

We Play Here!

Bringing the Power of Play into Children's Libraries

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"Play is the child's natural medium of self-expression."

Picture a child serving up a pretend cup of tea to her teddy bears. Picture a child getting messy in the sandbox, this time with a real-life friend. Picture a child pretending to be his favorite animal and gleefully chasing his mom, roaring all the while.

As light-hearted and whimsical these may be, while we conjure these images of children playing, we should also consider that play is the *work* of childhood. Children take play seriously, and so should we. For children, and especially young children, play is the process of building knowledge of the world and their place in it. A child's brain adapts to the environments in which they are nurtured and in which they play.

While play may seem to be a natural part of childhood, many children in our communities face barriers to playtime that can have detrimental effects on their long-term health and development. Many families living in poverty are unable to access opportunities for their children to explore and play. Safety concerns in some neighborhoods lead to children staying

home for long stretches of time with fewer opportunities to learn new words, make friends, or have extended periods of free play outdoors.

Research in this area has determined that children living in chronic poverty tend to demonstrate lags in language, cognitive, social, and physical development as compared to their age peers who are not impoverished.²

Somewhat ironically, affluent children are often rushed from one "enriching activity" to the next, with little time left for free play. Children with disabilities have the added barrier of multiple therapy and medical appointments that eat into time that could otherwise be spent playing. Also, anecdotal evidence from families suggests that environmental and social barriers to inclusion persist in many settings.³

This article attempts to explain both the developmental benefits of play for *all* children while offering concrete and practical examples of ways that children's librarians can promote, provide, and support play experiences while working with children and their families. Play is essential, and much of

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At a San Francisco Public Library Branch, a young patron plays with a toy that measures height and asks about reading habits too. Photo by Jason Doiy.

what we do in our work both inside and outside of the library can support the revival of playtime in the lives of children.

What the research tells us:

- A recent study reports that children age eight to eighteen spend an average of seven hours and thirty-eight minutes in front of at least one media screen per day.⁴
- Less than half of American children have a playground within walking distance of their home.⁵
- Parents often bring work home, spending time on work-related tasks that could be spent with their children.⁶

In “The Vital Role of Play in Early Childhood Education,” author Joan Almon documents the demise of play in the United States.⁷ A recent *New York Times* article by Hilary Stout repeated her concerns.⁸ These pieces present compelling evidence that children participating in too many organized and structured activities demonstrate diminished imagination, children under pressure to complete homework in their earliest years of life experience heightened stress levels, and childhood obesity is still a major health concern because sedentary activities have replaced active play.

For example, around the country, many preschools have replaced free play and recess with academics, expecting children under five to spend their time sitting in seats and memorizing information. Schools might try to improve math test scores by having young students take practice math tests instead of providing the children with more developmentally appropriate and hands-on experience with manipulatives, thereby building the children’s concepts of quantity.

In these settings, building with blocks, playing outdoors, and creating “delicious desserts” out of sand are no longer standard staples of preschool life. It is no wonder that more young children are obese and exhibit signs of depression.

The passage of No Child Left Behind has created a situation in U.S. schools in which teachers must prepare even very young students for standardized tests, leaving less time for creative and more playful (but still educational!) pursuits. This pressure to perform well on standardized tests (dire consequences await teachers and schools whose students perform poorly) also seems to have trickled down to some segments of the early childhood community.⁹

Many early childhood educators, however, recognize the importance of cognitive skills developing in harmony with social and emotional skills. For instance, in Maryland, early childhood educators assess children’s skills, behaviors, and knowledge using the Work Sampling system of the MMSR (Maryland Model for School Readiness). These assessments help teachers pinpoint what their students know, are able to do on their own, and what skills are still emerging.

The focus is not just on academic learning, however; there also is a focus on social and personal development, the arts, and physical development. This all-encompassing definition for school readiness, demonstrated by this particular assessment, seems to be the exception rather than the rule, as much of the discourse around school-readiness includes more academic skills such as early reading, writing, and math knowledge. In this paradigm, early learning is in serious danger of being seen as a product, not a process, and the end result may be that children miss out on the benefits of simply learning through play.

