

Language, Literacy, and Play



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“Here, you can wear this old dress to be Cinderella when she has to clean the house. When I say, ‘Cinderella, bring me my breakfast,’ you put down the broom and say ‘Coming, Stepmother.’” (Erin, age 4)

In our family we used to say that Erin, who is now 13, was destined for the stage. She absolutely loved fairytales and would totally immerse herself for months at a time in one favorite story before moving on to a new story with a new plot, a new set of characters and costumes. Old dresses, aprons, Halloween costumes, scarves, and even my old nightgowns filled her “costume wardrobe.” She also amassed a huge assortment of objects that she kept in a large plastic box to use in her re-enactments. When we didn’t have one of the objects mentioned in a particular story — how many people have a pumpkin carriage handy, after all — my daughter improvised: a ruler became a wand, an empty cardboard wrapping paper roll became a sword, or a small discarded bottle became a jar that contained a magic potion. When she played alone, she acted out multiple characters in the story, effortlessly changing clothes and props. When others participated, she became the director, costumer, and stage manager, in addition to the actress.

Needless to say, we were called on again and again to read and reread the “chosen” story. It was from these re-readings and her story retellings that she developed a solid understanding of the concept of story as having characters, settings, problems, goals, and a sequence of events leading to a satisfactory conclusion. She also acquired an excellent grasp of “book language” (the types of vocabulary words and sentence patterns found in stories and books) and the ability to portray a range of feelings and emotions of the various characters, even if she wasn’t always quite sure of the meaning. For example, one day I observed her practicing the scene from *Cinderella* in which Cinderella is upset about not getting to go to the ball. Erin lifted her right arm to her forehead and then dramatically swept it downward over and over again as she said, “There’s just no use! There’s just no use!” Then, looking up at me, she asked, “Mom, do we have any use?”



The first examples of pretend play are evident by about age 2, and dramatic play is at its most elaborate and extensive during the early childhood years.

Whether portraying Cinderella, Superman, or another familiar fairytale or modern-day character, or pretending to be the mother, the father, the doctor, the nurse, or the grocery store clerk, young children find great joy in engaging in pretend play. And, because the areas of the brain connected to language typically develop during these years, the richer the socio-dramatic play, the greater its effect on vocabulary development and sentence structure.

Using dramatic play areas to connect language, literacy, and play

As parents and teachers of young children, we can connect language, literacy, and play in ways that promote maximum development. One important way to establish strong and meaningful literacy connections is through the use of literacy props in dramatic play areas. Literacy props for the classroom house-keeping center typically include the following: notepads and pencils for making lists, newspapers, grocery store and other shopping advertisements, coupons, telephone directories, address books magazines, cookbooks, empty food containers with labels, and old wallets and purses with play money to use for “going to the store.”

Selecting, creating, and implementing dramatic play centers

During my work with children and teachers over the years, several key criteria for selecting, creating, and implementing dramatic play centers have emerged. These criteria are listed below, along with suggested props for encouraging language and literacy play in a variety of dramatic play centers based on familiar themes.

In addition to having a house keeping dramatic play area, create one or more additional dramatic play areas that is based on themes in which the children have expressed some interest and that contains a variety of “print props.”

Dramatic play areas based on themes for which the children have some initial familiarity typically generate the most enthusiasm both in terms of numbers of children engaging in play at the center and in the amount of literacy-related behaviors exhibited by the children during play. For example, two of the most popular dramatic play areas in our center are the bank and the post office. Both are based on real life experiences for which the children have some familiarity, interest, and curiosity. Both lend themselves to rich literacy play. By observing the teachers who join in their play for brief periods of time, the children learn to incorporate old checks, deposit books, deposit slips, ink pads and stamps, adding machines, play money, envelopes, paper, stamps, and so forth into their play.

Play is limited in dramatic play areas in which the children have little or no familiarity or interest and when there are limited opportunities for literacy play.

For example, we once created a “travel agency” dramatic play area complete with travel brochures, posters, ticket information, and other travel-related items. We observed that children did not spontaneously enter the center unless an adult was there to join in the play. And, unlike what we observed with the bank and post office centers, when the adult left the “travel agency,” the children tended to lose interest and wander off to other areas of the room. The theme was simply not one that was relevant to the lives of these young children, nor did the setting evoke sufficient opportunities for rich literacy play.

New dramatic play areas provide unique opportunities for children to learn new vocabulary words and sentence patterns, as well as to practice many valuable print-related behaviors. During a unit on community helpers, the children took a fieldtrip to local businesses, including a bank. The bank gave the children outdated counter checks, blank deposit slips, and deposit books to take back to the center. This sparked a great deal of spontaneous play, which led to the creation of the bank center. After a day or so, noticing that the children weren't using the deposit slips and ➡

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deposit books in their play, the teacher joined their play for a brief period of time to model their use. She picked up an old wallet with play money and went over to the “bank teller” saying, “I want to deposit this money into my bank account.” She pointed to the deposit slips and books and explained that she needed to write on a deposit slip the amount of money that she was giving the bank to keep for her, and the bank teller could then give her a deposit book in which the amount of money she gave the bank had been written. Still in the role of customer of the bank, the teacher completed her transaction, thanked the bank teller, and left the play area. This brief interaction served as model for the other children who then began to use these print-props, as well as the word “deposit,” in their play.

Observation of children at play in a dramatic play area provides teachers with unique opportunities for assessment. These observations can be used to direct the teacher’s planned interventions, such as the above-mentioned role-play with deposit slips and books. They can also be used to gather informal assessment information about individual children’s language and literacy use.

