Let's Play at the Library: Creating Innovative Play Experiences for Babies and Toddlers

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Abstract

Young children build an understanding of their world through play. Play starts in infancy and continues to evolve as children develop. Research shows strong links between play and early literacy, as well as other key developmental skills. This paper reviews what very young children learn through play, as well as optimal adult interactions that best support early literacy development. It looks at certain barriers to play and addresses what impedes parents and caregivers from being present and responsive during their children's play. At Brooklyn Public Library the authors have developed a play-based curriculum for babies and toddlers, which the paper describes, including suggested play activities and practical tips for setting up "play stations" in traditional storytime programs or in full-scale play events. Finally, the authors share examples of how librarians throughout the United States are implementing innovative play programming for babies and toddlers.

Introduction

A librarian in the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn covered a wall with contact paper, sticky side up. Little hands loved reaching up to feel this new sensation: "sticky." The librarian also supplied a variety of materials—fabric swatches, paper, feathers, and even bubble wrap—for the toddlers to create a vertical, tactile collage. She asked the children how the wall felt and talked to them about such words as "sticky," "soft," and "spongy." One little girl spent the entire morning sticking materials onto the contact paper, totally engrossed in the activity. At another play event at Brooklyn's Central Library in the heart of the borough, we put out pipe cleaners and a couple of colanders. A volunteer stood nearby and modeled to parents how they can talk to their children about this activity: "You're sticking the

LIBRARY TRENDS, Vol. 65, No. 1, 2016 ("Library Services for the Early Years," edited by Carolynn Rankin), pp. 41–64.

pipe cleaners through the hole! Did it come out of the other side of it?" The youngsters began to learn that there are words ("through," for example) to describe their actions. Both of these library activities are prime examples of play driving language development and early literacy. While some of these young children may not yet be talking, they are learning new words and new concepts in a meaningful, contextual way (Payne, 2015, p. 169).

Early childhood research emphasizes the many benefits of play. Beginning in infancy, play is linked to brain development, language acquisition, the development of socio-emotional skills, and self-regulation. A University of Iowa study reported that 18-month-olds who played with diversely shaped objects learned new words twice as fast as those who played with more similarly shaped objects (Perry, Samuelson, Malloy, & Schiffer, 2010). Another study of children ages 1–2 found that those who played with blocks with their parents for just twenty minutes a day scored 15 percent higher on language-development tests and were 80 percent less likely to watch television (Christakis, Zimmerman, & Garrison, 2007). Pretend play, which first emerges at around 12 months of age, has been shown to develop the part of the brain that enables a child to self-regulate (Diamond, 2014a, p. 14)—a strong indicator for lifetime learning and success across all developmental domains. These studies support what early childhood professionals have observed for decades: that play is the primary mode of learning for young children.

Libraries have an important role when it comes to promoting play. Research shows strong links between early literacy growth and the quality and quantity of play experiences that a young child has. The expanded and updated toolkit Every Child Ready to Read (Association for Library Service to Children, 2011) features play as one of the five key early literacy practices (along with reading, talking, singing, and writing) that parents should engage in with their children to promote reading readiness. In the United States, there has been an overall decrease in the hours that children play at home and school due to a complex array of factors, including the rise of digital media use, balancing hectic schedules, an increase in organized and adult-led activities for young children, and standards-based education and testing causing a trickle-down effect of early academics into prekindergarten and kindergarten classrooms, often at the expense of unstructured freeplay (Bastiansen & Wharton, 2015, p. 14). These increasing play gaps present an important opportunity for libraries to meaningfully integrate innovative play experiences into their programming for their youngest patrons, and to communicate the research-based importance of play to parents and caregivers.

At Brooklyn Public Library (BPL) we are continually developing ideas for play activities that get parents talking with their little ones. Through several generous grants, we were able to develop Read, Play, Grow!, an

early literacy curriculum for infants and toddlers. The curriculum consists of simple play activities using everyday household objects and materials designed to promote early literacy skills. At their existing baby and toddler storytime programs, library staff set up "play stations" with interactive play activities for little ones and their parents to explore. At each station, "play tips" are displayed with suggestions for parents on things they can say to promote language development. Librarians share tips and model ways of interacting with the children for optimal learning, as well as ideas for how to play at home using similar everyday objects and materials. The Read, Play, Grow! curriculum supports and guides other play events and materials, including themed curriculum kits and our annual Big Brooklyn Playdate.

What Do Babies and Toddlers Learn through Play?

From the day they are born, babies are eager to learn about and explore their world. During the first year, the infant brain doubles in size, and by age 3, the brain has already reached 80 percent of its adult size (Urban Child Institute, 2016). For the brain to grow effectively, connections, called synapses, must be made, primarily through early bonding, lots of talking, and plenty of opportunities for play. A young child's environment, experiences, and interactions actually construct the brain, forming many more synapses than the adult brain retains. While there has been much discussion and even product development surrounding infant brain development, exposure to language—reading, talking, singing, and playing—has proven to be the most effective way to build babies' brains and foster future language development (Zero to Three, 2014).

