

Opinion vs. research

Child development research shows that play is important to all aspects of a child's development, including the development of language and literacy. However, many adults do not recognize just how important it is.

In a recent survey about the importance of play in children's development, 80% of parents of children birth to six felt play was important to the development of language skills.

Of all future parents, grandparents and non-parents surveyed, only 70% thought play was important to the development of literacy.

Of parents of children ages zero to six whose income was under \$30K, 70% thought it important, while 81% of parents with incomes over \$50K recognized the value of play in contributing to a child's literacy.

Early vocabulary is the biggest determinant of later literacy.
Sources: Civitas, Zero to Three, BRIO.



The beginnings of literacy appear in activities such as conversations about the words on street signs or labels on favorite foods.



How does my child develop literacy through play?

It is through play that your child discovers language and learns to communicate through reading and writing. **When your child sings a song, looks at pictures in a book or turns the pages in a book, she is both playing and taking important steps to literacy.** Reading, writing, talking and listening can all be encouraged through play.

Reading enhances pretend play...

Young children who are read to often introduce reading into their fantasy play. They may pretend to read books to dolls or stuffed animals, or they may incorporate written materials into their play. **Playing with story ideas can begin very early.** A two-and-a-half-year-old may act out a scene from a book or repeat a sentence.

...so does writing

From age three, children often imitate writing in their pretend play: police officers write traffic tickets, waitresses write orders. When children bring writing into their play it indicates that they recognize writing as an activity worth imitating and that **they are seeking ways to make it serve their own purposes.**

How can play help my child develop literacy from the beginning?

Literacy begins with play.

It starts long before your child goes to school and masters the technical skills involved in reading and writing.

Through playful activities, such as pretend play, drawing, hearing a story and talking about its plot and characters, your child first experiments with language. **He learns what reading and writing are, and what he can do with them.** He also acquires attitudes about literacy.

Symbols used in play are bridges to literacy.

Through gestures or marks on paper, your child uses symbols to create and communicate meaning. Whether in pretend play or other activities like drawing, symbols allow her to leave her immediate environment and explore imaginary worlds.

When first experimenting with words and letters, your child may use them in the same way as symbols. Eventually she will make the connection between these play experiences and the activities of reading and writing.

Children play by pretending to read to themselves.

Play is a safe environment for your child to explore literacy. Because **play allows her to feel and act as if she is in control of her activity**, she can play with books and paper and pretend that she can actually read books or write stories. Therefore, through play, your child can feel like a reader or a writer before she knows how to read and write. **Such feelings can install confidence**, create positive expectations about learning to read and write and motivate a child to learn.

Give-and-take conversation and storytelling help develop literacy skills. When your child begins to learn the art of conversation and storytelling, **encourage her by asking questions, sharing stories and creating plots and characters together.**

How does play encourage literacy?

For your child, every word he hears and repeats, every storybook, song and nursery rhyme become the building blocks of literacy.

When he draws, pretends to read or write or invents stories, play allows your child to build his literacy skills by experimenting with pictures and symbols he has seen.

ACTION ITEMS

Avenues for enhancing literacy

1 Reading

Babies: Books are great first toys for babies. Begin with books that:

- can be propped up for a baby to look at.
- have pictures in bright contrasting colors.
- are made of cardboard or cloth to withstand a little chewing and make page turning easier.

Toddlers and pre-schoolers: Toddlers are just able to sit and listen to a complete story. Try books that:

- have repetitious text about familiar objects.
- involve activities such as counting, identifying colors, objects or letters.
- are about subjects that interest the child.
- deal with topics that relate to the child's life, such as toilet training or new siblings.
- are interactive, such as having lifting flaps.

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2 Writing

Babies: Even a baby can prepare for writing. Let her:

- hold a rattle to develop grasping skills.
- play with magnetic letters.

Toddlers and pre-schoolers: To get her interested:

- give her safe writing props to incorporate into her play, like crayons, blank paper, newspaper and construction paper, thick sticks of chalk and thick magic markers.
- promote the development of her fine motor skills by letting him cut paper or trace letters.
- allow her to draw freely and creatively.

3 Talking

Babies:

- Talk and read with him at every opportunity.
- Sing nursery rhymes and read books that play with word sounds.

Toddlers and pre-schoolers:

- Whether at the grocery store, the park or the zoo, point out objects, signs and people.
- Engage your child in conversation and ask a lot of questions.
- Play with words by making up funny names for people and objects. Making nonsense out of language helps children appreciate the rhythm and musicality of language.
- Play rhyming games with words.

4 Listening

Activities you can try with your child:

- A narrated version of hide-and-seek. When the child hides, the caregiver "thinks aloud" about where she could be. "Where is Laura?" a parent might say. "Maybe she's in the refrigerator—did I put her next to the milk?" Such silly discussion within earshot of the hiding child will encourage her to listen as she waits to be found.
- Singing songs. Children love to listen to songs. Try adding new words to her favorite songs to pique her interest.

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