A guide to Play with your child at home!

LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

By Nur Hazigah Binte Rosidin
Introduction

Today, there are several enrichment classes for preschoolers to enhance their language abilities. These include Play Date, Phonics and Speech & Drama classes. Some classes are offered within the school curriculum where external vendors conduct enrichment classes in the schools whereas, other classes require parents to send their children to centres around Singapore. However, sending children to these classes would be an additional cost. Costly fees place children from the low income families at a disadvantage. Not only would they be unable to participate in the activities, they would lag behind their peers in language development. As such, this booklet hopes to bring light to parents from the low income families on how to play with their children aged three to four years. This booklet also contains an example of activity that parents can do with their children at home which would yield the same positive results as an enrichment class.
How does play help my child’s language development?

#1 Play provides opportunities for your children to interact

As we all know, children talk more in play than in any other setting[1]. In play, children are constantly exploring and socializing with people in the make-believe world, or also known as dramatic world. This dramatic world creates a meaningful context where children are able to communicate meaningfully in a naturalistic setting[1][2][3]. When that happens, Cook [4] emphasized that language development occurs in two ways:

- **Play with linguistics forms**
  Linguistic forms such as rhyme, rhythm and grammatical structure begin to take place as they play with language in a systematical manner [5]. Language learning in this aspect occurs naturally. As a result, the dramatic world creates a tension-free setting where children are able to carry out trial and errors with linguistics forms.

- **Play with meaning**
  Children create meanings that only exists in the dramatic world. They are able to combine units of meaning that do not have any serious real consequences if it does not make sense in the present world. Furthermore, when interacting with others, children learn to negotiate and incorporate other’s perspectives of meaning [6]. Thus, it encourages children to learn to accommodate to different perspectives [7][8].
How does play help my child’s language development?

#2 Play enhances your child’s cognitive development

Play encourages children to use language to represent objects. This helps children to assimilate old experiences with new information learned through symbolic means. Thus, it enhances both the child’s cognitive development and his language.\(^9\)

#3 Play can introduce reading and writing skills

Play also provides meaningful opportunities for children to be introduced to reading and writing.\(^1\) Having to read the ingredients on food packaging or the recipe book in play allows children to enhance their reading skills. Whereas, when paper and pencils are provided as props, children will immediately take the opportunity to write. This shows that children learn to talk by talking, to write by writing and to read by reading.\(^{10,11}\) With this benefit, previous studies emphasized that play is the best way to learn these skills.
What exactly is child’s play?

Play is a fun and enjoyable activity. The components of child’s play are as follows:

#1 It is self-directed

It is what the child wants to do as compared to what he/she must do. He/she follows through his/her plan and overcomes any obstacles along the way. This teaches children to create their own activities and see them through. When adults take over, children’s responsibilities in making rules and decisions as well as negotiations are removed. Hence, it is no longer play and the real essences of play are lost.
What exactly is child’s play?

Play is a fun and enjoyable activity. The components of child’s play are as follows:

#2 It places more importance in the process than the end results

Play often has goals to achieve, but the goals are not the end result. Rather, it is the experience of carrying out the activities that matters the most\cite{13}\cite{14}. For example, if a child plays the same things over again, perhaps he/she is making small changes in every try. Thus, the achievement comes from the doing, not from the end result.
What exactly is child’s play?

Play is a fun and enjoyable activity. The components of child’s play are as follows:

#3 It may have rules but it leaves room for creativity and imagination

Some basic rules are required to create boundaries within which play must occur but, these rules do not dictate each action[12][13]. Instead, it leaves room for creativity. For example, in linguistic play, children play and practice the language. While creating something new with language, their products are still abiding to a set of linguistic rules[15].

On the other hand, play provides children with opportunities to create innovations that are not mere random innovations[14]. Rather, they are creatively useful innovations that are governed by rules.
What kind of play activities are there?
How do they help my child?

Play activities conducted by child care centres allow children to learn in an interactive and enjoyable way. It is organized to cater to children’s individual differences and learning styles. There are two types of play activities conducted in child care centres and they are as follows:
What kind of play activities are there? How do they help my child?

Play activities in the centre’s curriculum [16]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Curriculum Areas</th>
<th>Concepts Acquired (some examples)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>Sorting objects using attributes (colours, shapes, size, patterns etc)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music and Movement</td>
<td>Appreciate music (rhythm, beat, tempo) and movement (use of body parts in relation to space)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>Acquiring knowledge through direct experience, self-exploration and discovery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Appreciate the beauty of language through stories, poems, songs and rhymes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art and Craft</td>
<td>Working with paints, crayons, pencils and materials to create objects of aesthetics and creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Studies</td>
<td>Through interactions with adults and peers, social skills are acquired when children role play and emulate the people around them (dress-up and dramatisation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Activities</td>
<td>Children gain physical confidence as they develop their gross and fine motor skills.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

External enrichment classes conducted in the child care centres

Fonik Ria by Mini Monsters Limited [17]; Malay phonics enrichment classes

Art Explore by WOW Art Learning [18]; developing the child’s fine motor through a variety of materials
What kind of play activities are there? How do they help my child?

