

Learning Through Play: Dramatic Play

Dramatic Play is the most highly developed form of symbolic play. As children mature dramatic play changes in complexity. A toddler may pick up a toy phone and say, "Hi, Mommy." and then drop the phone and move on. Toddlers will use only realistic objects, a toy telephone to talk into or a cup to drink from. These acts imitate adults' actions and are not flexible. The toddler will not put the cup on his head and pretend that it is a hat. As children mature they imagine events and objects without the support of the real world. We see this all of the time in the classroom. The blocks become a space ship with a myriad of "buttons and switches". The small rectangular block becomes the perfect cell phone. Little baskets become a kennel for a dog or a terrarium for some salamanders. These are examples of how, over time, play increasingly detaches from the real-life conditions associated with it and becomes less self-centered.

Dramatic play gradually includes more complex combinations of schemes. Children can coordinate several roles in an elaborate plot. When a child plays dramatically with another person, the play then becomes sociodramatic. By the end of early childhood children have a sophisticated understanding of role relationships and story lines. The appearance of complex sociodramatic play signals a major change in representation. Children do not just represent their world but they display awareness that make-believe is a representational activity. Children assign roles and negotiate make believe plans. "I'll push the pretend baby on the swing and you act like you are setting up the picnic."

In sociodramatic play a child takes her life experiences and creates new ones. In sociodramatic play a child exercises creativity, organization and mobility of thought as she sequences events. The social interaction permits the child to see her peers' points of view. She can see the world from another person's perspective – a very important developmental milestone. Dramatic play helps a child learn the rules for positive social interaction. She learns how to cooperate, settle disagreements, take turns, negotiate, persuade and defend. Sociodramatic play offers the opportunity to exchange ideas, expand knowledge and practice individual and group problem solving skills.

Socially, in sociodramatic play, a child must encode the play rules, communicate with others and develop her narrative language. She must use her voice and language to express a whole range of human emotions. Vocabulary can make huge leaps. In comparison to social nonpretend activities (such as drawing or putting puzzles together), during sociodramatic play preschoolers engage in interactions that last longer, show more involvement, draw larger numbers of children into the activity and are more cooperative.

Many studies show that sociodramatic play strengthens a wide variety of mental abilities, including sustained attention, self-regulation, memory, logical reasoning, language and literacy, imagination, creativity and the ability to reflect on one's own thinking and take another person's perspective. All of these skills contribute to success not only in the many years of school ahead but in life in general.

Play is GOOD!