How parents and caregivers support brain growth happens quite naturally in the beginning. In the first year, babies prefer human interaction and stimuli to almost anything else (a caregiver's voice, face, touch, and smell). This early bonding is the first form of play and actually has the effect of synchronizing brain activity in both parent and child, and will provide a strong foundation for future play (Brown & Vaughan, 2009, p. 82). As they develop, babies begin to respond to new stimuli as they are introduced: objects, books, tastes, interactions, and experiences. If you show a 3-month-old baby a high-contrast black-and-white image or board book, their legs may start to kick and wiggle and their eyes may widen. This is not an involuntary reflex, but rather a response to sensory stimuli that represents a form of visual play. This sort of play sends strong signals to the baby's brain and stimulates its growth. From here, play continues to involve more senses and becomes more complex and interactive, and in turn brain development rapidly continues.

What does play look like for babies and toddlers? Many parents and library staff members have a good understanding of what dramatic play for preschoolers, or playground games for school-age children, looks like.

They may have positive memories of playing superheroes or "Kick the Can" with their friends or pretending that a chair is a rocket ship or race car, but play for infants and toddlers looks and feels a little different. Often, it can be difficult for a parent, an inexperienced caregiver, or a librarian new to working with children to know what kinds of play experiences are best for very young children (Payne, 2015, p. 170) (see fig. 1).

Babies are always exploring; once they can pick up and manipulate objects, they begin what is called "exploratory play." Many of the things they explore—for instance, their own feet, toys, and even books—go directly into their mouths. We have more nerves in our mouths than in our hands, so if you want to get lots of sensory information about something (including taste!), there is no better place than your mouth. From a very young age, babies are primed to put things in their mouths. Play continues to be about sensory exploration once they can start using their hands by reaching, grabbing, pulling, and gripping a variety of objects, including their own bodies. By manipulating these objects in play, they begin to develop fine and gross motor skills, problem-solving skills, and a beginning understanding of cause and effect.

Play is also about social interaction: How can I get the desired response from my parents and other caregivers? Gopnik, Meltzoff, and Kuhl (2000) write extensively that babies are indeed physical and social scientist as they test theories about the world. What will happen when I shake this rattle? What will daddy do when I drop my spoon on the floor? Will mommy smile at me if I smile at her? Their mode of inquiry? Play! Many people associate more social play with older children (ages 4 years and older), but babies and toddlers actually start playing simple cooperative games from a very young age. Taking turns rolling a ball back and forth between parent and infant, playing peek-a-boo, or collaboratively knocking down a block tower are all joint activities that lay the foundation for more complex cooperative play.

While toddlers are exploring the limits of their physical and social worlds, play begins to grow in new directions. During the first year and beyond, children begin to engage in parallel play, where they play side by side and often take notice of what their peers are doing, although without much interaction. As they see what a peer is doing, they may start to imitate what they see or desire the same toy the peer is using. At around 18 months to 2 years, parents may start to notice that their child has more of a desire to play "around" other children their own age (playing together does not occur quite yet). Interactions in play at this age may be brief and limited to one-word declarations such as "mine!," but through parallel play toddlers are beginning to learn the basics of sharing, expressing feelings, and by age 2 even starting to engage in activities with shared goals like building a tower or moving trains along a track together (White, 2012).

Figure 1. A toddler explores texture, gravity, and cause and effect at the "Unsand Box" during the Big Brooklyn Playdate. (Photo: Jessica Ralli, courtesy of Brooklyn Public Library.)

Play and Early Literacy

Play is a powerful force in developing literacy and language skills. When babies coo, babble, and smile at their parents or caregivers, they need a response. Researchers call this "serve and return interaction" and believe it is the key in establishing strong brain architecture (Center on the Developing Child, 2011). If a baby makes a playful squeal (the serve), the parent notices, smiles, and talks to the baby (the return). As children grow

older they attempt to say certain sounds or even words. A toddler may say "Bah" for ball, and her adult caregiver will respond by saying "Yes! That's a ball! It's blue and bouncy!" In this example, the toddler is making connections between words and objects or actions, and learning new vocabulary through interaction with an adult. Strong oral-language development contributes to later reading success and happens most naturally through this kind of interactive, language-rich play (Carlsson-Paige, McLaughlin, & Almon, 2015, p. 5). Young children learn best in the moment, in context, and connected to real objects.

When symbolic play starts to emerge, parents may not think much of their toddler picking up a banana and babbling into it as if it were a telephone, but this seemingly simple play-act means that they can think about objects in an abstract manner; one object can stand for something else entirely. This kind of play is at its height during the preschool years, but emerges much earlier, at around 12 months of age (White, 2012); it is the first sign of representational thought—a significant cognitive milestone and an important step in a child's literacy development (Stone & Stone, 2015, p. 4). Children use similar cognitive processes when they begin to learn and understand that letters represent sounds, and words represent things, people, places, and ideas (p. 4). The more opportunities children have for symbolic play, the stronger the foundation for their understanding of abstract symbols—an essential concept for learning to read and write.

