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PRETEND PLAY AT HOME:  
CREATING AN EDUCATIONALLY ENRICHED ENVIRONMENT  
FOR EMERGENT LITERACY AMONG PRESCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN

by

Kelly King Anderson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

Brigham Young University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Theatre and Media Arts

Brigham Young University

August 2005

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Kelly King Anderson

This thesis has been read by each member of the following graduate committee and by majority vote has been found to be satisfactory.

---

Date

---

George D. Nelson, Chair  
Dept. of Theatre and Media Arts

---

Date

---

Dean Duncan  
Dept. of Theatre and Media Arts

---

Date

---

Larry Nelson  
Dept. of Marriage, Family, and  
Human Development

---

Date

---

Janet Young  
Dept. of Teacher Education

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Kelly King Anderson in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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Date

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George D. Nelson  
Chair, Graduate Committee

Accepted for the Department

---

Rodger Sorenson  
Theatre and Media Arts, Department Chair

Accepted for the College

---

Stephen M. Jones  
Dean, College of Fine Arts and Communications

## ABSTRACT

PRETEND PLAY AT HOME:  
CREATING AN EDUCATIONALLY ENRICHED ENVIRONMENT  
FOR EMERGENT LITERACY AMONG PRESCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN

Kelly King Anderson

Department of Theatre and Media Arts

Master of Arts

This thesis will illustrate how pretend play can be used in the home for educational purposes. The major emphasis of the work will be emergent literacy, however, application principles can be applied in all subject areas.

Parents who desire to expand their child's literacy skills while exposing the child to an arts enriched home environment need ideas and tools developed with supportive research to strengthen and focus their efforts. These tools will greatly expand parental resources by offering several principles as a guide for adapting existing classroom materials for home use.

The following Seven Components form the core foundation for adapting pretend play materials to aid the home learning environment curricula: (1) Child as Active Participant (Vygotsky; Piaget). (2) Parent as Role Model for Dramatic Play and Literacy, serves as Facilitator, and Co-player (Haight and Miller; Vygotsky). (3) Physical

environment could be anywhere: car, office, or bedroom. (4) Resource material: should be able to use common found objects in home, with limited preparations or expense. (5) Play Content needed to provide elements of literacy: cognitive learning, symbol representation, oral language, self-expression, listening and comprehension (Goodman). (6) Promote creative and fun learning experience with a relaxed, informal atmosphere. (7) Play should be process and discovery oriented, and not for performance (Brown and Pleydell; Tuge).

This thesis will also examine the preliminary results of a study for parents and children who applied a curriculum developed with the core components and explored the participants' interest level in such activities. Recommendations for further research will also be made.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to express my appreciation to Dr. Harold Oaks, for encouraging me to find my own path and write a thesis that is deeply meaningful to me. I would like to thank George Nelson, my graduate committee chair, who has shown me true mentoring and kindness. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dean Duncan, Larry Nelson, and Janet Young for sharing their brilliant minds with me and inspiring me to do my best work. I also express gratitude and appreciation to Rodger Sorensen, Theatre and Media Arts Department Chair and Bob Nelson, Graduate Coordinator who have been cheerful supporters and have helped me move mountains to get this work finished.

Lastly, I would like to dedicate this work to my family. For my son Britain, whose birth inspired me to research, for my daughter Emma, whose birth motivated me to write, and for my husband, Matt, who supported me through the end.



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## CHAPTER ONE

### **Statement of the Problem**

Four year-old Britain gives his mom a rock and asks, "Do you want a cookie?" Researchers suggest that pretend play scenarios such as this contribute to the educational development of preschool aged children (Bredekamp). Other scholars also agree that pretend play should be the primary learning medium for preschoolers (ages 3-5) and it should dominate their free time activities (Lavatelli 43; Vygotsky 6). Research in pretend play is investigated by scholars of Child Development, Early Childhood Education, and Educational Drama; each having a different emphasis as it applies to their particular field. In research literature, pretend play behavior is referred to with a variety of terms such as make-believe play, dramatic play or socio-dramatic play. For purposes of this paper, the term, "pretend play" will be used for describing imaginative play behaviors.

Those who research and study the benefits of pretend play attribute literacy as one of the primary academic subjects it can best facilitate (NAEYC). The term, "emergent literacy" was coined by scholar, Marie Clay in 1966 to refer to reading, writing, listening, and oral behaviors young children exhibit prior to becoming fully literate (Clay 10). When these behaviors (e.g., scribbling on paper, pretend reading, symbol recognitions) are coupled with pretend play experiences, children become more prepared for learning literacy. Pretend play provides a safe environment for practicing literacy.

Studies on pretend play are published in scholarly journals, textbooks, and discussed in university lectures and conferences all over the world. The writing style for

this research is directed towards academic professionals who are abreast with the theory and have a background in these areas. Although these materials are valuable to scholars and educators, they are not typically available to all parents of preschool aged children. Research suggests parents are their child's most important teacher (Haight and Miller 61; Berk 65). Many parents desire to contribute educationally and could benefit by using the principles of pretend play as a tool for improving literacy in the home setting.

Given that pretend play is a valuable setting for children to learn, this study will first review the existing literature and connect the research of pretend play, emergent literacy, and the role of the parent. Second, this thesis will design a core based on the review of literature and develop a curriculum that incorporates key components that will support parents in fostering learning through pretend play, using emergent literacy as an example. And, third, this paper will (A) discuss preliminary results for parents and children who have applied this curriculum and (B) explore parents' interests in using such a curriculum in the home environment.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Review of Literature**

#### *Theoretical Considerations*

The research for this paper relies primarily upon the child development theories of L.S. Vygotsky and Jean Piaget. Their work has influenced a broad range of fields including those that are important to this study: Child Psychology, Human Development, Early Childhood Education, Parenting, and Educational Drama. The following review of literature provides examples of how their theories explore cognitive growth and how the research applies to parents with normally developing preschool aged children. In addition, this review discusses the approaches of several educators and scholars who have applied the theories of Vygotsky and Piaget in their work, advocating pretend play as a strong tool for emergent literacy.

#### *How Children Learn*

Vygotsky's contributions demonstrate how children assimilate their world in two phases: first socially, then psychologically (Berk 12). He wrote that young children excelled when mentored by a mature play partner, who could influence play more significantly than someone their own age. For example, children who pretend with their parents may obtain a broader vocabulary and become better capable of expressing a higher range of ideas than if they were playing with their peers. Vygotskian theory

encourages parents to seek opportunities to encourage children during play, in a non-controlling atmosphere to stimulate their minds and promote development (Berk).

One method parents can use to become more aware of their child's abilities, is to become familiar with their child's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). ZPD is the term Vygotsky used to define the range of a child's intellectual development. As skills and comprehension levels develop, there is always a range of what a child understands and does not understand. Elena Bodrova wrote, "ZPD is defined by the behaviors that are on the edge of emergence" (Bodrova 2). This zone helps educators and parents understand their child's range of capabilities. The upper end of the zone would be a child's independent skill level while the activities a child needs assistance to complete would be on the lower end of the zone.

A keen parent should be aware of her child's ZPD in any given situation so that she can support and guide the child to expand her abilities in this area. For example, we can consider a scenario where a young girl is playing with her doll. Imagine that the girl is giving her doll kisses and cradling it. Her parent might ask, "What do you love about your doll?" At first, the girl may not know how to respond because perhaps she has never considered her feelings or articulated her fondness for the doll. By asking a question such as this, the girl elevates her present level of thinking to a higher, more mature thought process. The question provides opportunity for creativity to expand because the child is suddenly put into a position where she has to consider what she thinks and feels, thus propelling her once silent activity into something verbal and potentially promoting story development or discussions that promote educational growth

(Brown and Pleydell; Clay). Parents who offer support to their children during pretend play demonstrate principles referred to as "scaffolding."

"Scaffolding" was first introduced by Wood, Bruner, and Ross in 1976 in response to Vygotsky's theory of the educational benefits of a mature play partner during pretend play. Scaffolding is a term used by these researchers to define a healthy learning method used by a mature play partner to assist a younger play partner. When scaffolding takes place, the experienced partner guides the child's acquisition of a new task by initially offering more assistance in the development process and gradually reducing their supportive influences as the child understands the process and gains necessary skills. If the guide fails by giving too much or too little help, the child will not be able to utilize the new skill properly when presented with a similar challenge.

Finding the right balance between guiding and pushing is vital for proper scaffolding. In our previous example, the child is a novice at voicing her opinion. Hopefully, her parents would recognize this issue and continue to help by continuing to ask thought provoking questions and listening to her answers. On the other hand, if parents demand too much from a child, or do not show respect to the child's efforts, the exercise has potential to hinder the child's development and possibly contribute to a stressful home environment. Scaffolding is a careful balance of teaching that encourages independence and confidence mixed with a great deal of freedom for the learner to try the new skill on his own with "just enough" guidance by his parent in a nurturing manner.