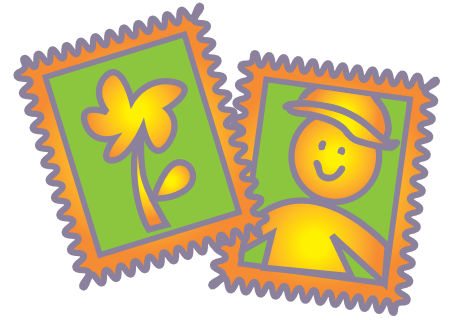
The children’s interest in even the most exciting theme-based dramatic play area tends to decrease significantly within a few weeks. Therefore, dramatic play areas should be rotated regularly.

If the teacher finds it necessary to spend an excessive amount of time in the dramatic play area just to keep play going or if the children no longer seem interested in playing in the area, it is time for a new theme-based center.

With the exception, perhaps, of the housekeeping area, which might be “spruced up” with a few new props every few weeks, most dramatic play areas run their course in about two to three weeks. At that point, place the print props and materials in a labeled container so that the items will be readily accessible later during the year when one or more of the children will remember the area and ask for it back!

Be on the lookout for themes for new dramatic play areas. These are often related to units of study within the classroom, such as the bank and post office themes that resulted from our unit on community helpers.

The best theme-related dramatic play areas often grow out of the children’s spontaneous play. The teacher observes the children at play and either notices the opportunity to introduce new print props and vocabulary words or responds to children’s requests for particular props. If the play continues and, perhaps even intensifies over the next day or so, teachers should try to designate an area of the room or playground for this particular dramatic play and add more props for children to explore and use, such as the case with a castle dramatic play area that evolved in our preschool center. The children were enjoying a number of fairytales, sparked, not surprisingly, by the release of a new Disney film, which almost all had seen. As the children’s requests for costumes and props increased, and as more

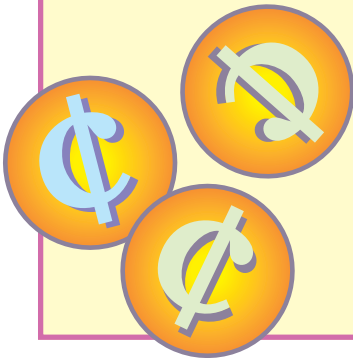


children participated, creating a castle to use as the primary setting for their dramatic play became a focal point of discussion among the children. We found a huge refrigerator box, and the children soon had their castle. As the castle took shape, the teacher took advantage of the opportunity to introduce new words associated with castles and life in medieval times (for example, turret, dungeon, drawbridge, moat). Literacy related props included markers and paper for making “blueprints” and signs, envelopes and paper for writing notes and letters, art materials for drawing and painting pictures to decorate the castle walls, and many fairy tale books, as well as non-fiction books about castles.

Other popular theme-based dramatic play areas and related print props

Keeping in mind the criteria for selecting themes for dramatic play areas and the need to create centers based on children’s interests and prior knowledge and experiences, there are several themes that are generally popular with most groups of preschool children. These include, but are not limited to, the following: pet store, grocery store, veterinarian’s office, and pizza parlor. See the sidebar on the next page for a list of print-related props for each of these, as well as those for creating a post office, bank, and house-keeping center.

<p>Housekeeping area props</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Newspaper advertisements Note pads Pencils Pens Magazines Bedtime storybooks Coupons Telephone and telephone directories 	<p>Veterinarian office props</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Disposable masks Small stuffed animals Pet carriers Pictures of animals and of veterinarians at work Office signs Open/closed signs Magazines Telephone Telephone appointment book Rubber gloves Pet comb/brush Scale Thermometer Clipboard Pencils and pens Eyedroppers Bandages Stethoscope Hospital smock 	<p>Post office props</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mailbag Cardboard mail organizer Large cardboard U.S. Mail drop box Mail carrier coat and hat Play stamps Play money Rubber stamps and ink pads Telephone and Telephone directories Adding machine Envelopes Paper Postcard-size paper Pens and pencils Tape dispenser Memo holder Posters or pictures of post office workers and stamps 	<p>Pet store props</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small stuffed animals Fish tank Pet carriers Posters or pictures of pets Store sign Open/closed signs Telephone Telephone directory Pet care items for sale (for example, a pet comb/brush, pet toys, empty pet food containers) Cash register Play money Bags
<p>Grocery store props</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empty food containers and plastic foods Grocery bags with store logo Posters or pictures of food items Toy grocery basket Aprons Newspaper advertisements Coupons Cash register Play money Adding machine Notepads Pencils and pens Store signs Open/closed signs 	<p>Pizza parlor props</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coupons and advertisements Empty pizza boxes and wheels Pizza pans Napkins with logos Placements with logos Straws Aprons and hats Plastic food Large plastic jars with construction paper pizza ingredients (for example, shredded yellow and white paper for cheese, red circles for pepperoni, green strips for green peppers, brown circles for meatballs) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Play money Cash register Poster menus Menus Open/closed signs Mop Dishcloths Sponges 	<p>Bank props</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Old checks and checkbooks Deposit books Deposit slips Ink pads and stamps Adding machine Play money Envelopes Paper Play stamps Wallets/purses Teller window Credit card application forms



Wrapping it up

As Doris Bergen and Juliet Coscia explain in their book *Brain Research and Childhood Education*, dramatic play enhances brain development by providing young children with opportunities to assume problem-solving and self-regulating roles. When children begin playing and engaging in

pretend-play with peers, our role as parents and teachers is to support that play. Using the ideas and suggestions shared in this article to create theme-based dramatic play areas, you can provide children with the support they need for their play, as well as for their language and literacy growth. **CS&F**

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