The importance of talking, reading, singing, and playing with babies and toddlers for early literacy development seems to be catching on outside of the library. New York City's "Talk to Your Baby, Their Brain Depends on It" campaign—a public-awareness initiative launched in 2015—stresses the importance of talking, reading, and singing in playful ways to develop babies' brains and promote healthy socioemotional growth (City of New York, 2016). Through the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, the initiative sends weekly text messages to parents with simple play activities they can do with their children up to age 3 to develop language skills. One of the initiative's founding partners, Too Small to Fail, launched a national "Talking Is Teaching" campaign with a similar mission, and offers a campaign guide for local organizations to implement awareness campaigns in their communities (Too Small to Fail, n.d.). The early literacy tips shared through these campaigns complement our baby and toddler curriculum, and we have been highlighting them to parents and caregivers in our programs for children ages 0–3.

Play and Self-Direction

Since there is no product to be created or no explicit goal, children can feel confident about their play. While some do get frustrated when their desires outstrip their motor skills and abilities, they often find a way to play

with the materials in a way that is in synch with their development. For example, take a collection of toy kitchen items: all children can play with the toy plates and kitchen utensils at their own level. A baby may enjoy putting the plate in his mouth; a toddler may like banging two plastic plates together to make some interesting noises; a preschooler may enjoy serving a pretend dinner to mom and dad. There are very few ways a child can fail at play, especially when surrounded by responsive caregivers.

Play allows for self-direction and is therefore naturally developmentally appropriate. Children learn about what they need to learn about: a child learning to walk may enjoy cruising on the chairs in the library program room; a child dealing with some separation anxiety may enjoy games of peek-a-boo—Are my parents still there even if I cannot see them?; a child learning social skills may pretend to prepare food for grownups and enjoy the replies of "please" and "thank you" once it is served. First-time parents are often amazed at how their babies "choose" what comes next in the evolution of their play. First grasping and mouthing rattle, then reaching for it successfully, later shaking it along to some music—children know what they are ready to do and naturally move on to the next step. When adults play with children, their optimal role is to be sensitive to the current level at which the child is playing and their needs and desires for where to go next (Gray, 2013, p. 141). When you have gone too far or pushed in an undesirable direction, a toddler will certainly let you know!

Play and Executive Function

When asked about the skills that children learn through play, librarians often name concepts (colors, numbers, counting, letters, and so on) and social skills like sharing; they also mention how play allows children to develop their creativity (Payne, 2015, p. 171), and many are aware of the strong links between play and early literacy. But play is also a highly effective way of developing important life skills like self-regulation; through active, unstructured play, children practice problem solving, make challenging decisions, and start to build an understanding of their world and how to function within it. Self-regulation is central to a group of cognitive skills called *executive function* (EF). The three core EFs are inhibitory control (or inhibition), working memory, and cognitive flexibility (Diamond, 2014b, p. 7). What this looks like in terms of child behavior is, among other things, the ability to plan and organize, to self-regulate and self-monitor, and to exercise patience and emotional control.

In recent years, early childhood researchers have been paying a lot more attention to EF, as there is strong research that shows that well-developed EFs can be one of the strongest predictors of success across all domains (Spiegel, 2008). Such functions start to emerge in infants as they begin to problem-solve to uncover a hidden object, for example (Diamond, 2014a, p. 12). Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child (n.d.) pub-

lishes an activities guide for developing and enhancing EF skills from infancy through adolescence. Lapsit songs and rhymes, hiding games like peek-a-boo, imitation and role-play, singing songs, fingerplays, and reading aloud and talking are all ways of encouraging core EFs in children ages 6–36 months, making playful library programs for babies and toddlers very relevant to the development of this important set of skills.

The Role of Libraries

Barriers to Play

It is important to understand what impedes parents engaging their children in play. Many are mystified as to how to play with a very young child, particularly one who is still gaining language. What do you say to a baby who can only babble? What do you do with an active toddler on a cold and rainy day when going to the playground is impossible? In *The Play Report 2015* (IKEA, 2015), which is a global survey of children and their parents, 49 percent of parents said that they do not have enough time to play with their children (p. 8). Even when they do find the time to play, 31 percent said they were "too stressed to enjoy it" (p. 10). For a grant report, we surveyed parents and caregivers who came to our baby and toddler programs at BPL about their challenges playing with their children so we could better support them in our programs. Many parents mentioned struggling with how to engage a baby or toddler with a short attention span.

Even more troubling, research has also shown that low-income parents engage less in literacy-rich experiences than their wealthier peers. The landmark study, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children* (Risley & Hart, 1995), noted that by the time children are age 3, those from educated and high-income homes heard 33 million words, while their low-income counterparts heard only 10 million. More recent research has noted that these gaps in vocabulary and language processing are leaving a mark on children as young as 18 months (Fernald, Marchman, & Weisleder, 2012, p. 246). The disparity in the amount of talk between babies and parents of different income levels and education backgrounds is enormous, adding up to massive advantages or disadvantages for children in language experience long before they start preschool. Risley and Hart (1995) found that the more parents talked to children, using a richer vocabulary with more positive affirmations, the more their children's language use increased. Recent related research found that the quality, and not just the quantity, of these verbal interactions can be even stronger indicators of future language development (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2015).

