

# Ready to Learn

Using Play to Build Literacy Skills in Young Learners

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# Contents

Foreword by David Booth 5

- 1. Using Play to Build Literacy Foundations 7**
  - Play as a Social Activity 7
  - Giving Value to Preschool Play 8
  - Emergent Literacy — Embedded in Social Practices 8
  - The Skills versus Play Debate 9
  - Challenges Facing Play as Learning 10
  - Play as It Relates to Curriculum Planning 12
  - Play as Children's Work and Other Viewpoints 13
  - The Value of Play 15
  - Come, Play with Me: Types of Play 16
  - Digging to China: Play as Process 19
  
- 2. Learning to Communicate through Play 23**
  - Oral Language Development as Part of Emergent Literacy 24
  - Sounds and Letters — Making the Links 27
  - Early Understandings about Talk 29
  - Planning for Meaningful Talk 29
  - Storytelling — Understanding the Nature of Story 33
  - Creating Space for Listening 36
  - Building Story Skills 37
  - Asking Questions about Story Play 38
  - The Importance of Play in the Development of Language 39
  
- 3. Understanding Print through Play: Towards Reading and Writing 41**
  - Immersion in Print and Social Interaction 41
  - Environmental Print — Reading Our World 43
  - Classroom Ideas for Exploring Environmental Print 44
  - Bridging Children's Home and School Worlds 45
  - Language Development through Dramatic Play 46
  - Dramatic Play Centres 50
  - Active Engagement with Words and Letters 53
  - Developmental Stages of Writing 55
  - Promoting Literacy at Classroom Centres 58
  - Play as Scaffolding for Literacy Success 63

<b>4. Play as a Path to Problem Solving: Mathematics</b>	<b>65</b>
Math Concepts and the Young Child	65
Math Conversations in the Home	66
Bridging Home and School with Positive Math Knowledge	67
Building Numeracy in Kindergarten	68
Playful Approaches to Numeracy at Home and School	70
The Role of a Math Centre	74
<b>5. Play as a Form of Exploration: Science</b>	<b>77</b>
Discovery through Play	77
How to Introduce Hands-on Science	79
The Discovery Centre	80
Science Play: Types and Examples	81
<b>6. Technology, Computers, and Play</b>	<b>85</b>
Video Games and Their Benefits	85
How Children Interact with Computers	86
Discovery-Oriented Computer Play	87
Criteria for Assessing Computer Games	88
Learning with Interactive Technology	89
<b>7 English Language Learning through Play</b>	<b>91</b>
Fostering Educational Play	91
Play, Literacy, and English Language Learners	92
Scaffolding Play for ELL Students	94
Resources That Honor Diversity	95
What to Consider When Involving ELL Students in Play	97
<b>8. Building Citizenship through Child Play</b>	<b>99</b>
Developing Understanding of Community	100
Building Blocks to Community	101
Sharing and Its Foundations	102
Making Responsible Decisions	103
Using Play to Create Collaborative Communities	104
Connecting Children to the Environment through Play	105
<b>Children's Books for Playful Learning</b>	<b>107</b>
<b>Annotated Bibliography</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>115</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>119</b>

# 1

## Using Play to Build Literacy Foundations

Through their earliest years of play, children develop a substantial body of skills and knowledge which they bring to the classroom when they first enter a school. Most of them vaguely realize that attending school means they will learn to read and write, make new friends, and take their first real steps towards independence. They will do this on the foundations of what they already know.

One of the biggest challenges that face educators is how to reconcile this early childhood knowledge with the formal education experience. A significant part of the early years' school curriculum is finding ways to build a base of knowledge on which skills may be taught. Programs, therefore, need to be designed in such a way that they address the needs of all children but are constructed in a manner that reflects the best knowledge and practices by which children learn.

### Play as a Social Activity

This book is about play and the way play can interact with early educational experiences. Pioneering psychologist Lev Vygotsky described *social play* as the way in which children come to understand rules, and just as important, that there are rules that underlie all their social interactions. All children's actions take on symbolic meaning, and through play, children build understanding of the world around them. Play is inherently social, and it facilitates children's integration into peer groups and collaborative learning spaces. It is needed for children to assume other roles and viewpoints, and to establish close interpersonal communication. In other words, play and children's social interactions are irrevocably linked. As educators, we must understand that children do best when their social interactions are valued in the learning experience.

Currently, enormous efforts and sums of money are being spent preparing young children for their education. Some of this is based on over-eager parenting; some of it is a creation of pop culture. An entire industry of DVD sales and pre-preschools has sprung up to service the perceived need to create an educational base for children's early school years. As educators, we must ask ourselves fundamental questions about preparing young children for lifelong learning: What skills do they need? What teaching methods and learning theories best address how to build these foundational skills? How do we address the diversity of learners in and bring needed cultural awareness to our classrooms? How do we value the home literacy experiences that children bring to the classroom door?

"I play more with friends who are in school than out of school as other kids are at clubs a lot. If you knock on the door and they are not there I get a bit bored."

"At school you can play with friends. I don't have friends after school."

— Children quoted in the 2009 British Playday study (coordinated by Play England)

Of the children surveyed in the Playday study, 73 percent said that school is their main opportunity to spend time playing with friends.

