

Tiny Hands, Big Impact

Play's Role in Early Literacy

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For babies and toddlers, play is a source of joy, a serious job to be done and a way of making sense of the world around them. To see young children at play is to observe the hands-on learning that will enable them to participate in society and live fulfilling lives, due in no small part to the effect of play in early literacy acquisition.

The academic literature indicates there is a positive correlation between play experiences and early literacy development for babies and toddlers. Therefore, engaging play opportunities should be incorporated for this group at the library, which serves as an accessible space for families and an invaluable resource for early literacy learning.

Supporting babies, toddlers, and their families within library services to a quality standard requires an understanding of their needs, including the vital need to play. Literacy is recognized as beginning from birth,¹ and as the brain creates more synapses in the first two years of life than at any other time,² this is a crucial period in children's development that deserves particular attention.

This review begins by defining play for babies and toddlers, followed by an exploration of the connection between play and early literacy. It then examines the literature surrounding the library as a play space, and the current perspectives of the value and role of play in libraries, particularly regarding early literacy.

Finally, this review looks at recent play-based initiatives in library curriculum planning, evaluating their overall impact and success in terms of early literacy development. Through synthesizing and analyzing the relevant literature and showcasing the success of library play initiatives, this review aims to promote the excellent work that is already taking place and advocate for the continued and advancing inclusion of play in all library services for the early literacy benefit of babies and toddlers.

Literature Search Methodology

The review of the literature began with the formulation and refining of primary and secondary questions. The primary question was, "How can play be incorporated into library services to support early literacy development for babies and toddlers?" followed by secondary questions:

"What does play look like for babies and toddlers?"

"What is the connection between play and early literacy development?"

"What is the role of play in the library?"

"What library play-literacy initiatives for babies and toddlers currently exist? Are these successful and why/why not?"

A search strategy was then devised based on each of these questions, identifying keywords and phrases and then searching using databases, journals, Google Scholar, and a university library's discovery tool that allowed for the searching of multiple databases, journals, and other sources. The sources were screened for relevance, reliability, and usefulness, and resources deemed irrelevant or inapplicable were discarded. This search was limited to English-language publications. The ancestry approach³ was applied throughout the search,



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so when highly relevant articles were discovered, their reference lists were examined for additional related articles.

Play Behaviors of Babies and Toddlers

Play has been long understood by researchers as the way babies and toddlers (children aged 0 to 3) navigate their understanding of the world, how they learn, explore, experiment, and develop cognitively.⁴ According to renowned child psychologist Lev Vygotsky, play is the “leading source of development in the preschool years” and allows babies and toddlers to learn through experiences.⁵ Play for babies (children aged 0 to 12 months) begins with sensorimotor action schemes such as mouthing and banging, and gradually progresses to include more controlled and coordinated actions.⁶

Babies primarily engage in “exploratory play,” exploring the world using their senses of touch, sight, smell, hearing, and taste, and, as their physical coordination advances, babies start to introduce objects into their play.⁷ Exploratory play typically begins around three months old and allows babies to access factual information about objects or concepts, promoting curiosity and stimulating crucial neural connections.⁸

This sensory information-gathering for babies is just as valuable to development as later, more imaginative types of play.⁹ Babies enjoy spending time with their parents and caregivers and benefit from an active adult role in their play. Supportive, responsive interactions with adults in games such as “peek-a-boo” help babies to focus their attention and use their working memory and self-control skills.¹⁰

Toddlers (children aged 12 to 36 months) are beginning to walk and talk and are taking strides in their physical and cognitive development. While toddlers still engage in exploratory play, they are now developing the capacity for simple imaginary play, which includes pretending, imagining, creating, and taking on the roles of others.¹¹

From around twelve months old, toddlers begin to demonstrate forms of functional play: using an object for its intended purpose as learned from watching others, such as drinking from a cup or pushing a toy car on the floor.¹² Functionally exploring objects is a precursor to symbolic play, which develops at around eighteen months, in which objects embody new meanings in play, for example, a toddler playing with a block and pretending it is a car.¹³

Play and Early Literacy Development

For babies and toddlers, play and literacy are often entwined, and research supports a relationship between play and language development.¹⁴ Literacy encompasses many skills essential to a successful life, as it is the basis for children’s ability to communicate, read, think, listen, write, and socialize effectively.¹⁵ Literacy development begins at birth and links to language

development.¹⁶ In fact, infants are tuned into language sounds even before birth and are born primed for language learning.¹⁷

