

## **Toys Promote Learning in the Early Literacy Skills Project at Monroe County Public Library**

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Library services change and evolve to respond to society's needs. Libraries have responded to the literacy crisis with adult programs for learners. Research indicates that illiteracy is intergenerational in nature, and that preventive activity must be undertaken at early ages. One part of the Monroe County Public Library's attempt to respond to this need has been the development of an early literacy skills program.

In 1985, the Monroe County Public Library Children's Department revised its departmental goals. When the revision was completed, the professional staff recommended a goal of "working with children and involving parents in establishing a foundation for literacy in the early years." In response, the library board approved a 5 year "Early Literacy Skills Project" with the goal of having each child in the county ready to learn to read by the time they begin first grade.

One important component of the project has been the development of resources for parents and caregivers

to use with very young children. Many of these resources are simply younger versions of existing library materials: books, cassettes, periodicals, and video tapes. One of the most pertinent categories of materials, however, was not part of the library's existing collection. Toys represent an important part of the infant to three year old's learning resources. The library staff was concerned that appropriate toys be available to all children in our community to develop skills during the first years of life and that parents and caregivers become aware of the importance of play and educated in the type of play that enhances early skills leading to later literacy.

In setting up a circulating collection of toys, the staff felt that the educational aspect of the collection needed to be emphasized. Rather than a lending toy library, the staff proposed the acquisition of playthings as "learning materials." The Learning Materials Collection has the following purposes:

- to enhance early literacy skills in

infants, toddlers, and preschool children;

- to extend library services to this age group in appropriate ways;
- to support parents and adult caregivers in providing for the educational and recreation needs of this age group;
- to promote the community's awareness of the library as a resource for all ages and stages of life.

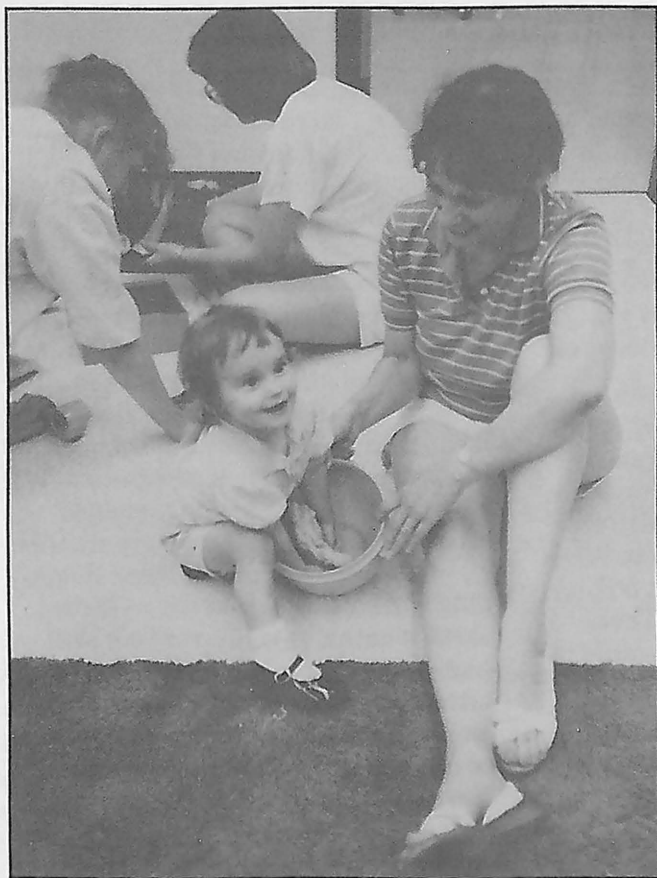
The selection and presentation of the collection were seen as crucial elements in fulfilling these purposes. In order to match selection with the development of literacy, the staff first had to identify the skills that a child needed to be ready to read. These skills were then traced backwards to infancy along a "skill track" which charted a logical progression corresponding to the child's normal developmental growth. For example, the skill of perceiving differences in size and shape begins at birth with the baby's eyes following a moving object. Toys such as the Tracking Tube (Johnson & Johnson) help the parent encourage such visual activity. Between three months and one year, the baby playing with Exploration Blocks (Ambi Toys) investigates varying shapes with hand and eyes. The one year old takes apart simple puzzles such as the Hands Puzzles (Dorom Layeled Ltd) and begins to put them back together. One mother of a seventeen month old reported in her evaluation of this puzzle: "Wonderful for thumb-finger discrimination, heightens awareness of hands" The parent of a sixteen month old said: "David enjoyed playing with the puzzle for very short periods of time. We did "Pat-a-cake" with the puzzle and he would also put his own little hand in place of the puzzle hand."