Parents who are aware of their child's ZPD can be more sensitive to what the child understands and can accomplish. To illustrate with another example, imagine a child is having a difficult time putting on his socks by himself. The child has requested that his

parent help, however he wants his child to learn to do it independently. The parent recognizes his child's ZPD, that he is capable of putting on his own shirt and pants, but socks are difficult. The parent is confident that his child has the ability to be successful, so he asks, "How did you get your pants on? Do you think that that would work for your socks?" The child makes an effort, but fails. Then the parent demonstrates and suggests that he try again. The child now makes a stronger effort because his parent has successfully applied scaffolding with the principle of ZPD to assist his child to reach a higher level of independence. Putting on socks, while challenging was within the child's ZPD, however, expecting a child to be able to put on a tie is well outside of the child's ZPD.

Challenging a child to learn a new skill is an example of a "Higher Mental Function." Vygotsky introduced the theory of "Lower and Higher Mental Functions." Lower mental functions occur most often with infants (pre-18 months) or children with disabilities. Lower mental functions require learning by repetition or by the senses in concrete ways. Learning without repetition or in abstract ways requires "higher mental functions." This type of learning occurs when a person is able to learn by observation or example. Higher mental functions also occur when creative thought processes take place. Repetition by prompting hint questions would be representative of lower mental functions. Once the child in our example can offer her own answers to her parent's questions, she begins to demonstrate higher mental functions.

One effective way to develop higher mental functions is to model behavior for children. For example a father enters the playroom, observes his daughter playing with a car and says, "vroom, vroom." Now, his daughter considers adding sound to her play. It

is likely the child will continue to play using audible sound because of the influence of this example even after the parent leaves the room. Then she may be inclined to try additional sounds to enhance her pretend play scenario such as "beep, beep!" As she continues to add ideas and creativity to her play, she acts out situations she has seen or imagined. As she uses her own thoughts, she employs higher mental functions. As children apply higher mental functions they become more aware of opportunities and creative abilities in their environment.

### ***How Children Learn from their Environment***

Piaget observed that children actively relate to their surroundings — learning by experimentation and discovery. Pretend play provides an ideal medium for active learning to take place because there is a constant state of disequilibrium. Disequilibrium is a state of unrest, where the learner is uncertain of how to solve a problem or achieve balance. Piaget explained the process of education as a constant need for equilibrium. Equilibrium provides confidence to the learner because they have solved a problem. When a child is faced with a new challenge he is placed in a state of disequilibrium. To achieve equilibrium, "adaptation," or learning takes place. Piaget used the terms "assimilation" and "accommodation" to explain how children encounter learning. In assimilation, new data fits into existing schemas. In accommodation, new schemas are developed to fit into new data. For example, if a child familiar with horses is shown a picture of a zebra, the child is put into a state of disequilibrium. The child may try to assimilate to the situation by calling the animal a "striped horse." However, to accommodate, the child would be required to create a new schema to recognize that



zebras are not horses. In this example, the child was challenged to expand his thinking because someone showed him a new picture, thus he was learning because of his environment.

Pretend play is a setting that is constantly changing and provides problem-solving opportunities for young children. Consider that a young boy is playing astronauts and tells his mother that he is going to drive his car to space. Recognizing her son's error, his mother mentions that astronauts fly in spaceships. This new information will put the child into a state of disequilibrium and require him to consider a new schema so he can achieve a state of equilibrium.

As children grow and develop new schemas, they also progress through psychological stages. Piaget identified the first stage as the sensorimotor stage (from birth to two years old). Here children rely on their senses to understand people, toys, or activities. Children at this stage are limited because they have lower mental functions and are unable to communicate verbally. They are generally able to mimic simple behaviors. Preoperational stage (ages two to seven) is a crucial stage for cognitive development. At this point children are capable of understanding symbolic representation, with higher mental functions. This is defined as the process of imagining one object to represent another, such as imagining a hairbrush to be a telephone. Here children are limited to pretending scenarios from their experience. For example, they would be able to pretend as a lion only if they have seen a lion before, perhaps at the zoo, or on TV, or witnessed someone else acting as a lion first. The third stage is concrete operational stage (ages seven to eleven). Children become more critical and mature in their thought development. At this stage they the ability to engage in creative thinking

and can contribute with more original ideas, without having to rely on examples or suggestions. Abstract thought occurs in the final stage, formal operations (ages eleven to adult). Abstract thought is different from symbolic representation developed in the preoperational stage because it requires more complex thinking. For example, studying Algebra as a teen is more achievable because teens are more developmentally able to think in abstract terms because their higher mental functions have matured.

This thesis concentrates on children in the preoperational stage. Preschoolers are continuously engaged in pretend play activities that Piaget often referred to as "the child's work." Children who are encouraged to pretend with objects and toys that challenge the mind such as using a yardstick as a train track or a potato as a snail are developing higher mental function capabilities than children who interact with realistic train tracks or plastic insects. Piaget called abstract thought in play, "symbol representation."

If a parent increases opportunities for symbolic thought within pretend play, the preschooler will be more likely to make the mental connections required to read, write, and do math (Brown and Pleydell; Bredekamp). Children will eventually observe their parent writing a grocery list and recognize that letters grouped together have meaning (Davidson; Dyson). They may also desire to make their own list for the store by pretending to write down items they would like to purchase. While these scribbles are illegible by adult standards, they mean something to the child. When children are asked about their scribbles, they will likely respond with an appropriate answer because they created their work with a specific intention.

### ***How and Why Children Pretend***

Pretend play involves natural and active learning that challenges children to use higher mental functions and symbolic thought. Vygotsky and Piaget agreed that pretend play should be the primary learning medium for preschoolers (Lavatelli 43; Vygotsky 6). Pretend play is the global title for this learning activity, however within pretend play, there are three distinct stages that help articulate the phases and levels (Dombro, Dodge and Colker 119). First, there is "Imitative Role Play" which begins around age one. At this stage children will often mimic their own behavior or the behavior of others. These young children understand the world in relation to themselves (Bretherton 22). For example, they will play "pretend nap" or try on Daddy's shoes. Children are generally using realistic props or toys in play because they are not cognitively ready for symbolic thought. The next stage is "Make-Believe Play" which occurs once children understand symbolic thought, around eighteen months. At this time, children begin to show signs of creativity with how they use objects in the home. For example, a discarded paper towel roll may become a trumpet or a fire hose. Make-believe play will often be solo play. Dramatic play, the last stage, usually occurs around age three. It is defined as the most sophisticated form of pretend play as it requires interaction with a co-player, verbal communication, scenario planning, and more complex plots (Dombro, Dodge and Colker 119). Parents are encouraged to participate and support their child at each stage, however, to emphasize the development of emergent literacy skills, the advanced stage of pretend play demonstrates the most significant opportunities for growth (Davidson; Vygotsky; Piaget).

Vygotsky believed pretend play allowed a child to express his unfulfilled desires (7). This process is beneficial in an emotional and social sense. In pretend play children can reconstruct a recent event, practice new vocabulary, figure out how to solve problems, and be challenged to think creatively (Bretherton 22). Pretend play is an ideal medium for growth because it is a "safe" environment to try out ideas and expressions without as much threat of being scolded or corrected by adults. Children in the world of pretend feel a sense of freedom to physically, verbally, and emotionally express themselves. (Dyson)

One extension of pretend play is the freedom to enjoy self-directing and other-directing (Bretherton 22). As children become directors of their own scenes, they are participating in one of the highest forms of active learning. Active learning is defined as a learning activity where children are invited to make decisions rather than being shown or told how to do something. Ideally, learning takes place as children discover by adapting and accommodating to new challenges, while their parents encourage by asking questions and making suggestions (Lavatelli 43) about their activity. Parents can also become a co-player instead of a facilitator and encourage their child to direct them.

### ***Pretend Play and Parenting***

As parents interact with their children, they will become their child's most important teacher and most desired playmate (Haight and Miller 61). If parents take this role seriously, they would continually looking for ways to provide "pivotal experiences" for growth to occur (Gardner 3). In discussing this principle, Howard Gardner writes, "individuals do not develop merely by existing, or by growing old, or becoming larger;

they must undergo certain pivotal experiences that result in periodic reorganization of their knowledge and their understanding” (3). Pretend play activities, supported by a parent can provide pivotal learning experiences for children. Vygotsky said that during pretend play children are stretched beyond their years (102). It becomes more mentally stimulating for the child as dialogue is exchanged with an adult play partner than if they were to play alone or with another child (Berk 65).

