

# **Read, Play, Grow!**




**Enhancing early literacy at Brooklyn Public Library**

**By Rachel G. Payne**

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**A**T ONE OF HIS TODDLER PROGRAMS AT THE BAY RIDGE LIBRARY IN BROOKLYN, Chris Lassen covers a table with contact paper, sticky side up. Parents and caregivers look at him skeptically when he tells them what he had done, but the kids know exactly what to do. Little hands reach out and touch the table over and over again to feel this new sensation. In the process, brain cells are connected and the little ones hear and learn a new word: “sticky.”

Across the country at a library in Fort Vancouver, WA, Kendra Jones tapes zip-closure bags to her windows with two colors of paint inside. Toddlers squish and scribble the paint to enjoy “no-mess finger painting.” Through this tactile play experience, their fingers develop fine motor control and they begin to learn the science and art of color mixing. Kendra reports on her blog that both parents and children are quite chatty as they mush and mix.

Both of these library activities are prime examples of play driving language development and early literacy. Early childhood research has always highlighted the many benefits of play. The expanded and updated toolkit *Every Child Ready to Read* (ALSC/PLA, 2011, 2nd. ed.) features play as one of the five key early literacy practices parents should engage in with their children to promote reading readiness. A University of Iowa study reports that 18 month olds who play with diversely shaped objects learn new words twice as fast as those who play with more similarly shaped objects. A recent study of 1 to 2 year olds finds that those who play with blocks with their parents for just 20 minutes a day score 15 percent higher on language development tests and are 80 percent less likely to watch television. The research touting the benefits of play goes on and on.

## THE PLAY GAP

Studies notwithstanding, many parents 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? (I know, I've been there.) In the *2010 Play Report*, a global survey of older children and their parents initiated by IKEA, 45 percent of parents said that they don't have enough time to play with their children. Even when parents do find the time to play, 26 percent said that they are “too stressed to enjoy it.” We also surveyed parents and caregivers at Brooklyn Public Library about their challenges playing with their children, and many 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 Risley & Hart study (*Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*, P. H. Brookes, 1995) notes that, by the time children are three, those from educated and high-income homes have heard 33 million words and their low income counterparts have heard only 10 million. 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. The study finds that the more parents talked to children, the more their lan-

guage use increased, utilizing a richer vocabulary with more positive affirmations. When parents sit down to play and talk with their children they draw out babble and burgeoning language from babies and toddlers.

All parents want what is best for their children, and many often think that a very young child's activities must take a school-like approach. In the race to learn more and more, earlier and earlier, some parents turn to packaged programs for babies and toddlers that incorporate developmentally dubious flash cards and video, such as Baby Einstein or Your Baby Can Read. Many parents have not heard that play is itself a rich and unparalleled learning activity. A child stacking blocks is developing math skills. When babies pull books off the shelves, they are experimenting with gravity and figuring out the properties of books (much to a shelve's chagrin). Trips to the sandbox and bathtime water play are all early science experiments.

## ENTER READ, PLAY, GROW

Connecting the dots for parents between play, language development, and early learning has been the driving force behind First Five Years programs at Brooklyn Public Library. Since 2009—with special grant funding and some help from the staff of New York City's Infant Toddler Technical Resource Center—we have been creating an in-house curriculum of simple, easy-to-replicate play activities for babies and toddlers dubbed “Read, Play, Grow.” Our recipes for play are deliberately simple. Blocks are made out of cereal boxes. Play dough is edible. Peek-a-boo magic tricks can be performed with a scarf stuffed into a paper





towel tube. We aim to show parents and caregivers how simple play can be for little ones and how easy it is to make it happen with everyday materials.

Read, Play, Grow activities are also designed to be easy to incorporate into existing baby and toddler programs. After storytime, librarians set up one to three play “stations” constructed from simple household materials. Parents and caregivers have ample time to interact with and observe their children in the act of playing and learning. Each station has a sign that explains the activity, and we offer tips for things to say to encourage early literacy development along with safety warnings, where warranted.

With these tips, we hope that we’re helping grown-ups to engage with their children. 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 have children who perform better on early language assessments. It is also important for staff to model these interactions with children. When parents and caregivers see library staff or other adults get on the floor to play and talk with a child, they see first-hand how to engage with a child. From my experience, this kind of direct observation speaks louder than a million parenting workshops.

Talking with a baby or toddler during playtime can sometimes feel awkward, particularly when a child is not talking back. That is precisely why parents should see these interactions modeled. Here is a composite transcript of one exchange that occurred in our library programs during which an 18-month-old boy is 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.*

**EVERYONE LEARNS:** Brooklyn’s Read, Play, Grow is about sensory learning experiences, but without the sticker shock of specialized toys. Children explore boxes like they’ve discovered new worlds, get hands-on with tactile learning through colorful glueing, and find the joys of stacking and destroying towers made from everyday objects. All the while, parents and caregivers get tips on how to engage with their kids to stimulate learning, picking up strategies large and small, including keys to the language of play.