For children with disabilities, parents may be less likely to bring them to library programs or into playful settings (playgrounds, children's museums, play spaces, and so on) with children who are typically developing. Parents may worry that institutions will not make accommodations for their children; they may stay away rather than ask for inclusion. These

families may also have less time for unstructured play at home due to the extra hours spent in regular therapeutic or medical appointments. Children with disabilities may not receive the rich play experiences that their typically developing peers may receive, despite the fact that researchers acknowledge that play is as necessary to the quality of life for young children with disabilities as it is for all other young children (Buchanan & Johnson, 2009, p. 52).

The Role of Parents, Caregivers, and Librarians in Children's Play

Adults play an important role in enriching children's play experiences, but are often unsure about how to do this. With infants and toddlers, adults are often in charge of introducing a toy or book, setting up a play space, and modeling ways of interacting with the materials and environment. Children learn language through reciprocal interactions with trusted adults, and play provides countless opportunities for this meaningful language exchange. If, however, play becomes too adult-driven, children may miss out on some benefits of play (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 183) or become frustrated. It is best to let the child lead, however young, and to respond by commenting on their actions and gradually building on where they are from a developmental standpoint.

Recent research in early literacy has noted that parents who are supportive and responsive to their children's chatter and other first attempts at language rear children who perform better on early language assessments. Parents who stroke, praise, and respond to a baby's babble foster children who make more attempts at language. While some parents have heard the message that talking to children is important, not all talk is created equal; parents who take note of what their child is looking at and then talk about it to them do better than parents who talk to them about things the children are not interested in (Bronson & Merryman, 2011).

Talking with a baby or toddler during playtime can sometimes feel awkward, particularly when a child is not talking back. This is precisely why parents should see these interactions modeled. Here is a composite transcript of one exchange that occurred at a BPL program during which an 18-month-old boy was stacking blocks made out of cereal boxes:

> LIBRARIAN: "I like how you're stacking the blocks."
> *Child looks at librarian for a few seconds and puts another block on top.*
> LIBRARIAN: "You put another block on top of the blocks. You've got a tall tower! Are you going to knock it down?"
> *Child looks at the librarian and then back at the tower and knocks it down with a smile.*
> LIBRARIAN: "Boom, boom, boom! You did it! You knocked down the tower!" (Payne, 2015, p. 172)

Even though the child never said a word, he obviously understood everything the librarian said. The librarian's role here was to put the boy's experience into words, while modeling how the parent should engage the

child with language during play. It is likely that she may have given the boy some new vocabulary words or reinforced some words he already knew, such as "stacking" and "tower." She helped him to learn or extend his knowledge about new concepts, such as "on top of" and cause-and-effect situations (p. 173). What she said may seem obvious, but we have observed anecdotally that some parents and caregivers do not frequently engage in rich language with their children during play.

While scaffolding and supporting learning experiences for children who develop typically, it is essential for children with disabilities. Parents need to "use their knowledge of their children to engage them in play while scaffolding interactions to facilitate social communication, daily routines, and learning" (Childress, 2011, p. 112). With children having speech delays, for example, a parent may want to focus on building language skills through contextual talking during the course of play throughout the day. Play, being a flexible teaching strategy, allows for parents to follow their child's lead.

Read, Play, Grow! at Brooklyn Public Library

Many librarians put out toys for kids to play with after programs and leave the parents and kids to their own devices. At times, this is done out of necessity due to staff shortages, but it is important to regard playtime as a core component of our programs, not an afterthought; it is also important to model early literacy interactions with children. When parents and caregivers see library staff or other adults on the floor to play and talk with children, they learn firsthand how to engage children in the kind of quality interactions that develop language and literacy. All parents want what is best for their children, but many parents do not know that play is itself a rich and unparalleled learning activity, particularly in the areas of language and literacy development. This is where we come in.

When we began to develop the curriculum for Read, Play, Grow!, we knew we needed to find ways to encourage play at home. The activities we have created and modeled in our programs are based on one idea: Can they be easily replicated at home? We created simple play activities that parents and caregivers can replicate with common household items; for example, cardboard boxes as blocks and plastic containers as stacking and nesting toys. We bought some developmentally appropriate toys for babies and toddlers and found ways to substitute household items for them. Other examples include oven mitts as puppets and clear plastic bottles filled with feathers or small rubber balls as "discovery tubes."

Play Stations

To encourage play and interaction, we set up "play stations" for children to explore before or after the storytime program, and display a simple activity or homemade toy at each. Every station has a sign (either in a

sign holder or as laminated paper) with various "play tips," which offer directions to parents, provide ideas for the kinds of things they can say to their children to promote literacy development, and offer a few words about safety (if warranted). Some activities require more direction than others; if additional staff or volunteers are available, we enlist them to help guide the activity. When setting up different play stations, choose a range of activities that speak to different modalities and senses. While this is very helpful for all children, it is essential to those with disabilities. (Activities that are only visual in nature may not work for children with visual disabilities.) An example of a multimodal play station for infants is the "baby tube" station: a toilet paper or paper towel tube that can be used to blow gently on the baby, play tug of war, roll back and forth in a turn-taking game, or hide a sock or scarf inside for a peek-a-boo surprise. Tips instruct parents and caregivers to use language along with the actions, and also how to adapt the games for older infants or toddlers. This and more play station "recipes" are available in "The First Five Years: Play Recipes" on the BPL's website (BPL, 2016).

