

Intentional Play: Supporting Early Literacy Through Open-Ended Exploration



**Speech, Literacy,
Play**
Summer Summit



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Learning Objectives

- 1. Describe** the role of intentional play and open-ended materials in fostering early literacy and language development in preschool and kindergarten settings.
- 2. Identify** collaborative strategies between speech-language pathologists and educators that support language-rich classroom environments.
- 3. Apply** play-based intervention techniques using flexible materials to promote vocabulary, print awareness, and narrative skills.
- 4. Evaluate** the effectiveness of embedded language strategies.
- 5. Develop** implementation plans for integrating intentional play strategies into daily routines.



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Perspective...



A photograph of two young girls playing on a carpeted floor in a classroom. The girl on the left is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt with a colorful pattern of ballerinas and flowers. The girl on the right is wearing a pink and white striped shirt. They are both looking at a small doll on the floor. In the background, there is a wooden table with various toys on it, and another child is visible in the distance. The text "Looks like, Sounds like, Feels like" is overlaid in green at the top, and "Open Play" is overlaid in black in the center.

Looks like, Sounds like, Feels like

Open Play



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A Common Thread



Building Secure Relationships

What are behaviors?

- Outward expression of internal processes (e.g., thoughts, feelings, intentions, perceptions, bodily processes)
- Behaviors are communication!

Challenges with traditional ways of viewing behaviors:

- Trying to eliminate or change the behavior without considering the cause
- Using a one-size-fits-all approach, rather than understanding each child's individual differences
- Not considering developmental foundations

Delahooke, 2019

Stressors that Impact Regulation

Biological	Emotional	Social	Cognitive
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hunger• Fatigue• Sensory processing challenges• Motor challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fear/Anger• Excitement• Sadness	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Being socially excluded• Theory of mind• New social situations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Memory tasks• Dividing or redirecting attention• Language comprehension challenges• Tasks that are not matched to a child's developmental level

(Binns, Hutchinson & Cardy, 2019).

Getting Started with Play

Regulate > Relate > Reason

- Presume competence → Knowing children developmentally
- Collaborate with other professionals to support communication.
- Ignoring a child's behavior is rarely helpful.
- Supporting our children starts with supporting yourself.

How SLPs can Support Educators

- Collaborating with teachers to embed regulating scaffolds into play and learning opportunities.
- Use storytelling, sensory breaks, and communication support.
- Check in with educators and **capitalize on their experience** & observation of strategies that children respond to or need to be adapted.

(Binns, Hutchinson & Cardy, 2019).

The Why: Open-Play in Early Childhood



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Importance of Play

- Vocabulary Expansion:** Pretend scenarios such as playing house or cooking a meal, introduce new nouns, verbs, and descriptive language.
- Symbolic Thinking:** Representational play (e.g., using a block as a phone) supports the cognitive foundation for language.
- Social Communication:** Turn-taking, joint attention, and conflict resolution during play mirror conversational structures.

Language Rich Environments

- **Responsive Interactions:** Engaging in meaningful conversations, asking open-ended questions, and narrating activities boost expressive and receptive language
- **Print-Rich Spaces:** Labels, signs, and books help children connect spoken and written language
- **Outdoor Exploration:** Nature-based play offers rich vocabulary and sensory experiences
- **Least Restrictive Environment:** In practice, LRE is about inclusion with the proper support, making sure children have access to the same curriculum, social opportunities, and classroom experiences as their peers, while still getting the specialized help they need to thrive.



The What: Intentional Play & Open-Ended Exploration



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Intentional Play & Open-Ended Exploration



- Intentional play: facilitated by educators/SLPs to support language growth.



- Open-ended materials: modeling clay, blocks, crayons, books



- Supports vocabulary, narrative skills, print awareness, and social communication.

Developmental Considerations

PreK	Kindergarten
Friendly, talkative, and imaginative.	Enjoy sharing and explaining events or things that they like.
Short attention spans and learn best through play and exploration.	Can create products of higher quality when encouraged to work slowly.
Writing skills are focused on early literacy strategies such as scribbling, drawing, and using inventive spelling.	Emerging sense of phonetic cues during reading and writing.
Reading skills are built through listening or parallel reading.	They use various media such as drawing, clay, painting, and drama to express their feelings about stories.

