

TOP

Tips on parenting



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Promoting Early Literacy in Young Children

by Dr. Lauren Cummins

Early literacy is a topic that has gained increased focus and importance over the last decade. Brain research, early childhood education advocates, and legislative mandates have linked early, positive literacy experiences with school readiness and success. But what do these positive early experiences look and feel like? How can parents foster and support these positive experiences at home and through the choices they make for quality child care and preschool?

You will be happy to know that early literacy is not *rocket science*. However, there is significant research that focuses on scientific evidence that has linked successful reading and writing to positive early literacy experiences in four integrated and inter-related areas; reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Literacy Begins at Birth: Receptive and Expressive Language
From the beginning of life, an infant is learning and responding to their world through their senses and communicating with others through listening and speaking. It is through the close relationships with parents and caregivers that infants begin to understand their world and learn to respond to others through their gazing, smiling, babbling, and crying (U.S. Department of Education, 1995). Learning to read and write is dependent on oral language development. The more parents and caregivers interact and share, the more engaged and attentive infants and preschoolers become. Another's vocalizations in response to her infant's babbling promotes two-way communication as the infant and mother listen to each other, pause, and take turns responding. The art of receptive and expressive communication is beginning. A game of pushing a ball back and forth engages an infant in physical development, but also promotes language development as the infant hears the dad say, "Push it to daddy," and then sees a responsive smile from dad as his child pushes the ball.

Early Literacy and Real-World Connections

Real-life, meaningful experiences build early literacy skills, even in the youngest of children (Teale, 1982). Parents need not run to the store to obtain the latest

From the beginning of life, an infant is learning and responding to their world through their senses and communicating with others through listening and speaking.



Promoting Early Literacy in Young Children

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guaranteed published activity that ensures a preschool child will learn to read. Literacy experiences are all around us on a daily basis and often promote the best motivation for learning to read and write. Motivation is critical for successful reading and writing and is also at the heart of adult literacy. Life-long learning occurs because people are motivated to become actively engaged in the process of learning.

In our daily lives we read our mail, the newspaper, or a book. We look through a telephone book to find a number, write out a grocery list, and go to the grocery store, where we pass numerous street signs and store names. We then come home and listen to music on the radio, phone a friend, or write an e-mail.

Young children are good observers and constantly interpret their world by what adults do. They also act-out these adult experiences through play, and develop an understanding of literacy through this play. It is not uncommon to see children pretending to talk on the phone, write a shopping list, or visit the library.

The Preschool Years

Early literacy experiences for toddlers and preschoolers are best supported at home through daily experiences that involve literacy. Here are several examples.

- Sit with your child on the couch and look through catalogs and children's magazines.
- Read children's books to your child.
- Discuss what your child believes will happen next in a story, or discuss what they might do if they were the main character in the story. Dialoguing about books while reading promotes the ability to think and comprehend about what is

being read. Comprehension skills are as important as being able to decode words. Without understanding, we lose the purpose of why we are reading in the first place.

- Ask your child if they would like to make their own book about a favorite vacation, or create a book about their trip to grandpa's. Allow them to make the pictures and dictate to you what they want their book to say. If they choose, let them write the story. Many effective early experiences in writing engage young children in understanding that

symbols (letters) represent words that can be spoken. You might not be able to read it, but they will and they will enjoy reading it to you over and over again!

- Allow your home to be filled with literacy items (Morrow, 1997). Develop a special writing and reading center in your home or your child's room. You will find your child reading and writing more often, if materials are readily available. But again, promote reading and writing activities within meaningful context. Your daily activities will identify this context. If you

book review

by Dr. Heidi Malloy, Editor

"Proactive parenting: Guiding your child from two to six" is an excellent resource for parents who are looking for answers to questions such as:

- Why does my three-year-old have a hard time sharing and making friends?
- Is it wrong to feel a bit uncomfortable when my child gives me a hug?
- At what age should my home computer be introduced to my child?
- What influence does television have on my child's social and emotional development?
- Should I use both English and my native language in our home?
- How do I help my child adjust to a new school?

