
Play Supports Language Development and Literacy

~ Sharifa Oppenheimer

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Similar to the way movement scaffolds for language acquisition, play scaffolds for literacy development.¹ Play supports children's emerging language ability, as they talk to themselves and their playmates during social pretend play. Their language continues to develop through the desire to express ever more complex imaginative ideas. These two threads, the ability to construct inner images—imagination—and the capacity to express these in language, work synchronistically; each encourages the growth of the other. The verbal exchanges and their symbolic meanings between three-year-olds at play differ dramatically from six-year-olds at play. Three-year-olds typically play out scenarios from their own day, like grocery shopping or getting ready for a nap. They are beginning to explore symbolic play, as they examine a block to check the grocery list or lay out a towel as their bed. At six years, this play has expanded to include travels to far-away lands. Dining chairs become a difficult mountain trail, toilet paper tubes and string are walkie-talkies that connect the mountaineers, the couch is base-camp. As the child's hands are busy building these richly imagined scenarios, the frontal lobes of the brain are activated for creativity and high-level reasoning!

This symbolic play and the language it involves share common capacities with the ability to read and write. Play and literacy both require the ability to use objects, mental images and words to represent other objects or events. "We can view the process of development of written language as one which leads from oral language through symbolic play to written language"² Our children begin to acquire language in simple ways; they know the language for a bowl and spoon. A short while later, as they develop symbolic thought, they will pick up a walnut shell, see the similarity, and say, "This is a bowl for my baby doll." Several busy-at-play years later than this, they will draw a picture and label it "The mother is feeding her baby from a bowl." Symbolic play, which uses mental images and complex oral language, becomes written language.³

Play also offers an open space for the child to assimilate and make meaning of experience. At play they create and understand the symbolic meaning of objects. This lays a foundation for the ability to understand the symbolic meaning of letters and written words. It is during play that these substructures for literacy are laid down in the most engaging way. As they play, children practice mental processes similar to reading and writing. When adequate play-time is lost, and the process of abstracting meaning from symbols is taught in a direct-instructional mode, the child loses inner creativity, and with it, joy. Research indicates that children can learn significantly faster, potentially 20 times more quickly, when engaged in play, compared to other learning methods.⁴ This is because play facilitates the rapid creation of new neural connections in the brain. For example, it may take 400 repetitions to create a new synapse through traditional learning, but only 10-20 repetitions through play.⁵ Let us encourage the joy of the creative process, as well as the ease of acquiring literacy, when we make plenty of time and space for play.

Play Transforms into Thought

When children can create, hold and mold inner images, they have a fine foundation for learning written language, for it depends entirely upon these skills. When the child can see, hold, and transform in their mind the inner pictures involved in play, they are then ready for the symbolic letters of a written language.⁶ They can now grasp how the letters remain the same yet are interchangeable, as new words are formed. Over time they have developed an extensive vocabulary and are practiced in using words to create inner images. We can think of this as second-order symbolic thought; using the symbolic forms of language to create the symbolic forms of inner images.

It is not wise to push this process, with the goal of early reading. We lay the finest foundation for reading by using language well ourselves: speaking in full sentences, articulating fully, and reading engaging age-appropriate stories to our children. When we

model this fine use of language and offer plenty of story elements, our children take these into their play, where they practice literacy skills. During this time the brain is slowly developing and growing the various regions necessary for reading written language. Importantly, it is at about the age of seven that these areas of the brain have become connected together neurally and are well-myelinated. Myelin is a fatty sheath that acts like pavement on a highway or a superconductor. It allows the neurotransmitters to flow more quickly and easily. When we ask young children under the age of seven to learn to read, it is as though we have asked them to take a weedy, overgrown back road, rather than a smooth highway. If we wait a few short years that are filled with fine language, stories, and play, their highway to reading will be complete.⁷ ♦

References

1. Stone, Sandra J. & Stone, William. *Symbolic Play and Emergent Literacy*. <https://ijheld.lakeheadu.ca/article/view/1501> Accessed August 2025.
2. Ibid. P. 4 This is a terrific, though heady, exploration of play as the central scaffold for the ability to read and write. It is definitely worth it to slog through the technical language.
3. A note about written language: "Writing by hand is whole-brained, while typing only activates the left hemisphere." From a conversation with Carla Hannaford, June 2018
4. <https://www.brown.edu/news/2022-11-15/children-learning> Accessed August 2025
5. <https://www.oaktreekids.com/blog/2019/2/23/the-importance-of-play-in-childhood-development>. Accessed August 2025.
6. Again from the conversation with Carla Hannaford: "The connected symbols of cursive writing give more depth of images to the brain. We see this in the original writing of the Chinese, Japanese and Arabic languages."
7. "How the Brain Learns to Read: Why Pushing Early is Not Better." *Speech Language Literacy Lab*, 4 April 2014, www.sl3lab.com/new-blog/2014/3/22/connections-in-the-brain-needed-for-reading. Accessed 29 June 2017.

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