

Especially for parents of toddlers! 

Books and Crayons of One's Own

Literacy Learning Experiences

Looking at and reading books are fun. Using crayons and other writing materials is fun. These activities also help toddlers build literacy skills they will use throughout their lives. In this guide you'll find ideas for fun ways to enrich your child's home life with everyday literacy learning.

What is the practice?

You can give your toddler a head start on literacy well before formal schooling begins. Having a supply of books, magazines, catalogs, art materials, and music in the home is great. With these supplies, you can provide a world of ways to have fun while learning.



What does the practice look like?

Parents can arrange their homes in many ways that invite literacy play. For example, you could give your toddler his own supply of crayons, markers, pencils, paints, stamps, and paper. Store them at a small desk or table kept just for his use. Fill a low shelf or box with children's books and magazines. Update these supplies from time to time by adding new items based on your child's growing and changing interests.

How do you do the practice?

It doesn't have to be hard or costly to provide a literacy-rich home for your toddler. Use recycled supplies (catalogs, magazines, newspaper inserts) or buy them cheaply at garage sales, thrift stores, and used-book shops.

- Find materials that match your child's own interests. One toddler might be charmed by bright, sparkly markers. Another might love using a notepad decorated with cartoon characters. Stickers and stamps might inspire still another toddler to decorate paper and "write" or "draw" on it.
- Let your child help choose a special place in the house for his "desk" and materials. It could be just one shelf in a bookcase or one end of a playroom table. Having his own space helps a toddler become more actively engaged in early literacy activities. When you're ready to share a story, he can choose a book from the box or shelf himself.
- Show excitement when your child writes, draws, and looks at books. Ask questions and praise his efforts. Suggest projects to do together. Pair up to write letters to family members, paint pictures for birthday gifts, or read a book while supper cooks.
- Help your toddler try out computer programs designed for his age group. Let him keep game disks in a special drawer or case. You can sit with your child and guide him through the beginning stages of a game. Let him take over little by little as his skills grow.
- Your toddler's literacy play won't look much like grown-up reading, writing, or drawing. He may page through books from back to front or hold them upside down. Much of his drawing may still be scribbling. Don't worry! His eager involvement in the activities builds his interest and paves the way for learning more mature skills.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Does your child know where to find his literacy play materials and go get them on his own?
- Does your child enjoy looking at books, using art materials, and playing computer games with you?
- Does your child point out similar materials he would like to play with when he sees them?

Take a look at more fun literacy activities

My Special Place

Two-year-old Lee cannot find her toys, especially when they get mixed in with her brothers' things. But she knows that the big box of books next to her bed is just for her. Lee often adds colorful ad pages and toy catalogs that come in the mail to her book box. When she goes to the library with her family, they sometimes stop at the book-sale table. There she can buy old books for only a quarter. Lee often gets to pick a book for her home book box. Sometimes her mom helps Lee go through her box and remove books that no longer interest Lee. They donate the books to charities or pass them on to younger cousins and friends.



Time To Sparkle

Carly, who is 30 months old, loves anything shiny or sparkly. Carly picks a glitter-gel pen set when her mom lets her pick a treat at the dollar store. Back home, Carly goes straight to the TV tray in the corner of her bedroom. The tray has become her special writing desk. She opens her box of writing supplies and finds a piece of fancy note paper her grandma gave her. Carly tries out the new glitter pens on the paper right away. Mom watches Carly use each pen. They talk about the colors she likes best and admire her drawing and "writing."

Reading Within Reach

Eighteen-month-old Andy's ability to move is limited. His parents know Andy loves to be able to do things without their help. Mom and Dad try to make this possible. For example, they hung a book shelf over Andy's bed. When he wakes up before they do, he can amuse himself while he's still in bed. Andy and his parents often look through the children's books in the family's regular bookcase. Andy picks new books to put within easy reach on his "bed shelf." Andy's parents know he likes having books close by because he chooses the books for his room very carefully. They often find him in bed in the mornings, happily looking through his favorites.



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Act Natural

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Dramatic play lets toddlers stretch their imaginations, retell favorite stories, and practice using new words. Research shows that rich make-believe experiences help young children develop skills such as language, speech, and attention span.

What is the practice?

