

Play, The Library, and Every Child Ready to Read 2

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Play is one of the five practices every parent uses to help their young children get ready to read. Through research and evaluation, Dr. Susan Neuman identified five simple but powerful practices and simplified the language used in Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR 1st edition) from the six skills (print awareness, letter knowledge, phonological awareness, vocabulary, narrative skills, and print motivation) to the practices (reading, writing, singing, talking, playing) used in ECRR 2nd edition.

Four of the practices—reading, writing, singing, and talking—are ones librarians easily incorporate into storytimes, collections, programs, library environments (both inside and out), and outreach activities. But play, especially gross motor play, is a bit more difficult to include.

Librarians add small motor activities such as bending, stretching, playing with a parachute, or tossing small balls into their storytimes with great regularity. And while libraries are no longer the quiet places they once were, most libraries still do not have a basketball hoop or slide in their children's area to encourage the development of gross motor skills, yet this category is as important as its smaller cousin. Especially in today's screen-filled sedentary world, children need to develop both small and gross motor skills; plus play is a primary way children learn about their world, its boundaries, and how things function. Sometimes being physical is the only way to figure something out.

How can we think about large motor play in an appropriate way? I use the word “appropriate” for two reasons. The first is, just because something is good for children and families, fun, or even easy to add to our services does not mean a library should offer it. Secondly, in my libraries, floor space is always at a premium. So if I am going to include play, I need to have really solid reasons for doing so, and I need to consider how to store these play items that I believe add value to the library.

Five years ago, the Pierce County Library (WA) chose to focus on finding meaningful ways to incorporate STEM activities into our early literacy practice. We already used ECRR2 as the basis for developing any activities, collections, and services for our preschool families, but our STEM offerings were limited. We developed a block program for preschoolers.

Research clearly showed that block play, when done with deliberation, allowed children to develop language skills,¹ social emotional skills, and STEM skills.²

We developed a Block Play brochure³ to tell our community why we, as their public library, were offering these programs. The library also determined that we wanted to build our community connections.

We added block centers to all of our facilities and now host block play programs, both closed sessions for Head Start and ECEAP classes and open public sessions for the community, all year round. This type of play has allowed us to incorporate STEM activities for children from a very early age.



Learning through play at the library!

Over the years, we have developed a programmatic structure for the closed sessions that is adapted for the open sessions. It's very simple. We begin each block play event with at least one story, often about building things, creating things, or various people in the community. That's followed by a reminder of the block play rules. We only have two: no throwing blocks and no destroying someone else's structure.

If there is time, we add a song or physical game to get the children moving, and then it is time to get out of the children's way and let them build. The adults are there to scaffold the children's play by doing things like asking open-ended questions about what is being built or who might utilize the structure. Questions are intended to get children talking about what they are working on, not direct what is being built. The program ends with a free book distribution, where every child in the closed sessions gets a free book to take home and keep. Our book giveaway is funded through our Pierce County Library Foundation.

Block play has proved incredibly popular over the years and has grown to encompass most of the Head Start and ECEAP classes across our service area. But I am always on the lookout for ways to enhance these core services. What else could we do to enhance and support play in our service area?

Last fall, I was introduced to a new concept for us. We applied for and recently were awarded an Imagination Playground from KaBoom, a nonprofit organization dedicated to making sure all kids have the opportunity to thrive through play. (The grant application can be found at www.KaBoom.org/grants.)

We added a very large mobile foam block center for use with our library's STEM and play mix. The Imagination Playground pieces are similar to our wooden unit blocks, only much, much bigger. With them, children build structures they can actually ride on or climb inside. They are using their gross motor skills to recreate some of the same building projects they build with unit blocks, only now the constructions are almost life sized.

The blocks come in four-wheeled bins, with an easy-to-remove cover, and they are lightweight and easy to clean. We store them alongside our wooden block center in the empty meeting rooms of our Administrative Center and Library.

Next step? We are determining how to transport the Imagination Playground to our branches and to community events. Our aim is to make it possible for children all over our county to enjoy playing with this equipment. We will continue to use the block play program structure so that children still get stories, and, where possible, a free book because we like to infuse all events with literacy.

Needless to say, offering programs with these new blocks has been a huge hit, and our observation so far is that it does not matter what size the blocks are—big or small, they still engender the same types of learning among children: math, literacy, science, social emotional development, and technology skill building. The added bonus is that we are able to offer a gross motor development program for a county that has limited parks and playgrounds. Inspired by ECRR2, this large block play has enabled the library to further and more deeply connect literacy and play. 📖

References

1. Dimitri A. Christakis, Frederick J. Zimmerman, and Michelle M. Garrison, "Effect of Block Play on Language Acquisition and Attention in Toddlers: A Pilot Randomized Controlled Trial," *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* 161, no. 10 (2007): 967, <https://doi.org/10.1001/archpedi.161.10.967>.
2. "Learning Library: Block Play Studies," Imagination Playground, accessed June 5, 2017, <http://www.imaginationplayground.com/learning-library/learning-library-block-play.html>; Gwen Dewar, "Why Toy Blocks Rock: The Science of Building and Construction Toys," Parenting Science, accessed June 5, 2017, <http://www.parentingscience.com/toy-blocks.html>.
3. Block Play brochure, Pierce County Library Systems, accessed June 5, 2017, www.piercecountylibrary.org/files/library/block-play-brochure.pdf.