

## Director's Corner: Parents-as-Set Designers

Last month, I claimed that being a parent is like being a theatre's director, in terms of defining the vision for the entire production with the aim of synergy between all of the diverse elements of family life and child-rearing. This month, I consider the role of "Set Designer". **How is being a parent like being a set designer?** According to the American Association of Community Theatre (<https://www.aact.org/set-designer>), "The set designer's job is to design the physical surroundings in which the action will take place," including the scenery, furniture, and stage properties (or props). For children's development, the primary setting is the home, which is further set within a community that includes secondary settings of the neighborhood, school, museums, worship sites, parks, etc. Since most readers of this article chose Pittsburgh's family-friendly environs for our neighborhood and the Children's School's developmentally appropriate environment for our children's early learning, I will focus the rest of my reflections on Parents-as-Set Designers in the home.



The primary goal of the theatre's set designers, in collaboration with the costume, lighting, and sound designers, is to create a unified look and feel for the production that aligns with the director's vision. Parents' efforts to design the atmosphere of the home sets the overall mood for the family and tone for their interactions. Consider your priorities for the look and feel of home. Do you want a



"Goodnight Moon" type of set, or do you have a different image in mind? Think about what will make family members and guests feel most welcome, secure, comfortable, etc. At school, we aim for color schemes that are naturally calming and décor that respectfully displays children's images and work.

Set designers also envision "creative possibilities for movement" of the actors throughout the space so that they can interact most effectively to bring their stories to life. For parents, that means balancing safety elements with opportunities for age-appropriate risk taking, both indoors and outdoors. We organize furniture and materials so children have the freedom of independent and innovative action, but we also recognize the limits of their self-regulation (e.g., so we anchor tall furniture, protect outlets, etc.). Set designers also consider varied groupings of the actors, so that the space is conducive to scenes with single actors, pairs, small groups, or the entire company. Similarly, homes can be arranged so that there are cozy places for individuals to rest, work, and play alone, as well as spaces for small groups to converse or the whole family to share a meal, a game, etc. Having multiple options for group size is especially important for managing the differing preferences and needs of the introverts and extroverts in the family.

Finally, the theatre's set may also need to be designed so the backstage areas used by the actors and stage crew are kept out of sight from the audience. Props are on stage only when they are needed. In the same way, Parents-as-Set Designers can rotate books, toys, games, etc. to limit children's choices to a manageable number and to highlight forgotten options in ways that might re-ignite interest. Children also benefit from learning to help tidy the living spaces so that everyone can safely maneuver without tripping. All of this set design work can support the director's vision so that the family home is a place of consistent encouragement and nurture for each child and for the family as a whole. Likewise, we aim for a school environment where your whole family feels welcome!