

In an effort to reach nontraditional audiences, libraries are beginning to collaborate with literacy groups that conduct outreach programs. In New York, the MCPL, as well as the libraries in Port Washington, Patchogue-Medford, and Mastic-Moriches-Shirley, have joined the Parent-Child Home Program (www.parent-child.org/home/), which trains home visitors in how to introduce age-appropriate toys and books to parents and young children. Such families, who may face the challenges of poverty, language and/or cultural barriers, and low education levels, may also lack access to public institutions due to poor or no means of transportation. Bypassing that barrier, home visitors come to the families and encourage increased parent-child verbal interaction through gentle modeling of play and reading activities. Once they have developed a relationship, parents and children are encouraged to visit the library to gain exposure to additional resources, services, and play techniques.

In addition to bringing parents and young children together and offering typical parent-education programs, many libraries are beginning to present nontraditional offerings for parents. For example, MCPL designed the Do It Yourself program as an opportunity and outlet for parents to interact and be creative while simultaneously learning to maximize the benefits of playing with their children. Parents learn how to create homemade learning games for their young children using materials provided by instructors.

Do It Yourself sends a number of positive messages. First, it reflects the value of parents as their child's first



The finger-play's the thing for a mother-daughter team as baby sister looks on. Spontaneous flights of fancy help youngsters appreciate the power of language.

teacher and empowers them to act in this capacity. Second, the tangible-play emphasis demonstrates the importance of play in a young child's life. The program also provides an opportunity to socialize and share ideas, concerns, and experiences with other parents without children at hand. Finally, programs such as Do It Yourself demonstrate that libraries are available to serve parents on a number of levels.

Friendly faces in family places
By modeling to parents and providing various collections, spaces, programs, and resources clearly

developed and designed with the entire family's needs in mind, libraries can dispel the belief that play and work are at odds, especially in the development of young children. Family Place, a national project cosponsored by Libraries for the Future and MCPL (*AL*, May 1997, p. 57-58), provides a model of service that actively supports this ideology. The goal of Family Place is to expand the traditional role of libraries by transforming them into community centers for early-childhood development, emergent literacy, parent education, family support, and community information. The model has been replicated in more than 160 communities in over 21 states with remarkable success and continues to grow at a staggering pace.

Libraries have always been the perfect place to nurture and foster lifelong learning. Now they are the perfect place for families with young children because books and play are natural partners that help parents in the most important role that they will ever take on: the providers of a nurturing and stimulating environment that all children require in order to grow both cognitively and emotionally. ♦

Emergent Literacy: A Research Primer

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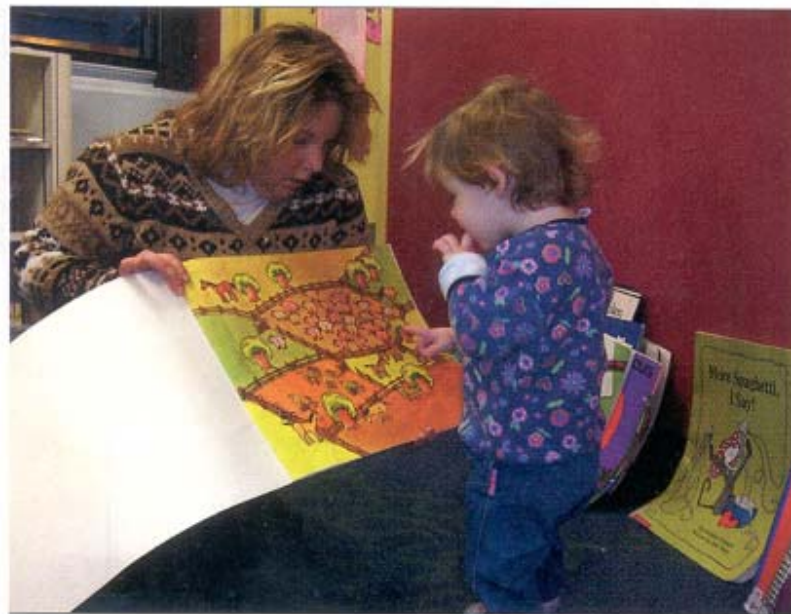
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BOOK a Play Date:

The Game of Promoting Emergent Literacy



It's about time that librarians made parents get serious about child's play

by Marci Byrne, Kathleen Deerr, and Lisa G. Kropp

ing implements before they are ready for formal reading and writing instruction.

Research has shown that a child's brain rapidly develops from birth through the ages of 3–4. Through the works of psychologists Jean Piaget, Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, and David Fernie, we also know that children develop an understanding of themselves and others, learn about their physical world, and learn to communicate with others through play.

Piaget and Vygotsky were among the first to link play with a child's cognitive development. In particular, Piaget's research shows that play behaviors become more complex and abstract as children progress through early childhood, promoting four major skills that are crucial to the development of literacy:

- Underlying cognitive skills, the ability to learn deliberately;
- Development of symbolic representation;
- Oral language;
- Introduction of content and related literacy skills and concepts.

Ring around the resources

Public libraries can help promulgate emergent-literacy skills by providing four key services: age-appropriate spaces, materials, programming, and the opportunity for parents to gain skills through modeling.

