Opinion vs. research
Child development research shows that play is important to all aspects of a child’s development, including the development of language and literacy. However, many adults do not recognize just how important it is.

In a recent survey about the importance of play in children’s development, 80% of parents of children birth to six felt play was important to the development of language skills.

Of all future parents, grandparents and non-parents surveyed, only 70% thought play was important to the development of literacy.

Of parents of children ages zero to six whose income was under $30K, 70% thought it important, while 81% of parents with incomes over $50K recognized the value of play in contributing to a child’s literacy.

Early vocabulary is the biggest determinant of later literacy.
Sources: Civitas, Zero to Three, 2003.

Avenues for enhancing literacy

1. **Reading**
   - **Babies:** Books are great first toys for babies. Begin with books that:
     - can be propped up for a baby to look at.
     - have pictures in bright contrasting colors.
     - are made of cardboard or cloth to withstand a little chewing and make page turning easier.
   - **Toddlers and pre-schoolers:** Toddlers are just able to sit and listen to a complete story. Try books that:
     - have repetitious text about familiar objects.
     - involve activities such as counting, identifying colors, objects or letters.
     - are about subjects that interest the child.
     - deal with topics that relate to the child’s life, such as toilet training or new siblings.
     - are interactive, such as having lifting flaps.

2. **Writing**
   - **Babies:** Even a baby can prepare for writing. Let her:
     - hold a rattle to develop grasping skills.
     - play with magnetic letters.
   - **Toddlers and pre-schoolers:** To get her interested:
     - give her safe writing props to incorporate into her play, like crayons, blank paper, newspaper and construction paper, thick sticks of chalk and thick magic markers.
     - promote the development of her fine motor skills by letting her cut paper or trace letters.
     - allow her to draw freely and creatively.

3. **Talking**
   - **Babies:**
     - Talk and read with him at every opportunity.
     - Sing nursery rhymes and read books that talk with word sounds.
   - **Toddlers and pre-schoolers:**
     - Whether at the grocery store, the park or the zoo, point out objects, signs and people.
     - Engage your child in conversation and ask a lot of questions.
     - Play with words by making up funny names for people and objects. Making nonsense out of language helps children appreciate the rhythm and musicality of language.
     - Play rhyming games with words.

4. **Listening**
   - Activities you can try with your child:
     - A narrated version of hide-and-seek. When the child hides, the caregiver “thinks aloud” about where she could be. “Where is Laura?” a parent might say. “Maybe she’s in the refrigerator—did I put her next to the milk?” Such silly discussion within earshot of the hiding child will encourage her to listen as she waits to be found.
     - Singing songs. Children love to listen to songs. Try adding new words to her favorite songs to pique her interest.

Through playful activities, such as pretend play, drawing, hearing a story and talking about its plot and characters, your child first experiments with language. He learns what reading and writing are, and what he can do with them. He also acquires attitudes about literacy.

Children: pretend to read to themselves.

Play is a safe environment for your child to explore literacy. Because play allows her to feel and act as if she is in control of her activity, she can play with books and paper and pretend that she can actually read books or write stories. Therefore, through play, your child can feel like a reader or a writer before she knows how to read and write.

Such feelings can instill confidence, create positive expectations about learning to read and write and motivate a child to learn.

How does play encourage literacy?

For your child, every word he hears and repeats, every storybook, song and nursery rhyme become the building blocks of literacy.

When he draws, pretends to read or write or invents stories, play allows your child to build his literacy skills by experimenting with pictures and symbols he has seen.

Through gestures or marks on paper, your child uses symbols to create and communicate meaning. Whether in pretend play or other activities like drawing, symbols allow him to leave his immediate environment and explore imaginary worlds.

How can play help my child develop literacy from the beginning?

Through playful activities, such as pretend play, drawing, hearing a story and talking about its plot and characters, your child first experiments with language. He learns what reading and writing are, and what he can do with them. He also acquires attitudes about literacy.

Children: pretend to read to themselves.

Play is a safe environment for your child to explore literacy. Because play allows her to feel and act as if she is in control of her activity, she can play with books and paper and pretend that she can actually read books or write stories. Therefore, through play, your child can feel like a reader or a writer before she knows how to read and write.

Such feelings can instill confidence, create positive expectations about learning to read and write and motivate a child to learn.

How does play encourage literacy?

For your child, every word he hears and repeats, every storybook, song and nursery rhyme become the building blocks of literacy.

When he draws, pretends to read or write or invents stories, play allows your child to build his literacy skills by experimenting with pictures and symbols he has seen.

Through gestures or marks on paper, your child uses symbols to create and communicate meaning. Whether in pretend play or other activities like drawing, symbols allow him to leave his immediate environment and explore imaginary worlds.

How can play help my child develop literacy from the beginning?

Through playful activities, such as pretend play, drawing, hearing a story and talking about its plot and characters, your child first experiments with language. He learns what reading and writing are, and what he can do with them. He also acquires attitudes about literacy.

Children: pretend to read to themselves.

Play is a safe environment for your child to explore literacy. Because play allows her to feel and act as if she is in control of her activity, she can play with books and paper and pretend that she can actually read books or write stories. Therefore, through play, your child can feel like a reader or a writer before she knows how to read and write.

Such feelings can instill confidence, create positive expectations about learning to read and write and motivate a child to learn.