Scientists, psychologists, other medical professionals, and educators say that “most of the social and intellectual skills one needs to succeed in life and work are first developed through childhood play.”¹⁰ In *Ghosts from the Nursery: Tracing the Roots of Violence*, authors Robin Karr-Morse and Meredith S. Wiley discuss the lack of playful, loving connections with an adult in the first three years of life as one factor leading to violent behavior in adults.¹¹

Research conducted by Stuart Brown, founder of the National Institute of Play, showed that violent individuals *all* had severe play deprivation in their childhoods. His research concluded that when children do not play, they demonstrate social, emotional, and cognitive narrowing. They are less able to handle stress and experience higher rates of depression.¹²

Play, then, is a catalyst for positive socialization; when children are not given the opportunity to play, the long-term consequences can be severe.

While we understand that play has a powerful influence on children’s development, we also are faced with the truth that children’s play often is marginalized and undervalued in our society. To counteract this situation, a growing movement seeks to restore play to the lives of children. As children’s librarians,

we believe we have a vital role to play in this restoration of play as the prime activity of childhood.

Even in their youngest years, children benefit from play. Watch a three-month-old child explore her environment. She is concentrating every sense on this moment. She will feel, listen, look, smell, and most assuredly taste everything that comes her way.

Spontaneous play opportunities can abound in children's early years, and they harness these experiences to maximize their own learning and development. Far from needing structure and an ever-ticking activity clock, young children benefit most from extended opportunities to play in environments suited to their development.

Lev Vygotsky, a Russian child psychologist and educational pioneer, conceptualized something he called “the zone of proximal development” in the early part of the twentieth century. This zone ranges from what a child is able to accomplish independently all the way to what he or she is unable to do without support from an adult or more experienced peer. The child's development, assisted by others, through the zone of proximal development has been described as “scaffolding,” or “scaffolded learning.”¹³

When it comes to play, children with disabilities are more like children without disabilities than not. They experience the same benefits and also have a difficult time finding the opportunity to play. In fact, for children with disabilities, play is even more important. In general, play helps the child with a disability “express herself, develop a positive image of herself, and learn to interact with the rest of the world.”¹⁴ It is an opportunity to develop new social, communication, and physical skills and a motivation to practice these skills in a “normal” environment. These are the skills they will eventually need in school, the community, and the workplace.¹⁵

Children with and without disabilities share in the benefits of inclusive play. Both sets of children develop friendships and an appreciation for diversity, increase their acceptance of individual difference, and experience an increase in empathy and social cognition.¹⁶ Additionally, Vygotsky emphasized the importance of providing children with disabilities with the same kinds of learning opportunities to advance their development as their nondisabled peers.¹⁷

So, play is an important factor in the development of *all* children. Not only does play encourage imagination, we are beginning to understand that it also helps children develop important lifelong skills such as emotional control, social competency, personal resiliency, and continuing curiosity about the world.

Children's Librarians' Role in the Revival of Play

Play is so important that the recently revised Every Child Ready to Read® @ your library now includes play as one of the five elements essential to the development of early literacy skills.¹⁸ In this way, practitioners and parents are encouraged to utilize the rich learning opportunities that talking, singing,

How Babies' Play Experiences Help Them Learn

- Interaction with adults by smiling, cooing, and imitating sounds helps develop communication skills.
- Exploring the properties of objects—how they feel and taste, what they do when shaken, how something might change if it is wet or frozen—is the beginning of observation and scientific exploration.
- Sensory exploration—feeling different textures and touching and holding things—is a precursor to writing.

Young children are thoroughly engrossed in the absorption of new information. Their interactions with people, objects, and events construct their new knowledge. Furthermore, children are attracted to activities that correspond to their current developmental needs. For example, young children delight in playing peek-a-boo as they develop the concept of *object permanence*, which is the understanding that objects continue to exist even when they are out of sight.* Through play, they are learning about the names of things and concepts, ways of interacting with others, their role in the world, and they are developing their own sense of self.

