

# Dramatic play

## Bring it on back

by Tammy Benson

**W**hat's in there?" asks 4-year-old José, pointing to the cardboard refrigerator box in the corner.

"Let's have a look," says Ms. Tremont, opening the side flap.

"It's empty," says Emily.

"What's it for?" asks Arnold.

"Today we're going to visit the fire station around the corner," says Ms. Tremont, "and after that you can use this to make your own fire station."

"We'll need a fire truck too," says Jose.

"Let's play like we're putting out a fire," says Emily.

"Yeah, I'll be the siren," says Arnold, cupping his hands to his mouth.

"Woooooooooooooooooooooooooooo."

**R**ecent demands by specific programs and curriculum trends may find teachers struggling to make time for strategies that have worked for children in the past. One effective strategy that is sometimes pushed aside is dramatic play.

Bolstered by research that clearly supports developmentally appropriate practice in the early childhood classroom, teachers can offer dramatic play along with the new ideas and trends. It comes down to a matter of balance.

### Research reveals benefits of play

Research is abundant on the positive effect of play on children's development. Play is enjoyable for all but often underestimated for its unique way of positively influencing physical, cognitive, and psychosocial development.

Developmental psychologists, such as Piaget and Sutton-Smith, define play as specific behaviors involving divergent thinking. The imaginary world of play offers children vast opportunities to learn about themselves, others, and the environment in which they live.

Dramatic play also contributes to children's development of values and their ability to become successful, healthy adults. Through dramatic play, children learn to assert themselves in a way to build their competence in later adult roles (Elkind 1981).

Play in the classroom offers the following benefits:

- **physical**—increase in strength, overall fitness, motor skill development, health;

#### Make dramatic play safe

- Inspect furniture and equipment regularly to make sure it's in good repair.
- Wash and disinfect dishes and countertops regularly.
- Cut adult clothing to child size to avoid tripping.
- Launder clothing regularly.
- Monitor or avoid use of hats to prevent lice contagion.
- Teach children to pick up props and return them to storage to avoid tripping.



- **cognitive**—increase in skills such as problem solving, perspective taking, creative thinking, planning, organizing, using language, and overall academic success (Berk 2002);
- **social and emotional**—enhanced development of cooperation, sharing, and turn taking; less egocentrism; increase in pro-social values and self-esteem; practice of appropriate social roles.

Smilansky (1968) pioneered the idea of a positive correlation between children’s sociodramatic play and their success in school. Her study was one of the first that looked at academic progress in low socioeconomic children who were tutored in play. She found children who were unsuccessful with sociodramatic play tended to have parents with little or no formal education. These children came from environments where play was discouraged as being unrealistic. Her research concluded that adults should value play by providing a context where the play can be supported.

## IT COMES DOWN TO A MATTER OF BALANCE.

Recent studies have supported the idea of dramatic play as a way to reduce stress in children’s lives and improve their ability to think, problem solve, and interact positively with others. “Research shows that children pushed too soon to excel at school, on the stage, or sports field show fatigue, reduced energy, lowered effectiveness in tests, and psychosomatic illnesses” (Leaf 2007).

Science has shown that early childhood stressors can change the actual makeup of the brain and lead to a negative, fearful attitude toward learning and school. Dramatic play is a proven way to alleviate these harmful effects of stress and replace them with a positive, constructive, even fun avenue to learning.

By engaging in dramatic play, children are planning, organizing, solving problems, thinking critically and creatively, and interacting with others—the same skills needed to excel in classroom study situations. Self-generated play has tremendous potential to enhance brain development and increase children’s intelligence and academic ability.

Singer, Golinkoff, and Hirsh-Pasek (2008) emphasize in their recent book the educational benefits of play. They explain that play provides a meaningful

context for children to learn concepts and skills. It makes learning fun and enjoyable. It encourages children to explore and discover together and on their own and allows them to extend what they are learning. It encourages children to experiment and take reasonable risks. It provides opportunities for collaborative learning with adults and peers, and it allows for the practice of skills.

Zigler, Singer, and Bishop-Josef (2004) added to these benefits the importance of play in the foundation of literacy development.

According to the Association for Childhood Education International, play is a natural behavior related to children’s development. No adult instruction can take the place of children’s own activities and experiences through continual play (Isenberg and Quisenberry 1988).