The Big Brooklyn Playdate

Each year, our central library hosts its annual Big Brooklyn Playdate, with over a hundred babies and toddlers (and their parents or caregivers) attending. The BPL staffers transform the Dweck Center—usually the site of gallery exhibits—into a baby and toddler play space with various play stations set up around the room that parents/caregivers and children can explore together. Signs are posted near the activities to provide tips to parents of things to say and ways to interact. A few years ago we borrowed an idea from *Running a Parent/Child Workshop* (Feinberg & Deerr, 1995) and invited "roving experts" (child-development experts and others) to our event to be on hand to answer parents' questions.

We set up three zones at the playdate as a way to direct the children to appropriate areas based on their development. The following are descriptions of these three large zones (Payne, 2015, pp. 179–180):

- *Baby play zone:* We securely tape various textured or visually interesting materials to the floor to create an area for babies to explore as they crawl around. We use rubber or fabric bath mats, bubble wrap, high-contrast-patterned hand towels, metallic paper, small quilts, craft foam, placemats, and zip-closure bags with visually interesting objects within, such as feathers, sponges, leaves, or seeds. We also place a large foam mat on the floor with several homemade and purchased toys for babies to explore who are not yet crawling (see fig. 2).
- *Active play zone:* This area is more appropriate for walkers and older children. We cut into a few large cardboard boxes variously shaped holes and doors. We also use a play parachute for even more boisterous play.

Figure 2. A caregiver and toddler exploring texture at the sensory-bin activity table during the Big Brooklyn Playdate. (Photo: Gregg Richards, courtesy of Brooklyn Public Library.)

To top it off, we present a few party-size bottles of bubbles for the parents to use with their children.

- *Block play zone:* In this area we spread commercially manufactured foam blocks, stacking blocks, extra-large construction bricks, and other building materials, along with our own handmade cardboard cereal- and food-box blocks (see fig. 3).
- *Play stations:* Around these three zones we also have "play stations" set up at child-size tables attended by library staff members and/or volunteers. Each station has one developmentally appropriate activity, which usually requires a bit more explanation and replenishment of supplies. The staff/volunteers also show parents the ways in which they can engage their children.

After offering our annual Big Brooklyn Playdate for five years, we have learned firsthand that play is fun and powerful stuff. The feedback we receive from parents is that all participants want us to do it every week. Two years into the Read, Play, Grow! program and after our first playdate, we surveyed parents/caregivers about the program's effectiveness: 74 percent of respondents reported learning new ways to engage with their children, and 44 percent said they use Read, Play, Grow! activities at home (Payne, 2015, p. 180).

Figure 3. A toddler exploring the "ball drop" during the Big Brooklyn Playdate. (Photo: Jessica Ralli, courtesy of Brooklyn Public Library.)

Examples of Innovative Play Programming

Libraries are increasingly embracing the importance of play to young children's healthy development, and have started incorporating play experiences into their early literacy programming for children ages 0–5. Through library blogs and websites, our professional associations with librarians nationwide, and our own program-planning research at con-

ferences, we have noticed that a lot is happening with innovative play at libraries. We wanted a more in-depth picture, so we contacted children's specialists through the Association for Library Service to Children listserv, as well as some of our colleagues and counterparts in other cities via an online survey, to inquire about innovative play programming for babies and toddlers beyond traditional lap-sit and toddler-time programs. We asked about their innovative play activities and how they also engage parents and caregivers. We received twenty responses from libraries around the country, representing communities that were either urban, suburban, or rural and serving populations of between 10,000 and 1 million.

A summary of our survey of innovative play programming, spaces, and practices at six libraries/systems in the United States is offered below. While there were more responses to our survey and undoubtedly many more examples being used, we wanted to focus specifically on providing ideas for organizing play events; creating do-it-yourself play spaces; encouraging block, exploratory, and sensory play; promoting community engagement through play; and promoting play beyond the library.

Example 1

Library: Oakland Public Library, Oakland, California
Profile: Urban
Librarian/branch: Mary Dubbs, Children's Librarian/Elmhurst branch
Play focus: Teaching the value of play

Why play at the library? When the library demonstrates that we value play, we make our spaces more welcoming and accessible to families who might think that their child's natural curiosity, levity, and verbosity are not tolerated in a "*Shh!*—it's-the-library" setting. Our desire to help families encourage play in their children's lives is reinforced by recent studies showing the importance of play to build school readiness skills.

Factoring "play" into almost every program provides access points for children of varying ages, interests, and abilities, so that whole families feel confident about bringing their kids to the library, including the youngest. When the expected outcome is that everyone will have fun and relax, versus "complete XYZ," everyone feels successful.

How are you incorporating play? Most of the programs at the Elmhurst branch have points of entry for all ages, as that is what the families want. Because there is usually no set goal, families can engage with a program for as long as they like. The open-endedness encourages creative play, whether we are making art, doing experiments, or having storytime.

At our Tea with Tots/Canciones y Café bilingual toddler playgroup we have hot beverages and snacks. With a grant from the Packard Foundation, we will be adding some bells and whistles that will encourage kids and caregivers alike to play, including new toys and manipulatives, a balance

beam, and a small playground for our backyard. Occasional guest speakers will address a variety of topics, including play. During our loose storytime, we draw from caregivers' knowledge to add to our repertoire of songs and rhymes. We want to support and reinforce their expertise, personal experience, culture, and language, giving them confidence to participate in storytime and playtime, and continuing at home.