Pretend play between parent and child promotes communication skill development. During pretend play activities parents have the best chance of "correctly interpreting" their child's speech patterns and assisting them in their communication attempts (Wells 64). Gordon Wells conducted a study in England on in-home learning patterns. The results of Well's study suggest that the role of the parent is fundamental in language development, especially when involved with one-on-one activities, having discussions, and reading aloud (64). He writes, "parents who treat their children as equal partners in conversation, following their lead and negotiating meanings and purposes, are not only helping their children to talk, they are also enabling them to discover how to learn *through* talk" (65).

Children use stronger communications skills with their mothers than with their teachers (Tizard and Hughes 9). Barbara Tizard and Martin Hughes' research states, "children were certainly happy at school, for much of the time absorbed in play. However, their conversations with their teachers made a sharp contrast to those with their mothers, the richness, depth, and variety which characterized the home conversations were sadly missing" (9). Tizard and Hughes also indicated that teachers were generally answering questions rather than asking them (9). This study suggests parents positively

influence their child's communication skills by asking questions and engaging in conversation at a deeper level than achieved with teachers. By combining language with pretend play in the home, parents contribute to cognitive and creative development (NAEYC: International Reading Association (IRA)).

Parents who contribute to pretend play as co-players provide a fundamental example for their children. A four year study conducted by Wendy Haight and Peggy Miller indicated that toddlers preferred to play with their mothers and their joint play lasted longer than the child's solo play (Haight and Miller 61). In the study, mothers directed pretend play activities with children aged 12 months old. By 24 months, parent and child shared play ideas and suggestions. At 24 months, 30% of children's dialogue was imitations of their mothers' speech (Haight and Miller 61). At 36-38 months, mothers and children continued to play together, however, children were no longer imitating their mothers' dialogue, but contributing their own original speech. By age 4 children were playing two hours a day (12.4 minutes every hour) and were playing twice as much with children their own age (61).

This study suggests that parents can positively guide their children in learning pretend play skills by serving as a role model and facilitator for these activities to occur in the toddler and preschool years. The results of this study also suggest that parents can directly influence how their children learn to communicate during and through play experiences, by providing a model for their children to imitate. Children in the study also learned about the importance of sharing ideas and suggestions between play partners from their mothers.

When parents take an active role in pretend play with their children, the level of play becomes more complex and challenging to the child. As parents guide pretend play, children consider and incorporate educational principles and possibilities they would have seldom thought of on their own. In this way, higher mental functions and creative thinking skills are elevated. Research suggests preschoolers communicate at their optimal level when they are speaking to a parent (Tizard and Hughes 9). Since pretend play is often an oral activity, communication during pretend play between parent and child will likely be stronger than if they were to interact with a sibling or another adult. Parents offer the most significant influence on their preschool aged children as they model and encourage pretend play.

### ***How Children Learn Literacy through Pretend Play***

Children learn to read and write the same way they learn to adapt to the world around them, they pretend to read and write. When preschool aged children listen to a story, they observe a model for appropriate reading behavior. This listening motivates active children to mimic their reading experience. They might talk out loud about the symbols or pictures they see in the book, turn pages, and may even say "the end" when finished. When children mimic these behaviors, they are making an effort to read (Clay). These pretend reading activities are termed emergent literacy behaviors. Clay writes,

What used to be regarded as due to individual differences in intelligence turns out to have a great deal to do with opportunities to learn about books and writing. Teachers used to think they had to wait for children to gain more mental age before they were "ready for reading": now we are faced

with giving them more make-up opportunities with print and stories as soon as possible to enhance their potential for literacy learning (10).

This statement provides an excellent introduction to using pretend play or "make up opportunities" as Clay described for the purpose of learning. Clay encourages "book sharing" and "exploring with pencils" to help children discover and feel more comfortable with literacy tools.

Jane Davidson was a strong advocate for having children play with a variety of writing materials. She felt that allowing children to experiment with paper in various sizes and forms helped children gain a sense of the purpose of literacy in natural environments. She encouraged taking notice of street signs, public symbols, and advertisements. When children interact with literacy in natural settings, they may desire to enhance their pretend play environments with literacy-based props because it makes their pretend play more realistic. Literacy-based props might include making a stop sign for a bike race or creating a sign for the pretend pet store. Children who learn to use literacy-based props in pretend play may become more confident with writing and reading later on.

Davidson emphasizes that pretend play should always be the primary focus in our attempts to increase literacy in young children. Parents can greatly amplify a child's value of literacy by assisting in writing and making literacy-based props with their child. Reading recipes, making invitations to a bear's birthday, and making a sign for a lemon-aid stand are just a few examples of natural applications of literacy within pretend play.

Children learn literacy as they experiment with writing and reading. Even if the child makes non-conventional efforts, the effort has meaning to the child. Scribbles are



literary actions (Goodman 5). Jennifer Goodman's study demonstrated that children learn about literacy by using it "purposefully" (5). Pretending is thought to be more "realistic" to the child when they see that servers write down food orders or police reports are taken at the scene of an accident (174). Parents should consider modifying the learning environment at home to encourage creativity in a new direction (Goodman). Ideas include making a cave out of a closet or use an old box as a pretend computer for playing office. Children placed in a new setting may be motivated to develop play around a new concept (Goodman).

Interactive learning opportunities promote verbal and visual experiences with literacy. In addition to reading out-loud, Clay supports giving children time to look at books with printed and non-printed words as very effective methods for pre-readers. Reading out loud provides an opportunity for the child to listen and enjoy reading, particularly when the reader uses a colorful tone or voice to enhance the character. Infusing literacy with color, sound, and movement generates interest in young children.

Victoria Brown and Sarah Pleydell created preschool drama lessons for application before, during, and after reading time. As teachers involve their students in telling the story with drama, children become more engaged and understand the message more clearly. Children will generally listen to a story with greater interest if they are invited to provide support to the story with a sound or action. Anita Page demonstrated that children are more "engaged" as they participate in a story through drama. Drama and storytelling also proved to help children remember sequence, plot, and vocabulary. Character motivation was better understood in dramatization with the story over only listening to the story (Page).

Engaging in pretend play with story-time may be an excellent method for introducing symbolic thought through use of a non-representational prop. Non-representational props advocate symbolic thought because they require imagination and require the child to think deeply. One example would be to demonstrate the wind by blowing on a scarf. Symbolic thought in pretend play is educationally challenging and sophisticated because it promotes the same type of behaviors required to look at a symbol and assign it a letter name. Another example of pretend play of symbolic thought would be to pretend that a bag of potatoes is a family of slugs. This thought process is more stimulating than if the child played with plastic slugs where little or no imagination is required. Brown and Pleydell explain that this "manipulation" is the same logic that children will be required to learn reading, writing, and math (88-89).

Not only should children listen and dramatize other people's stories for literacy development, they should be encouraged to create and dramatize their own. In this way, the child becomes playwright, director, and actor. Vivian Paley has written a series of books about her classroom storytelling experiences and has created an international preschool storytelling movement, where children are honored for their creativity. She calls play and story the "original learning tools." Paley believes that storytelling should be the core of learning for preschoolers; it promotes creative thought, problem solving, and self-expression (6).

Pretend play naturally enhances literacy because it is inherently verbally demanding. Children who are encouraged to include a literacy objective within their pretend play are further developing their abilities. Using pretend play with writing tools,

books, props, and other such aids strengthens a child's awareness of the value of literacy in their environment and promotes creativity.

### *Summary*

This review of literature has explored research in pretend play, emergent literacy, and the role of the parent to create a possible framework for creating an educational home environment with preschool aged children. The work of Vygotsky and Piaget provided a theoretical foundation for using pretend play as a fundamental activity for cognitive development. Piaget asserted that children are challenged during pretend play because the setting provides problem-solving opportunities and growth. Vygotsky reinforced the value of a mature play partner for scaffolding young learners and increased awareness of a child's ZPD (zone of proximal development) for successfully monitoring a child's range of independent behaviors. Parents can apply these principles in the home in a variety of ways for contributing to the education of their child.

Preschool aged children enjoy learning from a mature play partner or parent. They often experiment with ideas they have observed from others during pretend play to understand and acquire new skills (Piaget). Preschool aged children will often mimic their parents' behaviors or follow their lead to learn and discover (Haight and Miller). Parent involvement with pretend play is beneficial because they can take the role of facilitator or co-player, to encourage more mature pretend play ideas while reinforcing educational components, such as literacy. (Haight and Miller; Tizard and Hughes).