These activities lead to puzzles with several discrete single forms to lift out

and replace. By three years the child masters puzzles such as The Snowman (Childcraft) with several parts to the whole. More difficult puzzles challenge the four and five year old, such as the sequential shapes in the Egg to Chick Puzzle (Simplex) or the Turtle Puzzle (Childcraft) pieces which are similar in size and color. By age five, the child is (1) able to discriminate between subtle difference in shapes of puzzle pieces, (2) can identify the form and fit the figure to it, (3) sees the relationship between the parts of the puzzle and the whole picture which it is making, and (4) accurately places increasingly smaller pieces correctly in their place. Beginning with a simple activity at birth to three months, this pre-reading skill has grown through a pleasurable and often sought out activity, that of working puzzles, until the child is now ready to put the skill to work as he learns to read.

The skill tracks that were developed were intended to help with identification and selection of materials. Almost every item in the collection could be given multiple designations and could fit into more than one skill track, but the use of the skill tracks gave clarity and organization to the collection. Other tracks in the collection are: auditory discrimination, eye-hand coordination, perception of cause and effect, perception of color and shape, size and space, tactile discrimination, verbal and communication skills, predicting and problem solving, dramatic play, two-hand coordination and perceptual motor learning, counting and seriation.

An Activity Sheet communicates to the parent the purpose of the toy (Appendix A). These sheets have multiple functions. The section "using this toy" gives the adult hints and tips on introducing the toy to the child and using it most effectively. A "Safety



*This child enjoys a tactile experience as she plays with cloud dough, an inexpensive learning material that can be made at home. Monroe County Public Library Toddler Program.*



*Playing with blocks helps develop grouping skills and spatial and positional concepts and vocabulary. Monroe County Public Library.*

Note" points out any potential problems and reminds the parent to use the toy only in a supervised situation. "Library materials to use with this toy" shows the adult resources such as related books, cassettes and parents' shelf materials. "Try this!" note gives the adult an easily done home activity which builds the same skill as the toy.

This activity might be a fingerplay, song or craft idea. The sheets connect the toy with the library's purposes in providing the collection. If used by an adult with a small child they ensure that the toy actually works toward the goals. Although toys have been selected to develop certain skills, the maximum learning will take place when an adult interacts with the child playing with the toy. For this reason, only adults or teens who are already parents can borrow the toys.

Toys selected for the LMC need to meet certain criteria beyond functioning in an identified skill track. Criteria were developed to help select the best toy to meet each skill. The learning purpose of the toy needed to be clearly defined. Materials had to be suited for library circulation: sturdy, well constructed, not dependent upon many small pieces, and small enough to be easily carried by an adult. Although oral stimulation is important for infant development, materials specifically designed for this type of activity were not purchased for the collection. Materials are cleaned carefully after each circulation, and so must be made of a readily cleanable substance. Materials are selected with safety in mind; however, an item selected for a older child may not be safe for a younger one. The library expects the adult borrowing the item to be responsible for providing a safe environment for the individual child. Each item is evaluated in use before multiple copies are considered. An attempt is made to provide a range of

materials for each age and developmental level. Materials are immediately discarded if damaged, broken, or shown to be inappropriate for library circulation.

Toys have been easily integrated into regular circulation, using an automated system. One toy per family can be checked out for three weeks but cannot be renewed due to the demand. Holds can be made for toys and are used in evaluating for multiple copies. They appear with all other materials in the Public Access Catalog, with full subject tracings. A collection of the Activity Sheets in a looseleaf notebook gives the patron access to more information in making a selection. The arrangement of the sheets by age group and skill track help the parent see those items which might be most useful for their child.

### Evaluation

Circulation statistics have indicated a high rate of growth during the three year existence of the collection. In the first year, materials were purchased, cataloged, and Activity Sheets prepared. In the second year, 605 items circulated. In the third year, the number rose to 962, a 59 percent increase.

As toys circulated in 1987, patrons were asked to provide information about themselves in order to evaluate the use of the collection. A survey form was included with each item circulated.

One hundred twenty-seven surveys were completed. The indicated usage pattern corresponds to population distribution in the county, showing that all parts of the community were using the new service. One hundred twenty parents, one childcare staff worker, and six daycare home providers completed the survey. They used the toys with 180 children between

the ages of one month and twelve years. 75.5 percent of the children were between one month and three years of age. This represents the age group identified as benefiting most from the project. In looking at how selection fitted the child's age and interest level, respondents were asked to rate their child's enjoyment of the item from "Very much" to "Not interested." 44.6 percent of the children enjoyed playing with the toy "very much," 22 percent enjoyed it "some" and 1.6 percent were "not interested." One did not respond to the question. This subjective data indicates that parents and staff made suitable selections for the most part. In addition, 126 respondents wrote comments on the toy, the child's reaction and on the service. One parent wrote "Bert (a Sesame street character) was very helpful with toilet training!" Another said "it is good to be able to try out different toys to see what my children like before buying."

Many parents appreciated being able to check out expensive educational toys that might have been difficult for a family to afford. Toys which are suitable for intensive use while a skill is being mastered but which are not ones that a child continues to use were seen as good to borrow.

