

Anne Burke

# Invitations to Play

Using play to build literacy skills in young learners



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Anne Burke



Pembroke Publishers Limited

*For Momma's artists Lily, Aidan, and Isabella  
Always carry a purple crayon!*

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# 1

## Using Invitations to Play to Build Literacy Foundations

Through their earliest years of play, children develop a substantial body of skills and knowledge. Along with their backpacks and snacks, this knowledge comes with them when they first enter a school. Most of them vaguely realize that attending school means they will learn to read and write, make new friends, and take their first real steps towards independence; however, all these experiences will be built on the foundations of everything they already know.

One of the biggest challenges that face educators is how to reconcile this early childhood knowledge with the formal education experience. A significant part of the early years' school curriculum is finding ways to build a base of knowledge on which skills may be taught. Programs, therefore, need to be designed in such a way that they address the needs of all children but are constructed in a manner that reflects the best knowledge and practices by which children learn.

And the best way for all young children to learn is through play.

### Play as a Social Activity

This book is about play and the way that play can interact with early educational experiences. Pioneering psychologist Lev Vygotsky (2004) described *social play* as the way in which children come to understand rules, the rules that underlie all their social interactions. Early education expert Dr. Peter Gray (2008) describes it as the “means by which children develop their physical, intellectual, emotional, social, and moral capacities.” All children’s actions take on symbolic meaning, and through play, children build their understanding of the world around them. Play is also inherently social. It facilitates children’s integration into peer groups and collaborative learning spaces. It is needed for children to assume other roles and viewpoints, and to establish close interpersonal communication. In other words, play and children’s social interactions are irrevocably linked. As educators, we must understand that children do best when their social interactions are valued in the learning experience.

Conversely, enormous efforts and sums of money are being spent to prepare young children for their education. Some of this can be attributed to over-eager parenting; some of it is a creation of pop culture. An entire industry of online videos, expensive toys, and pre-preschools has sprung up to meet the perceived need to create an educational base for children’s early school years.

As educators, we must ask ourselves fundamental questions about preparing young children for lifelong learning: What skills do they need? What teaching

methods and learning theories best address how to build these foundational skills? How do we address the diversity of learners we encounter and bring needed cultural awareness to our classrooms? And, most important, how do we value and expand upon the home literacy experiences that children bring to the classroom door?

## The Value of Home and Preschool Play

Children bring many different learning experiences to the classroom, but some have more experiences than others. Those who have been exposed to child-care settings or preschool already will have begun to build playful learning skills, to engage in learning how to learn. For children without this type of play-based foundation, reconciling their previous experiences to those of the classroom is more challenging. Explaining this difficulty becomes easier if we think about how children learn. Learning is a social phenomenon that takes place within a child's cultural world (Street, 2000). Children learn in many ways — through active participation in play, planned activities, observations and explorations they make, and imitation of adults and older children. Social interactions and explorations of how they understand their world are vital — and these are achieved through play (Branscombe, Burcham, Castle, & Surbeck, 2014).

Teachers today plan curriculum in key learning areas, building upon children's skills and social interactions to help them learn. The twofold goal in this text is to help educators understand the importance of play as a pedagogy for learning those early skills and to show them how to extend play through invitations to learners, so the learners can re-create the playful learning engagement they had before their formal arrival at school.

Although schools and teachers have struggled to find time for play in the face of academic agenda demands, most academics and educators recognize the value of play as a pedagogical tool. On a related note, parents are beginning to question homework policies, standardized testing, and the lack of socialization skills in children. Play is now understood to be foundational to young children's literacy building. In this text, I build on these new understandings and offer concrete and achievable ways for educators to extend invitations to play in all early years' learning.

My intention is to connect children's play to curricula and pedagogical practices. Teachers understand that children's learning at home scaffolds and connects to school learning — and much of a child's early life, up to and including the first years in school, is spent playing. This book offers a look at the benefits of engaging children in a pedagogy that honors what they know and prepares them for later years with a strong literacy foundation. The learning experiences provided by playing at home are of enormous value to what will happen later in the classroom; understanding this will enhance the roles of both teachers and parents. Play represents a huge opportunity to create a foundation for children's future literacy lives.

## Emergent Literacy — Embedded in Social Practices

*Emergent literacy*, as termed by Marie Clay (1991), is the ongoing and developmental process of understanding and using language from birth until independence.

This book owes a heavy debt to my earlier title, *Ready to Learn*.

Typically, children from birth to eight years of age are in this phase of development. Emergent literacy begins with oral language, which is central to how children understand and communicate their needs and wants. Children establish language in order to connect words to specific actions and objects. Through their experimentation with language — the constructive process of engaging the world around them — and amid its constant feedback, children become competent “meaning makers” (Wells, 1999).

According to socio-cultural perspectives, children’s home literacy engagements can be viewed as social practices situated within communities (Wenger, 1998). These social practices are ultimately the foundations of children’s learning (Roskos & Christie, 2000). Through the early years of play and exploration, children acquire a substantial body of skills and knowledge (Hughes, 1991). Successful pedagogy recognizes that learning is not confined to the school and can neither begin nor end there. Embracing the valuable learning and language experiences that define children’s first literacy engagements with the world is necessary for later success (Heath, 1983).

This book recognizes the fact that children participate in literacy engagements long before they can discriminate between letters or recognize the correspondences between letters and sounds (Clay, 1991). Auditory discrimination starts with the first sounds children hear, as children begin playing with sounds, letters, and eventually, words. Learning, beginning at birth, is based on what children are hearing in their homes and early environments. From their earliest moments, all children are active learners who construct knowledge and understandings within a series of age-related stages (Piaget, 1962).

## The Skills versus Play Debate

Early childhood education is a challenging area. As society recognizes the importance of the early years in children’s learning, there occurs much debate about the value of play in early literacy, as opposed to the skills model approach. The skills model is still dominant in North American educational strategies.

The U.S. educational strategy known as “Head Start” places huge value on early childhood skills acquisition. It promotes the social and cognitive growth of disadvantaged children through programs in education, nutrition, social needs, and health services to enrolled children and families. Canadian programs, such as ABC Head Start (Alberta), are based on a similar philosophy. In its *National Strategy for Early Literacy*, the Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network (2009) put a focus on skills, too, but stated its awareness of stakeholders’ expanding definitions of literacy. The Network’s report says that “literacy included not only reading and writing, but also speaking, viewing and representing, as well as what these mean to various social and cultural groups” (p. 11). Although this definition acknowledges literacy as a social and cultural practice, Canadian definitions of literacy remain skills based, as defined by the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey and the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey. These surveys, conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and Statistics Canada, are quoted in the Network’s *National Strategy for Early Literacy* (see p. 11).

