

The teacher's role in child-directed play

"There has to be a doctor for the animals," Ian said, asking for a return of the bandages, stethoscopes, syringes, and other medical supplies they had used in their play earlier in the year.

Emily and Ashlyn quickly decided that the zoo hospital should be located in the library center where the noise level remains low.

Ashlyn observed, "It's quiet here, so the animals can just be still and be sick."

How did these children gain the skills of planning, organizing, and coordinating ideas to create a rich shared narrative where they will be able to practice important skills in literacy, math, social studies, and science?

In past generations, children learned how to play in mixed-age groups in a play lot as they roamed in the neighborhood after school and during the summer. Today children are more likely to be involved in lessons, organized sports, or other activities. They

are left to learn the skills of play with same-age peers and the coaching of a master teacher.

Setting the stage

The first day the children discovered the new zoo props, they spent their center time exploring. What materials did they have? What did they know about where each fit into a zoo? Who were the people who used or interacted with these props? What roles did these people have? What might they do and say? What was missing and needed for future play?

The teacher was patient, watching play that was primarily solitary, constructive, and associative. She also listened to the conversations to learn how she could support their play and made notes about other props they wanted.

The following day the teacher added the requested items to the room, allowing the children to arrange them to create their hospital.

While one group of children arranged the medical equipment to resemble a hospital examining room, other children joined the mini hospital by creating an appointment center complete with phones, writing tablets, and the house center calendar.

Austin shared his idea of using rulers from the writing center to "see if the animals are tall enough." He also built scales out of unit blocks to determine their weight.

"Oh, good idea," Emily called out. "Now we can see if the animals are sick or just too full!"

Using the full teaching continuum

As the children saw the possibilities for story in their play, ideas for the narrative formed for each individual. The group nature of socio-dramatic play forges those individual narratives into a shared story.

Children use their combined individual experiences as well as additional group experiences provided by

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the teacher to produce a story with a part for each of them.

This well-developed socio-dramatic play did not just happen nor was it learned solely from extended opportunities to practice with peers. Instead, a master teacher intentionally taught the skills of socio-dramatic play using the full continuum of teaching strategies: **acknowledge, model, facilitate, support, scaffold, co-construct, demonstrate, and direct** (Bredenkamp and Rosegrant 1997).

At the beginning of the year, the children were taught only three classroom rules: respect self, respect others, and respect property. The teacher showed children exactly what each rule looked like with direct instruction and demonstration. The children were then allowed to practice those skills at the acknowledge end of the continuum with occasional modeling, facilitating, or support from the teacher when needed.

The exploration of zoo began on the child-directed end of the continuum as the teacher provided leading props. She observed the play and assessed the children's knowledge of the organization of a zoo and the characters they would be able to write into their oral narrative. She provided direct instruction in the form of a video to expand the children's knowledge of jobs at the zoo and facilitated the opening of the hospital with the addition of requested props.

Ashlyn felt it was good to have so many books to look at in the hospital. "The animals can look and see how they should look when they're well," she said.

Mason, hearing her comment, suggested bringing the mirror down from the house center loft so the animals "can look and see if they look like the animals in the book." He recruited help from two other friends to bring the large mirror down the stairs and into the library now serving as the hospital.

Child-directed choices and problem solving

Ashlyn knew that books can be a source of important information. Mason knew that you need a mirror to see yourself, but he had a job he couldn't do by himself. He needed other children to choose to help him, to postpone whatever they would otherwise have been doing to contribute to the staging of their expanding story of the zoo.

The teacher allowed wide latitude to the children in choosing ways to use classroom equipment and supplies to support their narrative. She allowed them to make their own decisions and resolve their own problems whenever they were able, although she was always close by to step in and model or co-create if needed.

One day there was an argument in the hospital about whether there were enough rulers available to measure the giraffes.

"We have 10 rulers," Emily said. "Nothing is taller than 10 rulers!"

But Elizabeth held her ground, saying it would take a hundred rulers to measure a giraffe.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION WAS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHILDREN.

