

Reading Instruction and Play Go Hand-in-Hand

Play is the work of children in early childhood classrooms. Children explore their world and learn through play. However, there is often pressure for early childhood educators to directly teach academic skills such as letter recognition and letter sounds. Sometimes this instruction takes the form of teaching skills in isolation. How do teachers ensure that literacy instruction in the early years is not drill and practice, such as the letter of the week?

The joint statement on learning to read and write by the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) asserts that children become skilled readers by, among other things, developing vocabulary and verbal reasoning skills in order to understand what print means (Neuman, Bredekamp, & Copple 2000). There is a relationship between active, socially engaging play and early language and literacy development (Stegelin, 2005). Reading instruction in the early years is not just about letters and sounds, it is about encouraging children to “question, discover, evaluate, and invent new ideas, that enable them to become successful readers” (Neuman & Roskos, 2005). Knowing the letters of the alphabet is important. However, children best acquire these skills with developmentally appropriate practices. Skills should be acquired through experiences that draw on prior knowledge and that are significant to children which come in the form of play, not flashcards.

Features of effective content- and language-rich instruction are:

- Time, materials, and resources that actively build language and conceptual knowledge;
- Access to a wide variety of reading and writing resources;
- Different group sizes and different levels of guidance;
- Opportunities for play (Neuman and Roskos 2005).

Playful literacy instruction consists of:

- Access to picture books that help children understand concepts about print, retell stories, increase vocabulary, and acquire phonological awareness;
- The use of themes and literature that support pretend play which reinforces language and literacy skills;
- The availability of various writing tools (e.g., markers, pencils, pens) and surfaces (paper, chalkboards, whiteboards) in centers that relate to the theme or featured literature;
- Using objects that relate to pictures in the story for children to hold and manipulate while reading to support children who have limited language with making connections;
- Providing props in the dramatic play area that allow children to act out stories;
- Construction play (use of materials that can be used to create products; e.g., paint, play dough, blocks) that allows children to make products that represent things and ideas. It also allows children to develop fine motor and visual skills needed for reading and writing and promotes oral expression;
- Incorporating poetry, songs, chants;
- Providing adequate time for play that is facilitated by adults and structured for exploration and stimulation.

The T-TAC ODU library has numerous emergent literacy resources for teachers. Included is Toni Linder’s *Read, Play, and Learn*, which is a transdisciplinary play-based curriculum that “provides a literature based framework for learning for all children that encompasses cognitive, social-emotional, communication and language, and sensorimotor development” (Linder, 1999 p. 6).



Come to Toni Linder’s presentation, *Literacy AND Play: Integrating Both into the Curriculum*, November 1 at the Holiday Inn, Hampton. Registration information is available at www.ttac.odu.edu/NewButton/SeptOct06Workshops/11_1_06.doc

References

- Hanline, M.F. (2001). Supporting emergent literacy in play-based activities. *Young Exceptional Children*, 4, (4), 10-15.
- International Reading Association (IRA) & National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). (1998). Learning to read and write” Developmentally appropriate practices for young children. *Young Children*, 53(4), 30-46.
- Neuman, S.B. & Roskos, K. (2005). Whatever happened to developmentally appropriate practice in early literacy? *Young Children*, 60 (4), 22-26.
- Linder, T. (1999). *Read, Play, and Learn* Storybook activities for young children. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Stegelin, D.A. (2005). Making the case for play policy Research-based reasons to support play-based environments. *Young Children*, 60 (2), 76-85.