This entertaining and readable book helps parents understand why their children act the way they do and how they can best respond to their children's behaviors. Parents can use the book as a resource to help children learn social skills, develop self-discipline, and cope with life changes, including moving, the birth of a sibling, divorce, illness, and death. The book also addresses physical closeness and affection, topics not often found in other parenting books. Going beyond the traditional nuclear family, this book provides support for parents raising children in all types of family compositions.

"Proactive parenting: Guiding your child from two to six" (ISBN 042518837X) was written by psychologists and educators at Tufts University's Elliot-Pearson Department of Child Development and is now available at your local bookstore or on-line at Amazon.com.





are going on a family vacation, allow them to write down a list of what they want to take on the trip and be part of writing post cards to family and friends. If you are going to the grocery store, let them add their favorite items to a grocery list. When coming back from grandma's or after a birthday party, engage them in writing a thank-you card(s).

Letter Names and Letter Sounds

When talking about the alphabet, start with your child's name. Nothing is more meaningful to a young child than their name. Have your child name their favorite stuffed animal. You can then create a name tag for it. Point out labels of their favorite foods when shopping or ask them if they can find their favorite cereal on the grocery shelf. Put a job

chart on your refrigerator, with small chores that have pictures and words. Then let them tell you what their job is for the week. This will not only promote responsibility, but will also engage them in recognizing meaningful words that relate to their world.

It has been well documented throughout research that successful readers have mastered the sounds of letters. These children have become discriminating listeners. Parents can also promote discriminating listening throughout everyday experiences. Talk about sounds you hear outside as you walk through the park or the sounds of their cereal as milk is poured over it. The more they grow to be keen listeners, the more they will be able to discriminate the difference in letter sounds and blend several letters together to make words. Rhyming books and

games, singing, and music are other avenues to develop this skill. It is amazing how many young children are not familiar with famous nursery rhymes. Having a quiet reading time before bed, that also incorporates some nursery rhymes will not only make positive childhood memories, but will also promote sound discrimination without drilling and practicing letter sounds in isolated experiences.

Opening Doors

Remember, early literacy is not just for success in school. It is there for a lifetime of learning. The more engaging and meaningful early literacy experiences can be, the more motivated your child will be to read and write. Literacy opens doors to explore and understand our world. Promoting it in meaningful ways keeps these doors opened.

activity corner

Create Pretty Paper!



MATERIALS

Three small plastic bowls filled with 1 to 2 inches of water
Red, yellow, and blue food coloring
Coffee filters for a drip coffeemaker
Lots of newspaper to protect the work surface

PROCEDURES

1. Separate the coffee filters into sets of two.
2. Add 10-15 drops of red, yellow, or blue food coloring to each bowl of water and stir. Use more food coloring to create brighter colors.
3. Crinkle or fold the coffee filter papers.
4. Dip a portion of the paper into a bowl.
5. Next, dip another portion into the second bowl, and so on.
6. Squeeze out the filter between dips.
7. Set the papers aside to dry.

This activity introduces preschool children to primary and secondary colors. Older children will enjoy exploring how folding or crinkling the paper creates different designs.

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My Child Is Playing War! What Can I Do?

by Dr. Heidi Malloy, Editor

Tom, a 4-year-old boy, runs into the family room and yells to his brother John, "Watch out for the bad guys. Kill the bad guys if you see any." John replies, "Okay. I found a bad guy." Tom says, "Okay, kill him, put him in the bad guy hiding place." John creates a "gun" by holding up his thumb and index finger. John makes a sound like a gun being shot. He yells to Tom, "I killed him, I killed the bad guy."