*Jean Piaget, Howard E. Gruber, and J. Jacques Vonèche, *The Essential Piaget: An Interpretive Reference and Guide*. (Northvale, N.J.: J. Aronson, 1995).

reading, writing, and playing offer young children. (For more information, visit www.everychildreadytoread.org).

With the enhancements to Every Child Ready to Read @ your library, play has now been embraced as part of the public library's mission to support children in their early years and their families. Many public libraries have already begun incorporating play into programs and spaces, and we encourage readers to gain inspiration from these examples.

The later development of abstract processing requires first the development of language and literacy skills. We must build the ability to talk about, record, and recall the universe we are discovering. The library is the center of this aspect of play. Play in the library involves learning about the world, telling and hearing stories, and the transition to the world of abstract learning. For the young child, the early steps in these activities are rooted in play.

Here are some ways you may see play enacted in your libraries (in other words, you are already supporting play!)

- Playing with musical instruments gives children the opportunity to express themselves nonverbally. Learning what happens when a maraca is shaken or a bell is rung encourages scientific exploration through experimentation with cause and effect. Playing along to music strengthens

More Benefits of Play for the Young Child

- Language skills by talking with others during play and looking at books.
- Social skills, such as sharing while playing with toys and patience while waiting for a turn.
- Self-control, such as learning to stop through freeze games and knowing how to “use words and not hands” to solve an argument.
- Creativity through imagination and role-playing games.
- Problem-solving skills by solving puzzles and following rules.
- Understanding of symbols by using pretend play to imagine that one object really is something else. (For more information, visit <http://zerotothree.org/child-development/play/power-of-play-learning.html>.)

listening skills and fine motor coordination. You do not have to present an entire program on music. Rather, incorporate five minutes of musical instruments into your already existing programs and see how much richer they become.

- Participating in arts-and-crafts activities helps children build fine motor skills while cutting, pasting, or coloring. Exposure to a wide variety of art materials encourages creativity, and learning how to look at art enhances visual literacy.
- Using colored scarves sparks the imagination, inspires free-form body movements, provides librarians with opportunities to talk about colors, and exposes children to unusual textures. Play recorded music for a few minutes during a program, and move along with the scarves.
- Puppet play in storytime helps children explore ways to communicate ideas and feelings. By using a puppet as a mouthpiece, even very shy children can be encouraged to attempt independent learning experiences. Puppets can illustrate new vocabulary words, create a bond with storytime children by giving frequent hugs or kisses (which a human librarian could not do), and capture the attention of easily distractible children.
- Baby programs encourage playful bonding between parents and their children. Songs, rhymes, and fingerplays are presented that can be replicated at home. Librarians use playful rhymes and games to help children learn school readiness skills. They model playful behavior for parents and can talk about the importance of play.
- Playing around with picturebooks, such as showing animal illustrations in Eric Carle’s *The Very Busy Spider* and singing a song about the sounds the animals make rather than reading

the book aloud, instills a love of books, which can lead to improved language and literacy skills and more positive associations with reading in general.

More Playful Examples from the Field

Mother Goose on the Loose®

Mother Goose on the Loose is a parent/baby program used in public libraries throughout the United States. With nursery rhymes as the basis, this program seamlessly integrates book reading, singing, looking at book illustrations, playing musical instruments, reciting rhymes, waving colored scarves, puppet play, and interacting playfully with one’s caregiver. It intrinsically incorporates activities that help children build self-confidence and self-regulation skills such as sharing, taking turns, showing appreciation to others, following directions, and receiving positive reinforcement.

San Francisco Public Library

Baby Rhyme Time

Children’s services staff members at the San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) believe that libraries are natural gathering places for new parents, and that the library is uniquely positioned to offer playful programs and spaces. In response to noticing that the greatest need in serving young children was actually serving new parents, the literacy-based Baby Rhyme Time was expanded by introducing a playtime segment to support the emotional and social needs of caregivers and their babies. The pilot program at the Mission Branch Library received instant praise and popularity. Playtimes quickly became an integral early literacy service.

Components of a successful playtime are simple: a safe programmable space, staff to manage books, toys, and time. By expanding the storytime with playtime, caregivers relax after a hurried trip, mingle with other caregivers, connect as a community, observe other babies, and actually enjoy their child in the library setting. New parents crave and, more importantly, need these opportunities and outings.

