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, 87% 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 7% thought play was important to the development of literacy.

Of parents of children ages zero to five whose incomes was under $20K, 78% 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: Gilboa, Jeni. Tribune, 180.

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.

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 half-year-old may act out a scene from a book or repeat a sentence.

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.

Reading enhances pretend play...

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:
   - Are just able to sit and listen to a complete story. Try books that:
     - have repetitions and 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.

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 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 her 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 words.

   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 intrigue her interest.

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.