



Learning through play: We don't sit and practice writing each letter

Play activities that include letters and writing prepare children to read

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By Cecelia Leong

Anxious parents often ask, “Will my child know the letters by kindergarten?” But it’s a mistake to respond to this pressure by making young children sit for formal instruction, says kindergarten teacher Judy Ross, of Glazier Elementary School in Norwalk. It’s better to integrate pre-reading and writing into children’s important work—play.

“If you’re doing direct instruction with work sheets,” says Ross, “it’s cut and dried.” Kids will learn letters and sounds either way, she adds, but in play, “there’s higher-level thinking going on. Kids learn there’s more than one way to do something. When kids go into the work force, they know how to work on a team.”

Give children free access to materials

In Minoo Vaseghi’s classroom at Kidango in Fremont, the children can help themselves to reading and writing materials any time. There is a cozy book nook and a writing center where they can choose from crayons, markers, white and colored paper, white boards, and more. Teachers change the materials frequently and encourage children to incorporate writing into their play. “Why don’t you draw me a picture of what you are going to build?” Vaseghi prompts a boy in the block area.

Recently Olga confided that it was her father’s birthday. “Would you like to make him a card?” Vaseghi asked. “What would you like to say?” Olga decided on “Happy birthday!” and “I love you Dad,” so Vaseghi wrote the phrases for her to copy into her card. “She didn’t copy all the letters,” says Vaseghi. “That was OK, as long as she could make a relationship between (written) words and what she meant.”

Encourage children to write as part of play

“We often think of literacy as sitting indoors at a desk,” says Adrienne Lomangino, at the Bing School in Menlo Park. But “we also have materials we take out into the environment.” For example, Lomangino’s class was busily mixing “drinks” outside using pitchers of colored water. The children

decided they needed to post a menu, so they asked Lomangino to show them how to write “lemonade,” “lime juice,” “coffee,” and “blueberry tea.” “Darren” took another clipboard and declared he was making his own menu. Lomangino knew Darren was not writing actual words, but she didn’t interrupt the creative play to correct him. When “David” wanted her to copy the original menu again, though, says Lomangino, “I said, ‘let’s look at the letters here.’”

Both Vaseghi and Lomangino post clipboards near play areas so children can sign up for popular activities such as dramatic play or blocks. This helps the children take turns and it gives them a purpose for learning to write their names—always available on name tags or strips of paper for children to copy.

Support children’s reasons to write

Lomangino emphasizes that for young children, reading and writing has to have a meaningful purpose. When writing is part of everyday play, children seek teachers’ help with things they want to write. Says Lomangino, “it’s very meaningful to want to label your mountain or volcano”—or to make a sign warning others not to knock over your block tower.

Before a recent family potluck, “Leo” told Lomangino, “I want you to make a sign saying, ‘Everyone can come to the potluck.’” Then he wanted another sign saying, “Thank you for coming to the potluck.” As Lomangino wrote the words, she talked with Leo about writing: “Now I’m going to leave a space before the next word...I’m going left to right.”

When a girl in Lomangino’s class asked if she could help take attendance, Lomangino gave her a clipboard so she could write down the first letters of each classmate’s name.

Help children develop as authors

In Vaseghi’s class, children create their own stories. At first, “we just write what they say and they repeat their words as they ‘read,’” she explains. Later in the year, the children “write” their own narrations using a mix of symbols, letters, and words. Then they have the chance to “read” the stories during circle time.

Sometimes the children create books out of construction paper; one day, for example, they filled books with their drawings of sunflowers in the garden. That day they didn’t ask to write the words—but they were still getting the experience of recording their observations, an important step toward writing.

Use games to connect letters and sounds

Most of the children in Vaseghi’s class are just learning English, so she uses games to help them connect letters and English sounds. In a name game, after Jason responds to the chant, “Bumblebee, bumblebee, will you say your name for me?” Vaseghi might write the letter J on a board, then say, “Jason begins with J. The letter J sounds like ‘juh,’ Who else has a name that begins with ‘juh’ J?—yes, Jared.”

During free play, Vaseghi offers a letter bingo game, which helps children learn the sounds of the alphabet because they say the letters and sounds as they play.

Bilingual alphabet chart

The traditional alphabet chart with pictures allows children to notice letters and sounds at their own pace—but can be confusing to speakers of other languages. So in her Spanish/English classroom, Vaseghi has a special chart with pictures of objects that start with the same letter in both languages. A

is for airplane/avión (not apple/manzana), B is for bicycle/bicicleta, C is for car/coche. Says Vaseghi, "We bring it to the table with small groups or in circle during the ABC song. (Then) they later go to it and pay attention to it. They point and talk to each other. And when we see them interested we tell them words connected to each letter."

"We don't sit and practice writing each letter," Loma-gino concludes. "(But) what strikes me is how frequently parents come back to tell me their children are doing very well (in kindergarten)."

Resources

Articles online

- *Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children*, a joint position statement of the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children, www.naeyc.org/
- *Reading in Kindergarten*, www.colorincolorado.org/educators/teaching/kreading
- *Staff Workshop Teacher Handout: Literacy Through Play*, www2.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=3745925
- *Building Language & Literacy Through Play*, www2.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=3747175
- *Taking stock of what you do to promote literacy* (a three-page checklist), <http://www.naeyc.org/files/yc/file/200303/PromotingLiteracy.pdf>

Lists of resources on early literacy

- www.readingrockets.org/article/c62/?startnum=21
- <http://www.naeyc.org/>
- Learning Through Play: Language and Literacy Development (video), www.teachers.tv/video/12133

Books

- *Literacy Through Play*, Gretchen Owocki, order from <http://www.naeyc.org/> or <http://books.heinemann.com/products/E00127.aspx>
 - *Learning through Play: Language*, S.A. Miller, ed. (out of print, available at websites such as <http://www.ecampus.com/> or <http://www.abe.com/>)
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Extra resources from the *Children's Advocate* bulletin

Additional resources for teachers:

- **Literacy Play:** Dramatic Play Activities that Teach Pre-Reading Skills discusses how dramatic play ties in with literacy objectives and offers activity ideas. \$20. By Sherrie West and Amy Cox, available from RedLeaf Press.
- **From Play to Literacy:** Implications for the Classroom, from the Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting, discusses how literacy goals can be reached by supporting children's play.

Additional bilingual early literacy resources for parents:

- **On the Go,** from Washington Learning Systems, is a set of parent-child early literacy materials with activities to be used in the car, on the bus, and while walking. In English and Spanish.
- **Cultivating Readers: Making Reading Active and Fun!,** from the National Center for Family Literacy, includes activities for parents to help support their child's language and reading skills. In English and Spanish.

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