LIBRARIAN: “Boom, boom, boom! You did it! You knocked down the tower!”

While the child said nothing, he was obviously taking everything in and understanding what the librarian said. The librarian put his experience into words and modeled to the parent things to say while playing at home.

## GETTING HANDS-ON

While we love to show parents how they can make blocks out of cereal boxes, we also show them how they can check out blocks from the library—board book blocks. Parents sometimes look a bit dubious when we suggest playing with library materials, but it gives them permission to loosen up. We line the books up as dominoes or stack them into a tower. Usually a toddler will wander over and knock it over or start a domino rally going to complete the demonstration.

Another favorite activity for babies: tape tactile elements to the floor to create a sensory crawl zone. We have used bubble wrap, foam, textured bath mats, quilts, and pot holders. Visual elements also work well, such as black-and-white patterned bath towels or shiny paper. Little sitters and crawlers get to take in some new sensations as they explore, while staff and parents are talking to them about things that are “bumpy,” “smooth,” “soft,” or “rough.”

Many librarians want to create a program that results in something toddlers can take home. While the goal of giving the child a product based on a theme is laudable (I did this early in my career), all too often, the parents and caregivers complete the paper plate fish that requires motor skills that the toddler does not yet have. Young children are still getting the





feel of what a paper plate is and what it does, and are not yet ready to make it into a fish. This is why we have incorporated open-ended collage, process-based activities into our toddler programs. Sensory collage is one of my favorites. We give children a variety of things to glue to their papers, such as textured papers, cotton balls, burlap, and bubble wrap. Children get to explore these materials. They may never stick them down on their paper, and that is just fine.

### THE PLAYDATE, MULTIPLIED

For the past three years, our Central Library has hosted the annual Big Brooklyn Playdate. Each time, over 100 babies and toddlers (and their parents or caregivers) have come out to play. Brooklyn Public Library staffers transform the Dweck Center—usually the site of gallery exhibits—into a baby and toddler play space with various “play stations” around the room that parents, caregivers, and young children can explore together. Again, we place signs near activities to give parents tips of things to say and ways to interact. For the first time this year, we borrowed an idea from the Parent-Child Workshop playbook and invited “roving experts” (child development experts, a pediatric physical therapist, and a child sleep expert) to our event to be on hand to answer questions from parents.

The head of our mail room at the Central Library always knows when the Big Brooklyn Playdate is coming because we ask her for her largest cardboard box. We cut a variety of shaped holes and doors in it. Sometimes we give kids crayons or sidewalk chalk to decorate it with, but they are usually so engrossed in crawling in and peeking out of the box that this is unnecessary. Lots of language happens in and out of the box, with squeals and giggles offering delightful punctuation.

The surprise hit of the Playdate is an activity we call the “The Un-Sand Box.” It is two large tubs filled with shredded paper from our office shredder. Who knew recycled documents could be so much fun? The kids love throwing, tossing, and scrunching the “snow” as many of them like to call it. Of course, the paper does go everywhere, but it cleans up easily enough with a

push broom. The very first time we tried this, we hid small toys in the paper for the children to find, but we quickly learned it was pointless. The shredded paper was the thing.

The annual Big Brooklyn Playdate is the biggest event we do for babies, toddlers, and their caregivers at library. The feedback is that everyone wants us to do it again every week. We publicize it on several local mommy blogs and family websites, bringing in families with young children who have never been to the library before. Outreach efforts to local early childhood organizations also hook up a group of teen moms from a local high school.

Two years into Read, Play, Grow programs and after the first Big Brooklyn Playdate, we surveyed parents and caregivers about the program’s effectiveness. A full 74 percent of respondents reported gaining new ideas to use with their children and 44 percent said they use Read, Play, Grow activities at home.

### COME OUT TO PLAY

With President Obama calling for more funding for early childhood education and a *New York Times* article from 2011 reporting high-powered Manhattan parents attending block-building workshops, it seems that the educational pendulum is once again swinging back to embracing the value of play. While it comes naturally to children, some of us grown-ups need help—and even permission—to get down on the floor and stack blocks, squeeze dough, and make a mess.

Brooklyn Public Library’s programs are just a few of the playful activities going on at libraries throughout the country. From play installations that would rival most children’s museums to in-house-developed play activities using materials rescued from the recycling bin, ours is just one of the many libraries putting play front and center.

Has your library come out to play?

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