If you have ever observed a similar play scenario in your home, you may have questioned whether this play behavior is helpful or harmful to children's development. Perhaps you have a "no gun rule" in your home. Is it working? If so, does it work when the child goes to preschool or a child care center? This type of play, known as war play, is common among young boys and has been a cause for concern for many parents and early childhood educators.

What is War play?

In war play children act out good guy roles and transform harmless objects into guns or swords to kill imaginary evil forces. Boys tend to be the primary players in episodes involving war toys, face-to-face fighting, shooting, and action figures. Typically boys who find this play interesting identify with the stereotypical idea that to be a man one must be strong, powerful, fearless, and aggressive. War play provides these boys with a socially acceptable way to express these characteristics in their behaviors.

Should Children Participate in War Play?

There are both benefits and costs to children who participate in war play. Similar to other forms of dramatic play, children use war play as a vehicle for understanding the world. They try on different roles, experiment with storylines, practice social skills, and distinguish fantasy from reality. War play also helps

children learn how to regulate their emotions and provides a socially acceptable avenue for children to express anger and aggression. War play may be attractive because it meets children's needs for power, control, and mastery over traumatic or frightening situations that children have no control over in real life. Finally, children may also begin to develop an understanding between what is good and bad or right and wrong as they work through the central themes and issues in war play.

However, the costs of participating in war play may outweigh the benefits. Participating in war play episodes that include fantasy aggression may increase the likelihood that children will behave aggressively in the real world. War play may also teach children to use violence as a way to display power and solve problems.

Where Do Children Get Ideas for War Play?

Tragically, our world is full of examples of violence, aggression, and war. Children may have experienced acts of aggression first hand or they may have witnessed it in their homes, neighborhoods, or on television. Although researchers have documented that children's ideas for play can come from real wars and acts of terrorism, the majority of ideas for war play come from television programs, particularly cartoons (e.g., Ninja Turtles, Power Rangers). This is unfortunate because researchers have found that children are more likely to harm other children after viewing aggressive cartoons than viewing non-violent television programs; and there is overwhelming evidence that viewing aggression and violence on television can increase aggressive attitudes, values, and behaviors. The toy industry may also be contributing to children's aggressive play by promoting toys and video games based on violent television programs.



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What Can I Do When My Child Participates in War Play?

There is no clear answer as to how parents should respond to children's war play. Parents need to make the decision based on their own values and beliefs about aggression and play. However, parents can seek guidance from the book "The War Play Dilemma," written by Carlsson-Paige and Levin (1987). Carlsson-Paige and Levin describe four ways caregivers can address children's war play. Parents can (1) ban war play, (2) allow war play at anytime and anywhere, (3) allow war play within limits, or (4) teach children how to critically think about the war play they initiate.

To some parents, banning war play may sound like a good option. However, parents often find it difficult to enforce a ban on war play when children's ideas for the play come from the constant bombardment of violence in the cartoons they watch. Also, banning war play may teach children to become sneaky and participate in war play behind their parent's backs. Children in this situation may experience unnecessary feelings of guilt and anxiety. Finally, if war play is banned, children may lack some opportunities to regulate emotions and address traumatic or frightening events in the world.

Other parents believe that war play is a harmless part of childhood, so they allow it without any restrictions. This position is often based on the notion that "boys will be boys," and there is nothing parents can do about their displays of aggression. The positive side to this approach is that it does not lead children to feeling guilty or behaving deceptively, but it also does not help children increase their understandings of the effects violence, aggression, and war have on individual people and society. Children are left to create their own understandings, which may be flawed with misconceptions.

Other parents have concerns about children's physical safety when they

participate in the rough and tumble that usually accompanies war play. These parents put limits on when, where, or how the children participate in war play, but do not address the children's understandings or help children to develop morals and values. All three of these approaches to war play may fail to meet children's developmental needs or guide their political and social understandings.

So what can parents do to meet all the needs of children who participate in war play? Parents can intervene by helping children to critically think about the war play they initiate.