(Wood, 2017)

Strategies in Action



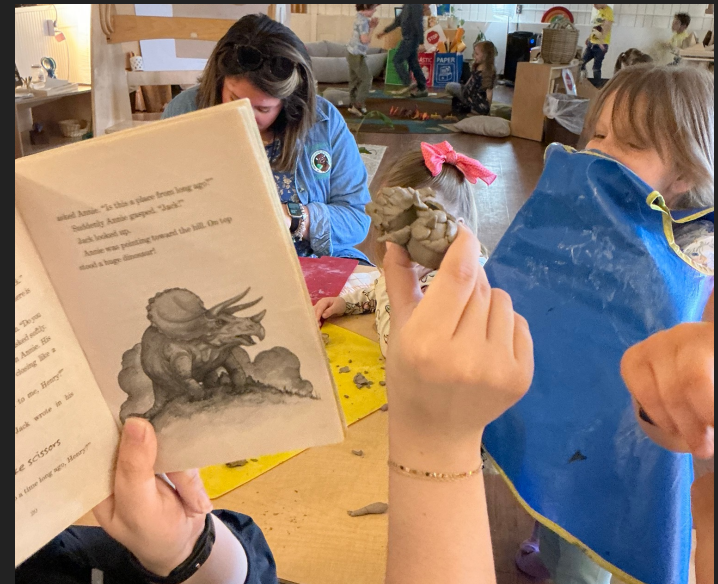
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Examples of play-based strategies

Characters, Setting, Problem, Actions, Resolutions (CSPAR): A story comprehension story that helps children understand the basic elements of a story to better make sense of it.

Ways to integrate the toolkit:

- Modeling clay: Create sculptures based on characters of stories read in class.
 - Describe character or setting features to support comprehension
 - Recalling core vocabulary and story
 - Can be expanded to a retelling of the story with different clay shapes.
- Build and Tell Story Extensions: Using blocks, beads to recreate stories
 - Scaffold discussion of the basic elements of stories
 - Emphasizes their understanding and emotions of the story.
 - Opportunity to model and recast language structures.



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(Greenberg & Weitzman, 2014).

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"Human Pottan" "I want to write it said IS. 01/02

Examples of play-based strategies



Stress, Show/Tell, and Relate, Say (SSTaRS): A vocabulary strategy that highlights new vocabulary words by drawing attention to them. It enables children to develop a dynamic understanding of the word, allowing them to use it independently.

Ways to integrate the toolkit:

- Whiteboard & markers during dramatic play to make signs (e.g., lemonade stands, kitchen, recipes), draw the new vocabulary, and write aloud large words.
- Clay word-creations: Sculpting new vocabulary with clay and describing it in their own words.
- Bead Patterns: Introduce descriptive vocabulary such as pattern, sequence, etc., and thread it in a specific pattern to facilitate the opportunity to explain using the vocabulary presented.

(Greenberg & Weitzman, 2014).



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Examples of play-based strategies



Point-Out-Print (POP) : A print knowledge strategy that calls attention to print in the child's environment to facilitate learning how print works. It emphasizes that print is a form of functional communication, and print directionality (e.g., left to right, top to bottom).

(Greenberg & Weitzman, 2014).

The How: Collaborative Implementation



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Collaboration

Educator and Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs)



SLPs participated in any activities planned by the teacher on the day of their visit (e.g., campus exploration, Marco's visit, special events).



Teachers shared with SLPs their weekly lesson plans and daily "My Day"



Joint workshops with Teachers & Students + Grant Team Workshops

A group of young children are gathered around a light-colored wooden table, playing with white shaving foam. One child in a grey hoodie is on the left, another in a red and black plaid shirt is next to them. In the center, a boy in a dark blue shirt is looking down at the foam. To his right, a girl in a pink outfit is partially visible. On the far right, a boy in a red shirt is reaching for the foam. In the foreground, the backs of two children's heads are visible as they look at the activity. The table is covered with a large amount of white foam, and several colorful plastic cookie cutters (green, purple, red) are scattered on it. A small black sign with white text sits on the table. The background shows a typical classroom or playroom setting with shelves and other children.

Activity



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Your turn!



- Break into pairs or small groups to discuss scenarios
- Brainstorm open-ended questions, vocabulary targets, and scaffolding ideas.
- Share examples with the whole group.

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