

Children learn best through active play. Young children acquire reading and math skills through pretending, building, and creating. Reading and math are developmental; playing with books, puzzles, and blocks teaches reading and math concepts from an early age. Providing this type of early childhood play at home leads to success in school. The development of reading and math begins at home and occurs through play.

Children love to pretend, especially by playing house or school. Reading books to stuffed animals, siblings, or invisible students gives children the opportunity to "pretend read." They use pictures to tell a story and can self-correct to make sense. They are able to retell stories that are read to them often. Folk tales such as *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* and *The Three Little Pigs* are great for retelling.

Building with blocks, legos, and lincoln logs gives young children an introduction to math concepts. From counting to sorting to comparing size, number, and shape, these manipulatives develop number sense and spatial learning. Playing with puzzles teaches a sense of logic. Using crayons, ribbon, or tissue paper among other materials encourages critical thinking and creative expression.

Active learning can take place at the kitchen table while reading the comics in the newspaper. Active learning can even take place in a car ride on errands. Children love to play the "license plate" game simply by identifying the letters and numbers on the plates of cars nearby. Environmental print is a term that describes words and signs easily recognized and read around the community. Pointing out the signs of fast food places and stores as well as labels at the grocery store builds early reading skills.

Listening to and learning nursery rhymes is one of the most effective ways to build early reading skills. Nursery rhymes teach the most commonly used vowel sounds and word family patterns, which are the building blocks of early literacy. Finger plays and classic songs use repetitive text that contain high frequency words often found in books.

When thinking about the right gift that will encourage fun and learning for a young child, a picture book, board game, art supplies, or building blocks are always well received. Think about giving something that promotes writing like sidewalk chalk or colored pencils. Stickers and stamps are also little gifts that spark creative writing. Playdough and cookie cutters or cookie sheets with magnetic letters and numbers help build letter recognition. Other gifts may be

around the house-shaving cream, yarn, pipe cleaners, and beans can be used to make letters and words. Newspapers, magazines, and catalogs can be used to cut and paste letters and words.

Children that experience active play at home, in daycare, or preschool during the first five years will be successful not only in kindergarten, but throughout school. Exposing young children to games and materials that teach language arts and mathematic skills is the first step in providing quality education for our youth.

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