Benefits of playtime include:

- supporting the social and emotional needs of babies and caregivers;
- creating an inviting environment for exploration;
- fostering new relationships; and
- positioning the library as the early literacy resource for families.

Here Come the Toys!

Start with an attractive collection of board books and hearty stock of bubbles. Build your program with balls, sorting toys, discovery boxes, scarves, bells, shakers, rattles, linking toys,

exploration tunnel, toys with mirrors, and creative dramatic toys. Young ones discover the world through their senses, especially taste. Be prepared to clean the toys before the next session. For cleaning, use soap and warm water or Clorox Green Works Compostable Wipes. Allow to dry overnight, and toys are ready for the next program.

On a shoestring budget, simply pass out board books, articulate how books are a child's first toy, turn on the tunes, and blow bubbles. At SFPL, some staff members incorporate a ritual by singing an opening and closing song.

Amy Perry, SFPL children's librarian, uses playtimes as an informal opportunity to get to know the community. With a warm smile, she walks around the room and speaks with each pair, especially new attendees. Perry sparks a conversation by asking open-ended questions, sharing an observation from the storytime, mentioning an upcoming program, or commenting on what the child is doing. These friendly chats cultivate a supportive community for new parents and welcoming environment for all. Also, she says, when in doubt, blow bubbles and turn on music, such as The Beatles, Putamayo Kids' Latin Playground, Frances England, or any cheerful tunes. Playtimes hold intrinsic value of providing families with an opportunity to play, socialize, and enjoy this special time. Friendships and playgroups form during playtimes.

Brooklyn Public Library

Including children with disabilities in these kinds of play opportunities is easier than you might think: it starts with the environment. Program spaces should be accessible to children with physical disabilities. Supportive chairs, such as cube chairs, and large foam blocks for support during floor play allow children to be on the same level. The area should be stimulating, but not overwhelming. Many typically developing young children, as well as those with autism or sensory processing dysfunction, are easily overwhelmed by too much sensory input. For that reason, background noise, such as music playing on a CD throughout the playtime, may prove to be a barrier for some children.

EDUCATIONAL, ENCOURAGING, AND ENTERTAINING



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The Morgan Love Series (written for girls, 7-9 years old) and the Alec London Series (written for boys, 8-12 years old) are chapter book series that provide moral lessons to aid in character development. These series will also help youth develop their vocabulary, English, and math skills as they read through the stories and complete the entertaining and educational exercises provided at the end of each chapter and in the back of the book.

You may purchase these series through your favorite library distributor or contact Moody Publishers customer service directly at 1-800-678-8812.





Two children collaborate to play their own invented music on the Magic Music Box in Vancouver (Wash.) Community Library.

The Child's Place for Children with Special Needs at the Brooklyn Public Library hosts inclusive playtimes. The toys and learning materials make up another essential element of inclusive play. They should appeal to multiple senses. For example, alphabet blocks with Braille are both visually and tactilely appealing. Try to have multiple varieties of the same toy: wooden trains, Lego trains, and remote-control trains will accommodate children with a wide range of physical and intellectual abilities.

There should be activities for children with divergent abilities. For example, puzzles with large knobs and texture appeal to young children, children with physical disabilities, children with developmental delays, and children who are blind. Smaller, more complex puzzles may prove attractive to children engaging in social play, older children, strong mathematical learners, and some children on the autism spectrum.

Finally, the materials in your collections, whether they are toys or literature, must reflect the children you work with. Dolls reflecting the variety of heritages seen in your community are important, as are dolls that use wheelchairs, mobility canes, hearing aids, and assistive animals. Toys designed for children with disabilities, and commercially available ones, should both be part of your collections and available to all children. The National Lekotek Center (www.lekotek.org) is a good resource for information on adaptive toys.

Playtime Tips

Inclusive play depends on communication in all its forms. Children may use speech, sign language, picture symbols, or computer-generated speech, so you should normalize these communication modalities. Have a set of picture symbols for basic words and learn some basic signs. Twenty or so words will get you started.

