

How Dramatic Play Can Enhance Learning

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Dramatic play can be defined as a type of play where children accept and assign roles, and then act them out. It is a time when they break through the walls of reality, pretend to be someone or something different from themselves, and dramatize situations and actions to go along with the roles they have chosen to play. And while this type of play may be viewed as frivolous by some, it remains an integral part of the developmental learning process by allowing children to develop skills in such areas as abstract thinking, literacy, math, and social studies, in a timely, natural manner.



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<https://www.littlelifelonglearners.com/product-category/imaginative-play/>



The Proper Environment

In many classrooms the dramatic play area has traditionally been centered in “housekeeping”. However, when we actually watch children play, we see them reinventing scenes that might take place in other areas of life such as gas stations, building sites, department stores, classrooms, or libraries. This should tell us, that in order to derive the full benefit from dramatic play as it relates to learning, early educators should “set the stage” throughout the classroom.

Setting the Stage

Any dramatic play area should be inviting. Presentation alone should inspire creative and imaginative play. This should be an area where the children can immediately take on a role and begin pretending. In establishing these areas, you will want to consider the following.

1. Each area should incorporate a variety of materials that encourage dramatic play, such as hats, masks, clothes, shoes, tools, vehicles, etc. You can include both teacher-made and commercial materials. The types of materials you supply will depend on the “theme” of the area.
2. Part of your materials list for each area should include items that stimulate literacy activities, like reading and writing. Paper, pencils, a chalk board, wipe-off board, address books, and greeting cards are all examples of materials that might be used to promote the development of literacy skills.
3. Materials should be developmentally appropriate and allow for both creativity and flexibility in play. This includes materials that can be used by all children (unisex) and those that may be used in more than one way (a table as a table, or with a blanket over it, as a doghouse).
4. The goal of all areas should be to reinforce grade level appropriate physical, cognitive, and social skills.

Finally, try to change the materials (or props, as they are sometimes called) on a regular basis. Different materials on occasion will enhance the area, spark new interest in a much-used area, and allow the children to incorporate new experiences in their play.

The Dramatic Play Skill Set

There are basically six skills children work with and develop as they take part in dramatic play experiences.

Role Playing – This is where children mimic behaviors and verbal expressions of someone or something they are pretending to be. At first they will imitate one or two actions, but as time progresses they will be able to expand their roles by creating several actions relevant to the role they are playing.

Use of Materials/Props – By incorporating objects into pretend play, children can extend or elaborate on their play. In the beginning they will mainly rely on realistic materials. From there they will move on to material substitution, such as using a rope to represent a fire hose, and progress to holding in their hands in such a way to indicate that they are holding an actual hose.

Pretending/Make-Believe – All dramatic play is make-believe. Children pretend to be the mother, fireman, driver, etc. by imitating actions they have witnessed others doing. As the use of dramatic play increases, they begin to use words to enhance and describe their re-enactments. Some children may even engage in fantasy, where the situations they are acting out aren't pulled from real-life experiences.

Attention Span/Length of Time – Early ventures into the field of dramatic play may only last a few minutes, but as the children grow, develop, and experience more, they will be able to incorporate additional actions and words, which will lengthen the time they engage in such activities.

Social Skills/Interaction – Dramatic play promotes the development of social skills through interaction with others, peers or adults. As children climb the social skill ladder of development through play, they will move from pretending at the same time without any actual interaction, to pretending that involves several children playing different roles and relating to each other from the perspective of their assigned roles.

Communication – Dramatic play promotes the use of speaking and listening skills. When children take part in this type of play, they practice words they have heard others say, and realize that they must listen to what other “players” say in order to be able to respond in an appropriate fashion. It also teaches them to choose their words wisely so that others will understand exactly what it is they are trying to communicate.

Dramatic Play and Development

Dramatic play enhances child development in four major areas.

Social/Emotional – When children come together in a dramatic play experience, they have to agree on a topic (basically what “show” they will perform), negotiate roles, and cooperate to bring it all together. And by recreating some of the life experiences they actually face, they learn how to cope with any fears and worries that may accompany these experiences. Children who participate in dramatic play experiences are better able to show empathy for others because they have “tried out” being that someone else for a while. They also develop the skills they need to cooperate with their peers, learn to control their impulses, and tend to be less aggressive than children who do not engage in this type of play.

Physical – Dramatic play helps children develop both gross and fine motor skills – fire fighters climb, and parents dress their babies. And when children put their materials away, they practice eye-hand coordination and visual discrimination.

Cognitive – When children are involved in make-believe play, they make use of pictures they have created in their minds to recreate past experiences, which is a form of abstract thinking. Setting a table for a meal, counting out change as a cashier, dialing a telephone, and setting the clock promote the use of math skills. By adding such things as magazines, road signs, food boxes and cans, paper and pencils to the materials included in the area, we help children develop literacy skills. When children come together in this form of play, they also learn how to share ideas, and solve problems together.

Language – In order to work together in a dramatic play situation, children learn to use language to explain what they are doing. They learn to ask and answer questions and the words they use fit whatever role they are playing. Personal vocabularies grow as they begin to use new words appropriately, and the importance of reading and writing skills in everyday life becomes apparent by their use of literacy materials that fill the area.

Dramatic play engages children in both life and learning. Its' real value lies in the fact that it increases their understanding of the world they live in, while it works to develop personal skills that will help them meet with success throughout their lives.