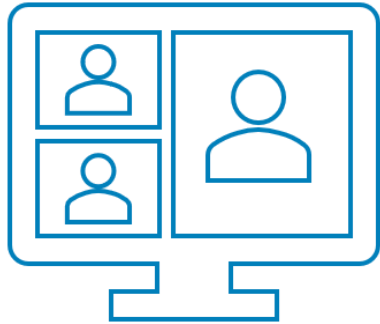




## Supporting Early Literacy Skills

# INTRODUCTIONS

## Today's Facilitators



## PAL Participants

Please introduce yourself in the **chat**:

- Your **NAME**
- **Shelter where you volunteer**

# GOALS FOR THIS TRAINING



***We hope you'll leave this session prepared to ...***

- Understand why early literacy matters
- Recognize what early literacy looks like in the Playspace
- Identify your role as a volunteer in fostering language and literacy skills
- Learn practical strategies for incorporating books into shifts
- Gain confidence in making reading playful

# Shared Practices



## Safety First

- *We create spaces where children feel physically and emotionally safe.*

## Consistency & Predictability

- *We offer consistent schedules, clear communication, and stable relationships.*

## Collaboration & Shared Ownership

- *Shelter staff, Horizons staff, and PALs work together to build and maintain healing environments.*

## Empathy & Understanding

- *We approach children & families with empathy, recognizing that behaviors often reflect traumatic experiences.*

## Empowerment & Voice

- *We respect the voices and choices of children & families whenever possible to promote autonomy and self-confidence. This is critical for children impacted by trauma.*

## Cultural Humility & Respect

- *We honor the diverse backgrounds & strengths of the children & families we serve.*

# Why Reading Matters



Reading aloud to children builds vocabulary, strengthens brain development, and fosters imagination.

Children who are read to regularly hear millions more words by kindergarten.

Early exposure to books helps children recognize print and prepares them for reading in school.



# What this looks like in the Playspace



Turning pages, pointing to pictures, or naming objects.

Listening to stories and asking questions.

Pretending to read to dolls.

Recognizing letters or rhyming words.

Drawing or scribbling as part of storytelling.

Incorporating books into other areas of play.



# Your Role as a Volunteer



You can encourage early literacy by:

Reading aloud with enthusiasm, using different voices for characters.

Letting children turn pages and explore books at their own pace.

Asking open-ended questions about the story or pictures.

Connecting book content to a child's own experiences.

Point out letters, numbers, and shapes.



# Reason We Emphasize Reading



In the Playspace, we use books as a bridge between play and skill-building because:

**Books Build Brains** – Reading aloud strengthens memory, focus, and problem-solving skills.

**Language Grows Through Stories** – Books expose children to new vocabulary and sentence structures they may not hear in daily conversation.

**Books Connect to Real Life** – When stories are linked to play, children see reading as meaningful and fun, not just something for school.

**Reading Supports Emotional Growth** – Stories help children understand and talk about feelings, build empathy, and see the world from different perspectives.

**Early Exposure Leads to Lifelong Benefits** – Children who are read to regularly are more likely to succeed academically and develop a love for learning.

By weaving books into pretend play, art, and hands-on activities, we make reading a natural and joyful part of every Playspace experience. Volunteers help children discover that stories are not only for story time they're for every time.





# Try These Strategies



In every interaction, you have the chance to nurture a child’s curiosity and love for stories. These strategies are simple ways to weave early literacy into play helping children build language skills while having fun.

What you can do	Why it helps
Infants and Toddlers	Use sturdy board or cloth books with colorful pictures. Name objects, colors, and shapes as you read. Sing rhymes and use playful voices
Preschoolers (3-5 years)	Choose picture books, alphabet, and counting books. Ask, “What happens next?” in familiar stories. Encourage them to retell the story in their own words.
School Age (5+ years)	Introduce longer stories and fairy tales. Point out letters in their name. Encourage writing and drawing related to the story.

Remember, it’s not about reading perfectly or finishing the book. It’s about making the moment joyful, engaging, and responsive to the child’s interests. Every playful exchange is a step toward a lifelong love of learning.

# Scenario: Literacy in Dramatic Play



**Child Age:** 4 years old

## **What Happens:**

A preschooler is “cooking” in the pretend kitchen and invites you to help make a meal.

## **What Not to Do:**

Just pretend to stir and eat without adding conversation.

Ignore opportunities to bring in books or storytelling.

## **Why This Doesn't Help:**

Misses the chance to expand vocabulary and connect pretend play with print.

Doesn't model how books can be part of everyday activities.

## **A Better Way:**

Bring over *Eating the Alphabet* by Lois Ehlert.

Flip through the pages together, naming each fruit or vegetable pictured.

Match foods in the book to the pretend foods in the kitchen.

Say things like, “*The book shows apricots – do we have any in our fridge?*”

Encourage the child to “make” a recipe using foods from the book.

## **Why It Works:**

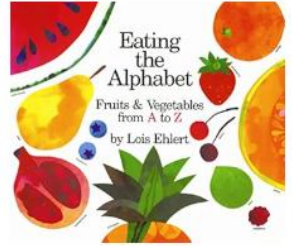
Links print to real-life play, making reading relevant and exciting.

Expands vocabulary with both familiar and new foods.

Encourages letter recognition through alphabet-based storytelling.

## **Skills Supported:**

Alphabet knowledge, vocabulary, print awareness, sequencing, pretend play.



# Scenario: Literacy in the Manipulatives Area



**Child Age:** 3 years old

## **What Happens:**

A child is building with cars and trucks and hands a car to you.