One key recommendation of the Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network’s report follows:

Children acquire fundamental literacy skills through an evidence-based instructional program that must include systematic, direct and explicit instruction, supporting the acquisition of essential alphabetic, code-breaking skills and development of strong oral language, vocabulary, grammar, fluency and comprehension skills. (p. 40)

This recommendation negates children's natural literacy acquisition in their own worlds and on their own terms. In fact, it holds children and play hostage in favor of a political and economic agenda. It ignores theoretical research on children's early literacy skills learning: children achieve language and literacy skills at higher levels when they experience rudimentary play scenarios and creativity in nurturing environments.

A lack of foundational skills for higher-order thinking points to the value of play. Despite a heavy emphasis on the 3 Rs in the Kindergarten to Grade 3 curriculum, educators and parents alike see that children often lack thinking skills such as how to make choices, generate solutions, and take risks.

### Challenges of providing appropriate instruction

Generally, developing appropriate literacy instruction for the early years is a serious challenge. The programming is specialized and falls largely outside the university experiences of primary and elementary teachers. Although we know and understand that most children pass through stages of physical and intellectual growth, we also know that they do not reach each stage at the same time and that growth is highly individual (Clay, 1991; Piaget, 1962). Early identification of learning and other developmental difficulties is a challenge, but if met, can lead to interventions, providing more optimal pathways for successful first literacy experiences.

With a full academic agenda, it is difficult for teachers to return play to the curriculum; however, more research is advocating play as an effective pedagogical tool that centres learning in a holistic environment similar to a home environment. Including play as a pedagogical tool is especially a struggle when teachers lack experience in early years' classrooms. By using a natural form such as play, however, we can cultivate children's natural love for learning and build a base of knowledge that privileges the social and cultural contexts in which children learn, while focusing on the skills that schools value so much.

### Issues that affect children's prospects as learners

High child poverty rates are still a huge concern, especially since child poverty studies suggest that family economics may lead to inequity later in life. As they grow up, children from poorer families often suffer health issues, missed opportunities, underemployment, and social exclusion out of proportion to their peers. All of this can be traced to a lack of early childhood intervention in education.

Research shows how early intervention using activities that engage children and challenge their young minds may affect some of their life path trajectories (Mustard, 2006). Other studies show that one quarter of Grade 1 students are at risk because of fewer resources in the home. Meanwhile, as a "Survey of Canadian Attitudes toward Learning" found, many Canadians think that early childhood learning should focus more on attitudes, such as fostering a positive attitude towards learning, than on school readiness (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). All these considerations need to be part of a teacher education process, if it is to fully engage with the issues facing children preparing for school.

## Challenges Facing Play as Learning

The role of play for children has come under much scrutiny by parents and educators. The word *play* once conjured up visions of children engaged in spontaneous thought, movement, and expression. Historically, it evoked images of carefree children running in fields, playing games, and climbing trees. Unfortunately, it has acquired another connotation: that of time wasted and educational opportunities lost.

Reasons related to work help explain why play has been relegated to spaces outside curriculum. In a crowded world, playtime — or, to use a favorite term of parents, *quality time* — is often something left when the “real” work has been done. This dichotomy between work and play is formalized in the workplace. Play is not considered to be a productive measure or preparation for the world of work; this sort of office and organizational thinking is too frequently transferred to the home and classroom.

Many early-grade teachers often struggle under the weight of school and societal expectations. They think they ought to keep children almost always engaged in serious learning tasks: tasks that, in some obvious fashion, prepare them for gainful achievement. This rarely stated (but commonly held) perspective holds that, outside the playground, play has no real place in our schools. On one hand, schools put great importance on play as a socialization activity; on the other, they often confine it to physical education classes, lunch break, and recess. Furthermore, although much research shows intricate connections between play and skills development, it is difficult for parents and educators to see how learning gained through play is transferable to work-related skills. Unfortunately, some types of play do not fit well within the confines of the structured and expected behaviors of children in school.



*For too long, many educators and parents have undervalued play and viewed it only as a playground or physical education class activity.*

Play as a form of learning is subject to other challenges. The outcomes of play are difficult to quantify. Educators also tend to have set ideas about good play and bad play. Meanwhile, the media, popular culture, and overt child consumerism have pushed the boundaries of childhood outwards, towards mimicking the real-life experiences of adults.

Nonetheless, a playful curriculum has much value. Creative in form and innovative in ideas, it produces children who show resilience in the face of change and can share divergent thinking about the everyday nuances that define their lives. The ability to explore and confront such changes prepares children for later experiences where changing patterns in life are becoming the norm. *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School* is a 2009 report from the Alliance for Childhood by directors Edward Miller and Joan Almon. The U.S. report makes this argument: “Creative play that children can control is central to their physical, emotional, and cognitive growth. It contributes to their language development, social skills, and problem-solving capacities, and lays an essential foundation for later academic learning” (p. 63).

The literature written on play is also very supportive of its role in the literacy development of the child. Several researchers (see Dyson, 2003; Edminston, 2007; Gregory, Long, & Volk, 2005; Hall, 2000; and Morrow & Rand, 1991) report that literacy engagements for children are enriched through pretend play. Jane Hewes (2006) says, “In play children explore and test the edges of what they know, where they begin to understand what it feels like to reach for something new, and to achieve something originally impossible, even unimaginable” (p. 33). Seeing the rightful placement of play as a pedagogy that responds to and addresses early literacy and numeracy skills is a return to the natural way in which young children learn.

## Play as It Relates to Curriculum Planning

If we agree that play is fundamental to the development and educational success of our students, then the challenge becomes how to bring play into a formalized curriculum, where skills are seen as the focus for future achievement. The following are aspects of play that need to be considered in relationship to (and with) curriculum planning for the early grades.

- Children learn in a holistic environment, one that encourages learning through speaking, listening, creative thinking, and moving, all of which are conducive to play-based exercises.
- Learning should be a hands-on experience, with classroom learning centres that develop independent thinking, learning, and other initiatives driven by children’s desire to learn.
- Children need to learn in spaces that acknowledge and build on the socio-cultural dimensions of home and family that they bring with them to school.
- Since children learn and grow at different rates, educators must develop programs that are responsive to every child’s needs and that exemplify learning through play as a pedagogy that provides equity. Teachers must be mindful of their students’ needs.
- Effective teaching practice requires having a philosophy that places play as important to learning and understanding.