Model your acceptance of communication boards and communication apps found on a variety of devices. And talk about talking! At a gardening program we conducted several years ago, Anthony (a child with autism) communicated with picture symbols pointing to “yes,” “no,” “want,” etc. There was also a Spanish-speaking family in this same program, so I began a discussion about what language we use at home, which led to the children teaching each other words in their language, including sign language (me) and picture symbols (Anthony). We all went home knowing new words that day. These important inclusive conversations can take place naturally and informally in the course of playtimes.

Vancouver Public Library

In a partnership program targeted to children with speech-language delays, facilitators have witnessed previously silent children burst into speech and action while they reinvent segments of the story they have just learned with toys and other props (such as felt board stories).

Unhindered by any structure or routine, children are free to explore story elements in ways that make sense to them, and they are able to use multi-sensory avenues to experience the story. As children with disabilities and children without disabilities are more alike than different, we believe that these same opportunities for language and literacy learning during playtime after storytime can easily be made available for *all* children.

Playtime Tips

After storytime, leave out your props, puppets, and felt board stories and invite children to play with them, move them around, talk about them, talk to them, talk to others, and reenact the stories they have just heard or invent totally new ones. This simple addition to already existing programs takes a bit of extra time; it's best to stay in the room to facilitate the play and be on hand to talk to parents and caregivers. This added playtime sends a message to parents that unstructured literacy-based play is valuable. At the same time, librarians can model and encourage this kind of literacy play at home by drawing attention to story elements that can easily be reenacted with toys of all kinds. For example, it is easy to act out various versions of Nicola Smee's wonderful *Clip Clop* with just a handful of stuffed animals, with either the child or adult playing the part of the horse. Provide picture books that encourage playful reenactments, and let young imaginations soar.

Other Examples

- Vancouver (Wash.) Community Library opened the largest early literacy space in the nation in July 2011. In more than 4,500 square feet, zones are designed to meet state standards in early learning while enticing parents to play with their children. Filled with library materials and prompts for playing, singing, reading, and talking, more than twenty sculptures and activity pods fill five unique zones. From the River Zone

Twenty-Five Playful Picturebooks

These books have been selected because of the ease in which they can be adapted to open-ended play scenarios. For example, many can be acted out with a few stuffed toys or household items. Others have elements that can easily be incorporated into dramatic or fantasy play. Encourage children to adapt the story they know to create their own unique interpretations together. Your own library shelves are filled with many more playful picture books!

Allen, Pamela. *Who Sank the Boat?* Illus. by the author. Coward-McCann, 1983. 32p.

Beaumont, Karen. *Move Over, Rover.* Illus. by Jane Dyer. Harcourt, 2006. 40p.

Bloom, Suzanne. *The Bus for Us.* Illus. by the author. Boyds Mills, 2001. 32p.

Brett, Jan. *The Mitten: A Ukrainian Folktale.* Illus. by the author. Putnam, 1989. 32p.

Burningham, John. *Mr. Gumpy's Outing.* Illus. by the author. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970. 32p.

Campbell, Rod. *Dear Zoo.* Illus. by the author. Four Winds, 1982. 18p.

Christelow, Eileen. *Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed.* Illus. by the author. Clarion, 1989. 32p.

Dodd, Emma. *Dog's Colorful Day: A Messy Story about Colors and Counting.* Illus. by the author. Dutton, 2001. 32p.

Dunbar, Polly. *Penguin.* Illus. by the author. Candlewick, 2007. 40p.

Faulkner, Keith. *The Wide-Mouthed Frog: A Pop-Up Book.* Illus. by Jonathan Lambert. Dial, 1996. 16p.

Feiffer, Jules. *Bark, George.* Illus. by the author. HarperCollins, 1999. 32p.

Finn, Isobel. *The Very Lazy Ladybug.* Illus. by Jack Tickle. Scholastic, 2001. 32p.

Hacohen, Dean. *Tuck Me In!* Illus. by Sherry Scharschmidt. Candlewick, 2010. 40p.

Harris, Robie H. *Maybe a Bear Ate It!* Illus. by Michael Emberley. Orchard, 2008. 40p.