For babies and toddlers, literacy learning is not dependent on formal instruction and does not include actually reading or writing. In fact, pushing babies or toddlers to achieve the action of reading or writing is not developmentally appropriate.¹⁸ Babies and toddlers acquire literacy skills through the daily exploration of words, sounds, and language, through which they build an understanding of how people use various forms of communication to share meaning.¹⁹ Through their daily experiences, babies and toddlers encounter opportunities to develop literacy skills, mainly through hearing language spoken around them.²⁰ Therefore, it is essential to expose babies and toddlers to public library spaces where there are abundant opportunities to engage in meaningful and literature-rich activities. Such activities can help them develop the skills and attitudes that will lead them to become successful readers and writers and build a foundation to help them succeed in later life.

Just as there are many different ways in which babies and toddlers play, there are many different ways in which play influences literacy. Four emerging literacy skills that develop during the baby and toddler years are representational knowledge, concepts about symbols, book handling, and identification of environmental symbols, all of which can develop through play.²¹ As language is based on patterns, activities that include patterning and visual discrimination, such as block play, reinforce pre-reading skills in a way that is appropriate and fun for babies and toddlers.²²

A 2007 study found that the distribution of blocks and encouraging block playtime was associated with higher language and vocabulary comprehension scores (as determined by the number of words and sentences a child understands) in toddlers age 16 to 30 months.²³ As parents in this study were given a list of suggestions of how they could play with their child and the blocks, the authors believe this activity was able to foster early literacy through giving the young children a socially and cognitively stimulating constructive play opportunity conducive to literacy learning.

Symbolic play is also closely linked to literacy development, as both share representational and communicative qualities. When children use abstract signifiers to convey meaning, like speaking into a block as if it were a telephone, they understand that one thing can represent another, an important step in literacy development as it directly supports the understanding that abstract symbols, such as words on a page, have meaning.²⁴

A study of the relationship between play, gesture, and spoken language in children ages 18 to 31 months found that symbolic play is positively associated with gesture use, which in turn is positively associated with language knowledge.²⁵ Another study found that for children ages 6 to 18 months, the age by which they begin engaging in single-object play correlates strongly with the age of later-emerging symbolic and vocal outputs.²⁶ The symbolic play context also promotes

communicative exchange between parents and infants, a predictor of language growth in early childhood.²⁷

Adult interactive roles are pivotal in play and literacy development for babies and toddlers, as they provide opportunities for speech and vocabulary expansion, and motivate babies and toddlers to explore language, as reciprocal interactions strengthen the neural connections in the child's brain that support the development of communication.²⁸ This connection between play, literacy, and the role of adults within play for babies and toddlers is one that easily lends itself to further examination within a library setting. Unlike preschools, where children must separate from their parents and caregivers, a library setting provides babies, toddlers, and their parents and caregivers with the chance to interact together within an educational and literacy-rich environment.

The Library as a Play-Space

The role of the library has evolved to become more than just a quiet repository for books, and many libraries now welcome the clamor and clatter of young children playing, understanding that the library has a significant role to play in early literacy and child development. Libraries supporting play for children is not a recent concept, and there is a long history of including recreational activities in libraries as both an educational tool and a way of bringing in patrons, from puzzle contests in the 1930s to video game collections today.²⁹

Libraries are an everyday space that can transform daily experiences into high-quality learning and engagement opportunities, enhanced by the incorporation of play. A recent study of the use of Play-and-Learn spaces in libraries found that having a dedicated space to play promoted the kinds of targeted interactions between adults and children that support language, literacy, and STEM skills, suggesting that the library, as an accessible space, has the potential to address the achievement gaps between lower and higher-income children through the provision of play spaces.³⁰

For babies and toddlers, the availability of appropriate library services to enhance early literacy is considered crucial by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions' (IFLA). In its Guidelines for Library Services to Babies and Toddlers, IFLA acknowledges the significant impact that a child's environment has on their development of pre-reading skills and advocates for access to free public libraries for children under three as necessary to the enhancement of literacy in later life.³¹ ALSC and the Public Library Association's (PLA) Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) initiative also emphasizes that play is a valid and valuable component of early literacy learning by including play in its five components to build literacy, alongside talk, read, write, and sing.³²

As libraries are an important educational environment where babies, toddlers, and their parents and caregivers can play and learn together, they have a unique opportunity to provide

babies and toddlers with literacy-rich activities and also to share the value of play with parents and caregivers and explain the research-based link between play and early literacy.

