

# The world is a child's stage – dramatic play and children's development

by Phillip Rowell

*If you want to be a mermaid you can imagine.<sup>1</sup>*

One of the core values stated in the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) is that play 'provides opportunities for children to learn as they discover, create, improvise and imagine' (DEEWR, 2009, p.15). To achieve this, the EYLF Learning Outcomes state that quality child care settings should promote children's sense of identity; encourage them to connect with and contribute to their family, heritage and community; and nurture children to become confident and involved learners.

Some of the most memorable and insightful play experiences educators witness take place when children are engaged in dramatic play – sometimes referred to as pretend play or make believe. A baby babbles into the receiver of a toy telephone; a toddler gently rocks a doll while feeding it a bottle; a preschooler imitates a conversation between puppets using different tones of voice; an older child builds a farm out of blocks and uses miniature animal props to re-enact a story.



## This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 3.1, 3.2, and 3.4-3.7

OSHCQA Principles: 4.2, 4.3, 5.1, 5.3 and 5.4

QIAS Principles: 3.3, and 4.1-4.5

Dramatic play is a type of symbolic play and is evident when children use objects, take on role plays and invent scenarios to make meaning of who they are, where they've come from, how to learn about others, the world they live in and their place in it. Dramatic play is instrumental in helping children develop an awareness of their identity, culture and community – and educators can truly observe the concepts of belonging, being and becoming when children have opportunities to engage in quality dramatic play experiences.

Dramatic play has been described as 'a story like performance of a player taking on an imaginary role' (Kostelnik et al., 2006, p.533) and that it 'permits children to fit the reality of the world into their own interests and knowledge' (ArtExpress, 2002). It is a process in which children can engage with and explore their actual world by creating an imaginary one – where there are a range of possibilities, stories to tell or scenarios to act out which reflect their family or day-to-day life, interests or life challenges. A child can be a parent, fire officer, chef, doctor, truck driver, puppy, superhero, princess or grouchy monster, and their dramatic world can reflect anywhere their imagination takes them. Importantly, the dramatic play process does not require groups of children to interact with one another (this is defined as socio-dramatic play). In most scenarios dramatic play is a spontaneous, child-initiated play experience, which can occur parallel to other children but does not always necessarily involve them directly.

## Dramatic play enhances children's learning

Dramatic play contributes to children's cognitive, intellectual and emotional development. It also fosters the growth of language and literacy skills as children's dramatic play is often rich in communication, using words, actions and gestures, sometimes with the use of props such as

<sup>1</sup> Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], (2009) p.7

puppets. It is also the kind of play that can further develop skills such as empathy, conflict resolution, problem solving and understanding the nature of relationships. Dramatic play can provide an outlet for children to deal with emotions and express how they feel about issues that are worrying them. Other skills that dramatic play experiences can strengthen include fine and gross motor, initiative, motivation and independence, sensory stimulation, perseverance, concentration, reflection, sensitivity and creativity (Dau, 2005).

## The skills that develop through dramatic play

It's important to understand that dramatic play doesn't suddenly 'appear' when children are provided with dress ups or 'home corner' furniture and equipment. Dramatic play happens from infancy, and as children's cognitive, language and social skills develop so too do their needs and interests, which are reflected in the complexity of their play. Dramatic play requires two skills which mature as the child grows:

**Representational skills:** This is when children use objects and materials to support their pretend play. These representational skills are closely linked with cognitive development, in that as a child's mind matures the purpose of the objects, and the way in which they are used, becomes more abstract. During dramatic play, infants and younger children use objects at 'face value' – they will push a toy car along the ground and make engine-like sounds based on their knowledge and experience of cars in the real world. Older children's cognition is more developed, and therefore they can extend their imagination and look at the functionality of the object. For example, an older child may push a wooden block around on a mat making engine sounds even though there are no wheels, and nothing remotely resembling a car in the real world. But in the child's mind, it is a car. Similarly, an older child can build a car out of Lego® based on their memory and experiment with different shapes and sizes. This means that children's use of objects as their brain matures is a personal experience and unique to each dramatic play event.

**Role playing:** This builds on representational skills by including the use of language, actions and dress. Role playing for infants and toddlers often involves imitating the actions, facial expressions and language of peers and adults, especially when relating to everyday tasks such as eating and drinking. For example, babies responding



to peek-a-boo games with adults or toddlers creating an elaborate tea party that includes pretending to drink from cups and helping the dolls with their bottles. Older children's role playing is again more complex. They can expand the tea party drama so there are specific characters and complex storylines that can reflect their family life, culture or community. Children may also create different vocal tones to identify different roles and be very aware of the stereotypes in their real world which might be associated with those roles. The tea party setting can even evolve to take place on an island or rocket ship. Their imagination can run wild!

## Planning for quality dramatic play experiences

One of the dangers for educators when planning for dramatic play experiences is to focus solely on the physical environment, such as 'home corner' furniture, objects and dress ups, to define the learning experience. Instead, it is crucial to observe the child at play, listen to their conversations, find out about their interests, talk with their families and plan for experiences that are catalysts for the child's imagination and the dramatic play process. The following strategies can assist with planning dramatic play experiences:

- Provide children with plenty of space to create their dramatic worlds, and involve them in the process of designing and deciding what goes into the space and how it should be arranged. Mirrors can also be very useful with non-verbal or younger children so they can mimic gestures and facial expressions.
- Acknowledge the outdoor environment as a valuable dramatic play space. Children can

create amazing dramatic worlds in sandpits using trucks, building elaborate sand castles and landscapes. Climbing equipment can be transformed into cubby houses. Be adventurous and move the home corner furniture and dress ups outside. This can encourage a whole new dramatic play opportunity.

- Give children plenty of time to engage in dramatic play. Allow them to return to their play over time, whether it be over the day, the week or longer, depending on their interests.
- Include real life objects and materials such as dolls, homewares and dress ups. Also consider other materials such as wooden blocks, art and craft materials, laundry pegs, fabrics and natural materials such as leaves, bark, flowers and sand.
- Ensure that dress ups include a variety of clothing, hats, shoes, props and accessories which can enhance the role play. Community roles may include an artist, hairdresser, dentist, pilot, doctor, teacher, truck driver, baker, sailor, florist, cook, nurse, police officer and fire-fighter. Children may also role play superhero characters. While this may be confronting for some educators, acknowledging children's interests and establishing clear guidelines for appropriate non-aggressive behaviour is important to supporting children to participate in superhero play in positive ways.
- Provide language and literacy rich props and tools such as books, posters, finger and hand puppets, dolls, soft toys, miniature people and animal props.

- Invite members of the community into the service to talk with children about their job or role. These people may include doctors, dentists, parents with new babies, vets, librarians or park rangers. This helps to scaffold the learning process so children can develop more complex and exciting role playing.
- Talk with children about their dramatic play. Ask questions that will further assist in the development of the play or scenario, or suggest how the play may be extended upon using additional objects or materials.

## Conclusion

Children need opportunities to engage in dramatic play, create dramatic worlds and be allowed to pretend and make believe. It not only stimulates their learning and is a powerful form of play, it also reminds adults of the magic of children's imagination and the wonder of how they interpret their world ■

This article relates to EYLF Learning:

- Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity
- Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world
- Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing
- Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners

## References and further reading

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