## Giving Value to Preschool Play

“During early childhood, abilities to represent feelings, intentions, and actions in words, to pretend play, to draw and to construct with blocks emerge. Children begin to build bridges between ideas and to connect feelings, facts, and new understandings. If properly supported in early childhood, children enter Grade 1 eager to learn the cultural tools essential to our society — literacy, numeracy, and inquiry skills.”

— Charles E. Pascal, *With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario*

Children bring many different learning experiences to the classroom, but some have more than others. Those who have been exposed to daycare or preschool will have already begun to build skills, to engage in “learning how to learn.” For children without this type of foundation, reconciling their previous experiences to those of the classroom is more difficult.

Explaining this difficulty becomes easier if we think about how children learn. Learning is a social phenomenon that takes place within a child’s cultural world (Street, 2000). Children learn in many ways, active participation in play, planned activities, their own observations, and discussions with adults among them. Social interactions and explorations of their understanding of their world are vital — these are achieved through play (Branscombe, Castle, Dorsey, Surbeck, & Taylor, 2000).

Teachers today have to plan curriculum in key learning areas and build upon children’s skills and social interactions to help them learn. My twofold goal in this text is to help teachers understand the importance of play as a pedagogy for learning those early skills and to reach out to learners who are challenged by current classroom practices as well as those children who need to be challenged. This book should be beneficial to educators in Kindergarten to Grade 3 classrooms.

Yet my goal stands in the face of current practice. Schools and teachers have largely abandoned play as a pedagogical tool in favor of the perceived benefits of an academic agenda. At the same time that many parents are beginning to question homework policies, standardized testing, and the lack of socialization skills in children, societal pressures insist that academics become the sole focus in classroom learning. As a result, in many school curricula, play is noted but rarely seen as foundational to young children’s literacy building — this is a serious omission.

My intention is to connect children’s play to our curricula and pedagogical practices. Teachers understand that children’s learning at home scaffolds and connects to school learning — *and much of a child’s early life, up to and including the first years in school, is spent playing*. This book goes some distance in offering a look at the benefits of engaging children in a pedagogy that honors what they know and prepares them for later years with a strong literacy foundation. The learning experiences provided by playing at home are of enormous value to what will happen later in the classroom, and this knowledge will enhance the roles of both teachers and parents. Play represents a huge opportunity to create a foundation for the future literacy lives of our children.

## Emergent Literacy — Embedded in Social Practices

*Emergent literacy*, as termed by Marie Clay (1991), is the ongoing and developmental process of understanding and using language from birth until independence. Typically, children from birth to eight years of age are in this phase of development.

Emergent literacy begins with oral language, which is central to how children understand and communicate their needs and wants. Through their experimentation with language — the constructive process of engaging the world around them — and amid its constant feedback, children become competent “meaning makers” (Wells, 1999).

According to socio-cultural perspectives, children's home literacy engagements can be viewed as social practices situated within communities (Wenger, 1998). These social practices are ultimately the foundations of children's learning (Roskos & Christie, 2000). Through the early years of play and exploration, children acquire a substantial body of skills and knowledge (Hughes, 1991).

Successful pedagogy recognizes that learning is not confined to the school and can neither begin nor end there. Embracing the valuable learning and language experiences that define children's first literacy engagements with the world is necessary for later success (Heath, 1983).

Children also participate in literacy engagements long before they can discriminate between letters or recognize the correspondences between letters and sounds (e.g., Clay, 1991). From their earliest moments, all children are active learners who construct knowledge and understandings within a series of age-related stages (Piaget, 1962).

## The Skills versus Play Debate

Early childhood education is a challenging area that has prompted an ongoing debate about the value of play in early literacy, as opposed to a skills model approach. The skills model is now dominant in North American educational strategies.

The U.S. educational strategy known as "Head Start" places huge value on early childhood skills acquisition. It promotes the social and cognitive growth of disadvantaged children through providing programs in education, nutrition, social needs, and health services to children and families enrolled in the program. Programs such as ABC Head Start Alberta are similar.

In its *National Strategy for Early Literacy*, the Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network (2009) put a focus on skills too, but stated its awareness of stakeholders' expanding definitions of literacy. The Network's report says that "literacy included not only reading and writing, but also speaking, viewing and representing, as well as what these mean to various social and cultural groups." Although this definition acknowledges literacy as a social and cultural practice, Canadian definitions of literacy are still skills based as defined by the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey and the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey; these surveys, conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and Statistics Canada, are quoted in the Network's *National Strategy for Early Literacy* (see p. 11).

One key recommendation of the Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network's report is as follows: "Children acquire fundamental literacy skills through an evidence-based instructional program that must include systematic, direct and explicit instruction, supporting the acquisition of essential alphabetic, code-breaking skills and development of strong oral language, vocabulary, grammar, fluency and comprehension skills" (p. 40).

This recommendation negates children's natural literacy acquisition in their own worlds and on their own terms. In fact, it holds children and play hostage in favor of a political and economic agenda. It ignores theoretical research on children's early literacy skills learning: children achieve language and literacy skills at higher levels when they experience rudimentary play scenarios and creativity in nurturing environments.