Dramatic play occurs any time a toddler acts out a scene or pretends she is someone else. As a parent, take part in these scenes by following your child's lead. Show your interest and provide props to enrich the activity. This can motivate your child to continue the fun of pretend play.



What does the practice look like?

A toddler dresses up in Mom's old high heels and hosts a tea party for her dolls. Another child acts out his own version of a scene from a favorite movie. These children are enjoying dramatic play. Playing different roles with a parent or another children is full of benefits for toddlers. They learn more about the roles they're playing and they practice using language they wouldn't normally use. For example, a child pretending to be a firefighter practices uncommon words such as *helmet*, *hose*, and *alarm*. These are important skills for developing language and speech.

How do you do the practice?

Many toddlers enjoy using their imaginations and taking part in dramatic play on their own. If your toddler hasn't shown much interest yet, there are ways to encourage pretend play based on her interests.

- Encourage your toddler to act out a story you read together. Try saying something like, "Show me what the little boy did." Or you could ask, "Do you want to be the cat or the dog?" to start the process. Take on the role of one character yourself and invite your toddler to play another part with you.
- When your child plays with a favorite toy, like a toy car, use another car to start a "chat." For example, one car might ask the other car where it's going or what its name is. Prompting talk between toys is a good first step in dramatic play.
- Provide your toddler with toys for dramatic play, like doctor kits, tool boxes, and old clothes for dress-up.
- Invite your child to use drawing, scribbling, or painting as a starting point for dramatic play. Ask her to tell you about the picture she is making. You can help her expand on her answers. "What's the lion doing? What is this lion saying to his friend?" Pair actions with her verbal responses. "Can you show me how this lion walks? Could we walk this way and be lions too?"
- Don't worry if your toddler's dramatic play doesn't make a lot of sense. A young child might have a firefighter stop for pancakes on the way to a fire. She might blast off into space after the fire is out. The important thing is that she is using her imagination and practicing different roles and words.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Is your toddler using her imagination in her play more often and for longer periods of time?
- Does your toddler pretend to "talk" for different toys or give voices to them?
- Does she expand on stories or movies in her play by imitating or adding conversations or people?

Take a look at more toddlers' dramatic play

Favorite Character Fun

Twenty-month-old Petra loves watching her Cinderella DVD over and over again. She knows every song and can name all the characters. Sometimes her mom suggests they "play Cinderella." Petra gets to pick which role she wants to play. They use dolls and stuffed animals to act out Petra's favorite parts of the story. Lately, Petra has begun including other props into her play. She uses her big brother's toy truck as Cinderella's carriage, for example, and makes the story different each time. Once, Petra and her big brother pretended to be Cinderella and the prince having a tea party. Mom knows Petra enjoys this kind of play because she wants to "play Cinderella" over and over.



Playground Pretend

Bella, who is almost three, is an active, energetic toddler who loves running and playing outside. She has less patience for looking at books and indoor play. When her dad takes her to the park, they use their imaginations on the climbing equipment. "What do you want to be today, Bella?" her dad asks. "Astronauts or explorers?" "Let's go on the rocket ship!" Bella yells, leading her dad to the spring-mounted riding toys. "We're in the rocket ship, about to blast off," her dad says. "What do we see?" "Stars," Bella says, "and some space monsters." "Uh-oh! What should we do about the space monsters?" "Blast off!" Bella yells, and bounces wildly toward her next adventure.

Hopping Imagination

Elly is a 30-month-old toddler who has developmental delays that affect her attention span and language skills. Her dad knows it's important that Elly practice speaking and staying with an activity. He also knows how much she loves playing with her two pet rabbits. When it's time to feed the rabbits, Elly's dad gets her attention. He asks, "Are you ready to be the mama rabbit, Elly?" Elly knows that as the "mama rabbit" it is her job to feed the rabbits in their cage. Elly also knows she must play with them gently and talk to them quietly so they don't get frightened. "What do your rabbit babies want to eat today?" her dad asks. "Carrots or lettuce?" "Carrots," Elly says. She gets a piece of carrot for herself, too, and takes the rest to the cage. "Hi, babies," Elly says. "They're happy to see you, aren't they?" her dad asks. "How can you tell your rabbit babies are happy?" "Noses," Elly says, pointing to their twitching noses. As she feeds them, Elly and her dad make up a story about the rabbits.