Bredenkamp (1987) first acknowledges child-initiated, child-directed, and teacher-supported play as a valuable element of developmentally appropriate practice. This has recently been supported in guidelines published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children’s (2006).

The research gives credence to the many positive results of children’s involvement in play. Many early childhood programs acknowledge its value in positively shaping children’s lives. Educators can’t afford to overlook the health, developmental, and educational advantages of keeping creative play in the early childhood classroom.

## Bringing back an environment conducive to play

Once we realize the value of play, we can provide ample time for play and create a physical environment conducive to it. How can we do that?

**Safety.** Rogers and Sawyers (1988) remind us that the environment should be safe but without unreasonable physical and verbal restrictions. At the same time, it need not be sterile or unchanging, which will limit the children’s involvement (Frost, Wortham, and Reifel 2005).

**Use of space.** To provide adequate space, we need to consider the number of children, their ages and developmental levels, type and range of play themes, materials and equipment available, and time allotted for play. If space is limited, we can extend the classroom to the outdoors. Much of the materials and equipment used indoors can be moved outside.

### Suggestions for locating the dramatic play center

- Provide sufficient space for children to move freely.
- Locate it near other noisy learning centers, such as blocks.
- Use walls, shelves, screens, and carpet to create a cozy enclosure.
- Provide ample storage for props.

### Appropriate materials and equipment.

Play materials influence children's play behavior as well as different forms of play. Include a variety of materials ranging from fluid (hardest to control) to more structured (easiest to control) to account for individual abilities and learning styles. Offer a wide variety of toys to provide sensory stimulus and feedback.

To encourage sociodramatic play, provide large, moveable materials, such as cardboard boxes, telephone line spools, and hollow blocks. Always select creative and imaginative materials stimulating to children.

**Playful atmosphere.** We need to establish an environment that encourages a sense of freedom in children. They need to feel they have some control over what happens around them.

Rogers and Sawyers (1988) found that giving appropriate choices to children can achieve this playful atmosphere. When children are allowed to make these decisions, they experience the freedom and intrinsic motivation associated with play and leisure. To promote play, we as teachers need to limit our direction and intrusion to assure children the opportunity to assert themselves and avoid a feeling of vulnerability.

## DRAMATIC PLAY MAKES LEARNING FUN AND ENJOYABLE.

To ensure a positive social environment, we need to make sure that children have had adequate experiences to be able to play. We can broaden their base of experiences (Isenberg and Quinsenberry 1988) through field trips, classic literature, and quality television and other media.

Use of themes in the classroom requires that children be fairly familiar with the theme. If the theme

is community helpers, for example, children need to have some familiarity with firefighters, police officers, and mail carriers. Otherwise, children may experience frustration. We need to make sure children are exposed to a variety of stimuli that familiarizes them with a given theme.

Aguilar (1985) suggests three other major areas of the social environment to consider. These are 1) significant others, 2) community institutions and organizations, and 3) inventions and creations.

Significant others include family members, friends, teachers, and others in a child's daily experiences. They can affect play by modeling playfulness, giving children a sense of freedom, and giving children opportunities to express themselves in their own unique way.

Community resources include schools, health clinics, libraries, nature and amusement parks, museums, and movie theaters. Parks, for example, provide opportunities for picnics, swimming, hiking, feeding ducks, biking, canoeing, and sports activities such as soccer. Park rules that put excessive restrictions on children can inhibit play and creativity.

Inventions and creations are attempts to amuse the society in general. Computers and video games are prime examples. The most successful inventions for children are those that allow manipulation, challenge, and variety (Aguilar 1985).

Aguilar also gives some interesting recommendations for creating a playful atmosphere. She suggests the following:

- providing outlets for self-expression,
- encouraging children to "play with" ideas,
- offering risks and challenges,
- incorporating the arts,
- being flexible,
- encouraging and demonstrating good humor, and
- allowing for fantasy and imaginative behaviors.

All these suggestions increase the chance that children will respond in a positive way. Once children see their ideas are valued as part of the class, they are more likely to engage in playful behaviors.

Rogers and Sawyers (1988) also provide suggestions for creating an environment supportive of sociodramatic play. These include the following:

- being supportive (not forceful) of pretend play,
- turning control of the play over to children,
- resisting a temptation to direct play,
- acting playful, and
- constantly encouraging children's involvement.

