Hello. It is great to be here today! My name is Tracy Hvezda-Lehtola. I’m a youth services librarian for Hennepin County Library and I’m also a co-chair for Hennepin County Library’s Early Literacy Traveling Team, which I will tell you more about in a moment. Hennepin County Library includes 41 libraries in Minneapolis and surrounding suburbs. Today I get to share with you how Hennepin County Libraries have created early literacy play spaces without hiring a designer. I will share ideas and strategies for creating play environments in both large and small spaces. I will also show you some ways to incorporate the 5 early literacy practices into your play environments.
2nd edition of Every Child Ready to Read: develop early literacy skills in young children by talking, signing, reading, writing and playing together

Hennepin County Library launched a system-wide initiative to create and support play in all of our branch libraries

Goals: to give opportunities for playful learning and building kindergarten readiness skills by creating hands-on, multi-sensory learning environments
And to engage parents and caregivers in the 5 early literacy practices of talking, singing, reading, writing, and playing together with their children.
In order to meet these goals without hiring a designer, we formed the Early Literacy Traveling Team (ELTT).

Collaborate with and train local staff to create new play environments

Create early literacy play activities that are well-integrated into library spaces and make sense in their communities
When the ELTT works with a library, the first thing we do is:

1. Meet with library staff to learn about their hopes and dreams for their early literacy play space. We also learn about aspects of their community that makes it unique.
2. Based on that, we put together a list of purchases.
3. Schedule a date for installation
4. Provide play training for all staff
5. Finally, each YS librarian is paired with a mentor from the ELTT to provide on-going support.
Play training is key
Foster a culture of play with all staff by giving them the tools they need for success
Give staff talking points, techniques for managing noise and activities
Have a plan for regular cleaning and maintenance
Be aware that ongoing support will be needed to keep play space fresh
The play space needs to be tidied throughout the day. Encourage kids in the library to be superhero cleaners by helping you tidy the space. Offer a special sticker for a job well done.
Utilize a cleaning bucket for toys that get mouthed, clean these items at the end of each day.
Once a week wipe down all hard surfaces.
Make a solution of ½ cup white vinegar
1 tbsp. of liquid dish soap
Few drips of lemon or lavender essential oil if you like
In a 32oz spray bottle add water to the vinegar and add soap at the end.

Safe, non-toxic all purpose cleaner

1 pint water to ½ tsp bleach
Do a thorough wash of everything
Utilize teen volunteers
This is when you might swap out for a new activity
Allow items to air dry for 24 hours
These ready-to-purchase play pieces tend to hold up well after a lot of repeated use in a public library setting.

Light tables skill-building: acrylic letters for practicing spelling and letter recognition, transparent color shapes and blocks for math and basic geometry learning, agate slices introduce earth science exploration, human and animal x-rays introduce biology and life science, and you’ve got engineering play with the magnatiles.
Dollhouse skill-building: talking and vocabulary building, developing social skills, sharing and taking turns.
Science play promotes observation and wonderment with the natural world. Opportunity to use science tools, like a magnifying glass, scales, magnets and more. Science play we've noticed really engages adults, especially dads. They experiment and play along with their children for long periods of time.
Reading and writing skills go hand in hand. Children can practice their writing and experiment with mark-making with chalk or with water and paint brushes. This kind of play also gives children a wonderful opportunity to use real artists’ tools.
Best practices: pair books from your collection with each play activity
Pair Collection with Play Activity
Best practices: rotate play activities
Switching out play pieces allows for new learning experiences upon return visits to the library
Rotate Play Activities
Best practices: unify the play by choosing a theme. This allows children to focus their play and learning energy. The repetition of the theme in various forms helps to reinforce and assimilate the learning. Then of course you have a selection of bug books nestled in next to the play.
Best practices: Caregiver Prompts
The prompts encourage caregivers to engage in early literacy play with their children and give ideas for talking together.
Keep the message clear and simple for the caregiver. You want to encourage them to play and talk together with their children and understand the value of the early literacy skill-building that is taking place in their child.

We also have made Spanish translations for use in libraries in Spanish-speaking communities.
Depending on the size of your library, you may select a smaller alternative to a larger play piece.
Light table as a piece of furniture with storage vs. a space-saving table top light panel
Go vertical with a LEGO wall or a magnet wall.
Create an I Spy tabletop activity.
For small libraries that don’t have a lot of storage, one solution may be a traveling kit of play activities they can keep for a certain amount of time before it travels on again.
There are all kinds of new possibilities to explore! I hope I’ve given you ideas for play spaces in your library that will help support school readiness, create a sense of community, and bring a sense of joy to your work. Thank you.