Parents enhance emergent literacy development during pretend play by making a suggestion to add a literacy element such as making a store sign or looking at picture

books for costume ideas. (Davidson) Reading stories with character voices and actions increases interest and reinforces the story theme. (Page). Empowering the child to be actively involved in a story or even *their* own story makes literacy more exciting (Brown and Pleydell; Paley). Pretend play applied to literacy lessons and development is not only enjoyable, but can be valuable for developing symbolic thought and reasoning necessary for reading and writing (Brown and Pleydell).

Drawing connections between three dynamic fields—pretend play, emergent literacy, and parenting demonstrates the educational value of applying pretend play in the home to promote emergent literacy experiences. While research firmly supports this field, there is still a lack of materials available for parents. The next chapter will develop a core of principles, Seven Components derived from this review of literature for taking existing lesson plans and adapting them for home use.

## CHAPTER THREE

**Adapting Existing and Creating Preschool Pretend Play  
and Emergent Literacy Materials for Home Use*****Seven Components for Adaptation***

Most pretend play texts do not directly address the home environment or teach parents how to assist children with their acquisition of emergent literacy skills. It is therefore necessary to adapt educational research and curricula intended for use by parents. The theories discussed in the review of literature provide the foundation for adapting materials for home environments. My research has identified Seven Components necessary for effectively adapting materials:

**Seven Components For Adapting Existing or Creating Pretend Play Materials For****Emergent Literacy In The Home Environment**

1. Child as Active Participant (Vygotsky; Piaget)
2. Parent as Role Model for Pretend Play and Literacy, serves as Facilitator, and Co-player (Haight and Miller; Vygotsky)
3. Physical environment could be anywhere: car, office, or bedroom
4. Resource material: should be able to use common found objects in home, with limited preparations or expense

5. Play Content needed to provide elements of literacy: cognitive learning, symbol representation, oral language, self-expression, listening and comprehension (Goodman)
6. Promote creative and fun learning experience with a relaxed, informal atmosphere
7. Play should be process and discovery oriented, and not for performance (Brown and Pleydell; Tuge)

### ***Discussion of The Seven Components***

The first component is "Child as Active Participant (Vygotsky; Piaget)." This component emphasizes that the purpose of the interaction is the child's development (Vygotsky; Piaget). When a child is an active participant they are involved in decision-making and are encouraged to contribute in a primary way. An example is asking a child what book they would like to read and then asking the child what character they would like to portray following the reading time.

The second component is "Parent as Role Model for Pretend Play and Literacy, serves as Facilitator, and Co-player (Haight and Miller; Vygotsky)." As parents engage in pretend play activities they may choose to be a facilitator for helping to organize the activity, or they may choose to participate with the child as a co-player. If the parent chooses to facilitate, they might encourage their children to engage in pretend play and offer coaching that could be done while the parent is involved with another activity such as checking email or washing dishes. The parent might ask questions about their play or make suggestions for resolving conflict. As a co-player, the parent is actively involved in pretending by taking on a character role or contributing in some way physically. As

parents become involved with pretend play, children will observe and mimic behaviors they see and vocalize and talk as they hear (Haight and Miller; Tizard and Hughes). In this way, parents become a mature play partner to challenge and encourage children to reach beyond their current state (Vygotsky).

The third component is "Physical environment could be anywhere: car, office, or bedroom." This component acknowledges the evolving setting of family life and the home environment. Families are often traveling and interacting with each other in unconventional settings. Flexibility offers parents an option for seeking ways to pretend wherever they may be to enhance learning by making the world their classroom. For example, a family might make up a story while driving in the car and then when they get home dramatize it together in the living room.

The fourth component is "Resource material: should be able to use common found objects in home, with limited preparations or expense." Generally families already have materials at home they can use for pretend play activities, they do not need to feel obligated to purchase a specific object. For example, one activity suggested purchasing gummy worm candies, a creative substitution could be to use cooked spaghetti, a staple many families have in their pantry.

The fifth component is "Play Content needed to provide elements of literacy: cognitive learning, symbol representation, oral language, self-expression, listening and comprehension (Goodman)." Because the purpose of pretend play is to enhance emergent literacy, when parents consider a pretend play activity of their own or one they would like to adapt for home use, they should emphasize these skills. For example, a child is pretending to be a bird and the parent might ask, "What does the bird hear in the

forest?" As the parent adds the principle of sound, the parent might then make owl sounds. Next the child might respond to the owl with his own chirping. Now the play has elements of oral language, listening, comprehension, and self-expression.

The sixth component is "Promote creative and fun learning experience with a relaxed, informal atmosphere." Pretend play should be enjoyable for the participants. As children pretend, the setting should be casual without time constraints or pressure. As the child becomes an active participant, play should be enjoyable for the child and evolve as the child directs. A child should never be pushed into pretend play if they lack interest or if he wants to do something else.

The final and seventh component is "Play should be process and discovery oriented, and not for performance (Brown and Pleydell; Tuge)." The purpose of this component is to emphasize that pretend play is not about practicing a skit for a local talent show. If children are interested in drama for performance, then it should be considered a separate activity from pretend play. During pretend play, there is no script to follow, however, books may inspire or offer a theme, but the overall purpose is not for rehearsing lines or practicing characterization for performance sake (Tuge). Pretend play is about self-expression, and using pretend play as a process for learning and exploring ideas in a creative medium (Brown and Pleydell).

These components offer a guideline for creating a pretend play for emergent literacy experience in the home. As parents find a lesson plan they would like to try in the home, they can quickly refer to the components for ensuring a successful adaptation. This core of components can also support and enhance non-academic curriculum ideas such as a "rainy day activities" as well as pretend play concepts generate by parent or child. The



components are also flexible such that if a parent would like to emphasize another subject other than emergent literacy, they could substitute component five with another theme or subject such as math or health.

### *Applying the Components for Home Use*

To illustrate how these components can be adapted for home use, I will utilize one method of applying pretend play to the subject of emergent literacy.

The method is derived from Jane Davidson's book, *Emergent Literacy and Dramatic Play in Early Education*. Davidson describes how preschool teachers can incorporate environmental literacy elements into pretend play scenarios in the classroom. In applying Davidson's methods in the home, a parent would set aside time for the pretend play to occur where she could be fully involved as facilitator and co-player (component 2). She would then ensure her child's role as an active participant (component 1) in selecting the pretend play theme (component 3).

Parents can identify a child's interests and involve them by asking questions and offering suggestions for the child to consider (components 1 and 2). To further strengthen the child's role as active participant, the parent would allow him to choose where the play takes place (his bedroom, living room, in a fort) and use objects around the house (component 4) to enhance the play environment. The parent would then allow the child to decide pretend play roles and storyline (component 1). At this point, the parent could apply scaffolding techniques by making suggestions to contribute to a more developed conflict or idea, if needed (component 5). The parent would ensure that the

pretend play is fun and enjoyable for him by participating in a relaxed manner (component 6) by allowing the play to develop as the child directs (component 1).

To help facilitate a relaxed atmosphere, the parent would be a co-player, making contributions to the story with vocal sounds, ideas, or movement as needed and encouraged by the child (components 1 and 2). She would keep it discovery based, not practice the pretend play for a performance (component 7). To include environmental literacy, she would be aware of elements that could be added to enhance the play experience for him, demonstrate literacy in a natural setting, and make suggestions as appropriate (component 5). Literacy elements parents might consider include encouraging plot structure or introducing written materials to enhance play.

The parent would allow the child to decide how long the play takes place (component 1) and demonstrate that she cares about his ideas and desires to spend time with him pretending together (component 2). As the play concludes the parent would ask her son what he enjoyed about the playtime and tell him what she thought went well (component 2). She would also make specific comments about strong choices and emergent literacy skill developments (components 2 and 5).

These principles for adapting existing educational material provide parents with a simple checklist for identifying whether a lesson plan or idea is suitable for home use while offering assurance that each component is research based and representative of the active learning styles necessary for a flexible learning environment. In application of the Seven Components, there are elements of practice required to support a successful pretend play experience between parent and child. These elements include: time, set up, execution, and evaluation.

Time means that the parent schedules time to pretend and play with his child. The parent can either lead the child in a structured pretend play activity or allow pretend play to be developed by the child. Time for pretend play can also be a spontaneous event, where the parent observes his child pretending and chooses to join or contribute to the play as a coach by asking questions about the play or as an active co-player.

Set up is when decisions are made about the play before it actually begins. Often pretend play is spontaneous and the set up has already been established. Other times, as play is being planned, the parent and child can consider the theme of their story and consider whether props, sets, or costumes are needed. Regardless of the set up, parent and child should be encouraged to use creativity and draw upon available objects in their environment.