Some uses were very specific. One parent commented on the stethoscope "We listened to our baby who is due in two weeks heartbeat! (with three year old)." A note on the Tracking Tube said "I really appreciated borrowing the toy. Our ten month old baby is so active and normally wouldn't have spent much time playing with this toy. But I checked it out to use in the hospital after he had surgery and was totally immobile for several days. It was perfect. Thank you for making it available."

After the results of this initial

survey were tabulated, questions were raised about the actual use of the item in the home. How often was the toy used during the circulation? How many children were using the toy? How were parents and caregivers selecting the toy? Did the collection attract repeated users? A longer and more detailed survey was done during August of 1988.

The sample size was smaller, with twenty-two surveys completed. The distribution in the county was similar to the first survey. Once again, parents were the largest borrowing group. An average of 2.5 children used each toy, with twenty being the highest number using a single toy during one circulation. The majority of the children were in the birth to three year old range. The following usage was reported in response to the question "Approximately how many times was this toy used while you had it checked out:"

|             |             |            |   |
|-------------|-------------|------------|---|
| 0           | 1-5 times   | 6-10 times |   |
| 0           | 4           | 8          |   |
| 11-15 times | 16-20 times | 20+        |   |
|             | 1           | 3          | 7 |

Each person who responded had borrowed an average of 3.7 toys in the last twelve months, indicating that users who began using the collection continued their use.

In addition to circulating for home use, the learning materials have been part of library programs for infants and toddlers. These programs have been developed as another component of the Early Literacy Skills Project. Parents or caregivers attending such programs are able to see their own and other children interacting with a variety of toys. Staff demonstrate activities using each plaything and have samples of learning materials that can be made inexpensively at home.

The Learning Materials Collection has proven an important part of the delivery of library services to the infant to 3 year old age group. These materials will further the library's goals as they enhance learning in the early years. With resources and programming in place, the library is ready to move into the fifth year of the Early Literacy Skills Project.

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Childcraft Educational Corporation  
20 Kilmer Road  
P.O. Box 3081  
Edison, New Jersey 08818-3081

Constructive Playthings  
1227 East 119th Street  
Grandview, Missouri 64030

Discover Toys  
400 Ellinwood Way, Suite 300  
Pleasant Hill, California 94523

Kaplan School Supply Co.  
1310 Lewisville-Clemmons Road  
Lewisville, North Carolina 27023


Toys to Grow On  
P.O. Box 17  
Long Beach, California 90801

## Selected Sources For Learning Materials

ABC School Supply, INC.  
6500 Peachtree Industrial Boulevard  
P.O. Bx 4750  
Norcross, Georgia 30091

## Appendix A

(Worksheet reduced to 50% for space reasons)

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| FARM ACTIVITY PUZZLE    Ages 4-5   |   | PERCEPTION - SIZE AND SPACE    3 1477 00170 8901<br>PERCEPTION - COLOR AND SHAPE    A FAPUZZ980<br>EYE-HAND COORDINATION   |
|  | <p><b>Using this toy:</b></p> <p>LOOK AT THE SHAPE OF EACH PIECE AS YOU TAKE IT OUT OF THE PUZZLE FRAME. NAME THE PIECE AS YOU TAKE IT OUT AND TALK ABOUT IT.</p> <p>POINT OUT FAMILIAR OBJECTS AND EXPERIENCES THAT RELATE. TALK ABOUT COLOR, SIZE AND SHAPE AND HOW EACH PIECE FITS INTO THE SPACE OF THE PUZZLE FRAME.</p> | <p><b>Items included:</b></p> <p>1 puzzle frame<br/>9 puzzle pieces<br/>1 learning activity sheet<br/>1 mesh tote bag</p> <p><b>Check for all items before returning.</b></p> <p><b>Try this!</b></p> <p>Sing "Old MacDonald Had a Farm"</p> <p>or Sing animal sounds</p>  |
|  | <p><b>Safety Note</b></p> <p>PUZZLES SHOULD NOT BE LEFT OUT FOR UNSUPERVISED PLAY.</p> <p>PUZZLE PIECES SHOULD NOT BE PUT IN MOUTH.</p> <p>KNOB MAY COME LOOSE WHEN ROUGHLY HANDLED. ASK YOUR CHILD TO TELL YOU RIGHT AWAY IF THIS HAPPENS. NO CHARGE WILL BE MADE IF KNOB IS RETURNED WITH PUZZLE.</p>                       | <p><b>Library materials to use with this toy:</b></p> <p>OLD MacDonald HAD A FARM by Tracey Pearson J784.4 o1</p> <p>FARMER JOHN by Dick Bruna EJ Br</p> <p>BIG RED BARN by Margaret Wise Brown EJ Br</p> <p>THE COUNTRY NOISY BOOK by Margaret Wise Brown EJ Br</p> <p>LITTLE PEEP by Jack Kent EJ Ke</p> <p>EARLY MORNING IN THE BARN by Nancy Tafuri EJ Ta</p> <p>THE LITTLE WOMAN WANTED NOISE by Val Teal EJ Te</p> |