Rich socio-dramatic play was enhanced by the support of a teacher able to use her assessment of the children's play to guide her instruction. While the teacher was not directing the play, she was intentionally providing the children with facts and information that would expand their schema of zoo. The teacher was also intentionally providing the potential to add detail in their shared narrative.

Conflict resolution was the responsibility of the children. However, the teacher was near to provide support, scaffolding, and even co-construction of knowledge when needed. In this instance, the teacher shared an informational book with the children. As co-learners they discovered that baby giraffes are 6-feet tall when they are born.

"See," Emily chimed. "We only need 6 rulers, and we have 10."

Fluid movement along the teaching continuum

Here we see how the children made connections between the content and previous learning that each

ruler is 1-foot long and that 6 rulers are fewer than 10. To further help the children gain a real visual of 6 feet, the teacher directed an activity in which the children worked together to paint, cut out, and stuff a 6-foot-tall baby giraffe.

Once the activity was complete, the children were able to stand next to it and discover the difference in their own heights as compared to the baby giraffe. It was even taller than the teacher!

Laying the giraffe on the floor, children were able to see how many rulers it took, end to end, to be as tall as their giraffe. Then Austin suggested it would probably take 100 pennies to be as tall as their baby giraffe. The teacher pulled out an often-used jar of pennies. Within a few minutes, all 14 members of the class were there, enthusiastically lining up pennies from the bottom of the paper hooves to the top of the giraffe's yarn-lined head. The children not only stayed focused long enough to line up the pennies (11 minutes), they also insisted on counting them one at a time, in chorus.

"1, 2, 3, 4.....90, 91, 92, 93!!" Cheers erupted as though an Olympic event had just been won.

"Write it on the board. Write it on the board," they called.

"Yes, and circle it big," Megan said, knowing that important numbers are always circled on the calendar and other areas in the room.

"Is it close to 100?"

"Can we leave the pennies out?"

Measuring an object with other objects touching end-to-end was a skill taught in a small-group, direct-instruction lesson earlier in the year and practiced many times since. Now the teacher served as an observer and co-learner as they counted the pennies together. She honored the children's request to leave the giraffe, rulers, and pennies out across the classroom floor, which allowed the pennies to be re-counted nearly a dozen times that day.

PLAY HAS VALUE IN THE EMOTIONAL, SOCIAL, AND COGNITIVE HEALTH OF CHILDREN.

While the children were given responsibility for writing and producing their shared narrative, the teacher set the stage and watched the play closely, assessing possible needs, asking leading questions, coaching appropriate behavior, facilitating measurements or new centers, and providing support and scaffolding when the conflict hit an impasse or the counting was beyond their skills to do independently.

The teacher shifted to direct instruction by reading from a book about how tall a giraffe is at birth. She shifted to co-construction as she provided a way for the children to build their own baby giraffe to scale

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and then use traditional and non-traditional tools to measure its height. Developmentally appropriate practice presents the continuum of teaching strategies, which should be used fluidly and intentionally to meet the needs of the group and the individuals within the group (Bredekamp and Copple 2009).

Using the continuum for safe and joyous learning

We know that play has value in the emotional, social, and cognitive health of children (Elkind 2007). Understanding how to use the tools of developmentally appropriate practice to assist children to access all these benefits is essential for early childhood educators. The interactions that foster rich socio-dramatic play meet all the standards of quality interactions measured by CLASS™ (Classroom Assessment Scoring System), a PK to 12 classroom assessment tool developed by the University of Virginia. CLASS is designed to enhance student achievement and development by improving the overall relationship between teachers and students (Pianta, La Paro, and Hamre 2008).

Children can be taught to engage in complex narratives, form new schema as they resolve conflict, practice emerging skills in literacy and numeracy, and immerse themselves in social studies and science-rich play. Teachers can learn how to use each strategy on the developmentally appropriate teaching continuum to engage in teacher-child interactions that provide the safe emotional climate where children learn joyously.

References

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