## Preparing to facilitate play

Play can find a space in classrooms where the teacher has mastered such skills as keenly observing learning moments, sharing and communicating to find children's voices, and using play to help children connect their feelings and thoughts with words. Teaching children how to freely communicate their thoughts and feelings to others is needed if, ultimately, they are to interact with their world of learning. To successfully introduce or encourage play in their classrooms, teachers need to do the following:

- model attitudes that recognize and use play in the curriculum as a learning pedagogy
- gain an understanding of the importance of play and its vital relationship to learning
- understand how to include appropriate play experiences for young children
- learn how to contribute to play without controlling children's exploration
- understand how to encourage certain learning goals in play when working alongside children
- recognize the importance of socio-dramatic play in the construction of children's identities
- create spaces for and categorize play for learning

## Offering enriching opportunities

During the primary years, children benefit from complex play invitations when paired with materials that enrich play opportunities. The importance of the materials in the classroom environment should not be overlooked. The choice of materials and the equipment chosen for the classroom should optimize learning opportunities. The suggested materials in the table (pages 14 to 15) foster creativity, musicality, critical thinking skills, understanding of math concepts, and problem-solving skills. They also aid physical achievement.

Kindergarten teacher Karen Jennings makes use of these materials, as described. This table is derived from *The Right Stuff for Children Birth to 8* by Martha B. Bronson (1995, pp. 120–121).

## Play as Children's Work

At its simplest, play is children's work and the way in which children make sense of their formative world (Piaget, 1962). Children's play is used for different functions, such as social engagement, symbolic expression, and motor activity. All these forms of play show traces of the identities of children and may be an expression of power within themselves and how they communicate with others. Essentially, play is what children do in their world and it is fun. Through it, we see the development of children's cognitive skills, such as fine and gross motor skills; an orientation to their environment; and skills of socialization to play out with others. In many ways, play is the foundation upon which these types of skills for life are built.

The building blocks for life that are found in play-based activities show the intricate link between play and life. Child play provides opportunities to engage children through a performance of life: one that can be experienced in a safe environment. Language and communication skills, problem solving, and the use of critical thinking strategies are all needed. Play is a chance to practise these skills that are so much a part of a child's life (Bruner, 1978).

# 2

## Playing with Language

### Active Engagement through Play: Piaget

Known for his theory of cognitive development, Jean Piaget talks about active engagement through play: children practise what they know and risk new experiences through testing and trying things out. As an example, when my nephew Steven was five years old, he loved to play Restaurant. He brought menus, checked our fridge for ingredients, and pretended to write a list of what we ordered, discussing which dishes he felt were the healthiest for us.

After enacting this scenario many times, Steven asked his parents if he could go to a “real restaurant with tablecloths.” Bravely, his parents decided to let him do so. As soon as they had ordered their food, Steven advised the waiter that he had to check the fridge to make sure that the restaurant had the necessary ingredients. In play moments like this, children develop real-world connections between their experiences and what they explore in play; they can also learn social cues in real-life scenarios.

When children are playing happily, they are also developing a sense of well-being. These feelings of comfort and security help them to regulate their emotions and give them opportunities to develop their interpersonal skills. Play is also an essential piece of self-regulation. *Self-regulation*, in its simplest terms, is children’s ability to control their own emotions, actions, thoughts, and impulses. It is an essential part of their early years’ development, and according to many researchers, it can have considerable impact on their later academic success. Games and other forms of collaborative playing are crucial for self-regulation: important concepts, such as sharing, waiting one’s turn, following directions, not being too rough, and controlling frustration, are all learned on the playground and through interacting with other children. Similarly, play also encourages negotiation among children, as game rules must meet the standards and approval of all parties. Beyond self-regulation and negotiation, play is essential in developing collaboration and interaction skills; it also gives an opportunity for children to display what they have learned through observation. In turn, these skills can help children become better communicators — and good communication is the foundation of effective speaking and listening.

Inviting children to play with language will help them to think creatively. In doing so, the process by which they engage in language for problem solving and use language for varying forms of communication will become more enriched. McLeod (2018) asserts that it is important to “emphasize language learning through activities that children find familiar and meaningful. Children’s language can be developed in a play setting when teachers provide the appropriate opportunities.”

Literature is critical to help children be successful. When children use their imaginations and ask questions about what they read, it helps them feel that they are accomplished learners. For children to become masters of their language, they need many opportunities to test these skills, processing their creative energy through repetitive efforts.

Building a classroom environment where children can seek out different challenges and risks to become better communicators will help children develop skills essential for literacy. Not all children begin their learning in language-enriched environments, so learning how language sounds, how words are used in communication, and what the words mean is central to a balanced language arts program. Children need to be engaged and interacting with words, sounds, and language all the time for the proper development of these skills. Watching children at play shows how they can use language for their own good.

Lev Vygotsky reminds us that children's play worlds help to develop their thought processes. He also reminds us that proper learning and development are dependent on healthy social relationships. Social development literally is child's play in Vygotsky's eyes due to his belief that play offers children a more sophisticated array of social skills to use in problem-solving situations. This high-level engagement during playtime helps children navigate social problems and understand how to play by the rules. Vygotsky (1988, p. 191) states that "the very mechanism underlying higher mental functions is a copy from social interaction; all higher mental functions are internalised social relationships."

During recess one day, one of my students asked me to hold his "plane ticket" (a field-trip permission slip with a suitable airline symbol pasted on the folded paper). He announced he was going to Florida for the winter break and would be leaving with many of his classmates at playtime after lunch. Other children became interested in the game, and as I listened, I could hear familiar airport codes and an announcer saying, "Plane 424 leaving now for Florida — bring your ticket." Children arrived with their own versions of tickets. The air was filled with commands to "buckle up" and "show your passport here." Playing Airport for these children was a lead-in to discussions about travel, holidays, and family times, but, most important, it contributed to their language development: they gained practical understanding of the vocabulary of travel and location.

## Oral Language Development as Part of Emergent Literacy

Often overlooked in the race to teach young children to read is the development of their oral language abilities and their role in good communication. The progression of child language development is correlated with the development of facial, tongue, and dental growth. Many children struggle with oral language, and strategies that involve play often prove helpful. By way of definition, when we speak of *oral language*, we are referring to abilities that involve children's skills at speaking and listening. More specifically, we are referring to children's ability to acquire vocabulary and language, their phonological awareness, their knowledge of letters and words, their comprehension of meaning, and their ability to follow storytelling, read-alouds, and other narratives.