Execution of the pretend play is the heart of the activity. Execution is when the child becomes engaged in a character role(s), experiencing and discovering life in a new way while parents support the play as a co-player and facilitator. This phase includes the unfolding of events — plot, conflict, and resolution of the story.

Evaluation follows the conclusion of the pretend play. Evaluation can be an informal discussion during clean up when parent and child talk briefly about their interaction. The purpose of evaluating is to identify and learn from the pretend play what elements worked well and what could be improved in the future. It is also a time for specifically reinforcing positive personal and educational growth. Some possible questions to ask would be: “what did you enjoy about our pretend play?” or “what did it feel like to pretend to be the main character?” When parents take time to evaluate a pretend play activity with their child and encourage feedback, parents will become more

aware of how the child understood or felt about the activity. Discussion also promotes improvement as ideas are exchanged in a kind manner.

### ***Adapting Existing Materials for Home Use***

The following is an example from Victoria Brown and Sarah Pleydell's book, *The Dramatic Difference: Drama in the Preschool and Kindergarten Classroom*.

#### **Stellaluna**

From the Story by Janell Cannon

This is a story about separations and reunions as well as similarities and differences.

**Materials:** Surgical gloves and soft feathers [spaghetti, celery, and wicker basket]

**Before the Story:** After sharing pictures of bats and reviewing the previous days' bat discussion, the teacher gives each child two surgical gloves, telling them they're going to use them to make bats (the gloves suggest the texture and elastic quality of a bat's wing). Before putting them on, she has the class flap their "bat wings" in unison, using a high pitched whistle for the bat call. After this, she and her aid help the children put the gloves on. They choose between joining hands to make one bat puppet or keeping the hands separate as two bat puppets. She demonstrates both, then give them time to create their own "flying bats."

**Stopping for Drama:** After Stellaluna and her mother are separated, the teacher stops reading and asks the children to mime this action with their bat puppets. Most verbalize the separation with cries like "Mama, help me, I'm falling," whereas some prefer nonverbal "bat squeaks." The action ends with the teacher showing the picture of Stellaluna hanging upside down alone, the "bats" copying her pose.

The story continues, with Stellaluna falling into the birds' nest, then being taken in and fed with baby bird food. The teacher stops to let her brood of "bats" (portrayed by the children this time) open their mouths, close their eyes, and try some "grasshoppers" (chucks of celery) and "worms" (spaghetti).

The teacher pauses again for puppet play after reading about Stellaluna hanging way up"(upside down for a bird and a person). Some children have difficulty conceptualizing this, so they act it out with their own bodies first.

Finally, they stop to act out the emotional reunion of Stellaluna and her mother. The teacher asks how the bats felt. "Better" one child says; And the Mommy too," another chimes in. The teacher completes the story, offering each "bat" a "baby bird friend" (feathers in a wicker nest) to hug.

**Closing:** Bird nests are collected and children take off their "bat skins," rubbing their skin until it feels soft and human, not stretchy and bat-like.

**Follow-up:** The teacher reads Janell Cannon's follow up information about fruit bats. (44-45)

In order to adapt the above activity for home use, minor changes need to be made to better suit the needs of a home environment. One change is to offer additional or substitute materials that may be found at home to limit preparations and expense (component 4). Brown and Pleydell's outlined activity also works well with the elements of time, set up, execution, and evaluation for applying the Seven Components.

### ***"Stellaluna" for Home Use***

#### **Time:**

Set aside fifteen minutes at home to complete the following activity.

#### **(Set up) Materials:**

Dishwashing gloves, surgical gloves or mittens, small pieces of chopped celery or raisins (for bugs), spaghetti noodles, sock (component 4)

#### **(Execution) Before the Story:**

Do a search together on the internet for bat images, or look at images of bat in an animal book (components 1, 2, 4, 5). Also look at pictures of birds and discuss the differences between bats and birds (component 5). Have the child try on the gloves and pretend the gloves represent bat skin. The parent demonstrates that by joining their hands together, by interlocking their thumbs, they can be one bat or their hands can be two separate bats. The child is invited to flap their new wings, making bat sounds (components 1, 6, 7).

#### **Stopping for Drama:**

(Do the same as the Brown and Pleydell section) Exception: instead of using wicker nests and feathers for Stellaluna's reunion, offer child a sock rolled up into a ball to represent

the bird (component 4), or act out the reunion with the mother being the mama bat and the child being Stellaluna.

**Closing:**

Take off gloves, clean up materials

**Follow up:**

Read the follow up section about fruit bats (component 5). Consider going on a nature walk to look for birds and nests (components 6 and 7).

**Evaluation:**

Discuss the activity together. Ask questions such as what did you enjoy? What did it feel like to be Stellaluna? Point out what you felt worked well.

***Child as Storyteller in the Classroom***

Another example of a pretend play activity intended for the classroom comes from Vivian Paley's book, *The Boy Who Would be A Helicopter*. This text is Paley's strongest text for learning about her storytelling method. In this book she writes, "Stories are literature; the play is life" (19). Her methods for teachers are outlined below:

1. Child is invited to tell a story
2. Teacher writes story down verbatim in a notebook
3. Child casts his stories' players using students in the class
4. Dramatize story as a class
5. Teacher keeps stories in a notebook as a collection of the child's thoughts
6. Teacher measures development by use of new vocabulary and phrases used

When Paley was asked about using her storytelling concept in the home, she responded with this statement, "What I have developed in a classroom is equally adaptable in a family setting ... the family provide as intimate a stage as can be imagined" (personal correspondence to the author May 30, 2002). Further, she offered additional suggestions for doing stories with young children at home:

To answer your other question, about how to begin storytelling/acting with children as young as two ... when you observe a little play monologue from your little boy, you can suggest it makes a "story," write it down, and act it out with him and anyone else who is around, including stuffed animals. It works easily, I have found. Keep it simple and short (personal correspondence to the author June 11, 2002).

Paley's advice, "Keep it simple and short" is an excellent reminder. Using pretend play for literacy development is not meant to be stressful or time consuming for parents or preschoolers.

The following is a suggestion of how to adapt Vivian Paley's methods for home use by applying the Seven Components and elements:

### *Child as Storyteller in the Home*

#### **Time:**

Set aside fifteen minutes to spend with your child. This activity can take place anywhere in your home or office (component 3)

#### **Set up:**

Collect a notebook, pen or pencil (component 4)



**Execution:**

1. Ask child to tell a story (components 1 and 2)
2. Write down the story verbatim in a notebook (component 2, 4, 5)
3. Child determines which family members or toys should play which parts of his story (components 1 and 4)
4. The child will dramatize the story with family members for discovery and process learning (component 7)
5. Parent keeps notebook as a collection of the child's thoughts (component 2)

**Evaluation:**

During clean up, the activity is evaluated by both the parent and child (components 1 and 2). To evaluate, the parent asks the child questions about their experience and makes comments about the effectiveness of the activity (component 1). The parent may comment on vocabulary development and improvements in literacy skills (components 2 and 5).

***Summary***

The components are a contribution to the fields of pretend play, emergent literacy and parent-child education. Before the components were developed there were no existing guidelines for adapting classroom materials for home use and while parents may have already been adapting materials, now there is a set of research-based principles to foster adaptation.

As parents are introduced to the components, they should be given examples for how to apply them in the home. The intention is to empower parents, not overwhelm

them with a list they don't understand how to apply. As parents are taught, ideally they will be able to read an activity intended for a class setting and instinctively know how to adjust the lesson to better suit the home environment. The objective is that parents will no longer have to consider what components or elements should be included to execute an activity at home, rather that they will become comfortable with the criteria and be capable of creating and developing their own activities as inspired by their child's interests to promote literacy development. As parents learn to combine their resources and imaginations with the ideas of their children, they will see there is no limit to what can be developed at home using pretend play for learning, discovery, and fun. Utilizing these components through pretend play at home is a valuable way to spend time together and further enhance the parent-child relationship.

The next section of this thesis will introduce a curriculum that incorporates the key components to support parents in fostering learning through pretend play, using emergent literacy as an example.

## CHAPTER FOUR

**Developing and Evaluating the Curriculum "Playing to Learn"***The Playing to Learn Curriculum*

To assist parents in their efforts to use pretend play as an effective learning tool, a curriculum was developed for home use. The curriculum was written as part of a study to explore the application of the adaptation components. Three different styles of pretend play were utilized to promote literacy skills and demonstrate variation. The final curriculum pieces took the form of three, fifteen-minute activities adapted from the works of Vivian Paley, Victoria Brown and Sarah Pleydell, and Jane Davidson. The intention was to create one activity based on the general concepts of each educator and adapt one of their classroom ideas for home use.