We have a number of toys to play with at the library, including puppets, blocks, play food, dinosaurs, cars, and more. We store them on shelves in clear plastic bins labeled with a picture of the toy that belongs in that bin. In addition, versions of most of those toys, plus many more, are available for patrons to check out and bring home for three weeks. This is a fairly new service, launched at several Oakland Public Library branches about a year ago, and currently entering phase 2, where we will be adding new toys and expanding to more branches. The toys have a target age range of 0–6, and were chosen in part for their durability and their ability to function even with missing parts. Suggesting books to go with a toy can increase the fun—for example, checking out *The Day the Crayons Came Home* along with a pretend mailbox, or telling a family with a stack of T-Rex books that they can also bring home giant plastic dinosaurs.

How do you try to engage parents and caregivers in play experiences? We are struggling with the first step in engaging parents and caregivers—letting them know that the library exists in their neighborhood, has free services for them and their children, and that they are welcome. We have started leaving the branch to walk the streets and meet people and business owners. We have seen people come into the library who have never come before as a result of seeing a flyer posted in a laundromat or having a conversation on the sidewalk a few blocks away. What I have learned from this process is that if you are are having trouble getting new parents to the library, look at what is keeping you from hitting the streets or doing other outside-your-comfort-zone outreach, and see if you can overcome those barriers.

What do you hope families take away from these play experiences? We often say "people over things" to remind ourselves that the library is here for the patrons, not to hold the items in the catalog, and when building our relationships with parents, caregivers, and children we try to show and tell them that this is where we place our value—in them. Encouraging play is part of that philosophy.

I hope that after playing at the library, families feel joyful and more connected to their child and the community of other families. I really hope that these experiences build caregivers' confidence in their own abilities and those of their child. Lots of families in this neighborhood face messages that they or their kids are failing in some way. My hope for them is that their time in the library makes them feel that success is possible and their kids are able.

Example 2

Library: Skokie Public Library, Skokie, Illinois
Profile: Suburban
Librarian: Holly Jin, Community Engagement Supervisor
Play focus: Community engagement through play

Why play at the library? Through a community conversation with a local school's early childhood staff, we learned that some parents in our community do not spend time playing with their children. They may not understand the importance of play, have the time to actively play with their kids, or have the knowledge or resources to provide developmentally appropriate toys or books for their children. This lack of interactive play can negatively affect children when they enter school, as they may not develop the social/emotional skills needed to engage in meaningful play with peers, or possess the executive functioning skills needed for learning. Integrating play into our early literacy program allows me to model ways that parents can have fun with their children and share the educational value and necessity of play.

How are you incorporating play? With focused collaboration among Skokie Public Library staff, East Prairie School teachers, and three parent ambassadors, we have begun a new program for parents and their children (ages 0–3) called "Friendship & Fun with Little Ones," which meets weekly at the school. The success of this offsite, play-based program is due to the three parent leaders who joined our team as ambassadors to the Spanish-, Urdu-, and Assyrian-speaking communities. Our ambassadors invite families to the program and facilitate during class as needed.

We begin each one-hour program with free-play for the children and conversation for the grown-ups. I then share a thirty-minute storytime that includes songs and fingerplays, lap and tickle rhymes, two stories (one group reading and one shared reading, with a book for each child–caregiver pair), music and movement, a rhyme in Spanish/Urdu/Assyrian, a group flannel-board activity, and bubbles. For the last ten to fifteen minutes, I introduce the families to a simple, homemade toy or game, such as a glove puppet, pull-box, or shape sorter, and then we all make the toy and play with the children.

How do you try to engage parents and caregivers in play experiences? During the toy-based portion of our program, I demonstrate how to use the toy with various ages according to developmental stages. We then make the toys and play as the parent ambassadors and I model ways of interacting with the children. For example, when we made pizza-box flannel boards, I led a little boy through a "Who has the acorn?" game while his mother translated my words into Assyrian and encouraged her son to guess which animal the acorn was hiding behind. I have been told that parents and children continue to use the toys at home, and even some grandparents are getting in on the fun!

What do you hope families take away from these play experiences? We want parents to know how to have fun with their children and recognize the value and necessity of play. I occasionally talk about the importance of developing self-regulation, turn-taking, role-playing, vocabulary-building, and learning mathematical concepts like numbers and shapes, but I try to avoid lengthy explanations of skill acquisition and instead focus on the five Every Child Ready to Read practices and the directive of the Thirty Million Words Initiative: Tune in, talk more, and take turns. In addition to the primary goals of building a close-knit parent community at the school and equipping parents to play with their children, by playing together we hope to promote healthy child development (especially language acquisition and socialization), to gain a real understanding and appreciation of other cultures, and to cultivate long-term friendships.