During the past 20 years, public libraries have expanded children's services to include collections and programs for very young children (infant–3 years) and their parents and caregivers. Board, cloth, and big books; simple puzzles; and parenting materials in a variety of formats are now standard in most children's departments. However, the library's physical environment is just as important as the materials offered. Because environment plays such an important role in emergent lit-

MARCI BYRNE, children's librarian; KATHLEEN DEERR, assistant director; and LISA G. KROPP, children's librarian, serve patrons at Middle Country Public Library in Centereach, New York.

eracy, it is vital for libraries to create spaces that encourage young children and their parents to engage in age-appropriate activities.

Such an area might include a colorful rug spread out with books, puzzles, and multihued blocks for sorting and stacking. A creative play area—such as a storefront, post office, or puppet stage—encourages families to engage in symbolic play. A train or Lego table offers toddlers the opportunity to play alongside others—what early-child educators refer to as parallel play since toddlers and some preschoolers are still learning how to interact with their peers and share with them.

In library spaces set up for play, parents aren't worried about "shushing" their children; instead, they are talking, reading, singing, and playing together. According to Edythe O.

Cawthorne in the April 1975 *School Library Journal* ("Toys and Games—The First Reading"), public libraries with age-appropriate spaces that include toys and books are conveying to parents that play is the chief learning activity of preschool children, and that toys and games are their first reading tools.

The Preschool Exploration Center (PEC) at Monroe County (Ind.) Public Library (www.monroe.lib.in.us/childrens/pec2.html) takes the concept of play and space design a step further. Designed for patrons up to 6 years old and their parents/caregivers, PEC is adjacent to the children's room and includes science stations, a picture-book area, and a spacious, open-floor area designed for infants just beginning to crawl. This room's design shouts "Welcome!" to young users and provides an opportunity for families to explore concepts, colors, and various themes together, so parents can embrace the science, math, art, and early literacy skills of their children through play.

Other sites have taken the concept of play even further by offering circulating toy collections to their patrons. A recent search on the USA Toy Library Association website (usatla.deltacollege.org) revealed that out of 281 registered toy libraries, 56 are housed in public libraries. (The num-

Play is the chief learning activity of preschool children, and toys and games are their first reading tools.

ber of participating libraries is actually higher, as some circulate toys without being members of the association.) Toy libraries are committed to the philosophy that play is a learning experience and toys are valuable learning tools; public libraries are a natural location for such a service because toys are helpful in the development of prereading and prewriting skills, contends Karen Ponish in the September 1987 *American Libraries* ("Babywise and Toys Develop Literacy Skills"). The Toy Resource Center (TRC) at the Lincoln Branch of the Rochester (N.Y.) Public Library (www.rochester.lib.ny.us/lincoln/) offers patrons the opportunity to borrow over 4,000 toys selected to support a child's physical, emotional, cognitive, and sensory growth. In addition, TRC offers programs for parents on the importance of toys and play to emergent literacy.

Children's departments can also incorporate the concept of play through circulating story kits, which blend the traditional (books) with the not-so-traditional (toys)—thus building for local families a solid rung on the emergent-literacy ladder. In Centereach, New York, the Middle Country Public Library (MCPL)'s "Project Link" kits connect specific books with activities and toys to enhance the story experience through creative and symbolic play.

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Nurturing the nurturers

In addition to developmentally appropriate spaces and collections, libraries also provide family programs that help foster emergent literacy in young children. Public libraries are in the unique position to nurture, support, and empower parents who accompany their children there. By participating in programs in which librarians model enjoyable and effective ways to share books, toys, language, and songs, parents gain the skills, support, and validation they need to take on the role of their child's first teacher and partner in learning. Moreover, the concept of play as a means through which young children learn becomes a method in which parents can—and should—take a prominent and active role.

Several library programs have been created to act as a model of service to parents and caregivers as they relate to their children. The play-based Parent/Child Workshop is specifically tailored for parents and caregivers of 1–3-year-olds to interact and socialize in an age-appropriate environment without outside distractions. Both parents and children are exposed to developmentally appropriate toys, books, and art materials, and are encouraged to experience them together. ☞

A young client practices hand-eye coordination—an essential skill in emergent literacy. Opposite: A Middle Country Public Library patron introduces her daughter to symbolic representation by translating into words the images intriguing the toddler.



In the field of emergent literacy, perhaps the hottest topic among specialists in early childhood development is the importance of play for infant brain development. Adults can engage even newborns in activities that gradually foster reading readiness, thus setting infants on a journey of lifelong learning. But what do children's games, which we associate with playpens, backyards, and nursery school, have to do with libraries, and why should librarians add them to their already full professional plates?

It's as simple as ABC. Despite the research linking play to early literacy, it is still difficult to get parents and caregivers to make time for play. Why? Many adults perceive play as the opposite of work; because it's fun, some parents believe it has little intrinsic learning value. But play is a young child's work and primary learning activity, and the means by which emergent literacy is fostered. That's where we come in: Librarians who serve young children and their families have both an opportunity and a responsibility to incorporate play into their early childhood offerings, and to teach parents how crucial it is to prekindergartners' intellectual development.

Specifically, emergent literacy is the constellation of skills young children accumulate through hands-on, age-appropriate, playful experiences involving listening, speaking, being read to, handling books, and using writ-