As each activity was selected and designed, the Seven Components were considered for the basis of adapting the activity concept. For example, the first activity, "Step into a Story" was inspired by the work of Victoria Brown and Sarah Pleydell. Their book, *Dramatic Difference* offers several examples of how to use books with pretend play experiences. Since every family library is different, it would be difficult to create a lesson based on a particular book. This flexibility illustrates how component four is applied. This component requires that commonly found objects be used to ensure limited preparation or expense. To adapt this approach to home use, the activity was designed such that any story could be applied or used. The activity also included elements of time, set up, execution, and evaluation.

Jane Davidson's book, *Dramatic Play and Emergent Literacy in Early Education* provided a strong reference for creating the second activity. "Come Fly with Me" invited the parent and child to spend some time looking at a map and then asked them to pretend flying on a magic carpet to the destination of their choice. The activity is written so that the child is an active participant and makes decisions regarding the play, this is component one. Davidson did not suggest this specific activity in her book, however, she suggested using literacy-related materials in play scenarios such as menus, receipts, and catalogs to enhance learning about the natural uses of literacy. The activity works well in the home environment because the requirements are flexible and rely on basic objects commonly found in a home, component four. The play is process oriented (component seven) because the activity requires looking at a map and then deciding where to go, instead of telling the child he must travel to China.

The third activity was based on the work of Vivian Paley. This activity is very close to what Paley would recommend for a classroom setting and very little adaptation was required for home use. In this case, I looked at each of the components as a checklist and found that the child was an active participant (component one) because they would be asked to tell a story and then dramatize it. The parent would facilitate the activity in the home and possibly pretend with the child as co-player as they dramatized the child's story (component two). The activity lent itself to be in various environments because the child could tell a story in a car and then dramatize later at home, so it met the requirements of component three. The activity promoted story telling, thus oral language and self-expression were present (component five). The activity promoted creativity and

fun because the child was empowered to develop their own ideas and dramatize them (component six). The activity was not intended for performance, but for discovery purposes (component seven). As I found each of these objectives were met, the only change I had to make was to say that instead of inviting class members to dramatize the child's story, family members or toys could be substituted, which is a part of component four, which requires using commonly found objects in the home.

The "Playing to Learn" curriculum has various applications. It could demonstrate to parents of preschool aged children how to use pretend play in the home for emergent literacy development. It could also provide an example for how to adapt existing materials by applying the components. For this thesis however, the curriculum was created to support a study for exploring preliminary responses and evaluating parents' interests in pretend play and literacy activities.

### ***Creating The Study***

The study included the "Playing to Learn" curriculum including three pretend play activities discussed above. (See Appendix A) In addition, a survey was created to accompany the activities. The purpose of the study was to determine positive outcomes from mother and child participants as well as investigate whether parents would be interested in continuing to do pretend play and literacy activities in the future. Then the study was submitted and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Brigham Young University Office of Research and Creative Activities (ORCA).

This guide was presented to twenty-one mothers of preschool aged children in Springville, Utah who are participants of the PBS *Ready To Learn* program, sponsored by

the KBYU public television station in Provo, Utah. These parents were selected because of their participation in this eight-month literacy-based program. It was assumed that this commitment to the program demonstrates that these individuals have a vested interest in their child's education and would make a concerted effort to fulfill the study's objectives. While the pretend play activities of the study were designed for both parents to enjoy, the study only focused on mothers because fathers generally do not participate in *Ready to Learn*.

### ***Distributing the Study***

Stephanie Anderson, program director of the *Ready to Learn* program provided twenty-one mailing labels containing names and addresses of present and recent participants from her Springville, Utah group. Anderson said that it was a group of mixed ages and interest levels, but she felt that they would be willing to complete the study, especially if we offered an incentive like a complimentary book.

Participants were first contacted by the mail and requested to participate in the study. Twenty-one large manila envelopes containing a letter of introduction, a consent form, the study materials, and a self-addressed, stamped envelope was sent on March 26<sup>th</sup>. The participants were requested to return the study by April 6, 2005. The introductory letter explained that the study was a part of a master's thesis with the support of the *Ready to Learn* program. It was explained that the study was for mothers of preschool aged children aged three to five. The letter also stated that all submissions were voluntary and would be kept anonymous. All participants were informed they would be rewarded with a complementary book if they completed the study.

### ***Participant Response***

Forty percent of the participants completed the study. In all, eight of the twenty parents completed the activities and returned their results for evaluation (one participant had moved).

### ***Evaluating the Results***

The purpose of this study was (A) discuss preliminary results for parents and children who have applied this curriculum and (B) explore parents' interests in using such a curriculum in the home environment. Participants offered written feedback for each activity by answering questions, giving comments and examples. Their responses will provide the basis for evaluating the results.

### ***Preliminary Results for Parents and Children Who Applied the Curriculum***

To investigate the reaction to the curriculum, questions were asked to parents and children who participated that would determine any positive outcomes. For each activity there were two questions directed to the child about what they liked best, or how they felt about the activity. There was also a question directed to the mother requesting that she tell her child what she liked best and what she thought was particularly good about the activity. In addition, after each activity, each mother was asked to look at the list of components and mark YES or NO for whether the component was included in the activity and provide an example. The reaction to this section were used to determine if

there were any positive outcomes for using the components in the activities and how the parent saw it represented.

After the completion of the activities, the mothers were asked a series of additional questions to get their overall impression and reaction to the different activities and experiences. They were asked which activity was their child's favorite and which was their least favorite. They were also asked if they felt they or their child learned anything from the activities.

After reading the responses, two rounds of data reduction helped provide the findings for the study. Patterns of responses were noted and will be discussed in the following sections. To discuss the answers and comments I will group the responses into two categories, child or parent enjoyment and educational benefit.

### ***Reporting the Children's Responses to the Curriculum***

All of the children enjoyed the activities. Each child who participated wrote "fun" in at least one response for the three activities. Most children gave some detail in their responses of their enthusiasm by commenting, "it was great" or "it was cool." There were two children who got excited about the map activity and afterwards expressed interested in traveling to those places. When one girl was asked what was her favorite about the activity she responded, "all of it."

Most of the children also indicated some degree of educational benefit in their responses. Most of the children really enjoyed acting as book characters and gave some insight as to why they enjoyed relating to the character they played. Half of the children also enjoyed creating their own stories, illustrating them, and acting them out. One girl



commented after illustrating her story, "It makes me feel like I'm expressing my words only in pictures."

While most of the children were focused and interested in the activities, one child was distracted in two of the activities and it was challenging for his mom to get him to contribute as an active participant, even though she said he had fun. His mother responded that she felt he was too young for the activities and he did not answer questions about two of the activities. She responded that she would like to try the activities again in six months because he was 34 months.

### ***Reporting the Children's Activity Preferences***

"Step into A Story" was the overall favorite activity. The children enjoyed acting as characters from their favorite books. The overall least favorite activity was "Come Fly with Me" because some children did not understand about maps, geography, or flying carpets. There were a couple of parents who thought that their children would like "Dream Makers" more if they were a little older because it was difficult for their children to tell a story.

### ***Reporting the Mothers' Responses to the Curriculum***

All of the mothers expressed that they enjoyed participating in the activities. They expressed their enjoyment by saying throughout the questionnaire, "it was fun" or "it was great." Most of them thought that it was enjoyable because their children had fun doing the activities. Most mothers commented how much they enjoyed watching their children express themselves creatively and use their imaginations by acting out the

stories. For example one mother wrote, "it was fun to see what she had imagined." Another comment a mother made that demonstrated satisfaction was that during the activities that her children "got along and didn't argue" and another mother said that the experience "strengthened their relationship" and helped them to "share quality time together in a non-stressful activity."

The mothers all found educational merit from the activities. Many of their comments supported the value of pretend play. For example, "it really opens up their imagination and helps the book/visual aid come to life." Another mother said, "...my child used imagination to add on and change the story, but with structure of story it kept playtime moving." All the mothers made a comment acknowledging that emergent literacy was integrated in the pretend play activities. One mother said, "it helps retain the info and makes reading fun and interactive." Another mother said, "it taught her different ways to play. It reinforces the learning triangle, read, observe, do." This mother observed that the activities supported the PBS *Ready to Learn* learning triangle format. Two mothers thought that the concept of pretend play for emergent literacy activities was a good idea for their children, but they expressed a concern that "Come Fly with Me" and "Dream Makers" were too difficult because these activities did not hold their interest or they were not able to contribute as an active participant, however, they did say they would like to try a different type of activity or try these again when the children were older.

All of the mothers also provided at least one comment of how they personally benefited from the activities. Two examples for this are "I learned how to encourage her

and engage her in imaginative play" and "I learned that we have to help them develop their imagination by presenting these types of activities."