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question corner



We usually do not allow our 20-month-old daughter to watch TV or videos. However, last summer we took a long car trip and let her watch Disney videos in the car as a means of entertaining her for long periods of time confined to her car seat. She really likes the videos and asks to see them often so once we let her watch while she ate her lunch. Now, she asks to see them almost every time she eats and we find that we give in. How can we break that habit?

~ Jamie in Colorado

You likely already know how to break this habit, and it will probably prove more painful for you than for your daughter! She continues to ask to watch videos during lunch because you continue to let her (at least sometimes). So here is the painful part: to end this habit, you must be absolutely consistent in not allowing videos during lunch. You want to replace the habit of watching videos during lunch with an activity you find more acceptable, such as talking and making mealtimes a more social activity. When your daughter asks for a video during lunch, remind her that we eat and visit during lunch, but we do not watch videos. If there is a time when you feel it is acceptable to watch videos, remind her of that as well: "We will watch a video after your nap." If you do not want to encourage the videos, offer another activity. "We do not watch videos during lunch, but after lunch we will read your duck book." She will probably keep asking for videos during lunch for a time, but if you consistently respond with a reminder that videos are not for lunchtime (and offer a more acceptable alternative), after a bit she will stop asking for videos at mealtimes.

-Karen Hager is a doctoral student in Special Education and Rehabilitation at Utah State University. She has worked with children across a wide range of ages.

question corner features questions posed by parents to early childhood experts who provide brief responses in this newsletter. If you have any questions you would like answered, please send email to eejcenter@coe.usu.edu or mail to EEJ Center for Early Childhood Education • Utah State University • 6515 Old Main Hill • Logan UT 84322-6515.

science corner : Exploring motion with a young learner

by Leigh Monhardt, Ph.D.

The motion of objects is a very important concept for understanding the physical world around us. Since some children are in constant motion (or seem to be), this can lead to some exciting investigations into the science concept of motion. We may remember from our own science experiences in school that to be able to ‘understand’ the physics of movement one had to know some equation like $a=F/m$. But for almost all children (and adults) one can grasp the idea that an object’s motion will be greater if the force is greater and will be less if the object has more mass without having to memorize an equation (Benchmarks for Science Literacy, 1993).

The National Science Education Standards specifically suggests that students in K-4 have experience with and develop an understanding of the following two concepts on motion:

- An object’s motion can be described by indicating the change in its position over time (speed).
- Pushing or pulling can change the position and motion of objects and the size of the change is related to the strength of the push or pull.

From very early on children should be encouraged to view, describe, and discuss all kinds of moving things – themselves, insects, birds, trees, fans, swings, balls, etc. Children should be encouraged to draw pictures to suggest their motion, asking questions such as:

- How does the object move?
- Is the motion fast or slow?
- How can you tell?
- Can you change the movement of the object?

Children should be given many opportunities getting things to move or not to move and have experiences in changing the direction or speed of objects that are already in motion (Benchmarks for Science Literacy, 1996, p. 89).

In order to facilitate these objectives one can engage their child in the following activities.

Warm-up Activity

Action Poems

Have your child perform the movements as directed by these poems. Read the poems aloud, talk about the words and

Bouncing, bouncing,
up and down
Bouncing, bouncing,
turn around
Bouncing, bouncing,
be a clown
Bouncing, bouncing,
hit the ground!

Thumper, bumper,
Rough and tough,
Crasher, smasher
That’s enough!
Lightly, sprightly,
Soft as mice
Creeping, sleeping...
That’s nice!

- actions, and then read them again while performing the actions. Memorizing the poem makes it more fun.
- The Canadian Institute of Child Health and Government of Canada - Fitness and Amateur Sport published this poem. http://www.cfc-efc.ca/docs/cich/00002_en.htm

• After you and your child get moving, have your child explore the movement of other objects.

How Does it Move?