When children come to school, and during their first years, they are still very much in emergent literacy, constructing their understanding of language, how it works, and how it is relevant to their needs and lives. Over time, they understand that language and its use is critical to their being able to engage with others socially. They learn that language serves a purpose and is used in differing contexts, and that understanding these differing contexts will be beneficial to them.

Researchers William Teale and Elizabeth Sulzby (1986) studied children's emergent literacy for some time and reached several conclusions about how it works. Their ideas serve as simple guidelines for us as educators when we begin to assist children in attaining oral language development.

1. Literacy develops when children interact with reading, writing, and oral language in their homes and communities. That is where they learn what language is, how to use it, and what purposes it can serve.
2. Children's literacies begin to emerge long before they enter school. Within their families and communities, they acquire many skills.

3. These home- and family-based experiences contribute to later formal literacy education and are crucial to children's overall language development.
4. Interactions with adults are crucial in laying the foundations for children's language and literacy development.
5. All children learn and acquire language at different rates and move through stages at different speeds.

Although "school literacy" has often been rather narrowly perceived as only reading and writing, early learning for young children is multimodal; in other words, children use many different text forms to engage in literacy acts (Kress, 2005). These acts include speaking, gesturing, aural communication, and other forms of personal expression, such as drawing. The process by which children use these language forms is developmental. It begins at birth, continues throughout childhood, and carries on into adulthood. The playmaking in the early years of children's lives, however, fulfills a formal role in their ability to communicate. Children experience literacy within environmental and social contexts that help them make sense of how their reading and writing fit within their own social world and the one around them. As emerging readers and writers, children want to make sense of what they read and write. They benefit when they can use these skills in meaningful activities that require active participation. In the example below, Laura Huckle used a community event to encourage an elaborate play activity, which, in turn, required considerable use of communication skills.

*Laura, teaching in a Grade 1 classroom in St. John, New Brunswick, was striving to situate the children's reading and writing within their local community. To encourage children to build their oral skills, she began a discussion about the farmers' market. She brought in newspaper clippings, discussing the idea of a market, and asked the children to help make a list of the jobs at the market. Children engaged in small-group discussions about the jobs, having conversations such as the following.*

Henry: *When my grand-dad took me to the market last week . . . I mean Saturday . . . um . . . we bought hot chocolate and waffles. . . . I know that could be a job. Someone sells hot chocolate and waffles.*

Madison: *Yeah . . . Yeah . . . I got hot chocolate, too. You know what . . . you know what? I think that when we went, we got eggs. Yeah, we did.*

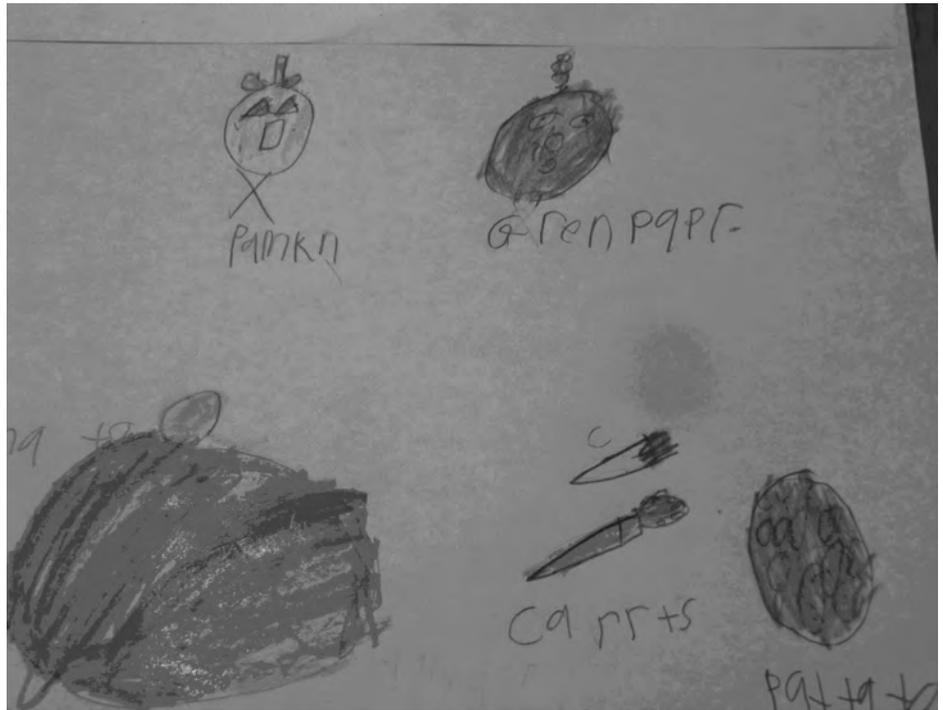
George: *You know what you were saying (gesturing to Madison), we could have someone to take the . . . take the money. Yeah, that would be good.*

*This discussion encouraged the children to use their oral and communication skills to share what they already knew about jobs at the market. Laura drew on their discussions, asking each group to share one idea. The discussion included all the children and provided a mutual understanding of the local market. Laura bridged this knowledge to a writing and representation activity.*

*Children made multimodal representations of what they knew to share with others. They worked in small groups, drawing pictures in comic-strip form of what each person would do at a market. They thereby shared their literacy experiences in a way that evolved from their social and environmental contexts.*

*Laura also used their understanding of what it meant to communicate within a group. Some children drew a road map of how to get to the market, showing various familiar stores and restaurant signs, such as McDonald's, and a nearby fire station. Another group drew and cut out pictures of vegetables that would be sold and discussed colors of vegetables and tastes according to color. One boy reported he felt that green vegetables should not be eaten, while another child argued strongly about the virtues*

of a balanced diet. Later on, one group of the children used puppet role-playing about shopping at the market, furthering their oral skills in playmaking.



Students in one group discussed the colors and tastes of vegetables at the market after drawing pictures of common ones.

This vignette shows us how children engage in many different language processes to inform themselves of the world around them. The processes of oral language call upon all the social and cognitive ways in which children come to literacy. Meaning is gained from active participation, where children construct social understanding — in this case, of the market — as well as from their skills and knowledge, shared in their oral language and play-based activities. Based on this vignette, we can confirm the importance of the knowledge that children bring to the classroom.

Literacy is socially constructed, and, in this example, we see how the children develop it in the context of the market. They interact with one another, adopting different forms, such as speaking and listening, problem solving through discussion, writing, role-playing, and drawing, and we gain insight into the rich literacy context that forms the basis of the children's knowledge. These children share "funds of knowledge," which Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzales (1992) defined as the ways in which we all form understanding of our experiences. Meaningful role play boosts learning potential for language development, problem solving, and mathematical cognition. Ultimately, we must consider oral language as a part of everyday living that is socially and culturally situated (Barton & Hamilton, 2000). Embracing the valuable learning and oral language experiences that define children's first literacy engagements with the world is needed for later success (Heath, 1983). Teachers who see the value of embedding oral language in how children view the world and within their individual contexts strengthen the foundations of literacy that children have when they come to school.