### *Reporting the Reaction to the Components*

Most of the parents agreed that the components were included in the pretend play activities. Only two parents marked "NO" next to a component and a couple marked "Mostly". One parent disagreed that her child was the active participant in the map activity because the child never took the lead and required prompting. Another disagreed that emergent literacy was included in the activity because it was two short of an experience. Two of the mothers did not complete the table for the last activity.

Next to each component the mothers were asked to provide an example for how the component was a part of the activity. In general the mothers filled in examples for the first activity but then for activity two and three the examples were not always filled in, however, their comments were positive. For example, one mother commented on the literacy component by stating, "there was lots of new vocabulary and play dialog. In our hotel there were phone calls and in the restaurant there was a menu and ordering." Another comment regarding the literacy component was, "we solved the three tasks of the story. He knew the story well." One mother said she filled the role of facilitator and co-player by "asking 'what's next?' questions and playing a character." Another comment for this same component was, "I helped write her story down and encouraged her imagination." These and another comments reinforce that most mothers made observations that the components were integrated into their children's pretend play experiences and that they saw value in how they spent their time together.

*Exploring Parents' Interests in Using such a Curriculum in the Home Environment.*

Each parent was asked several interest questions regarding the activities. One question was, "Would you be interested in doing this activity again? And if so, why?" At the completion they were asked two more questions, if they would be interested in purchasing a book or visiting a website that would provide sample activities on it for parents who wish to help their children with literacy development and if they would share what they have learned with other parents or children. Children were also asked following each activity if they would be interested in doing the activity again.

Most of the mothers said they would do the activities again because they found them valuable and enjoyable. One mother wrote, "we have already started to act out scripture stories and talk about them" another said, "I think we will play more." An exception is that there were two mothers who did not care for the activity "Come Fly with Me" because they felt it was not age appropriate for their child. They explained that their children were not interested in maps and the activity did not hold their interest. One of the mothers said she would not do the activity again because she did not know enough about the places her son wanted to go. One mother also felt that "Dream Makers" was too challenging for her daughter because she could not keep the same theme through telling a story, drawing a picture, and acting it out. Even though the parents may have preferences for which style of pretend play they would like to do in the future, all of the children responded "Yes" when asked if they wanted to do each activity again. In fact, three of the families did the activities more than once because it was fun for their children.

Regarding the question of purchasing a book or visiting a website, most of the mothers answered "Yes" that they would purchase a book or visit a website. One mother said she "would purchase a book, but would be unlikely to visit a website unless she needed specific help with her child." One mother said, " Yes, definitely, I think this type of resource would be very helpful to parents."

The final question addressed whether the parent would be willing to share what they have learned with another parent or child. Most of the parents said they would, however there were two who were uncertain with "Perhaps" or "Maybe" as answers. One mother wrote, "I already have" and another mother wrote, "such a project as this can be very useful to awaken their minds and stir their imaginations to serve their children and their homes."

### *Discussion of the Study*

The study findings indicate that the participants found positive outcomes from the curriculum. Most of the participants found the activities worthwhile because they were enjoyable for their children. They indicated that they found the activities to be educationally beneficial and demonstrated by providing examples how the components were integrated into their experiences. The participants also indicated they had an interest in continuing to do these types of activities in their homes to promote emergent literacy in the future.

The implications of the study indicate that the curriculum created with the Seven Components generated interest on a personal and educational level, therefore, academia

has an opportunity and responsibility to help parents integrate these ideas in the home with their preschool aged children.

To make a recommendation based on the results of this study, continued research that supports parents in their role as facilitator and co-player with their preschool-aged children should be considered. There are a variety of materials that could be created to aid parents' application of the Seven Components as well as encouraging use of pretend play in the home for promoting emergent literacy. The parents who participated in this study indicated they would purchase a book or visit a website because they are interested in learning more and receiving additional ideas for how they can encourage literacy through pretend play activities. Creating a parent workshop may be an excellent tool for supporting parents with these concepts. Resources created could be distributed to parents through preschool programs and day care centers.

The study produced positive outcomes, however, in considering how to improve the study, it would have been more effective to invite more *Ready to Learn* students to participate. Another suggestion is to first visit the group at their *Ready to Learn* class, introduce the study, answer any questions they may have, and then leave the study with them that night. This would provide a stronger emphasis and value in doing the three activities in one week's time and encourage more students to participate. Another way to improve the study would be to encourage more flexibility with the questions asked to the children so the parents could ask questions that their child might understand better.

The participants' responses should encourage research in the field of pretend play and emergent literacy to continue and to provide more meaningful and in depth analysis

of how to better support parents with their role as their child's most important teacher  
(Haight and Miller.)

## CONCLUSION

Most parents have a strong interest in their child's cognitive, emotional, social, and creative development. The research has established that pretend play fulfills these needs and helps children stretch beyond their years (Vygotsky 102). When parents act as the mature play partner with their child, they scaffold learning and foster progression. Parents are more aware of their child's ZPD (zone of proximal development) than anyone else because they see their child in various settings and circumstances. In this role, parents are the best possible catalyst in strengthening pretend play, therefore, this activity nurtures new skills on the edge of emergence (Bodrova).

The research also proves that pretend play is a "child's most important work" and should dominate their free time (Piaget). As parents become more adept at utilizing pretend play, their children will grow and develop under their carefully constructed tutelage. Parents who take an active role either as facilitator or co-player demonstrate to their child that they recognize the value of pretend play and become more involved in their child's interests, concerns, and needs.

The interactive nature of pretend play is its power. Children are constantly challenged to think, plan, and execute the ideas they imagine. These characteristics often require verbalization and regardless of the pretend play theme, children who pretend are strengthening and demonstrating emergent literacy behaviors. As parents encourage existing pretend play or even organize a pretend play concept with a literacy component in place, emergent literacy skills elevate at an exponential rate.



In my own home, I struggled with my mother's reading lessons and was constantly daydreaming, wishing I was playing with dolls. I was highly encouraged to pretend, however, play-time and reading time were not integrated in anyway. If my parents understood more about the theories that support using pretend play within a literacy curriculum, I may have recognized the value of literacy as it applied to a familiar setting and benefited from this understanding at an earlier age. Applying literacy to pretend play enhances play and supports the theme by making the scenario even more realistic to the child. For example, as I grew up, my mother and I had several tea parties with my dolls. Simple additions that could have greatly enriched my play with emergent literacy skills would have been for my mother to suggest that we create invitations or look at cookbooks to design a menu, or even make a shopping list for items we need to buy at the store. In this way, traditional pretend play remains the focus while literacy skills are developed in a natural setting.

The Seven Components of adaptation I have gleaned from the research helps me in my own home as a co-player with my preschool aged child who loves to dress up as our local super hero. In the application of literacy components in his current pretend play theme, enables me to help him develop emergent literacy skills as we write secret messages to other super heroes, write our own comic book stories or extend the play by reading existing comic books.

It is enjoyable for all children to see their parents involved in their pretend play world. It strengthens parent/child bonds necessary to sustain them through more challenging years ahead. Parents who learn to harness and enjoy pretend play discover that it is not "just play", but is an essential and valuable learning tool for their child.

Parents who participated in the study agreed that they have a responsibility to provide such experiences for their children to help them develop creatively and academically. Most of them discovered they had overlooked pretend play as a significant tool of educational development. Their responses to the survey supported my initial premise and fortified the need for greater tools to assist them in this important task.

The window of opportunity is closing quicker than most parents realize. By standing on the strength of child development research they can make the most of these fleeting years by crossing the natural play activities of their children with educationally enriched activities. If parents will draw on all the resources created for more formal educational settings and adapt them by using the Seven Components template outlined in this work, they will discover a new dimension of parenting that will serve them well in many areas of life. After all, who is better suited to lay the educational foundation of our children's lives? Pretend play is the basis upon which sound futures are built, it is a "child's most important work" (Piaget).

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There is a need for continued research and study in this small, yet growing field. The positive response from study participants indicated parents would like additional information and support in utilizing pretend play in the home for educational purposes.

One strong recommendation would be to encourage continued research and to test the effectiveness of the Seven Components and refine them as necessary to better suit the home environment.

Another idea for further study would be to design a workshop for parents in the *Ready to Learn* program that taught them how to adapt pretend play classroom materials using the Seven Components. This workshop could be an effective method for demonstrating examples and encouraging parents to practice using the components with existing materials. Another concept would be to have a small group of parents and children and do a group workshop where parents and children follow adapted lessons and interact together in a class setting and then invite them to follow the same ideas at home.