## **What Not to Do:**

Simply say, "Thanks for the truck" and sets it aside

Focus only on the truck without encouraging conversation or book connection.

## **Why This Doesn't Help:**

Misses a chance to link hands-on play with reading and real-world concepts.

Limits opportunities to expand vocabulary around vehicles and transportation.

## **A Better Way:**

Thank the child and say, "This red truck reminds me of something in a book!"

Bring over *Things That Go* by Amy Pixton.

Flip through to find the page with the truck (or a similar vehicle).

Talk about where the truck might go, then suggest building a road or bridge with blocks.

Write a simple label like "Truck Garage" or "Bridge" and "read" it together.

## **Why It Works:**

Links the child's existing play to reading in a fun, natural way.

Encourages them to see books as sources of ideas for play.

Builds new vocabulary while keeping the child in the lead.

## **Skills Supported:**

Vocabulary, print awareness, descriptive language, sequencing, creativity, spatial reasoning.



# Scenario: Literacy in Art



**Child Age:** 5 years old

## **What Happens:**

A child is painting with bright colors at the art table.

## **What Not to Do:**

Simply say, "That's pretty!" and move on.  
Only talk about the colors without encouraging storytelling or deeper connections.

## **Why This Doesn't Help:**

Misses the chance to connect colors to emotions and story concepts.  
Limits opportunities for building emotional vocabulary and comprehension.

## **A Better Way:**

Bring over *The Color Monster* by Anna Llenas.

Read or summarize a page about a specific color and the feeling it represents.

Ask, "Your painting has lots of yellow — in the book, yellow means happiness. What makes you happy?"

Encourage the child to add other colors from the story and talk about their feelings.

Write down the child's "color story" and read it back to them.

## **Why It Works:**

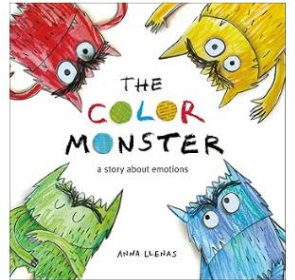
Connects art to storytelling and emotional expression.

Builds vocabulary for both colors and feelings.

Encourages children to see their art as a form of communication.

## **Skills Supported:**

Emotional literacy, vocabulary, comprehension, narrative skills, self-expression, creativity.



# Tip Sheet



## TIP SHEET Supporting Early Literacy Skills



### Why Early Literacy Matters

- Reading aloud to children builds vocabulary, strengthens brain development, and fosters imagination.
- Children who are read to regularly hear millions more words by kindergarten.
- Early exposure to books helps children recognize print and prepares them for reading in school.

### What This Looks Like in the Playspace

During your shift, you may notice children:

- Turning pages, pointing to pictures, or naming objects.
- Listening to stories and asking questions.
- Pretending to read to dolls or stuffed animals.
- Recognizing letters or rhyming words.
- Drawing or scribbling as part of storytelling.

### Your Role as a PAL

You can encourage early literacy by:

- Reading aloud with enthusiasm, using different voices for characters.
- Letting children turn pages and explore books at their own pace.
- Asking open-ended questions about the story or pictures.
- Connecting book content to a child's own experiences.
- Pointing out letters, numbers, and shapes.

1

## TRY IT YOURSELF! Supporting Early Literacy Skills



Reading is one of the most powerful ways we can support a child's growth. In the Playspace, your warmth, curiosity, and engagement can make reading an exciting adventure.

AGE GROUP	WHAT YOU CAN DO
Infants & Toddlers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use sturdy board or cloth books with colorful pictures.</li><li>• Name objects, colors, and shapes as you read.</li><li>• Sing rhymes and use playful voices.</li></ul>
Preschoolers (3 - 5 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Choose picture books, alphabet, and counting books.</li><li>• Ask, "What happens next?" in familiar stories.</li><li>• Encourage them to retell the story in their own words.</li></ul>
School-Ready (5 - 6 years)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Introduce longer stories and fairy tales.</li><li>• Point out letters in their name.</li><li>• Encourage writing and drawing related to the story.</li></ul>

By turning each story into a *shared experience*, you help children see themselves as *storytellers and learners* building skills and confidence that last a lifetime.

2

# PAL Resource Page



PROGRAMS > PAL RESOURCES

## PAL RESOURCES

The Playspace program is made possible by the 700 dedicated PALs across Massachusetts who bring kindness, play experiences, and moments of joy to children living in shelter every week! Horizons staff is committed to the success of the volunteers, the program, and the families we serve. Ensuring volunteers feel prepared and confident is important to us and your feedback is welcome. Email us at [palsupport@horizonschildren.org](mailto:palsupport@horizonschildren.org) if you have suggestions or feedback.

### Tip Sheets

The following resources and tip sheets are designed to empower you with the tools and knowledge needed to support the children served in Playspace. For more in depth information, attend one of our ongoing training sessions!

#### Playspace Policies

#### Activity Ideas

#### Building Healthy Relationships

#### Language Support

#### Managing Behaviors

#### Outdoor Playspace

- [Policies and Procedures](#)
- [Attire Guidelines](#)
- [Incident Reporting Guide](#)
- [Incident Report Form](#)
- [Non-Permitted Items & Materials](#)
- [Communication Guide](#)



# Final Thoughts



Reading is one of the most powerful ways we can support a child's growth.

In the Playspace, your warmth, curiosity, and engagement can make reading an exciting adventure.

By turning each story into a shared experience, you help children see themselves as storytellers and learners, building skills and confidence that last a lifetime.