Hort, Lenny. *The Seals on the Bus.* Illus. by G. Brian Karas. Henry Holt, 2000. 32p.

Lillegard, Dee. *Sitting in My Box.* Illus. by Jon Agee. Marshall Cavendish, 2010. 32p.

Litwin, Eric. *Pete the Cat: I Love My White Shoes.* Illus. by James Dean. HarperCollins, 2010. 40p.

Numeroff, Laura Joffe. *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie.* Illus. by Felicia Bond. Harper & Row, 1985. 32p.

Rosen, Michael. *We're Going on a Bear Hunt.* Illus. by Helen Oxenbury. Margaret K. McElderry, 1989. 40p.

Slobodkina, Esphyr. *Caps for Sale; A Tale of a Peddler, Some Monkeys & Their Monkey Business.* Illus. by the author. W. R. Scott, 1947. 42p.

Smee, Nicola. *Clip-Clap.* Illus. by the author. Boxer, 2006. 28p.

Taylor, Thomas. *Little Mouse and the Big Cupcake.* Illus. by Jill Barton. Boxer, 2010. 32p.

Waddell, Martin. *Owl Babies.* Illus. by Patrick Benson. Candlewick, 1992. 32p.

Williams, Sue. *I Went Walking.* Illus. by Julie Vivas. Harcourt, 1990. 32p.

Wood, Audrey. *The Napping House.* Illus. by Don Wood. Harcourt, 1984. 32p.

to the Land of Imagination, the Light Tower Zone, and the Mechanical Artworks, more than half of the activities and toys were invented for the space. Imaginative play takes center stage with structures like a Spy Craft, Pretend Garden Café, and Weather Wind, while children and parents alike learn to play with brand new activities like the Magic Music Box.

- In Maryland, Storyville is located inside two Baltimore County Public Libraries. These interactive early literacy and learning centers are “child-sized villages that include developmentally appropriate books and activities” (bcplstoryville.org/storyville_about.html). Designed to provide a safe, educational, and fun environment that supports parents’ roles as their child’s

first and best teachers, each village provides opportunities for children with their caregivers to read, play, and learn together in a literacy-rich environment. In addition to the physical space, regularly scheduled learning parties for caregivers and their children are led by librarians.

- The Waukegan (Ill.) Public Library has an Early Learning Center in the Children’s Department that includes an art studio, music hall, nature and play center, crawl space, theater, and math and science lab (www.waukeganpl.org/kids/elc).
- Little Heights is a special PLAYroom in the Cleveland Heights–University Heights (Ohio) Library that has carefully

chosen play materials to help children “learn the art of counting, sorting, matching, and much more.” Free drop-in sessions are held throughout the year. This dedicated space within the library is open to the public three days a week (www.familyconnections1.org/facilities/littleheights.php).

- The Farmington Community Library in Michigan has an indoor percussion playground on one side of the children’s room. Careful construction and soundproofing allow children to experiment with sound and play a variety of percussion instruments without disturbing other library visitors.
- Laramie County Public Library in Cheyenne, Wyoming, has a large-scale “book factory” with conveyor belts, a twenty-foot-long Bookmobile, and animation kiosks with more than one hundred activities for young children and their families (www.lclsonline.org/children).
- In Ohio, the “Librainium” in Lakewood Public Library has a life-sized paper boat covered with local news, book reviews, songs, and fishy tales for young children, families, and caregivers. Their several hundred activities include a letter factory and an alphabet whirligig to entice families to visit and play at the library regularly (www.lkwdpl.org/art).

Inviting and Encouraging Play

Most adults have developed the ability to focus their attention. A young child will pay attention nearly equally to all of her sensory inputs. Through a process referred to as sensory integration, children learn to connect sensory inputs by source, and then to focus their attention to specific sources of sensory inputs. The later development of abstract processing requires first the development of language and literacy skills.

Through experiences, we build the ability to talk about (via multiple communication modes), record, and recall the universe we are discovering. The library is the ideal champion and destination for aspects of play that support the development of language and literacy development. Play in the library involves learning about the world, telling and hearing stories, and the transition to the world of abstract learning. For the young child, the early steps in these activities are rooted in play.

