

---

## BACK TO BASICS

# Dramatic play

---

Opportunities to try on adult roles give children social and emotional ties to the real world. Through dress-up clothes, realistic materials, and representational environments, children can create adventures, practice real-life activities and skills, act out fantasies and fears, and interact with people and objects in a familiar, comfortable, and safe place.

The dramatic play center—also called the house-keeping or home center—helps children build language skills as they make discoveries about themselves, their families, and their communities.

### Stages of dramatic play

Infants and toddlers usually play alone, mimicking—in sound and action—others in the environment. They build skills through sensory interactions with adults and other children, from blowing kisses to waving bye-bye when taking an imaginary train trip. Sharing is a challenging skill for the youngest children so be sure to provide duplicates of favorite dra-

matic play props like dolls, telephones, and cooking equipment.

---

### SHARING IS A CHALLENGING SKILL FOR THE YOUNGEST CHILDREN.

---

Preschool children have usually developed the ability to play with others—both side-by-side and cooperatively. They are beginning to understand the negotiation, compromise, and give-and-take of human interaction. They often substitute symbolic objects for the real thing—a block for a cell phone or a rope for a fire hose, for example. The ability to use symbols allows children to create imaginative situations in which they can act out feelings and emotions.



PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ

---

In school-age children, socio-dramatic play develops parallel to communication skills. Children invent and assign roles, plan scenarios, and direct action. Domestic scenes, crises, and sudden danger—with heroic rescue—are frequent themes.

## Guidelines for planning

- Learn to recognize the stages of dramatic play. Use this knowledge to set up a rich and inviting learning center. Adapt and modify the center according to the developmental needs of the children using it. Add props to correspond to the children's needs, interests, and skills.
- Provide enough space to allow children to move freely. Make sure aisles and traffic paths can accommodate children who use braces, walkers, or wheelchairs.

props often—or whenever they end up in a child's mouth. In the event of a head lice outbreak, be even more diligent about laundering and consider removing hats, scarves, and other head coverings for the duration of the outbreak.

- Help children feel comfortable in nontraditional gender roles. All children need the chance to experience twirling in a lavish skirt and being the fire chief. For more insights on gender roles in children's play, read *You Can't Say You Can't Play* by Vivian Paley. ■

---

## HELP CHILDREN FEEL COMFORTABLE IN NONTRADITIONAL GENDER ROLES.

- 
- Define the space with sturdy screens, storage chests, and shelves. Provide basic equipment like a child-sized refrigerator, stove, sink, doll bed, full-length mirror, table, and chairs.
  - Provide enough equipment to invite several children to use the center simultaneously. Limiting the number of children to two limits the depth of social interaction and skill development.
  - Curb television, film, and video influences. Invite children to create their own play and make rules clear and logical. Be consistent in helping children learn that hurting or threatening someone is not OK.
  - Equip the center with hooks, baskets, and shelves for storage. Make sure all props are safe and in good condition. Build theme boxes (sometimes called prop boxes) that contain appropriate materials for a specific study like a doctor's office or grocery market. Develop the skills to anticipate when interest in a particular theme is waning, and be prepared to introduce a new theme before children become bored and play becomes stale.
  - Periodically launder dress-up clothes. Wash other