Many researchers agree on the role of play in the library, and the value of play-based early literacy learning. Knoll affirms that young children, and babies, in particular, are just developing their reading skills and should be invited as "do-ers" in the library, presented with opportunities to engage intellectually through the avenue of play.³³ Rankin and Brock contend that library practitioners should provide young children with opportunities to play imaginatively in the library and that it is vital for early years librarians to create programming which allows for optimum learning opportunities for young children to contextualise early literacy through active play experiences.³⁴

Payne agrees that play enhances early literacy in babies and toddlers and should be a core concept within library programs, maintaining that librarians can help inform parents and caregivers that the best way to promote early literacy is to connect and speak to their baby or toddler during playtime.³⁵ As parents and caregivers are the most significant adults in babies and toddlers' lives, how they respond to and engage with their children influences language development during the early years.³⁶

Play-based programs for babies and toddlers at the library can assist parents and caregivers in understanding the direct link between play and early literacy and language, and encourage at-home practices that foster emerging literacy development. Ralli and Payne state that libraries have an essential role when it comes to promoting play through parent and caregiver engagement, finding that while adult interactions with babies and toddlers play a vital role in early literacy development, many parents and caregivers are unsure of how to engage with their babies for optimal literacy learning.³⁷ Through providing information on how to interact with babies and toddlers to encourage early literacy development and modeling these engaging behaviors, librarians can assist parents and caregivers in gaining the skills and understanding of play that they can apply at home.

Payne provides an example of a simple, one-minute play interaction between an 18-month-old child and a librarian during a play program where the child is stacking blocks, and the librarian communicates with them, using words relating to the child's actions such as "I like how you're stacking the blocks."³⁸ Through speaking with the child during play, the librarian gives them new vocabulary or reinforces already familiar words. This form of librarian-child interaction helps to model interactions for parents and caregivers and promotes early language and literacy learning for babies and toddlers through social play experiences with toys.

Aside from creating a play space and engaging families, it is also essential that the library provides adequate play materials suitable for babies and toddlers. Bastiansen and Wharton assert that the provision of toys and playtime for children in

the library is an enjoyable way to support early literacy. In their paper, they claim that as the public library is a free, safe, and accessible space for families, it often provides the sole access a child has to toys and unstructured playtime, especially for low-income families, and may be the only way parents and caregivers can access information regarding the role of play in child development.³⁹

Knoll similarly argues that as many babies come from impoverished learning environments, for them the library is one of the few places where they can experience complex play elements such as toys, games, puppets, and other tools of exploration.⁴⁰ McCleaf Nespeca emphasizes the importance of toys in library programming for young children and urges librarians to incorporate periods of block and brick play into library programming due to the correlation between constructive play and early literacy skills.⁴¹

Babies and toddlers being able to play within the library is a matter of inclusion and community development, in addition to being a positive force in early literacy development, which is strengthened further through programs and services that are directly targeted towards understanding and meeting the needs of babies, toddlers, and their families.

Studies in Practice

Many libraries are embracing play as part of their mission to support babies, toddlers, and their families on their literacy journey. Below are descriptions of a variety of different library programs and services identified in the literature that incorporate play for children under three, looking at the types of play included, their influence in relation to early literacy development, and overall impact in the community.

Evaluation

All of these programs have an emphasis on parent and caregiver involvement and education. For library programming with young children, parent and caregiver supervision is necessary. However, these programs also provide families with instructional support on how to further their own play practice at home for early literacy, which led to positive feedback from families who had gained new ways to play and interact with their children, along with a better understanding of how these practices influenced early literacy development.