## Sample prop boxes

### Office prop box

- Packs of paper
- Magazines
- Typewriter paper
- Pen holder with pens and pencils
- Paper clips
- Stamps
- Stapler
- Rolls of tape
- Tape dispenser
- Memo holder
- Magnets for memos
- Small tables and chairs
- Posters or pictures of office workers
- File folders
- Envelopes
- Telephone
- Typewriter
- Adding machine
- Computer
- Hole punch

### Flower shop prop box

- Small garden tools
- Clay and plastic flower pots
- Potting soil
- Aprons
- Garden hats
- Garden gloves
- Posters or pictures of flowers
- Plastic flowers
- Styrofoam® squares
- Vases
- Baskets
- Cash register
- Play money
- Watering pitcher
- Empty seed packets
- Books about flowers and plants
- Seed catalogs
- Order forms for seeds and plants
- Newspapers to spread on the floor

### Beach party prop box

- Beach towels
- Swimsuits
- Sunglasses
- Straw hats
- Empty sunscreen tubes
- Small radio
- Lounge chairs
- Hawaiian leis
- Fish-net décor
- Plastic fish, crabs, and starfish
- Fishing poles
- Water bottles
- Beach Boys music
- Surfboard
- Inner tubes
- Air mattress
- Life vests
- Shorts
- Tank tops
- Beach umbrella
- Beach balls
- Picnic basket
- Picnic blanket
- Plastic food

### Bakery prop box

- Paper baking cups
- Measuring spoons
- Wooden mixing spoons
- Spatula
- Dishcloths
- Towels
- Sponges
- Empty food containers
- Empty milk cartons
- Play dough
- Posters and pictures of bakers and baked goods
- Rolling pins
- Aprons
- Oven mitts
- Cupcake tins
- Cake pans
- Mixing bowls

- Hand-held mixer with cord cut off
- Measuring cups
- Cookie sheets

### Gas station prop box

- Work clothes
- Attendants' jackets
- Oil rags
- Oil cans
- Hats
- Hose or tubing
- Paper towels
- Plastic spray bottles
- Steering wheels
- Real car tire to work on
- Penlight flashlights
- Posters from local garages or tire stores
- Squeegee
- Air pump
- Lug wrench
- Toolbox
- Assorted tools
- Cash register
- Play money
- Large box decorated as a car

### Veterinarian prop box

- Office signs
- Small rolls of cloth bandages
- Adhesive tape
- Eyedroppers
- Empty pill bottles
- Cotton balls
- Cotton swabs
- Stethoscope
- Disposable masks
- Small stuffed animals
- Pet carriers
- Small examining table
- Magnifying glass
- Pictures of animals or veterinarians at work

- Plastic gloves
- Hospital scrubs
- Pet brush and comb
- Sponges
- Scale
- Thermometer
- Syringe with needle removed
- Clipboard
- Pet care papers

### School prop box

- Hand bell
- Whistle
- Clock
- Stickers
- Teacher's desk or table
- Notebooks
- Stapler
- School books
- Chalkboard
- Erasers
- Chalk
- Pointer
- Spelling test
- Report cards
- Write and wipe calendar

### Grocery store prop box

- Telephone
- Posters of food items
- Grocery basket
- Assorted baskets
- Plastic food
- Cash register
- Play money
- Adding machine
- Aprons
- Shelves for food
- Table for checkout area
- Empty food containers
- Brown grocery bags
- Small white bags with handles
- Grocery cart

### Fast food restaurant prop box

- Paper fast food containers
- Plastic french fries
- Napkins and straws
- Aprons and hats
- Small table and chairs
- Cash register
- Play money
- Plastic food
- Sponge
- Dishcloths
- Mop
- Broom
- Trays
- Wall poster with pictures of food
- Paper note pads for taking orders
- Cardboard box for drive-through window

### Doctor/nurse prop box

- Doctors' and nurses' scrubs
- Doctor kit
- Stethoscope
- Blood-pressure band
- Cloth bandage rolls
- Crutches
- Slings
- Splints
- Penlight batteries
- Baby dolls for patients
- Pictures or posters of doctors and nurses
- Hospital sign (may be handmade)
- Disposable plastic gloves
- Disposable paper hats and gowns
- Cotton balls
- Cotton swabs
- Empty pill bottles

