



## **Dramatic Play in the Lives of Children**

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**"I know! Let's not make cakes anymore. Let's make candy!"**

Greg, age three, in the outside sand area of the child development center.

Dramatic play, sociodramatic play, symbolic play, creative dramatics, make believe play, role play are often mentioned as we explore the phenomena of children playing together. They often use a variety of props, materials, and interactions to explore, define and recreate worlds for their pleasure, laughter and the ability to play together. This play brief discusses the importance of dramatic play and how it impacts children's learning, growing and becoming.

The developing child has all of the wonderful complex structures and, developmental domains, such as motor development, language development, cognitive development, social development, emotional development and values. All of these domains are in full swing, in dramatic play. Joan Isenberg and Mary Jalongo, in their work "Creative Expression in Play in Early Childhood" said:

*"In dramatic and sociodramatic play children can be both actors and directors. As actors, children experience the feelings, thoughts and behaviors of the roles they are playing. As directors, they imagine the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors associated with a role and coach the actors. Playing both roles in dramatic and sociodramatic play helps children:*

- *Construct their own understanding of how the world works by stepping into the shoes of another person.*
- *Act out social situations requiring negotiation with players with different needs and views.*
- *Express their inner feelings*
- *Communicate in meaningful ways and develop social skills by negotiating roles, locating props, and agreeing on a common theme.*
- *Develop the confidence to explore freely and imaginatively the structured forms of drama."*

*(Isenberg & Jalongo, 181)*

**"It's a sugary day!"**

Twins Krissy and Karen (age four) talking to a teacher on the inside living room dramatic play loft, Child Development Center.

There is a common element between early childhood education programs, Head Start, child care, family child care facilities, kindergartens as well as after school programs, we notice something in common, a dramatic play area with child sized, kitchen sinks, stoves, ovens, refrigerators, kitchen tables, chairs, costumes, mirrors, baby dolls and soft plush animals. Why? What is so valuable about this particular area within the early childhood curriculum, that they

would invest in this type of materials, resources and funds to equip a space within the classroom for dramatic play? In their work entitled "Pretend Play Training and Its outcomes", Saltz and Saltz said:

*"Children's pretend play requires that children's social and cognitive skills are such that they can transform their reality and experiences, as well as symbolic transformations (a toy block becomes an airplane, a toy rubber duck becomes a sailboat). Pretend play is heightened by the use of toy objects that are familiar and similar to the actual objects, feeding the baby doll with a toy baby bottle. Calling home to talk to their Mom or Dad, on the play phone and have a discussion about food and recipes, etc.*

*Spontaneous social pretend play (we will use the term dramatic play) has been seen to impact children's social, linguistic and cognitive skills). The works of both Piaget and Vygotsky strongly suggest that pretend play has a strong link to cognition."*

**I know! You can be the dog, now get over there, lay down and be quiet! I'll bring you food!"**

Nakiesha, age four, in the outside dramatic play area.

Another aspect of dramatic play in children is taking on various roles. When children are truly engaged in dramatic play, they try out new roles and ideas real or created related to who they are as players. Those roles show the emotions, language and what behavior they are supposed to enact. This also brings out social, emotional, and language components as well as motor skills and how the children are "supposed" to act in this play opportunity. Frost, Wortham and Reifel state,

*"Sociodramatic play is the most advanced form of social and symbolic play. In sociodramatic play, children carry out imitation and dramatic and fantasy play together. Sociodramatic play involves role playing, in which children imitate real-life people and experiences that they have had themselves. Make-believe is also a component because it serves as an aid to imitation. It allows the children to represent real-life events and includes their imaginations in carrying out their roles." The child's abilities in sociodramatic play improve with experience, and, as the child plays with different children, play becomes more varied to include new interpretations and ideas."*

**Lloyd! Let's be rocket ships when the teacher says the hill is open and we can fly up to the tree!"**

David, age five, at the cubbies of the URI Child Development Center, waiting to go outside.

Elements to consider as children prepare and engage in dramatic play:

1. Children try taking on real or imaginary roles such as TV, movie, characters animals, superheroes, supervillains by doing so, they ask themselves, "Who am I in dramatic play?"
2. They develop fine motor skills by putting on costumes, buttons, clips, and hats, shoes, boots and tying shoe laces.
3. They develop gross motor skills by running, hopping, skipping, jumping, climbing, etc.
4. Children engage in cooperative play by sharing and being with others.
5. Sharing and Being with Others
6. Perspective taking takes place.
7. Children become more aware of diversity.
8. Language use, vocabulary building, exposure to new words and terms occur.
9. Creative self-expression as well as creative thinking occur.

10. Symbols and other abstractions are learned.
11. Problem identifying as well as problem solving techniques are developed.
12. Notions of self and other (friends, companions, buddies) are developed.
13. Children's ability to express emotions are developed.
14. Role assignments such as, "you be the cat and I'll come and feed you." are explored.

As the coordinator for the New England Symposium on Play, I have had the honor to explore, create, design and provide a wide variety of presentations for my New England education counterparts who are advocates for the importance of play in the lives of children. We continue to support the notion that children learn best through direct involvement with self, others and a rich environment that says, "Come play, explore, create, develop, grow, experiment, learn and share." Dramatic play, sociodramatic play, creative dramatics, interactive play, make believe play or just play are critical to the healthy growth and development of children.

I believe that Grounds for Play is instrumental in setting the stage, preparing the opportunities and laying the ground floor for children's imaginative and dramatic play opportunities with a rich variety of place spaces that entice, engage and invite our children to come and play! Let's have a look and see what kinds of dramatic play spaces they have for children's self-expression and dramatic play opportunities.



*This child is involved with trying on adult life — "Filler up please."*



*These children are involved in language, communication and even economics — "That will be two dimes, a nickel and three pennies, please!"*



*All aboard the U.S.S. Ferry! We can see language, pretend play and trying on roles — "I'm Captain Lee!"*

### **Dramatic Play Themes**

Grocery store, gas station, restaurant, library, ice-cream shop, flower shop, post office, bank, boat (sail, power, row), airplane, train, park, zoo, museum, airport, space ship, submarine, lake, ocean, shore, beach, underwater park, aquarium, house, apartment, fire station, police station, military post, and college/university, gym.

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