Informal home literacy activities have a positive effect on children's learning,⁴² and programs such as Baltimore County Public Library's *Storyville*, which made resource materials for parents and caregivers and themed take-home kits available for checkout,⁴³ help promote continued play-based literacy learning at home. In the *Baby Builder's Club*, parents and caregivers were provided with a handout about the seven stages of block play, detailing what young children do and learn with blocks and how adults can support their play. The

librarian provided further information about how block play stimulates the brain, which encouraged parents to interact more with their children and even experiment with creating their own block games.⁴⁴

Racing to Read used tip sheets with ideas for play and engagement to accompany the toys in order to showcase the variety of ways children might play with them and explain the skills they are building while doing so.⁴⁵ Similarly, in the *Big Brooklyn Playdate*, signs were posted at each activity station to provide tips to parents and caregivers about things to say and ways to interact, and librarians and child development experts would be on hand to answer questions.⁴⁶ Having this kind of expert help and guidance during playtime helps parents and caregivers to feel supported and understand that play is a rich learning activity and promotes the quality interactions that develop literacy and language.

As many families may have limited access to toys at home, programs such as *Friendship & Fun with Little Ones*, which have an emphasis on making toys out of convenient household materials such as cardboard boxes, along with teaching families about how to use these toys at home, help make sure that play is accessible to all families.⁴⁷

Free play, rather than structured task setting, is associated with more favorable child-parent interactions and language use⁴⁸ and opens up rich opportunities for symbolic play behaviors in toddlers.⁴⁹ Most programs had at least one free/unstructured play component. All of the programs had a vocabulary-building element, due to the rich language opportunities provided through verbal adult-child interaction and modeling of language. Vocabulary is a cognitive foundation of both reading accuracy and reading comprehension, as the more words children know, the more effectively they will be able to begin decoding print once they begin learning to read.⁵⁰ Providing a language-rich play environment for babies and toddlers allows them to expand their vocabulary through exposure to new words and strengthening of familiar ones.

Young children also acquire a rich vocabulary through music and movement play, as exposure to rhymes, and playing rhyme-action games familiarizes young children with sound patterns and syllables.⁵¹

In *Baby Bounce and Rhyme*, babies and toddlers were exposed to the sound patterns of different nursery rhymes and given musical toys to play.⁵² As this program was for babies, the participants were too young to move their bodies in controlled and deliberate ways, and their bodies were manipulated by their parents and caregivers to follow the actions in the songs.⁵³ Hedemark and Lindberg argue that the role of the body in learning is valuable as physical motions are used to characterize the literacy practice taking place during library literacy sessions with babies and that the professional objective of the librarian is to contribute to early literacy by educating parents and caregivers on how to stimulate this development.⁵⁴

In *Baby Bounce and Rhyme*, the babies' bodies became part of the play experience, and they were able to engage with the nursery rhymes as an interactive literacy experience. *Mother Goose on the Loose* is similarly designed to incorporate actions through interactive rhymes and movement games and provides time for babies and toddlers to bond with their parents and caregivers through pleasurable physical interactions such as hugs and knee bounces.⁵⁵ Through the use of musical sounds and patterns, these programs encourage language use and help babies and toddlers to develop an awareness of sound patterns and syllables, a necessary precursor to phonological awareness, a key early literacy skill.⁵⁶

A significant positive impact that these programs had on the community was that they brought more families into the library. *Baby Bounce and Rhyme* led to an increase in library use and membership,⁵⁷ and Baltimore County Public Library found that after opening *Storyville* there was a surge in circulation and borrowing of library materials for young children and growth in patron numbers, with many new families visiting the library for the first time.⁵⁸ Encouraging families with young children to visit the library through the inclusion of play experiences means that more babies and toddlers are able to engage with the library space, materials, and resources, setting them up for a lifetime of literacy learning.

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Although there is much literature regarding library play programs, this review found no empirical research conducted regarding the long-term benefits of such programs for young children and families and their effects on literacy development. This absence of research is likely due to the complications inherent in collecting empirical data about babies and toddlers in library settings, especially for long-term studies that would require a control group. Further research into this area could enhance understanding of how libraries impact early literacy learning through programming and services dedicated to babies and toddlers.

Conclusion

The library has a long-standing role as a place to play and an obligation to serve the community by providing opportunities that engage even the youngest of patrons and set them up for future success. It is observable from the available literature that incorporating play in library services opens up myriad literacy and language learning opportunities to young children during their most formative years, and that play programs are an enjoyable way for babies, toddlers, and their families to bond. Such programs bring new families into the library, encourage them to engage with library materials, and provide them with the knowledge of how to create quality at-home literacy practices. &

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