## Sample prop boxes (continued)

- File folders
- Clipboards
- Prescription pads

### Police station prop box

- Police caps
- Police badges
- Black belts
- Walkie-talkies
- Telephone
- Phone book
- Pads of paper
- Pens and pencils
- Tables and chairs
- Small clipboards for issuing tickets
- Sunglasses
- Hole punch for parking meter reader
- 9-1-1 signs
- Stamp pads
- Posters or pictures of police officers

### Fire station prop box

- Plastic fire helmets
- Firefighter coats
- Garden hose
- Boots
- Telephone
- Gloves
- Flashlights
- 9-1-1 signs
- Large box or row of chairs with a steering wheel to represent a fire truck
- Stepladder
- Clipboards
- Baby dolls to rescue
- Fire safety posters

### Camping prop box

- Plastic ants
- Wood for fire
- Drinking mugs
- Sticks
- Pillows

- Fly swatter
- Small tent
- Frying pan and pots
- Spatula and utensils
- Sunglasses
- Empty sunscreen tubes
- Plastic hot dogs
- Fishing vests
- Flashlights
- Grill
- Paper plates
- Cooler
- Thermos and coffee pot
- Sleeping bags
- Binoculars
- Fishing poles

### Post office prop box

- Adding machine or computer
- Envelopes
- Paper
- Postcards (or paper cut to size)
- Pens
- Pencils
- Mail carrier coats and hats
- Mail carrier bag
- Stamps (Christmas and Easter seals you get in the mail)
- Play money
- Rubber stamps
- Stamp pads
- Telephone
- Telephone book
- Cardboard shoe organizer (great for sorting mail)
- Small boxes for parcel post
- Large cardboard box made into a U.S. mail drop

While realizing our responsibility to create a positive, playful social environment, we also need to address barriers to this process. Some barriers are the inflexibility of rules, norms, and social expectations (Aguilar 1985).

Propaganda and advertisements, in particular, have their own way of forcing a social control upon all adults and children alike. TV commercials featuring a fashion doll, for example, may influence children's ideas about the kinds of dolls they should be playing with.

When we feel that we are under the constant scrutiny of the social environment, we are less likely to "let loose and play." We all have a need for social approval, but we need to balance it with a commitment to create a positive, fun atmosphere where children are willing to take chances and try new challenges through play (Aguilar 1985).

## Creating prop boxes

Which materials are best for encouraging sociodramatic play? Myhre (1993) recommends thematic prop boxes. As the name suggests, these boxes contain all the props needed for a particular theme. See sample prop boxes at left.

When creating dramatic play boxes and planning their use, consider these guidelines:

- Build around thematic units.
- Collect inexpensive play materials.
- Use realistic props for toddlers and younger children.
- Designate a specific play area in the classroom.
- Allow adequate time for play experiences.
- Encourage children to be creative with play themes.
- Add literacy/print experiences to every play box.
- Add items to promote character development and pro-social behaviors.
- Rotate prop boxes to align with curriculum objectives or in response to the children's interests.

## Assessing your dramatic play area

After setting up a dramatic play center in your classroom, use the questions below to evaluate the materials:

- Does the play center incorporate a variety of materials that will encourage dramatic play of young children?



- Does the play center include materials that will stimulate literacy activities (reading, writing, speaking, listening)?
- Does the play center include teacher-made as well as commercial materials?
- Are materials available that promote creativity and flexibility of play?
- Are the materials developmentally appropriate for young children?
- Are play props conducive to a thematic unit? Is there a theme to your play center?
- Does the play center reinforce physical, cognitive, and social skills appropriate for the age and developmental level?
- Do the materials reflect a diversity of cultures and abilities?

Once your dramatic play area is in use, consider the following questions to assess the quality of children's play:

- Are children actively involved in play themes?
- Do projects stem from natural encounters with play materials?
- Are children engaged in high levels of social play—specifically, cooperative play?
- Does the center area account for various skill differences and individual learning preferences?
- Are children supported in problem-solving activities?
- Does the center encourage positive attitudes toward both sexes, even when children assume nontraditional roles?

## Balance new ideas without sacrificing time-tested play

Today experts agree that play is beneficial to children and their overall healthy development. The secret to keeping the balance in developmentally appropriate practices involves adjusting our curriculum to new trends and research suggestions without sacrificing the benefits of current practices that have proved beneficial for young children time and time again.

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