

# A Letter to Families about Dramatic Play

Dear Families,

In the Dramatic Play area, children take on different roles and enact real-life experiences. They use props and make-believe to deepen their understandings about the world.

Pretending is very important to your child's development. Children who know how to make believe develop good vocabularies, which are important for reading. They learn to cooperate with others, to solve problems, and to think abstractly. All of those skills are important for success in school. When children pretend, they recall and re-create experiences. To do this, they need to form mental images. For example, to play the role of a doctor, children have to remember what tools a doctor uses, how a doctor examines a patient. And what a doctor says. In playing a doctor or other roles, children learn to cooperate with others and to share their ideas.

When children make believe, we talk with them and participate in their play to extend their thinking. We might ask,

“Is your baby sick? What are you going to do?”

“Are you the storekeeper here? I need to buy some food.”

“What are you cooking for dinner tonight? It smells very good!”

## What You Can Do at Home

You can encourage the same kind of pretend play at home as we do at school simply by playing with your child and providing some simple props. Draping a sheet over a table creates a house or a hideout. A large empty cardboard box can become almost anything: a pirate ship, a doghouse, a castle, or a train. The nice thing about dramatic play is that it requires only your imagination. Here are some simple ways to encourage your child's learning through dramatic play:

- During baths, offer plastic boats, cups, and rubber dolls and pretend together.
- Save empty food cartons, make some play money, and play store with your child.
- Read stories together and involve your child in acting out different parts.
- Collect some old clothes for your child to use to dress up and make believe.
- Say to your child, “Let's pretend we're going on a train ride. What do we need? Tickets? Suitcases? Do you want to collect the tickets?”

When you engage in pretend play with your child, you are teaching important skills and strengthening the relationships that are the foundation for all learning.

# What Children Learn in the Dramatic Play Area

## Literacy

Promote **vocabulary and language** by introducing and teaching your child the names of props. Ask questions and read stories about topics that your child uses in their dramatic play, such as buying new shoes or going to the clinic.

Encourage your child to explore **print, letters and words** by placing writing tools and paper in the Dramatic Play area. Participate in your child's play by demonstrating the uses of writing. Encourage your child to use writing tools and paper as part of their play. Offer props such as telephone books or empty food boxes with labels.

Promote understanding of **books and other texts** by including story books, phone books, calendars, cookbooks, newspapers, magazines, and other print materials in the Dramatic Play area. Encourage your child to use these props in their play.

## Mathematics

Guide **problem solving** by helping your child find solutions to problems they encounter.

Promote understanding of **number concepts** by asking number questions. Offer props such as play money, scales, measuring tapes, cash registers, and calculators.

Encourage your child's interest in **measurement** by providing props such as a foot measurer for a shoe store, sand timers, height charts, and a bathroom scale.

## Science

Encourage your child to explore **physical science** by providing balance scales, eggbeaters, kitchen magnets, timers, and fishing rods (without hooks).

Expand your child's knowledge of **life science** by including a plant in the area. Talk about what kinds of foods are good to eat. Have your child name fruits and vegetables as they pretend.

## Social Studies

Encourage learning about **spaces and geography** by including maps.

Explore concepts related to **people and how they live** by providing props that encourage them to role-play family life and different kinds of jobs. Display photographs of families and community helpers.

## The Arts

Encourage your child to explore **drama** by teaching them the skills they need to pretend. Read and reread stories that children can act out.

Promote the **visual arts** by providing materials your child needs to make their own props for dramatic play, such as cardboard boxes, collage materials, construction paper, scissors, etc.

## Technology

Raise your child's **awareness of technology** by including old cameras, calculators, different types of phones, typewriters, and computers in the area. Talk with your child about how these objects are used.

# How Dramatic Play Promotes Development and Learning

## Social-emotional

When your child engages in dramatic play with other children, they have to negotiate roles, agree on a topic, and cooperate to portray different situations. They recreate life experiences and try to cope with their emotions by acting out roles and situations that interest 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.

## Physical

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

## Language and Literacy

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

## Cognitive

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.

# 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. Most 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, going to the doctor, and other places. To maintain children's interest and support them in extending their ideas, regularly change the props and enhance the setting to incorporate new experiences and interests.

## Location

- Find an area in the play room that can be defined by walls, shelves, and furniture to create a secluded area and separate spaces – kitchen, living room, bedroom

## Furnishings

- Familiar furniture (doll bed; child-sized wooden stove, refrigerator, sink, chest of drawers, table and chairs, couch, sink, ironing board and iron; doll carriage or stroller; high chair; full-length mirror)

## Suggest Materials

- Dress-up clothes for men and women; accessories like hats, shoes, boas, jewelry
- Pots, pans, dishes, and other kitchen equipment relevant to different cultures, stored on shelves and/or hung on pegboard
- Dolls with clothes and blankets
- Child-size broom and mop
- Toy telephone
- Pocketbook and briefcases
- Plastic food and empty food boxes
- Calendars, memo pads, address book, pencils, cookbooks, message board
- Home-like touches such as curtains, a tablecloth, photographs, a small rug, a plant

## Frequently Asked Questions about Dramatic Play

**Sometimes children's play makes me uncomfortable. How should I respond?**

Children's dramatic play often reflects what they see around them. For many children, violence, sex, and drugs are everyday experiences – either in real life or what they see on TV or in the movies. By taking on a pretend role, you can address children's interest in the topic and redirect behaviors that are not constructive.

**What should I do about superhero play that is overly aggressive?**

Increasingly, children's dramatic play is heavily influenced by television. Play based on TV shows usually involves a lot of action – jumping, leaping, and fighting. For this reason, sometimes it is smart to limit this kind of play to the outdoors.

If you are seeing a lot of this kind of play, consider that your child may be trying to deal with very real fears about violence they have experienced or seen on the news. For example, after the Pentagon was hit and the World Trade Center destroyed by hijacked planes, preschool children were seen building towers and then taking a toy plane and destroying them. Be aware of what your child is worried about and use the opportunity to talk with them.

**What do I say to my parenting partner who does not want their son to use dress-up clothes or play with dolls, or their daughters to play with tools?**

First, reassure them that such play is entirely normal during the preschool years. This is the time when children use dramatic play to better understand their world and the different roles people play, both men and women. They enjoy dressing up in clothes they normally wouldn't wear and trying out roles of the people who are important to them, especially mothers and fathers. The Dramatic Play area is a safe place to explore and learn. At the same time, be sure you have included dress-up clothes and props used by men and women in a variety of roles.