Pair books with play activities. Encourage further exploration and learning by displaying books from your collection near the play activity. For example, if you have a science theme, pull some science-themed books from your shelves!

Rotate play activities. Switching out play pieces from time to time allows for new learning experiences. For example, if you have a light table with insect x-rays for science learning, after a while switch out the x-rays for colored acrylic letters for letter recognition skill-building.

Consider a theme. Unify the play space by choosing a theme, which allows children to focus their play and learning energy. The repetition of the theme in various forms helps to reinforce and assimilate their learning. For example, if you choose to have an insect theme, you might put out magnifying glasses and encased insect specimens, a set of dress-up butterfly wings, and a selection of bug books from your collection.

Have caregiver prompts. We want to encourage caregivers to play with their children and to understand the value of the early literacy skill-building that is taking place. Keep messages clear and simple for the caregivers. Also, consider having translations of the prompts available for communities that have a particular language need. Examples:

Clean the play pieces regularly. It is important to create a cleaning schedule, and stick to it. Utilize a bucket for toys that get mouthed, and clean those items at the end of each day. We recommend the following cleaning schedule:

Weekly: wipe down all hard surfaces. Make a non-toxic cleaning solution by mixing ½ cup white vinegar and 1 tablespoon of liquid dish soap in a 32-oz. spray bottle, then fill with water.

Monthly: do a thorough wash of play pieces in a sink with hot water and dish soap. Let items air dry for 24 hours.
Ways to engage with youth in play spaces

Staff’s presence in the play space throughout the day serves many purposes. A friendly staff presence allows patrons of all ages to get to know their local library staff and feel welcomed by them. It allows staff to model playful interactions with children and demonstrate the use of the play activities and tidying up the space. Circulating through the area might also discourage theft.

- “That’s a big tower, what are you going to build next?”
- “What a creative chef you are! Mmm...that looks yummy. What are you cooking?”
- “It’s time to clean up, would you be a clean-up helper and pick up some of the toys?”
- “What are you making on the light table? What color do you see when you stack the red and the blue discs?”
- “You are thinking like a scientist! What do you think will happen next?”

Comments about volume or energy

We encourage parents/caregivers to read, sing, write, talk and play along with their children when they visit the library so naturally there will be noise that results from those interactions. Staff could use the following phrases to address patron concerns.

- “The children’s area is very active right now.”
- “We encourage families to use the library together.”
- “When children play they develop important early literacy skills.”
- “The library is committed to helping kids succeed in school. We provide play spaces in our libraries because kids learn best through play.”
  - Offer to help the patron reserve a quiet study room if your library has one or other areas of the building that are less busy.
  - Let the patron know when storytimes are usually offered at your library so they might avoid the busy times in the future. Maybe suggest something like “Yes, the library is really busy on storytime mornings. Things usually quiet down after ____ time.”

Questions about play pieces that are no longer there

Just like other materials in our libraries’ collections, play pieces get worn out, lost, damaged or go missing over time. Depending on the particular situation, staff could say:

- “We rotate the play pieces periodically to provide fresh and different opportunities to play and learn.”
- “Those items may have been taken off the public floor for cleaning.”
- “I’m glad to hear that you and your child enjoyed that play activity. Let me show you the activities we are offering here today.”