

Literacy Building Blocks

INFORMATION AND IDEAS TO HELP CREATE LITERACY-RICH ENVIRONMENTS FOR CHILDREN

Insert #3

Three Easy Steps to a Print-Rich House Corner

by Kathleen Roskos

Among the many interesting places to play in the early childhood classroom, children still love the house corner. Here, they take on social roles and routines that playfully reenact the small dramas of everyday life — the baby is sick, shopping needs to be done, guests are coming for dinner, and more.

The roles children assume and the scenarios they create are influenced by the items at hand in the house corner. If there are many cooking utensils and plastic foods, children pretend to cook. If there are several dolls and a crib, they take care of babies. And when there's a trunk filled with dress-up clothes and purses, they go shopping or host dinner parties.

The acting out of familiar scenes and handling of playthings is important because it encourages children to use words, pursue ideas, and build on skills in order to organize and develop their play themes. The cooking theme, for example, usually prompts discussions about food and eating, whereas shopping might lead to the counting of money.

The house corner is more than just a fun space for role-playing, it's also an ideal place to encourage the use of print, promote conversation, and reinforce early literacy skills. Take a look at how you can turn an average house corner into a meaningful place for exciting print discoveries.

To begin transforming an ordinary House Corner into an extraordinarily print-rich environment, look for as many ways as possible to make connections between play themes and print materials. For example, cooks use food packages and recipes; babysitters need books to read to babies; and good shoppers need lists, including the paper and pencils to write them.

Providing these print-related items will inspire children to become literacy discoverers as well as



mothers, fathers, caregivers, cooks, and shoppers. They'll browse through storybooks, read environmental print, write alphabet letters, print their names, and scribble important messages. Thus, children will have golden opportunities for hands-on, personal experiences with print. Children will begin to understand that print has meaning; they'll learn alphabet letters; they'll try to read words; and they'll write. As a result, the game of house will be transformed into a fertile blend of traditional fun and effective learning.

Here are three basic design steps to ensure that the beloved house corner not only remains comfortable and familiar but also provides new, challenging print-rich play experiences for children.

Step One. Make the House Corner very visible.

You can accomplish this by doing the following:

1. Position the house corner away from noisier play areas, such as the blocks area, and also away from really quiet spaces, like the book corner. Traditional play themes in the house corner require players to negotiate roles, and relative quiet is needed for these deliberations. Yet these may easily erupt into disagreements or lively interactions, and thus disturb others nearby. ➔

2. Use small-scale furniture and low shelves to define the play space so that it has a front, a back, and sides. Providing a physical space with boundaries gives children a sense of place that encourages them to create pretend schemes and stories.

3. Hang or place a sign near the front of the play space to identify the area. Make sure the sign is visible to children from a distance. Use bold, black lettering against a plain background.

4. Make the space appealing. Use baskets and plastic trays to hold materials. Put samples of children's artwork on the wall. Include colorful cloth such as towels and tablecloths and natural things such as plants.

Step Two. Boost the amount of print in the play space.

Here are a few tips to get you started.

- Include an abundance of print such as grocery packages, coupons, storybooks, a calendar, emergency number decals, magazines, recipe cards, cookbooks, telephone books, menus, and other common items.
- Provide writing instruments and materials such as pencils and markers, assorted paper and notepads, blank recipe cards, greeting cards, envelopes, a message board, and magnetic letters.
- Label objects, like on/off knobs on the play stove, hooks for dress-up hats and coats, utensils, and fruit and vegetables baskets.
- Display print and messages gathered from other activities, such as language experience charts from day trips, recipes from class cooking activities, enlarged versions of upcoming community events, collages of logos and labels (made by children), and children's work.

Step Three. Connect the print opportunities in play to early literacy learning goals.

Here are some examples of how this can be done.

1. Ask children to tell you their House Corner play stories from time to time. Record these narratives on chart paper for shared reading with the children. Build a collection of house play stories.

Organize them into a big book of house play stories illustrated by the children. This will encourage children to learn how books are made and how they work; connect their real play experiences to written language; and cultivate their own interest in books and reading.

2. Introduce literacy props and activities into the house corner that foster basic concepts. In order to help children to learn their colors, for example, you might add place mats that are labeled by color, empty food coloring vials (labeled green, yellow, red, blue) for pretend baking, and wall displays of multi-colored cloth swatches or paint strips from a nearby hardware store. To further alphabet knowledge, post an alphabet chart (at children's eye level) and encourage children to make their own labels to organize items in the cupboards and on the shelves.

3. Provide plenty of books in the house corner. Some can be more permanent, relating specifically to a house environment, such as *Daddy Makes the Best Spaghetti*, by Anna G. Hines, or *My Kitchen*, by Harlow Rockwell. Children's cookbooks are also terrific. Other books that link to current units and themes that the children are exploring can flow in and out of the space. Gail Gibbon's *The Milk Makers*, for instance, might be an interesting addition to the house corner during a class unit on health and nutrition. Books should become an integral part of play so that children have the opportunity to become familiar with books, practice emerging reading skills, understand the importance of print, and discover the joy of reading. **C&F**

Kathleen Roskos teaches courses in emergent literacy and reading education at John Carroll University. She coordinated one of the first public preschools in Ohio (Bridges and Links) and is currently instrumental in strengthening literacy preparation at the associate degree level through a collaboration grant between 2- and 4-year institutions. Roskos studies early literacy development, teacher cognition, and the design of professional education for teachers. She spearheaded the development of a video on linking literacy and play for the International Reading Association and has published widely on play-literacy connections.

"Literacy Building Blocks" is designed to be removed from the magazine, photocopied, and distributed to parents.