complementary activities, and investigating the future use of translated program materials for families to take home.

Strengths and challenges: ABC 30&3 in review

Taking into consideration the statistical data of attendance, the feedback provided by the parent evaluation form, anecdotal stories and experiences and library staff reflection, the following challenges and strengths of the *ABC 30&3* program can be identified:

Challenges

- The four week commitment can often be hard to maintain and fluctuates between sites depending on outside commitments, families overcoming their fear of the library space on the fourth and final session and timetable clashes from both the library and playgroup sites
- The ability to track longitudinal outcomes is outside of the program's scope
- Potential for parental resistance if they feel they are being given information they are already aware of, or sense they are being 'socio-economically profiled'
- The program is not able to reach all communities within the Salisbury profile due to AEDC parameters, resource funding and staff commitments
- The long term sustainability of playgroups within the Salisbury community is questionable due to staffing and funding issues and long term parental attendance in an unstable and changing Salisbury employment landscape

Strengths:

- The program is well received by parents, children and current playgroup coordinators and facilitators
- The program has been recognised with a 2015 Messenger Award within the Creating Opportunities for Young People (Aged 0-5) category
- Families are connecting more with library spaces, programs and resource materials
- The program offers rewarding and tangible professional development opportunities for Salisbury staff involved
- The program captures a significant portion of the Salisbury community that is not actively engaging with the Salisbury Library Service and who would otherwise be missed in terms of early literacy intervention
- Strong networking links are created by working with existing playgroup coordinators and facilitators and has proven to be a key part of the program's ongoing success and positive community recognition
- Parents and children report more time is spent reading in the home and parents feel more confident reading and using books, singing nursery rhymes and being involved in play and conversation with their child/children at home

Feedback:

"Fantastic program...great way of introducing reading to families who don't do it very much"

"Very good program for young children to develop their reading and singing skills, also fun for the parents, I enjoyed it very much!"

“Huge change in the children who attend regularly...able to sit and concentrate for longer...able to sing and read the stories used”

“Thank you for your visiting and sharing. It will be helpful for my little baby in early literacy development”. TAFE ESL class

“The books are so well chosen and so much appreciated. It’s a wonderful program”.

Conclusion

The City of Salisbury’s *ABC 30&3* program is a family literacy program deeply informed by both early literacy research, and an in-depth knowledge of our community and its needs. Through this program we are contributing to a culture that values literacy and lifelong learning, supporting local families in developing their child’s early literacy skills.

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