



# Dramatic Play

## How Dramatic Play Promotes Development

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Dramatic play is central to children's healthy development and learning during the preschool years. For this reason, every *Creative Curriculum* classroom includes an area designed to inspire creative and imaginative play. In the Dramatic Play Area, children break through the restrictions of reality. They pretend to be someone or something different from themselves and make up situations and actions that go along with the role they choose. When children engage in dramatic play they deepen their understanding of the world and develop skills that will serve them throughout their lives.

**Social/emotional development.** To engage in dramatic play with others, children have to negotiate roles, agree on a topic, and cooperate to portray different situations. They recreate life experiences and try to cope with their fears by acting out roles and situations that worry them. For example, a child who anticipates going to the hospital for an operation can pretend to be the doctor. By assuming this role, the child can switch from feeling out of control to being in charge. Research shows that children who engage in dramatic play tend to demonstrate more empathy toward others because they have tried out being someone else for a while. They have the skills to cooperate with peers, control impulses, and are less aggressive than children who do not engage in this type of play (Smilansky, 1990).

**Physical development.** Children develop small muscle skills when they button and snap dress-up clothes and dress the dolls. They practice hand-eye coordination and visual discrimination skills when they put away props and materials.

**Cognitive development.** When they pretend, children create pictures in their minds about past experiences and the situations they imagine. These images are a form of abstract thinking. When children set the table for a meal for two or use play money to purchase food at their grocery store, they explore math concepts. They also learn from one another as they share ideas and solve problems together.

**Language development.** To engage with others in dramatic play, children use language to explain what they are doing and ask and answer questions. They choose the language that fits the role they have selected. They use reading and writing skills when literacy props are included in the Dramatic Play Area.

## Creating an Environment for Dramatic Play

Think of the Dramatic Play Area as a stage. Children can enter the area and immediately take on a role and pretend. Initially it is set up to look like a home with props and furniture that represent a kitchen and perhaps a bedroom and living room. This is because children are most familiar with themes related to family life. All children share common experiences such as taking care of babies, cooking and serving food, and talking on the telephone. Before long, children extend these themes to situations like shopping at the grocery store, and going to the doctor, the post office, and more. To maintain children's interest and support them in extending their ideas, teachers regularly change the props and enhance the setting to incorporate new experiences and interests of the children.

*The area includes a home setting and a small grocery store. Children can extend their play to include going shopping for food (social studies).*



*Literacy materials such as magazines, signs, food boxes, telephones, paper, and writing tools invite children to incorporate reading and writing into their play.*

*Children explore math concepts by setting the table, using the cash register with play money, and talking about time.*

## The Teacher's Role

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### Observing and Responding to Individual Children

While pretend play is considered natural—something all young children do on their own—it is less common today than it was in the past. Teachers in all types of settings are finding that young children do not necessarily engage in dramatic play on an advanced level. Because the ability to engage in and sustain imaginative play is so central to children's development—particularly cognitive and social/emotional development—we recommend that teachers take an active role in teaching the skills to make-believe. Your role, as in all interest areas, is to observe what children do and individualize your response. Based on what you learn, you can interact with children and support their play.

To get the most from their play, children need specific skills and a range of experiences to give them ideas for make-believe. It is therefore useful to familiarize yourself with the six skills children use to pretend at a high level. Children who have and use all six skills are engaging in what Sara Smilansky calls “socio-dramatic play.” Here are the six skills that she identifies (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

**Role-play.** Children have to be able to pretend to be someone or something else and mimic typical behaviors and verbal expressions. At a beginning level of role-play, children simply imitate one or two actions of familiar people or animals: a mommy feeding her baby or a dog eating out of a dog dish. On an advanced level, children think of many different actions relevant to their chosen role and expand the types of roles they play.

**Use of props.** Children elaborate their role-play by incorporating objects into their make-believe. At a beginning level, they rely on real or realistic objects. Then they use objects to represent a prop (e.g., a paper plate for a steering wheel). Children at the advanced level of pretend ability can substitute words and actions for real objects (e.g., they use hands in circular motion for a steering wheel).

**Make-believe.** In early dramatic play, children imitate actions they have seen others do, such as picking up a toy phone and talking on it. At a higher level, they are able to use words to describe and then re-enact real-life actions or events. For example, a child might point to the table and say, “I’m the doctor. Pretend this is my office. You be the Mommy and bring your baby for a checkup.” Children may also engage in fantasy—enacting situations that aren’t drawn from real life such as slaying dragons or battling monsters.



**Length of time.** At first their involvement in dramatic play may just last a few minutes before children move on to something else. They are not able to sustain their play. As children become more adept at role-playing, they can remain in play episodes for increasing amounts of time.