Several decades ago, it was unusual to find community spaces intended for children outside of parks, schools, children’s museums, or entertainment centers like Disney’s theme parks. Even in public libraries, the physical world was primarily designed for adults, with perhaps some child-sized furnishings.

More recently, library designers have looked to parks, schools, children’s museums, and Disney World as inspiration for ways to make their children’s areas more inviting.

But what if libraries were to reinvent the notion of play at the library? How would library play look and feel different from play at home, in a preschool, in a park, or in a children’s museum? If the nature of a child’s environment has a profound impact

on how a child plays and grows, why not make a different play environment at the library? How can libraries, in other words, make unique learning environments that are distinct from these other play and learning models?

How do libraries engage children and families as a critical and necessary destination for all ages? Libraries have materials and resources that are not available elsewhere, so how do we integrate books, materials, and other media into how we think about play in spaces?

One simple model is to identify toys and manipulatives that relate to your special collections, like color, alphabet, numbers, and shapes, and then create integrated materials and activity tabletops, kiosks, or spaces that reflect the content of those collections.

In the Vancouver (Wash.) Community Library, a series of special collections were identified and used as a springboard for more than twenty large-scale play structures in five learning zones. One structure, the Magic Music Box, is a creative, collaborative, large-scale replica of sheet music, which allows children to add wooden notes (balls) on a conveyor belt and have them make music by turning the handle and having the notes fall off onto a xylophone. It requires the collaboration of at least three participants exploring through play how the toy works and taking turns at different stations to make the music work. This piece is accompanied by a collection of music books for inspiration, to take home, to learn more, or to match patterns to hear sheet music revealed. This toy is creative, open-ended, collaborative, and evolves as participants learn more about how it works.

Like music itself, there are endless variations for learning about melody, chords, harmony, and tempo. Because caregivers have never seen it before, and are often puzzled about how it works, children often become the explorers, showing their parents how to play. Hidden along the side of the music box are messages and hints for play for parents to prompt their child, evoking Vygotsky’s concept of the proximal zone of development with questions like, “What does a triangle sound like?” “What does a letter sound like?” “What happens if . . . ?”¹⁹

Although an elaborate example, the same basic principle of providing collaborative play opportunities can be successfully applied in any library. Create a literacy café! With a simple set of dishes, a table, and some graphics taped down (burner, grill, etc.), you will soon see dramatic play blossom. Add in a menu of play for parents (with suggestions for how to interact at various ages and with a few jokes for good measure), and you’ll have a bustle of play right next to a collection of books selected for the experience. Soon you’ll see a child consult a “cookbook” in dramatic play, use a book as a serving platter, and even ask a parent to choose from board book menu of fruit shapes.

Since play is truly how children learn, the time is ripe to explore how that play relates to collections, programs, space, and how play can be integrated into the library.

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For one project I did with my son, who was four at the time, I gave him index cards on which he could draw each scene or panel of his story. After he finished creating, I laid the cards out and recorded him telling me the story.

I scanned the index cards, added the audio file and a title screen, and we were done. This method skipped the initial writing and just let him have fun drawing images and thinking about the story more as a comic book.

Another possibility—if it is too difficult to record the children or you don't have access to a microphone—is to create text

screens between the images that help tell the story, such as in silent movies. You could let music be the soundtrack and let the images and text do the “talking.”

These examples are not meant to be a definitive guide; rather they are a starting point for digital storytelling.

What's important is to find what works for you and your participants and fits the resources available. Digital storytelling is an empowering and creative way for kids to tell their stories, and when they're all done, they won't just stick it on their refrigerator—they can share it with the world. ☺

WE PLAY HERE!, continued from page 10

We reiterate that children's librarians have an important role in the repositioning of play as a vital aspect of childhood for *all* children. We hope that our collective experience as children's librarians in a variety of roles has provided you with insight, ideas, and inspiration about how you can continue to support play in your programs, spaces, and conversations. The library is the perfect place to show the way through play and we invite you all to become advocates for play in your libraries. ☺

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