Example 3

Library: Anchorage Public Library, Anchorage, Alaska
Profile: Urban
Librarian/branch: Lacey Hemming, Youth Services Librarian, Muldoon Library
Play focus: Block play

Why play at the library? Play is such an important part of early brain development and helps to spark new neuro-pathways. One of the main reasons I wanted to have a play-based program at our library was to create a welcoming place for parents and caregivers and their children. Our library has a huge impact in our surrounding community and neighborhood. We are a meeting spot for many families, and I wanted to provide them with a space to casually come, play, and socialize with other children and families. Early literacy goes well beyond just reading out loud and singing songs; there are other ways to gain early literacy skills, and block play is a huge part of that.

How are you incorporating play? We have a weekly Baby Builders Club in our program room. It is part of our Friday early literacy rotation that includes programs for ages 5 and under. Our program room is relatively small, with anywhere from ten to forty attendees, and a capacity for up to sixty. The program is forty-five minutes long, and it is a free, unstructured play program—meaning that children are free to play however they want. We set up the space to encourage exploration, with seven areas with different types of blocks, including fabric blocks, foam blocks, alphabet blocks, nesting blocks, mega blocks, wooden unit blocks, and Duplos. We provide a handout about the seven stages of block play, and what children do and learn with blocks at different ages and how parents can support their play.

How do you engage parents and caregivers in play experiences? I enjoy striking up a conversation and talking about the different stages of play. For

example, if a baby knocks down a stack of blocks, I let them know that that is actually one of the milestones of block play for infants and toddlers. Parents/caregivers love knowing that these simple actions are actually helping build their child's brain. Knowing this information also encourages parents to interact more with their children. For example, one parent created a fun game with the blocks measuring different body parts. I mentioned to them that expressing ideas using symbols or pretend objects is one of the important things that young children learn through block play.

What do you hope families take away from these play experiences? Mainly, I encourage families to play at home, and I encourage them to use everyday objects to encourage block play and visual-spatial development; for example, if they do not have a block set, they can use everyday items like making a fort with furniture cushions or stacking up cups of different sizes.

Example 4

Library: Skokie Public Library, Skokie, Illinois
Profile: Suburban
Librarian: Mary Michell, Youth Services Librarian; Gudrun Priemer, Youth Services Librarian
Play Focus: Exploratory Play

Why play at the library? Play and exploration are a child's way of learning about his/her world. Play at the library gives babies and toddlers, and their caregivers, exactly what they need. We can provide a safe space for babies to explore, toys that they do not have at home, opportunities for socialization, and an opportunity for parents to network, form friendships, and ask questions. The library functions as not only a champion of early literacy, but also as a support system for the community. New parents often feel unsure and isolated, and all parents can use support, confirmation of their parenting practices, information, and friendship. Playgroups at the library provide all of the above.

How are you incorporating play? On Wednesdays, we offer two short storytimes in our program room: one for infants under age 1, and one for toddlers from 12 months to 2 years. During these storytimes we share early literacy activities including bounce and tickle rhymes, fingerplays, songs, and lapsit reading. We have multiple copies of great-board books and pass them out to parents so that they can read together with their children. As storytime leaders, we read along as well, modeling early literacy practices like talking with babies about what they are seeing on the page. We always provide handouts of our rhymes and songs so that parents can refer to them at home.

Simultaneously, we provide a morning-long playgroup in our large meeting room, complete with infant-friendly toys, lots of board books,

coffee for caregivers, and classical music in the background. Toys include everything from small-motor activities (large beads, stacking cups, and rings) to noisy toys like colorful shakers, and even gross-motor-riding toys and tunnels. This means that caregivers can easily move from literacy activities to free, exploratory play, depending on their child's needs for that particular day.

How do you try to engage parents and caregivers in play experiences? The Wednesday-morning programs are run by two librarians, and we ensure that while one of us is doing a storytime, the other is with the playgroup, getting to know parents, chatting with them about their children, and engaging the children in play. We are always observing the children to see what they are interested in, and we offer them toys to match their interests. Between the two of us and our program assistant, we ensure that we personally interact with every baby, every week.

What do you hope families take away from these play experiences? We hope that families come away from our Wednesday-morning storytimes with tools for helping their children become lifelong learners, increased feelings of confidence in their parenting skills, a sense that the library is a place that will support them throughout their parenting years, and most importantly, friendships with other parents in the community. We see concrete evidence that this is happening, and we are very proud of this program.

Example 5

Library: Hussey Mayfield Library, Zionsville, Indiana
Profile: Suburban
Librarian: The Hussey Mayfield Memorial Public Library Youth Services team (Kelli Brooks, Laura Gangstad, Julie Myers, Jamie Schlenk, Caitlin Selby, Rebecca Stuck)
Play focus: Sensory play

Why play at the library? Play at the library is important for learning and promoting community engagement with our early literacy programming. By facilitating an environment that stimulates creativity, imagination, and early literacy growth, I think we are providing something that families find both fun and informative.

How are you incorporating play? Before we begin our program, I speak briefly with caregivers and children about the benefits of sensory play. We set up our Sensory Play program in one of our larger rooms with a tile floor (great for flexibility and worry-free clean-up). I set out plastic storage bins, along with the lids on the floor as different "play stations." The play stations contain colored rice, water, and sand; we add cups and scoops, seashells, dried noodles, and beans, as well as glitter or sequins to add variety to the visual and textural aspects. On the lids, I set up flat play-dough stations with plastic molding toys, plastic cookie-cutters, and

rolling instruments. In the water bins I add flat marbles, sponges, cups, plastic sifting bowls, and plastic toys—anything that might be dynamic and engaging.