**External enrichment classes**

However, there are enrichment classes that require parents to send their children to the centres around Singapore such as:

- **Gymnastics 3 – 6 years old awareness** by The Little Gym[^19]; focusing on strength, flexibility and spatial awareness.

- **Speech and Drama** by Julia Gabriel[^20]; focuses on expressive communication.

- **Melodic kids** by Our Music Studio[^21]; learning the various elements of music.
I would rather send my child to enrichment classes than playing with them. Is it a good idea?

While enrichment classes do help your child in his/her developments, there are limitations to it. Enrichment classes often cater to groups of students. Hence, not every student gets the attention that he/she needs. Also, these classes are carried out once a week. This results in insufficient opportunities for your child to strengthen his/her abilities. Furthermore, enrichment classes follow a strict lesson structure and syllabus. It limits the learning opportunities for your child and does not reflect a self-directed child’s play, neither does it provide room for creativity and imagination. The real lesson of play is lost once again!

This is when you come in! Know that a child learns best through play and that you can play a part. Play at home not only provides your child with freedom, but it also caters to his/her needs and developments. If your child is weaker in a specific area, you can place more focus on that aspect. Thus, play at home is beneficial as it is targeted to a specific child with specific aims and objectives.
I don’t know what language play activities can I do with my child at home?

Set aside some time for you and your child to be engaged in a dramatic play at least once a week. In fact, about two to three hours would be sufficient for your child to explore the dramatic world. What is dramatic play? I am not an actor! I am not equipped or capable to do dramatic play! Do not worry! Dramatic play is a type of play where children are able to demonstrate common cultural and social practices such as cooking and interaction\textsuperscript{[22]}\textsuperscript{[23]}. Objects used in dramatic play encourages children to manipulate them into creative objects. It also contains a problem for your child to develop solutions to resolve it. Does it sound manageable now? Here is a 4-steps guide for you to follow. An example is provided for you to try out too! It will be fun and remember to enjoy the time spent with your child.
I don’t know what language play activities can I do with my child at home?

Learning through Play!

Objectives:

- To learn new words associated to the theme of the dramatic play
- To encourage meaningful conversations between you and your child that help to enhance your child’s language learning

Step 1: Choose a theme!

Step 2: It’s the day!

Step 3: Oh no! There is a problem!

Step 4: Let it roll!
Allow your child to choose the theme for next week’s dramatic play. Some examples of themes are:
- Time to go grocery shopping!
- Let’s see the doctor!
- It’s my birthday!

Once your child has selected the theme, ask him/her what kind of items are needed in the theme. You may provide a paper for your child to write down a list of items needed. Plan together with your child and make the preparation as detailed as possible.

Now, on your own, take some time to prepare the items. This may require you to look around your house. You do not need to buy any items. Instead, you can make them using recycled materials. As preparation may take some time, do set aside a few days before the play day to prepare the items. Try not to let your child see that you are preparing them. Do not kill the fun! Also, identify what words should your child learn in this theme. It can be nouns, verbs or adjectives.

Example: **It’s my birthday!**

For this theme, discuss with your child what needs to be done before a birthday party. What is the most important thing a birthday party needs? Some items required for a birthday party are invitation cards, decorations, cake, recipe book, baking ingredients and utensils. These items can be in the raw materials such as paper and colour pencils in order to provide hands-on activities in the next step. Do include some craft materials, such as scissors and tapes, as you can expect to be doing some art and crafts with your child. After which, identify words that you would like your child to learn in this theme in order for you to emphasize them throughout the play. Some examples are:
- Celebration greetings (eg. Happy Birthday! You are invited to a birthday party!)
- Baking ingredients and actions (eg. Flour, Salt, Sugar, Eggs, Sift, Bake)

Once all are ready, clear the play room to provide ample space for you and your child to have fun. And, you are ready to enter into the dramatic world!
Prepare the items and place it within the play room. Once ready, bring your child in and let the adventure begins! In this step, allow the child to explore the items that you have prepared first. Create conversations and pass down knowledge about the items to your child. After which, enroll your child as a character for the theme. He/she may take on the role of the person-in-charge or a helper. In this step, seek your child’s help in carrying out tasks in order to make the event a success.