On the next page is a line master that can be shared with the parents of the students in your class.

## Phonics in the Home

Authentic teaching moments at home, in child-care centres, and in early years' classrooms help children to feel comfortable exploring and experimenting with language. Here are some playful ways to engage children in exploring sounds and letters.

- Bring words and sounds into your conversation. For example, if you see a train, talk about the sounds it makes: "The train goes choo-choo; you need to put a *c* and an *h* together to make that sound."
- Once in a while, read aloud books that use a lot of alliteration, such as Janet and Allan Ahlberg's *Each Peach Pear Plum* or Jeffie Ross Gordon's *Six Sleepy Sheep*. Encourage your child to speak the words with you after a few readings. Once you feel that your child is ready, invite him or her to sound out words based on the first letter.
- Read alphabet books or make one together by drawing fancy letters or cutting out letters from print advertisements and catalogues.
- Make up flashcards that show simple sound units, such as short /u/ or /b/ — these are called "phonemes." Ask your child to say them aloud.
- Point out letters, and their sounds, in your environment: "Look. That sign says 'STOP.' Can you make that sound?"
- Play letter-based scavenger and treasure hunts: "Can you find a word for something in the room that has the /oo/ sound?"
- Place plastic magnetic letters on the fridge, and perhaps during meal preparation times, play this game: "Can you find the letters to make a /b/ sound? a /th/ sound?" Alphabet blocks can serve the same function.
- Share tongue twisters. The tongue twisters help children appreciate the differences between sounds, while providing amusement. Children love to recite these together, perhaps competing playfully to see who can say them without errors. *She sells seashells at the seashore* is a great example, but there are many others, including these.

*A big bug bit the little beetle, but the little beetle bit the big bug back.*

*The black bug bled black blood.*

*Betty bought butter but the butter was bitter, so Betty bought better butter to make the bitter butter better.*

*How much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood?*

*I scream. You scream. We all scream for ice cream!*

And the one that even parents and teachers struggle with:

*Irish wristwatch . . . Irish wristwatch*



## Sounds and Letters — Making the Links

Most children can speak quite clearly long before they can read. Many will have some grasp of the links between sounds and letters via constant recitation of the ABCs. Discovering that letters can have more than one sound or be combined to create more sounds can be difficult to grasp. Although that is just one part of the puzzle, it is one necessary to successful reading and writing.

As stated earlier, the best way to ensure that a child successfully navigates the shoals of emergent literacy is through the provision of a stimulating home life and community, full of play and opportunities for language use. Consider, though, that most parents will have only a vague recollection of the term *phonics*, one area in which their children will need help. As we know, phonics essentially describes the relationship between the sounds of language and the written letters, or combinations of letters. These sounds are called “phonemes.”

When introducing phonics concepts, adults will find it valuable to remember that children need to hear language in a familiar and meaningful context. Emphasizing the sounds of words as opposed to just saying the words and the letters will greatly help children in their efforts to become readers. Be sure to remind parents that this should be a logical extension of their current playful conversation and coaching, rather than any obvious effort.

### Exploring phonemes

Phonemes, the sounds that make up the auditory form of the English language, are represented by letters and groups of letters. Although many phonemes use just one letter, some use two or three. In most standard North American English dialects, there are about 40 sounds but only 26 letters to represent them. Various combinations of letters are required to create the rest of the sounds, /ch/ and /th/ being two examples. Some groups of different letters can be used to make the same sound, too. For example, the hard /a/ of “bake” and the /a/ sound in “gain” are made by different letters. Spelling is not necessarily a good guide for phonemes; for example, the hard /e/ sound can be made several ways (e.g., *feet* and *beat*).

Although there are six vowels — a, e, i, o, u, and y — there are 10 distinct vowel sounds used in English, not all of which correspond to their originating vowel. These include the short /e/ (*beg*), long /e/ (*beet*), short /a/ (*bat*), long /a/ (*fate*), short /o/ (*blog*), long /o/ (*blow*), short /i/ (*fit*), long /i/ (*fight*, *my*), short /u/ (*luck*), long /u/ (*duke*), and other vowel-based sounds, such as /oi/ (*toy*), /oo/ (*fool*), and /ear/ (*gear*). Keep in mind that if a child has been exposed to other languages, he or she may have knowledge of even more sounds. French and Spanish, for example, are quite common in North America, and both contain vowel sounds that differ widely from those used in English.

Consonant phonemes are a bit easier, often corresponding more specifically to the alphabet sounds a child may already know. Phonemes made from combined letters — such as *ch* (*chair*), *sh* (*shop*), and *th* (*this*) — will take longer to get established.

## Early Understandings about Talk

At an early age, children develop their understanding of how language works. Indeed, infants can determine differences between various languages, displaying a preference for the language their mother uses. All babies make similar sounds in their first months of life no matter the language spoken around them. All babies have the capability to produce the sounds used in every known language. This finding about how children learn to speak is interesting because it means that in the first few years of life, every baby is capable of learning how to speak and comprehend every human language.

Parents are amazed at how quickly children discover that language serves different purposes depending on the ways and context of use. Children learn through language — what and how it is used — to communicate with others. In their early language use, children draw on a wide range of vocabulary and expressions that vary according to whom they are talking.

Young children develop many understandings about talk. For example, they come to realize that the way we use our voices varies according to the context: quiet voices for the library and outside voices for the playground. Children also quickly understand that choice of words spoken is influenced by the circumstances. On a basic level, toddlers and babies are guided to listen to the sounds of spoken language. Over time, children discover that all language serves a purpose. Therefore, we must ensure that talk is purposeful and planned so that young children learn the appropriate places and contexts for its use.

To become good communicators, children need certain skills that can be both taught and practised. Taking turns when sharing ideas, negotiating differences in opinions, and learning how to share information individually as well as in a group are important beginning steps for children. Giving children the opportunity to both talk and listen to one another is crucial in early years' settings. Sharing and explaining their thoughts and opinions builds confidence within the children.

## Planning for Meaningful Talk

Children learn through meaningful engaged interactions whereby they share in the literacy event. When children see the benefit of talking — to share and explore their ideas — they become engaged in developing their own literacy.