How do you try to engage parents and caregivers in play experiences? I try to encourage conversation between the caregiver and child. I ask the children questions, allowing them to create a game or story. I move around the stations, briefly talking and playing with each child. The parents mirror the conversation style, and this creates a bond and a door to creative thinking and sensory discovery for children and parents playing together.

What do you hope families take away from these play experiences? I hope that families will bond over this kind of conversational play, and find ways to create similar connections through play at home.

Example 6

Library: San Francisco Public Library, San Francisco
Profile: Urban
Librarian: Rebecca Alcalá-Veraflor, Early Literacy Coordinator
Play focus: Play spaces and the library's Big SF Playdate

Why play at the library? In our commitment to incorporate the Every Child Ready to Read practice and the continued development and expansion of our Early Literacy Initiative, we incorporated play into our early literacy programming. From all the research, we know that play is one of the five key early literacy practices for children ages 0–5. The programs we offer are a way for the library to connect the dots between play and language development, and an opportunity for us to demystify play for parents and caregivers.

How are you incorporating play? Our twenty-eight locations have Play to Learn stations, which include interactive panels attached to cubes, interactive panels attached to the library walls, and/or standing kiosks. Children are able to manipulate the stations with their hands and sometimes with their bodies so that their fine and gross motor skills are developed.

We also offer programs and events where families can participate actively in play. Of our seventy-six storytimes, the library provides thirty-three playtimes that follow a weekly program—meaning that every week, families are offered thirty-three opportunities for play. To support this programming, our central office provides branches with toys and other play materials; some items remain in the branches, while others are shared on a rotating schedule. These toys include vehicles, dress-up costumes, puppets, soft blocks, balls, and other age-appropriate materials. We try to create a variety of play materials and opportunities that meet the needs of various abilities by offering open-ended activities, sensory toys, and quiet corners. We also provide examples of easy and no-cost play activities that families with limited means can easily incorporate into their homes. In

addition to our weekly play programs, the San Francisco Public Library hosts the Big SF Playdate in April, which is recognized as the Month of the Young Child. This is a time when we highlight the importance of play and links to early literacy development.

How do you try to engage parents and caregivers in play experiences? Our engagement with families varies and depends on the play experience. Our Play to Learn stations are always available in the children's area and are not monitored by librarians, although if caregivers have questions, the librarian is available. Our playtimes after storytime do allow for more interaction. Some librarians provide information about the activity and then leave the room for families to play freely; other librarians stay in the room with the families for the duration and are able to engage with the child and the adult. Our Big SF Playdate is also a time when librarians are in the room with the families and are able to engage more actively. To initiate the conversation, some librarians will comment on what the child is doing and ask the adult questions; others will engage the child with questions.

What do you hope families take away from these play experiences? We hope that families are able to leave the play experience with a sense of community. We hope that they see the library as place to learn, but also to play and meet other families in their neighborhood. We also hope that they see that play is very important work for their children.

Conclusion

It is said that parents are their children's first teachers, but they are also their first playmates. The importance of play in the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development of young children is not only well-supported by years of qualitative and quantitative research, but if embraced and supported, it can also be one of the most joyful aspects of childhood and raising young children. Parents are often bombarded with information about how to give their children the best start. Books, blogs, apps, and products sometimes offer conflicting advice that can leave well-intentioned parents confused as to how best support their children's development. Since libraries are often the first cultural and educational institutions in which the very young can fully participate, they are uniquely positioned to support parents in these first interactions and help them navigate the sea of information available.

Libraries are also one of the few educational environments where parents and children learn together. We know that parents and caregivers can greatly enrich children's learning through play merely by providing the necessary opportunities, and beyond that by guiding play through open-ended questions, encouragement, and adding language to children's discoveries (White, 2012). Barriers to play, including time constraints, access to safe play spaces and materials, and an increased focus on academics in

early education that can trickle down to very young children (Ginsburg, 2007, pp. 184–185), make our mission even more critical. Creating playful experiences for parents and children in library spaces and programs help parents understand that play is directly linked to children's literacy and language development. When we get down on the floor and model positive, responsive interactions, parents observe at first hand how to engage their child to foster emerging language skills. We can help parents "connect the dots" among language, literacy, and play, and show them that the best thing they can do to foster their child's growth and development is to encourage squeezing dough, stacking blocks, and peeking through boxes.

Acknowledgments

A number of people helped create, develop, and assess the Read, Play, Grow! curriculum at BPL. Special thanks to Steven Lamonea, Christopher Lassen, Jeanne McDermott, and Catherine Skrzypek for jump-starting the program, and to McDermott, Katya Schapiro, and Jessica Ralli, who helped refine and evaluate it. Many thanks to the wonderful children's specialists and librarians, interns, and volunteers at BPL, who field-tested it at branch programs and the Big Brooklyn Playdate. And many thanks to the New York State Library and the Altman Foundation for their generous support of Read, Play, Grow!

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