

DRAMA

Boosting Young Imaginations

by Jennifer Pishny, Child Care Aware® Region Three

Although dramatic play is as varied as the children involved, it always has the same fundamental purpose- process. Children use dramatic play to process experiences and explore possibilities. Dramatic play is a tool children use to learn more about their environment and test their boundaries. They imitate activities and scenarios they see around them. Sometimes they imitate daily occurrences, such as cooking, taking care of babies or riding in a car. Sometimes they process experiences of significant importance, such as an airplane ride or a new baby. As their cognitive abilities increase, they are able to stretch their play to include more creative scenarios and characters.

Caregivers are often asked to join in dramatic play, but should ensure the process and direction of the play are always controlled by the child. Children delight in this “role reversal” when they are allowed to control what the caregiver does and says. The most important part for caregivers in dramatic play is to provide materials, time, space and encouragement without directing the creative play process.

Which materials can caregivers provide to encourage dramatic play and creativity? Of course, it would depend on the child’s age and development, as well as on the child’s interests and recent experiences. Babies need very simple and easy to manipulate materials that reflect daily experiences. Dolls and hats are favorites at this age. They love to hug baby dolls and may even try to feed them toward the end of their first year. Hats can be a bit tricky at first, but once they discover how to get the hats on and off, anything can become a hat — baskets, boxes, bowls, etc.

As experiences and cognitive ability increases, so, too, does the range of dramatic play. Offering new materials creates new opportunities to explore possibilities. Babies love boxes, but toddlers begin to use boxes in more creative ways. A box becomes a house, a car, a train or a bathtub. Extra materials enhance and expand the play such as dolls for house or a washcloth and empty shampoo bottle for a bathtub. Adults shouldn’t decide what the box becomes, but should watch closely to provide encouragement to expand the play theme that the child has chosen.

Preschool age children spend a great deal of time and energy in dramatic play. Their play ranges from processing experiences and practicing “grown up” activities to exploring many new and creative ideas, sometimes including fantasy play as they learn to distinguish between real and pretend. During this time, it is difficult for children to stop in the middle of the process. Often the child’s play concept extends beyond the time a caregiver has scheduled which results in conflict. Flexible and creative solutions are important to support the child’s need to completely explore the process whenever possible.

Dramatic play in the preschool years can take on an endless number of themes. House and farm are always favorites, but children this age need more options. Their current interests and experiences can inspire many dramatic play scenarios. Caregivers can watch and listen for these cues and respond with materials to help them act out these scenarios. In addition to recreating recent events like a field trip to the fire department or a new baby brother, children love to retell stories they have heard. Related props can extend those stories to increase literacy skills as well as creativity.

Children need encouragement and materials to process experiences and explore possibilities through dramatic play. Caregivers who are particularly in tune and responsive to these needs, will help their children reach a new level of creativity as they use their cognitive abilities and their whole body in the play process. The play possibilities are as endless as the imagination of a child.