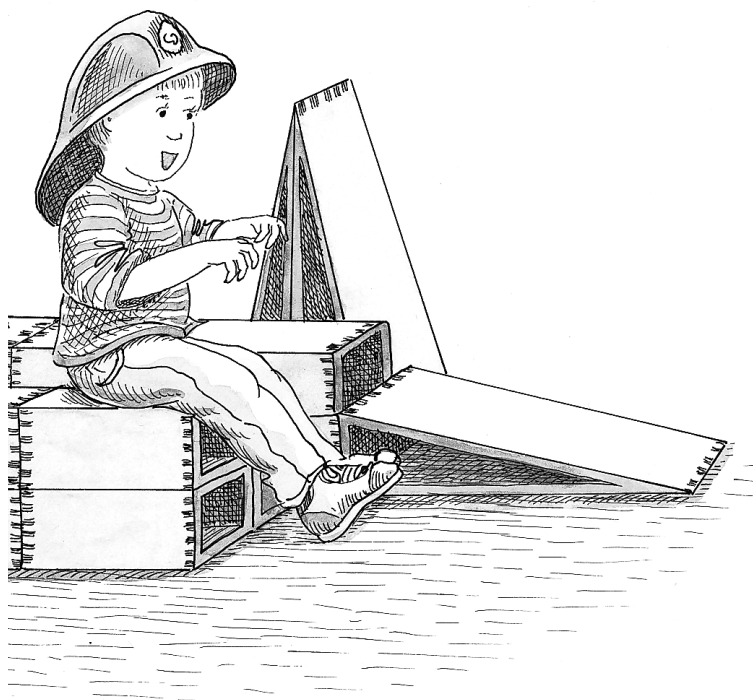
**Interaction.** Notice when and why children interact with one another in the Dramatic Play Area. At an early stage, several children may be pretending at the same time but not interacting with each other except if they need a prop someone else is using. At a more advanced level, children have agreed on what roles they are playing and they relate to one another from the perspective of their chosen role.

**Verbal communication.** Listen to what children say when they are engaged in dramatic play. If they are talking from the perspective of the role they are playing, and communicating with others about the make-believe situation, they are playing at a high level.

Knowing the six skills gives you a framework for observing children's play and deciding when and how to intervene.

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Knowing these skills gives you a framework for observing children's play and deciding when and how to intervene. The following chart shows the progression from a beginning level of simple dramatic play to the more advanced level of sociodramatic play for each of the six essential skills.



Levels of Dramatic Play		
Dramatic Play Skills	Beginning Level	Advanced Level
<b>Role-Play</b> Role Chosen  How Child Plays Role	Role relates to child's attempts to understand the familiar world (e.g., mommy, daddy, baby, animals)  Child imitates one or two aspects of role (e.g., child announces, "I'm the mommy," rocks the baby, and holds a bottle)	Child selects roles related to the outside world (e.g., firefighter, police officer, doctor)  Child expands concepts of role (e.g., child says, "I'm the mommy," feeds the baby, goes to a meeting, prepares dinner, reads the newspaper, goes to work, talks on the phone, etc.)
<b>Use of Props</b> Type of Prop Needed  How Child Uses Prop	Child uses real object or replica of object (e.g., real or toy phone)  Child enjoys physically playing with objects (e.g., banging receiver of phone, dialing)	Child uses any object as prop (e.g., block for phone) or holds hand to ear and pretends it's a telephone  Prop is used as part of play episode (e.g., child calls a doctor on phone because baby is sick)
<b>Make-Believe</b>	Child imitates simple actions of adult (e.g., moves iron back and forth on ironing board, holds phone receiver to ear)	Child's actions are part of a play episode of make-believe (e.g., "I'm ironing this dress now so I can wear it for the party tonight")
<b>Length of Time</b>	Involvement in play is fleeting (e.g., child enters area, plays with doll, puts on hat, and leaves area)	Child is engaged in dramatic play for more than 10 minutes (e.g., child dresses up as a doctor, examines a "patient," writes a prescription, and asks, "Who's next?")
<b>Interaction</b>	Solitary play (e.g., child pretends to be a mommy rocking a baby, paying no attention to what others are doing)  Functional cooperation (e.g., child agrees to take turns using the steering wheel)	Cooperative effort (e.g., child agrees to be a passenger on a bus, gives the driver a ticket, and asks for change)
<b>Verbal Communication</b>	Verbalization centers around the use of toys (e.g., "Bring me that phone" or "I had the carriage first")	Dialogue about play theme—constant chatter about roles children are playing (e.g., restaurant scene: "What do you want to eat?" "Do you have hamburgers?" "Yup. We have hamburgers, french fries, and cokes.")