It is valuable to encourage young children to use language in a purposeful manner. Doing so will enable them to share ideas in collaborative settings. It will also help them cope with the conflicts that are sure to arise in an early years' setting. Inexperienced with conflict, children need opportunities to explore ways to resolve problems through playmaking. Helping children find the appropriate forms of language and the ways in which to express their feelings acceptably prepares them for more formal schooling tasks. Regulation of their emotions happens when they feel that they are competent communicators. Children have a strong sense of injustice and can feel isolated if they have been wronged in some way.

Learning to read children's non-verbal expressions, such as their facial expressions, gestures, and posture, helps educators understand the children's needs. The larger numbers of children coming to school with delayed speech abilities also require educators to pay more attention to children's non-verbal communication (Canadian Language and Literacy Research Network, 2009; Miller & Almon,

### Communicating through Charades

Trevor Mackenzie, the teacher of a large, diverse class of Grade 1 students, found a good way to draw out some of the class's more reluctant communicators: Charades. He simplified the game and the rules, so that one child acted out a household task, while three other children with varying skills guessed what the task was.

"I asked them to explain what the actor was doing," said Trevor. "The key thing was that the children were so focused on what the actor was doing, they didn't worry about how they were saying it. The game also really appealed to their sense of humor — they loved to play it, even the students with little English."

# 3

## Playing with Print: Towards Reading and Writing

Even before they come to school, most children know that oral language can be represented by symbols and marks on a page. Through the observation of language in use around them — environmental print — children come to understand that language appears in many forms. Children who are immersed in play-based environments can experiment with how language is used, constructing an understanding about the forms of written language, their meanings, and the connections between them. This is how they come to understand that the marks on a page have meaning in and of themselves, and that these meanings contain information of interest to them.

Classrooms that are play oriented allow time for children to experiment with and experience language; however, achieving this can be a challenge for many school curriculums, which generally rely upon repetitive skill-based worksheets. Many worksheets prompt children to practise needed skills, such as printing and making numbers. While most parents and educators agree that these skills are needed, they are also aware that asking children to learn and practise these skills apart from an active engagement with language may ultimately make it harder for them to see the connection between what they are doing and the language in use. Play can help bridge the gap between how everyday language is used and the needed foundations for reading and writing.

### Immersion in Print and Social Interaction

Many language theorists have demonstrated that children come to language use when immersed in an environment both print and verbally rich — one that encourages interaction (Dyson, 2003; Graves, 1994; Hall, 1987; Heath, 1983). In a rich environment, children learn the important and needed aspects of language, including the differences between language and sound, the rules that govern language use, its varying meanings, and how to use it.

For educators and parents, the first step in developing language use is to make sure that the environment is print rich. In one visit I made to a Grade 2 classroom, the teacher had placed labels on things so that children would be accustomed to the use of words with objects to see how words can represent their visual knowledge of the world. Taking this approach is an important way to include children, particularly those whose home language is other than English, and show them words in their first language.

Many teachers adopt a similar approach. They link objects, colors, and ideas to words in print. Students' names are an ideal starting place for classroom print displays, as often they are the first words children can read or write. Taking attendance each morning is important as children begin to realize that they are accountable — that they are at school to learn! Asking children to sign in on a daily sheet suggests the importance of their names. They may find it motivational to view how others write their names and form letters. Using the attendance list to reinforce who is in school reminds children that print has a function in sharing news or knowledge in the world.

Although providing a print-rich environment will encourage language learning, children's interaction is what brings rich language learning. In other words, children need good language modeling by others; however, if they are to become literate, they also need to experiment and test out different hypotheses on how language works.

We know from research on children's play that children build language ability and skills when they interact with one another through play. In her studies conducted in Israel and the United States, Sara Smilansky (1990) found that dramatic play and socio-dramatic play both contribute to the development of cognitive and socio-emotional skills in young children. The children in Smilansky's studies showed many gains in school literacy due to their play: gains included richer vocabulary, deeper language comprehension, more curiosity about language, and better expression of ideas out loud.

The key element — the one that does so much good during play episodes — is that the situation almost always requires children to talk to one another. Children regularly come up with interesting themes and locations for their play, such as going to the doctor, visiting the vet's office, or running a café. Agreed-upon themes, such as "let's play restaurant" or "let's play school," can become the common ground for collaborative playmaking. As they play out scenarios, children describe what they are doing and show how everyday objects can symbolize other things. Basically, free play encourages risk taking through the sharing of children's ideas about what to play. Playmaking draws from the pretend world and grows within the frames of a specific theme.

Constructive play lends opportunity for the teacher to support students' language interaction. While students are engaging in constructive play, teachers have a perfect opportunity to introduce a question for them to investigate or new vocabulary words or skills. In many ways, this is a perfect type of interaction for children, one where they can, at the same time, gain confidence and regulate themselves in language ability. Imagine a trio of children getting ready to put on a rock concert: they might practise with their instruments, draw up pretend tickets, or try out dance moves. This sort of play invites the teacher to expand on what children know and scaffold in new learning by asking critical questions and providing resources.

Children's functional play contributes in the same way to their emergent literacy in writing. It may be witnessed in the early classroom Writing Centre, where children practise writing their names and those of their peers. These pretend-written forms may be letters to relatives, complete with invented spelling, or notepads filled with messages for friends. As opposed to other sorts of playing, sending notes, drawing pictures, and making lists are all writing-practice play scenarios: efforts that build towards real writing engagements. At first, such attempts may have just simple symbols to characterize letters and words, but as children notice

how letters are formed and how print is used to communicate, they begin to use real letters from the alphabet to convey their meanings to others.

### **Following Games with Rules**

Games with rules are particularly helpful when we are teaching children English language forms. Just as the games require a certain narrow interpretation of rules, so does English sometimes require a more concrete learning process. When they play games governed by rules, such as board games, children must understand how to use language forms just to get through the games. Just as important, however, they must know how to interpret the rules of the game and negotiate with others. Children begin to associate the rules of a given board game as a guiding form to find success. Whenever a disagreement or argument arises over the rules, the teacher can take advantage of an authentic teachable moment to reinforce social skills, such as playing fairly, taking turns, communicating clearly, or co-operating.

## **Environmental Print — Reading Our World**

Environmental print is the print we see in our everyday world. It consists of the forms of language that have meaning in our environment. Sometimes called “directional print” or “signage,” it is children’s first reading experience of the world around them. Environmental print could be television remote-control buttons, street signs, logos, print ads, notices, magazines, notes, food packages, and catalogues.

