

May I Have a Word?

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My Baby Can Read...Play: How Productive Play Promotes Literacy

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If you pay attention to the current toys, television shows, and materials for children like *Your Baby Can Read!* you should notice a cultural shift to the promotion of literacy, especially early literacy skills. From older shows such as *Sesame Street* and *Between the Lions* to newer shows such as *WordGirl*, *WordWorld*, and *Super Why!* we see the push for phonological awareness skills and reading skills, which encompass rhyming, letter/sound naming and identification, sound segmenting and blending, and so on.

The available research clearly shows the importance of promoting literacy skills early, and the overall consensus is that oral language provides the building blocks for literacy.

So if oral language is the foundation, and if we achieve language through quality language *input*, how is that input provided for infants and toddlers? Through PLAY!

Besides daily caretaking routines that parents and children engage in (feeding, grooming, sleeping), the next most important activity they engage in where crucial language input is provided is play.

So if appropriate play skills predict appropriate language skills, and if strong language skills predict literacy skills, then I see a clear link between play and reading.

I'm not suggesting reading to infants and toddlers is not valid and necessary; I am suggesting though that perhaps there should be a greater or at least equal push for promoting quality play. My meaning of play, however, is where the play partner of the child is engaging the child and providing quality LANGUAGE INPUT *naturally* but *purposefully*.

In a nutshell, let's not bypass the building block of play because we're so concerned that children be able to read.

As a personal example, both of my toddlers love books. From the time my four-year-old daughter was one, she would quietly sit on the floor going through baskets I had set around the house full of little books, and she would flip through the pages "reading" one book after another. I often find my two-year-old son sitting in a rocking chair in his room surrounded by books "reading." He spontaneously points out characters and talks about the pictures. His big sister also helps him out, making up stories for him based on the pictures as though she is reading...and he believes every word!

As parents, my husband and I have read to them consistently, have made sure books are readily available and accessible to them, and have encouraged them to talk about the pictures and relate what they're seeing to experiences they've had, but I firmly believe *their enjoyment of books would not have been fostered without purposeful play in our home*.

Purposeful play is crucial in order to develop what I call the **4 C's**: *Concentration* (attention), *Creativity* (imagination), *Curiosity*, and family *Connection* (through a shared activity). These four components are extremely important for promoting reading ability.

So as professionals, educators, and parents, let's evaluate where we're investing our time and resources and make sure the push for early literacy doesn't overshadow or do away with the need for consistent and quality play, not through the latest electronics or gadgets, but using good ol' blocks, dolls, cars, toy farms, puzzles, toy kitchens, playdough...and the list goes on and on.

For purposeful play suggestions, check out FREE tip sheets (known as P.O.P. sheets) entitled *Purposeful Ongoing Play: Enhancing Language Skills Through Play*, available at www.thespeechstop.com, under the Parents' Corner tab.