Research could also explore pretend play activities for home use by applying additional subjects such as math, language, science, religion, and social behavior. A website could be created to provide parents with a library of ideas for pretend play activities suitable for the home environment and provide suggestions for how to adapt existing classroom materials.

APPENDIX A

**Study Given to *Ready to Learn* Participants**

**PLAYING TO LEARN**

Literacy-based Activities for Mothers and Preschool Aged Children

**Directions for the Study:** Please set aside time to participate in these activities on three different days in the same week. Each activity will last approximately twenty minutes. Follow the directions before beginning and write down the results in the provided form. If you or another adult would like to document the following activities with digital photographs and consent to have them published, please send them to me via email at <kka@byu.edu>. Thank you very much for your contributions to this study.

**Day 1: Step into A Story**

**Parent Tip:** The purpose of this activity is to promote interactive experiences with books.

**Directions:** Choose a book your child enjoys and is familiar with. Ask your child who their favorite character is in the story and ask if he would like to pretend to be that character. If he is willing, instead of reading the story engage in a “play” of the story. You may need to solicit the “help” of puppets and other toys to act out the events. Any props, costumes, or resources your child desires to use should be encouraged. Do not “perform” this in front of others, the activity is merely for fun and exploration. As the play begins, encourage your child to remember the sequence of events, but do not tell

them how it “goes,” rather ask questions such as, “what happens next?” or, “what did they say?” or, “does the character walk or talk a certain way?” The purpose is to have the child tell their version of the story, not necessarily play it out verbatim.

Following the activity, ask your child:

What did you like best about your story?

How did it feel to act as this character?

Mention to your child what things you liked the best and what parts you felt were particularly good.

List these here:

**Ask them if they would like to read the story now, if so, read it together.**

Did you read the story together? Yes or No

Ask the child: Would you want to do this activity again someday?

Parent; Would you be interested in doing this activity again with another book? If so, why? If not, why not?

Topic	Yes/No	Provide an Example
Child was an active participant.		
Parent took role of facilitator and co-player		
Activity used found objects in the home with limited preparation or expense		
Play content had elements of literacy to promote learning of oral language, problem solving, listening, and comprehension		
Play promoted creativity, fun experiences in a relaxed, informal atmosphere		
Play was discovery oriented, not for performance		

**Day 2: Come Fly With Me**

**Parent Tip:** The purpose of this activity is to demonstrate literacy as a natural part of life, and that it can be fun as well.

**Directions:** Locate a map. This can be on the internet, an atlas, or a road map. Ask your child where they would want to go if they could go on a trip today. Talk about the locations and places that interest them. Talk about what things you can do in those places, what kind of environment is there or what animals live there. Once you have identified where your child would like to go, get out a towel and pretend it is your magic carpet or airplane (their preference). Engage in a pretend play activity based on where they would like to go. Allow the child to direct how long this activity will last and what should happen on the journey.

Following the activity, ask your child:

What did you like best about your story?

How did it feel to pretend to fly to this place?

Would you want to do this again?

Mention to your child which of the parts of your activity you liked the best — particularly aspects your child excelled in.

List these here:

As a parent, would you be interested in doing another literacy-based activity with your child? If so, why? If not, why not?



Topic	Yes/No	Provide an Example
Child was an active participant		
Parent took role of facilitator and co-player		
Activity used found objects in the home with limited preparation or expense		
Play content had elements of literacy to promote learning of oral language, problem solving, listening, and comprehension		
Play promoted creativity, fun experiences in a relaxed, informal atmosphere		
Play was discovery oriented, not for performance		

### Day 3: Dream Makers

**Parent Tip:** The purpose of this activity is to validate the creative abilities your child has as author, artist, and actor.

**Directions:** Get a piece of paper a pencil and some crayons. Ask your child to tell you a story and explain that you want to write it down. The story can be whatever they want it to be, not matter if it is one sentence long or 2 pages. As he tells you the story, just listen and write it down, do not ask questions or tell him how to do it. Simply write. Then, when he is done ask if he wants you to read it back to him. Read it and then ask if you should change anything. Invite him to draw a picture about it. Once this drawing is completed, ask if he would like to help you act it out. Ask which part he wants to play and what part(s) you should play. Allow him to direct you. You can gather any other toys or people to help tell the story as well.

Following the play activity, ask them the following questions:

What did you like best today? Telling me the story, drawing it, or acting it out?

How did it make you feel to write your own story?

How did it make you feel to draw it?

How did it make you feel to act it out?

Would you want to do this again?

Tell them what things you felt they did well.

As a parent, would you choose to do this activity again? If so, why? If not, why not?

Of the three days activities, which was your child's favorite? Why?

Which was their least favorite? Why?

Do you feel that these activities have taught your child anything? What?

Do you feel that you learned any valuable parenting skills from these activities?

Would you purchase a book or visit a website that had sample activities on it for parents who wish to help their children with literacy development?

Would you share what you have learned with other children or parents?

Topic	Yes/No	Provide an Example
Child was an active participant		
Parent took role of facilitator and co-player		
Activity used found objects in the home with limited preparation or expense		
Play content had elements of literacy to promote learning of oral language, problem solving, listening, and comprehension		
Play promoted creativity, fun experiences in a relaxed, informal atmosphere		
Play was discovery oriented, not for performance		

## APPENDIX B

**A Personal Example**

The following is an example of how I apply these principles in my own home. It comes from personal experiences I've had playing "pirates" with my four year old son, Britain.

Mid-morning Britain came into the kitchen wearing his pirate hat and asked if I had seen his treasure chest. I recognized that finding the treasure chest was important to my son, so I decided to stop loading the dishwasher and took a minute to help him. As we located the old wooden treasure chest, Britain asked me to play pirates with him. My baby was sleeping, so I was able to make time to continue spending time with him. We then gathered pirate gear and supplies from our dress up box—two plastic swords, eye patches, a couple of Marti Gras necklaces and a scarf for my head. We suited up and looked like a couple of mates.

Britain had set up his pirate ship and figures in the living room. I recognized that our play would be a combination of looking and acting as pirates as well as pretending with small pirate figures. As we began to play with the ship and figures, Britain told me where the figures are supposed to go and what they are supposed to do. For the most part I followed his directions, except when I wanted one of the pirates to jump overboard and start swimming. Britain doesn't like swimming pirates, so he got mad at me and told me that the pirate need to stay on the ship. I suggested that maybe this pirate was looking for treasure in the ocean. Britain liked the idea and this suggestion became a springboard for him to consider making a treasure map.

I agreed that making a treasure map was a great idea and would be fun to do. We then made a map at the kitchen table with a torn piece of paper from a brown grocery bag and markers. I was pleased that my four year old asked me how to spell “Treasure Map” and wrote the words by himself. Britain also drew a big “x” for where the treasure was buried in the mountain cave next to the sea. After our map was finished, Britain asked me to get the Halloween candy out of the cupboard so he could fill the loot in the treasure chest. I explained that I threw out his candy months ago and he burst into tears. Realizing that he wanted the candy to be the treasure, I explained that there were some fruit snacks we could use. He was satisfied with the substitution. Britain put the fruit snacks in the treasure chest and we began a game of hide and seek.

After we took turns hiding the treasure chest and eating the fruit snacks, we decided we were tired of playing and it was time for lunch. We cleaned up the pirate gear and I made lunch as we talked about our activity. I pointed out how I liked his idea to make the treasure map on the brown paper bag and I compliment him on his improved “s” (they no longer looked like a “z”). I asked him what he liked about the play and he replied that he liked hiding the treasure and eating the fruit snacks. I told him how much I liked playing pirates with him and suggested that while he ate his lunch I would read him our favorite book, “How I Became A Pirate” by Melinda Long. After the story Britain suggested he play soccer, just like the boy in the book. I helped him get ready to go outside to play soccer and I returned to cleaning up the kitchen.

All things considered, the activity took about twenty minutes of my day. I benefited by playing with my son because I was able to be creative and take a break from my routine while participating in an activity of his choice. I also felt like a better mom

because I helped Britain to recognize the natural application of literacy and measure progress in his writing. I offered assistance, alternatives, and read to him. I felt like Britain benefited from my participation because we were able to plan and develop the theme into a more detailed idea than he could have done on his own. He enjoyed playing with me and dressing up together. I also felt that by taking the time to play together, I demonstrated my interest and love for my son.

If parents will set aside time to pretend with their preschool aged children, they will recognize that they can easily adapt any situation to incorporate emergent literacy into pretend play scenarios. As parents follow the principles and practice as outlined, pretend play between parent and child will take a life of its own, strengthen family bonds, and nurture the development of emergent literacy based skills. Parents who regularly make pretend play a part of their family time, will find an increase of creative and educational resources available and begin to see that adapting existing materials for home use becomes second nature.

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