Most children quickly come to see how environmental print symbols represent meaning. To offer a common example, many children understand street signs, like STOP, long before they comprehend any conventional text. Connecting children’s first reading to environmental print builds their confidence, competence with language, and self-esteem. Most children can also readily connect meaning to environmental print because early reading experiences have already occurred in the home and in their community.

One pioneer researcher in early literacy, Marie Clay (1993), found that children often first become engaged in reading environmental print. In a study she established that children explore varying aspects of print in the home and surrounding community. Environmental print allows authentic learning opportunities for children whereby they are introduced to new word choices, spelling, and letter form — all through marketing choices meant to attract attention. Children’s interest in books and print emerges due to these early connections. Children begin to form hypotheses about how letters form words and words lead to messages of communication.

Children often play-make meaning using the print they see. I once watched a group of preschool children make tickets for a community hockey game that was raising money for a hospital. One boy had a sibling with cystic fibrosis, and visiting the hospital was a common experience for him when home with his mom. Making use of the boy’s experience, the children excitedly designed what they thought the ticket should look like. This artifact showed much literacy understanding, evoking both the hospital and the hockey game. The boy had tangential

experience of both, enough to create a graphic impression, even though his command of real print was slight.

Often, when children enter school, parents feel as if the literacy experiences they have had may not be what is needed in school. In a session I conducted on school readiness, a mother shared this: “I am afraid we don’t read to our daughter enough. Kayla can’t really spell anything, and she never plays with the word-builder game we bought. She will be way behind the others.” In reality, the child was neither behind nor ahead of the rest of the children in emergent literacy. The mother was following the typical popular culture message about literacy, that only conventional reading of narrative texts is literacy. I tried to reassure her that her daughter was coming to understand printed text in a satisfactory fashion and that her overall environment was fine.

In an overview of language and literacy in the early years, Terry Piper (2003) presented several factors to consider when children enter the formalized instruction of the classroom. Children grow and come to language at different stages, and their readiness for more formalized learning varies tremendously. Many young children already have a clear sense of what interests them and what does not. Their experiences of play have an impact on their language ability — social interaction is central to their language and literacy learning.

As educators, we can make students excited and curious about their world by introducing them to printed text that will help them read their world. When children first enter the classroom, the onus is on us to find out what they can do and what they find challenging. By basing literacy engagements for children on what they already know, we can empower them to include the learning they bring to the classroom. For example, children often know several logos and corporate symbols, such as the McDonald’s Golden Arches, grocery items such as Froot Loops, Kraft Macaroni and Cheese, and store names, such as Toys “R” Us. On the other hand, children who have been raised in other countries and societies each develop a different mental schema for printed text, and, as such, they each have different experiences with print exposure. Their different schemas mean that these children will view print in different ways and their understandings of print may differ.

Harste, Burke, and Woodward (1984) looked at early literacy development and print awareness. In their study they found that children know a lot about print before formalized instruction begins, but early language programs often assume that children know little about it. Their study had interesting implications for teachers in that early-grade educators would have greater success in promoting print awareness if they built on the many language strategies and the knowledge that children have about print before they enter the classroom. The researchers also argued that children need to learn written language through a variety of experiences, especially those that are representative of the world in which they live. Although most researchers agree that skill-based instruction is important, the researchers advised that teachers also need to be aware of whole language theories, where language is essentially about meaning making. These theories encourage teachers to explore reading and writing from many perspectives, of which the child’s environment is a crucial piece.

Children not raised in North America may find consumer symbols and print quite foreign; if so, it may be useful for you to ask their parents to situate your understanding of what early print exposure would have represented in their first countries.

## Classroom Ideas for Exploring Environmental Print

Combining play and environmental print is not difficult, and there are many play scenarios in which children will enthusiastically participate.

### The imaginary restaurant

This scenario can be played out in different ways, depending on what the teacher hopes to achieve. When the goal is to focus on environmental print, do the following:

- Collect a variety of restaurant and other take-out menus, or ask the children to bring them in. Aim to represent a wide variety of cuisine choices (e.g., Indian, Chinese, and Italian).
- Prompt the children to either draw or cut out photos of the foods represented; or, they could find or create pictures of their favorites.
- Invite the children to either use the existing menus or create their own.

With menus in hand, the children can role-play a variety of café and restaurant scenarios. Since the goal here is to create awareness of print, any extension of the play should lean towards print activities, such as creating snack labels, posters for imaginary restaurants, snacking guides, and simple recipes.

### The local landmark alphabet book

A landmark alphabet book, based on the children's own community, is a good way to encourage both print awareness and local connectedness.

- Ask parents to help children obtain local tourist information and publications, postcards, and maps, and to share photographs that they may have in family photo collections.
- Encourage the children to identify landmarks that are important to them, perhaps a park, a public library, or a church.

Each landmark should be assigned a letter of the alphabet and then represented either by a drawn picture, a photograph, or one of the gathered printed sources. Eventually, these can be combined into an alphabet book.

This play, which calls on creative thinking, could be extended by changing some of the letters to correspond to seasonal variations in the environment, such as showing the landmark in both a winter and a summer setting. Another idea is to focus on one landmark and engage in a wider exploration of it, say, the history and environment of a popular local park. The goal is to give as much scope as possible to connect the alphabet to the children's physical environment.

### Postcards from far away

This game requires planning and the co-operation of parents and other adults, but it can satisfy and interest children. The idea is to make geography more real by bringing a personal experience to the mystery of Somewhere Else.

Encourage the children to ask parents, friends, and relatives who travel or live elsewhere to send postcards with generic greetings to the classroom or give them

to the children to bring to the classroom. Depending on who sends them, these postcards can be displayed on a map of the country or even of the world. By displaying where each postcard is from, you can create a sense of wonder within the child. There may be a great opportunity to teach about different countries and societies, and about the basics of writing a postcard.

Another variation is to invite the students to create their own postcards, based on either real places they have studied or on imaginary places they have envisioned. These postcards can then be filled in and “mailed” within the school.

Either activity can be combined with classroom map-making. Maps can be as simple as showing the way from the child’s home to a park, or from school to home. Rather than having them draw the spaces to which the map reader is to be guided, ask children to cut out representative pictures from magazines and catalogues. For example, a tree can represent a park; a car, a parking lot.

### A real-life connection: The bakery café

Environmental print can also connect classroom learning to the community, providing rich and memorable learning experiences. In Amy Wilson’s Grade 1 French immersion class, students wanted to have a French bakery café modeled after their local Sobey’s grocery store. The students first examined the weekly grocery flyers to understand how the grocery store is divided into departments. They cut out pictures from the advertisements and in French made signs, labels, and name tags. On their field-trip visit, Amy took pictures of the store to help the children with their choice of bakery items and bakery café design.