In this activity, not only will you introduce a new set of action words for your child to learn, but you would re-emphasize the words that she has learned earlier in a different context, such as mixing and stirring. At this step, always make reference to the recipe book to provide opportunities for your child to read. Do carry out mini test of your child’s vocabulary by asking them to repeat the words after you.

Example: *It’s my birthday!*

Enroll your child as a birthday party organizer, while you are enrolled as his/her assistant. He/she needs to prepare a successful birthday party for the birthday boy/girl within a short duration. Ask your child what are the tasks that need to be done and arrange them from the most to the least importance. After which, carry out the most important task first. In this theme, he/she will definitely say that a birthday cake is the top priority. Read the recipe book together to determine the ingredients and steps in baking a cake. Present the ingredients and tools used in baking for your child to learn the words. Before baking, inform him/her that a person who bakes cake is called a baker. With the new information obtained, allow your child to choose the flavours and ingredients for the cake. While baking, introduce action words that are associated to baking and allow your child to carry out the actions. Once the cake is ready, place it inside the oven to bake.

Words for your child to learn: baker, flour, sugar, eggs, spatula, mixer, sift, stir, bake

*You may wish to use real ingredients to provide a more immersive experience. Otherwise, pretend play would be as good as an immersive one! It enhances your child’s imagination and creativity.*
Play should not be that simple. You should create problems while they are preparing or enjoying themselves in the dramatic world. These problems will encourage creativity in your child to resolve it himself/herself. However, ensure that the problems must be solvable within your child’s abilities.

In this step, your child would be able to carry out meaningful interactions with you. Through this meaningful interaction, your child will develop skills in creating sentences and learn how to communicate effectively in order to deliver his/her messages to you. With writing activities in this step, your child would be able to develop writing skills as well as learning spellings that are beneficial for future formal education. In addition, problems arising in this step would create opportunities for your child to expand his/her creativity in resolving them.

Example: *It’s my birthday!*

Once the cake has been placed in the oven, discuss with your child what are the tasks left in a birthday party. Birthday party will not be possible without guests and decorations. As such, your child needs to make invitation cards for guests and decorate the play room before they arrive. However, there is a problem. You have insufficient ink to print the invitation cards. Seek advice from your child on what he/she can do. With paper and colour pencils provided, your child can create his/her own invitation cards. In this activity, introduce celebration greetings that is often written in an invitation card. Do guide your child in writing skills if he/she has yet to master it. After which, allow her to decorate the card and include the name of recipients of the cards. Upon completion, it is time to decorate the room. Inform your child that the birthday girl/boy is arriving soon and your child needs to decorate the room quickly. Provide your child with decorative materials and lay out the table for the birthday cake.

Phrases for your child to learn: You are invited, Welcome to my party, Please arrive before the cake cutting ceremony, See you there!
Learning through Play! – Step 4: Let it roll!

Once all the problems have been solved, allow your child to have fun! Be in the dramatic world and have conversations with them. You may need to take on roles of other characters in order to make play a meaningful one. Sometimes your child might need you to play a character, do not be shy! Do as they say! Remember, play should be child-directed because that is how learning takes place. While carrying out this part of the activity, emphasize on linguistic forms such as pronunciations and sentence structures.

Example: *It’s my birthday!* Take on the role as a birthday girl and ask your child who is the birthday party organizer. Complement him/her that you are impressed with the party and ask for his/her process on organizing it. You may even want to ask your child to re-enact the actions that he/she takes to complete the cake, decorations and invitation cards. Have lots of fun interacting and play with your child. Before the play ends, remember to congratulate your child for the success of the birthday party and that you really enjoyed it.

Questions to ask your child: What ingredients did you use for the cake? How did you make this cake? Looks like you make the invitation card as well, why did you make it instead of printing?

In this step, asking your child to share his/her experiences in organizing the birthday party will create a sense of ownership. Furthermore, allowing them to share his/her experiences allow him/her to recall the new words that he/she has learned earlier with you. Thus, you will know that your child has successfully acquire those words associated to the theme.
What is my role in child’s play?

- Your attitude towards play must be positive. You must be encouraging in order for your child to develop self-confidence and mastery through play. Playing with your child will foster the bond between you and your child.

- Facilitate and support your child by selecting appropriate and varied materials.

- Provide ample space and time in the play environment. Give your child the freedom to explore and enjoy. This will help to enhance his/her growth and development.

- Don’t forget to observe your child at play to see the improvements that he/she has made. Be amazed!
References

Have fun Learning Through Play with your child at home!

Hazizah, 2017