

Director's Corner: Dramatic Play

"Almost all creativity involves purposeful play." – Abraham Maslow

"Play gives children a chance to practice what they are learning." – Fred Rogers

In *Nurturing Creativity: An Essential Mindset for Young Children's Learning* (Isbell & Yoshizawa, 2016), the authors highlight the 4C's of 21st Century Learning as Creativity, Communication, Collaboration, and Critical Thinking. These are exactly the skills developed by the rich play experiences I've been discussing in this fall's Director's Corner series.



Children's pretend play engages their imaginations as they assume roles of other people and diverse creatures. They invent make-believe actions with imaginary props as they spin scenarios while playing house, school, zoo, restaurant, etc. Such dramatic play involves communication on two levels, both speaking in character while pretending and temporarily stepping out of character to negotiate the setting and plot. For example, this morning's 3-year-olds were playing with rubber animals and foam blocks. In that context, I heard Mrs. Tomer suggest, "Let's make houses for the animals" (in her normal tone of voice) and then later when the play developed into a zoo's animal hospital, "Show me which paw is hurting" (in her most sympathetic veterinarian voice). As children progress to deeper collaboration in their play, they learn to build on each other's ideas to create intricate story lines but also have to negotiate and compromise when peers have differing ideas. Together, they learn to creatively utilize open-ended materials like blocks, playdough, fabric, and boxes to become whatever their fantasy requires, and they practice solving problems that arise within the scenarios they invent. When trusted adults provide both time and space for dramatic play, as well as both scaffolding to foster richer pretend play (as Mrs. Tomer did in the situation above), children begin to demonstrate increasing persistence such that the play episodes can last for extended periods. According to Isbell and Yoshizawa, these "play experiences develop skills they need now and help prepare them to be creative thinkers, team leaders, and innovators in the future" (p. 97).

During December, the preschoolers will be exploring Building, which naturally leads to dramatic play related to both the construction process and the use of the final structures. For example, after reading about architects and construction workers, educators will provide opportunities for children to engage in pretend play within the "dramatic play center", as well as in the block areas, at the playdough tables, etc. At the same time, our kindergartners will be studying the author A.A. Milne, who is most famous for the Winnie-the-Pooh stories. This unit will likely lead children to re-enact the stories with themselves as characters or using stuffed animals, and educators will encourage them to dramatize their own ideas for adventures in the "hundred acre wood" (i.e., the Children's School playground and Schenley Park).

For families interested in promoting dramatic play, I have included practical tips in the "Bringing Theatre Home" article in this newsletter. I also highly recommend the enclosed piece on **Choosing Playthings** from the Fred Rogers Company. This insightful article explains that common preschool play themes emerge from the developmental tasks challenging children at the moment, answers common parenting questions about weapon play and electronic games, and encourages parents to take a proactive role in providing open-ended toys and time for imaginative and creative play. Perhaps reading it will help us all consider the gifts we offer our young children during the upcoming holiday and vacation season, particularly the gifts of our own time and attention. Enjoy!