Step I

• Provide your child with a variety of objects to explore and describe how they move. A good place to start is having your child experiment with a variety of balls of different sizes, weights, and made from different materials such as: tennis ball, basketball, rubber ball, marble, ping-pong ball, light foam ball, etc.

Step II

• Have your child describe verbally or in a picture how each ball moves. How is the movement different or how are they similar? During this exploration phase your child will discover interesting aspects of how the different objects move. You may want to take note of what some of these ideas are. (Caution: Working with these objects can and should be a lot of fun but make sure that you are recording your child’s ideas and not yours.)

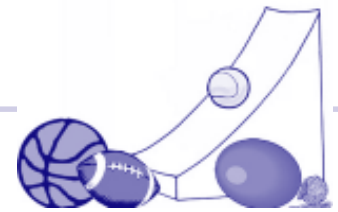
Step III

• Have your child collect information about the way each object moves. If you chose to use different kinds of balls, your child could see which ball bounced the highest, bounced the most times, or rolled the furthest. Let your child ask questions while they explore the objects and encourage them to make observations about what they are experiencing. You might ask your child to explain which objects have similar movements and which are different. Have them explain their thinking. For example, your child may group several balls that bounce high together and notice that they are made of a similar material.

Balls and Ramps

Step IV

• If your child did not explore rolling the various balls down an incline this idea can be introduced to your child. You and your child can build a ramp using materials such as a piece of wood, cardboard or even several stacked books. Follow the same procedures as in Steps 1-3 where your child explores, describes and develops questions about how the various balls move down the ramps.



Step V

Depending on the age of your child the last step is to have them explore ideas that they “wondered about” during the exploration phase. You may want to model for your child an “I wonder” question. For example you might wonder which ball rolls the furthest down the ramp. Next develop “a plan” for conducting the investigation. You might decide to mark a starting point on the ramp and one by one roll the balls down the ramp. Then you will mark or measure how far each ball rolled. You would finish by explaining what you “found out” from your experiment.

After you model the “I wonder ...”, “My plan ...”, and “I found out ...” investigation method, have your child experiment with their questions.

It is important to remember that the questions are much more important than the answers at this stage. The fun experiences they have exploring objects today will help set the groundwork for more in-depth explanations and explorations as they get older. Who knows? They may even find a use for the equation $a=F/m$ (but I doubt it)!!

Reference
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Benchmarks for Science Literacy: Project 2061. Oxford University Press, New York: 1993.

~ Leigh Monhardt is an assistant professor in the Department of Elementary Education at Utah State University.

My Child Is Playing War! What Can I Do?

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Parents can do this by observing what their children are working on during play and actively intervene by expanding on what their children do or say. Through this approach parents not only show children they are interested in their play activities, but they can also influence their children’s developing political and social values.

One way parents can influence their children’s values is to point out the humane characteristics of the good guys and the bad guys in their play. Parents can intervene in their children’s war play by focusing on the needs of the victims. Parents can join the children’s play and discuss the importance of getting help for the injured parties as they incorporate ambulances, fire trucks, police cars, and rescue personnel into their children’s play scripts. Parents can also introduce hospitals and medical equipment to change the focus of children’s play from killing to a more positive theme of helping people who are in need.

Furthermore, parents can help children investigate concepts that are related to characters prominent in war play scenarios. For example, children fascinated with “Batman” may find it interesting to learn more about bats or children playing “Spiderman” may be thrilled to study how spiders create webs.

Additionally, parents can change war play scenarios by introducing children to equally exciting play content by reading books about dinosaurs or space and planning trips to the zoo.



Parents can also use stories to introduce children to real life heroes and heroines. Most importantly, parents can make it clear to their children that aggression is not acceptable. By intervening in children’s war play, parents can help their children learn alternative strategies for solving problems and consider the consequences of their actions. When parents intervene in children’s war play, children are able to increase their abilities to peacefully solve conflicts, develop positive attitudes and values, and create more accurate understandings about the conflicts that happen in the world.

Resources :
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