The children invited their parents to the opening of the bakery café, complete with a ribbon-cutting ceremony. Students took on the roles of bakers, cashiers, and servers. They stocked their café with dishes, baskets for playdough baked goods, and a cash register. The bakery café captured the children’s attention for the whole year because it provided a play area and materials to which all the children could relate due to the real-life grocery store visit and family visits when the café opened.

## Bridging Children’s Home and School Worlds

Environmental print is being used to bridge the gap between home and school in Jenny Temple’s classroom. In her early literacy intervention program, Jenny uses symbolic representations to help the class create an ABC book. As part of this program, she calls upon parents to help build children’s skills at home. Using objects from the children’s neighborhood, homes, and school, Jenny actively involves her students as she connects their cultural and learning worlds.

Jenny initially asked parents to bring in their children’s favorite books; however, she quickly noted that some did not have any books. Instead, when parents visited the classroom, Jenny chatted about reading environmental print. She offered grocery flyers, catalogues, and coupons she had received in her own mailbox and explained how these accessible resources could be used to reinforce print recognition. Parents were pleased to discover that everyday print is a good way to introduce children to early concepts of print — many of these parents had had difficulty with school as children, while others were newcomers learning English.

### **Environmental Print Apps**

AlphaTots  
Montessori Crosswords  
TeachMe: Toddler  
Community Signs  
Learn the States with Flat Stanley  
Tiny Countries  
State Bingo and Road Trip US

### Environmental Print Items

- Newspapers
- Calendars
- Event brochures
- Grocery flyers
- Recipes
- Junk mail
- Food cartons

### Using Environmental Print

- Use environmental print to promote a talk curriculum. Provide a list of environmental print items, and make it available for parents to help children collect items from home. Ask children to describe how they came upon these items and to share their experiences. As a group, you could create a scrapbook of children's literacy experiences to show how home and school together can become a learning community.
- Teach letters and words in contexts that define a child's world — home, pets, snacks, entertainment. Use sheets of logos that can be accessed from the Internet. Doing this can help children to understand that letters make up words.
- Active engagement in reading helps children to understand that as you do, you become. In other words, when they contribute print examples from their environment to form a personal ABC book, they are promoting literacy in their world.

Although educators are called upon to make use of environmental print, it is just as important that parents take the same opportunities. Remind parents that their homes are filled with numerous printed artifacts, all of which can be introduced to children in a playful fashion. Parents can and should use these environmental artifacts to encourage their children's emergent literacy.

### Book-related play

When children play using books to provide themes, they think about social situations and problems that could arise from the real world. Pretend play through stories may be personal; while it focuses on settings or characters within tales, it always has a personal spin. Children use themes and characters from books to connect to the world around them while they play. When children create play scenarios and dramatic scenes from stories, thereby exploring literacy, they take ownership over their work. Play allows children to learn from books. It also allows children to learn about books.

Play that is derived from books is fluid as young students frequently change their minds about what they want to play or how they want to play using stories. Children create their own interpretations of books and should be allowed to do so without interference. Children consider the elements of stories that are important to them without restrictions. When students touch objects and relate them to their everyday life through gestures, movement, props, wardrobe, language, and set design, they are understanding their world through the world of books. When children play using books, they learn that there are many ways of interpretation — for example, scripts, drama, and pictures. Children thereby discover new ways to communicate and to create meaning. Young children assign roles and interact with their peers, thus creating community bonds. Even when children play-act books alone, they still reflect the social interactions that a community would provide. When children play with others, they use their peers' understanding of the world to scaffold their own understanding of the language worlds around them.

The line master on the next page provides parents with a summary of ways to promote literacy at home.

## Early Literacy Practice at Home

Make literacy engagements with print a part of your home and family routine.

- Engage your children in helping to write a grocery list. Write the items down in a numbered list and ask them to help by copying letters. As they print the name of an item such as “milk,” say the letters out loud: “m-i-l-k.” Point to the letters of the word as you speak.
- Within the kitchen, create a scavenger hunt associated with certain letters. Ask your children to help find items: “What is a fruit whose name starts with the letter o?”
- Talk about how things are grouped — for example, cold things (e.g., meats and dairy products that go into the fridge) and canned and bagged food that may be kept in a cupboard. Doing this helps children to notice how you sort and classify items.
- Help your children to read their world, as well, by pointing out words and letters everywhere you can. Read traffic signs, billboards, logos, store signs, and more. Point out specific letters in each sign.
- Ask your children to begin naming common signs and to find some letters. While passing a McDonald’s sign, for example, ask, “What letter does this word start with?”
- Ask your children to identify words and letters noticed while you are driving. For example, play the game I Spy while making obvious use of the alphabet so that they will look around the environment for something whose word begins with the asked-for letter.
- Ask guiding questions to engage children in conversations that promote early literacy awareness:
  1. How do you know that says “Skittles”? How do you know that says “Walmart”?
  2. What letter do you see at the beginning?
  3. What sound does the letter S make?
  4. Do you recognize any other letters in that logo?
  5. Can you find another logo that begins with the same letter?
  6. Do those words begin with the same sound?
  7. Are any of those letters in your own name?



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Our youngest learners thrive when their learning environment is one that celebrates curiosity, exploration, and imagination. This comprehensive resource sets the stage for play-based learning that will help children build a strong literacy foundation, as well as negotiate the choices they make in real life. Built on the strength of Anne Burke's previous book, *Ready to Learn*, this timely book draws on new research and ideas to create an exciting array of possibilities for using play as an effective resource.

A perfect blend of theory and instruction, *Invitations to Play* offers background and strategies for you to explore all aspects of playful learning. It shows you how to

- incorporate digital literacy — choose and use apps that will access children's imaginary worlds and promote creative collaboration
- use music to develop sensory and collaborative learning — create music play centres that include making instruments from household items
- build on student home languages and ideas — guide children into English knowledge through social and collaborative interactions
- nurture multiple literacies — innovative ways to use play as scaffolding for later explorations in literacy

*Invitations to Play* gives new and experienced teachers a road map to involve and engage their young students in all forms of literacy learning.



**Anne Burke** is a specialist in children's literature and early learning at Memorial University in Newfoundland. A former classroom teacher, she has been involved in extensive research around the role of play in children's education development, social justice, digital literacies, maker-spaces, and the role of media in children's literate lives. Anne is a strong advocate for informing literacy research through the sharing of voices of teachers and children. A popular presenter at major international conferences, she has contributed to many books and journal articles based on her extensive research.

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