

Dramatic Play in Outdoor Play Environments



Outdoor play time at preschool is fun, but it's also an important part of child development; by sharing their pretend stories through speech and body language, children learn to understand the world around them.

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What is Dramatic Play?

It is widely accepted in the community surrounding young children that play is the dominant activity that leads development. Children learn best not when they are told, but when they can act upon their environments and construct knowledge for themselves. They do this best through play. A commonly held belief among those in early childhood education is that play is the most important activity of young children because it is during play that children are at their most competent. Lev Vygotsky, a leading early childhood theorist, strongly stressed this point, explaining that “in play the child is always behaving beyond his age, above his usual everyday behavior; in play he is, as it were, a head above himself” (1978, p. 74).

But there are different kinds of play, different stages of play, and different purposes underlying play. The play of preschool children is different from the play of toddlers, which is different from the play of school-age children (Jones & Reynolds, 1992). Generally, children under the age of three engage in exploratory play. Their objective is to explore the world through physical actions, to experiment with their movements and discover what they can do. They poke, dump, taste, stroke, and pull whatever they encounter in order to learn about their world. From three to seven years of age, however, children's actions become more about “play” than exploration, and efforts to know and understand become more than sensory experiences. They require spontaneous action, action which takes the form of play (Jones & Reynolds, 1992). Children become representers of their experiences, rather than just doers of activities. The understandings that they have built through exploratory play experiences are symbolized by things, actions, plots, and behaviors in their representational play.

In representational play, also known as dramatic play, preschoolers use speech and body language to become storytellers of pretend events. Through dramatic play, which is also commonly called pretend/fantasy play, children continue to build understandings of their world, just like toddlers and young infants do through exploratory play. In essence, it is “play for understanding” for older children. “Fantasy play is their ever dependable pathway to knowledge and certainty” (Paley, 1988, p. viii). This will be further explained in the section below on research into the connection between dramatic play and cognitive development.

Dramatic play is an imitation of reality. Children create play “themes” and act them out by participating in various roles. By doing so, they are able to imitate the physical world and human relationships through symbolic representation. Children perform with concrete objects (e.g. dolls, pots, tricycles, or sticks), which are symbols for something else children have experienced directly or indirectly (e.g., babies, cooking, cars, or swords) (Landreth, 1991). For example, children may pretend that a log is a boat, or that they are Batman and Robin fighting all the bad guys in Gotham City. Dramatic play is a time of non-literal, symbolic behavior that merges the child's imagination with the real world, giving everything an “as if” nature.

Smilansky (1968) provides six criteria of dramatic play. The first four are behaviors in which young children may engage in alone, and the last two involve social dynamics in the play (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

- Imitative role-play: the child performs a make-believe role and acts it out through imitative bodily action and/or speech.
- Make-believe with regard to objects: play behaviors and/or speech dialogues and/or materials or toys that are not replicas of the object itself are substituted for real objects.
- Verbal make-believe with regard to actions and situations: verbal dialogue takes the place of body movements.
- Persistence in role-play: the pretend play episode lasts at least 10 minutes.
- Interaction: more than one person participates in pretend play episode.

Verbal communication: verbal dialogue is exchanged between the players.

Why is Dramatic Play Important?

Research suggests that engaging in dramatic play can have beneficial effects on children's cognitive development, learning, peer relationships, and emotional well-being (Ellis, 1973; Fisher, 1992; Landreth, 1991; Piaget, 1962; Stambak & Sinclair, 1993; Smilansky, 1968).

Cognitive Development

Researchers have concluded that children who actively participate in dramatic play during preschool and early elementary years are advanced in intellectual development, score higher on tests of imagination and creativity, and have an enhanced ability to think inventively (Freyberg, 1973; Pepler & Ross, 1981). According to Piaget (1962), play is vital to cognitive development. However, he explains that children are not acquiring new skills during their dramatic play episodes; instead, they are practicing skills they have recently acquired in non-play situations. Without this practice in play contexts, Piaget explains, their skills would be quickly lost. Play allows children to assimilate information they are gathering from their environment into their minds and helps them make sense of it. Through play they are able to find ways to "own" their knowledge.

Dramatic play can also be viewed from a "preparation for life" perspective. Jones and Reynolds (1992) explain that pretending allows children to represent real-life problems and practice solving them. They are able to question things and to learn about the world in ways that make sense to them. "Play is self-motivated practice in meaning-making; its themes are repeated over and over until the child is satisfied that she's got this figured out" (10) (author's emphasis). By participating in dramatic play, Jones and Reynolds (1992) argue that children are developing learning and problem-solving strategies, as well as utilizing their knowledge and skills.

Social Development

Smilansky (1968), on the other hand, investigated how dramatic play helps children develop socially. Generally, preschoolers' play becomes more social as they get older. Smilansky (1968) found that by engaging in socio-dramatic play (dramatic play that involves more than one player), their social skills were enhanced. Participation in socio-dramatic play requires a high level of social ability, including cooperation, negotiation, sharing, problem-solving, self-regulation, and appreciation of another's play efforts. The amount and complexity of fantasy play have been found to be predictors of social skills, popularity, and positive social activity (Connolly & Doyle, 1984). Thus, "young children who engage frequently in social fantasy play are more socially competent than those who play less frequently" (Frost, 1992, p. 34).

Through participation in socio-dramatic play, children develop skills necessary to regulate their own actions in order to keep the play going, to control themselves and their emotions, to be flexible in their responses to other players, and to transition from being an egocentric being to a social being. Frost (1992) captures the importance of dramatic play to children's social development when he states that it is difficult to overemphasize the value this type of play.

Emotional Development

Children, due to limited vocabularies and understandings of emotions, are generally unable to verbally express their feelings. Instead, they express them through the safe outlet of play (Landreth & Hohmeyer, 1998). Children's play is their natural form of communication. Thus, they are able to express themselves more fully through self-initiated spontaneous play than they can verbally. "For children to 'play out' their experiences and feelings is the most natural dynamic and self-healing process in which children can engage" (Landreth, 1991, p. 10). Dramatic play allows children the opportunity to use toys to say things they cannot verbalize, to do things they would otherwise feel uncomfortable doing, and to express feelings and emotions they might be reprimanded for expressing in other contexts.

Despite Sigmund Freud's limited amount of work with children, he also believed in the emotional benefits of play. In 1953, he expressed his recognition that children's occupation is play, and that they take their play seriously and expend a great amount of emotion on it. Freud proposed that play works as an emotional cathartic release, as a means of reducing stress and anxiety, and as a way to understand traumatic experiences. Once negative feelings such as fear and aggression have been expressed, children are able to move on to communicate more positive feelings such as joy and contentment in their play.

As children engage in dramatic play scenarios, they act out relationships and experience putting themselves in another person's shoes, which leads to increased, more sophisticated understandings of others and themselves. Dramatic play contributes to children's emotional development by helping them reach places of increased happiness, more positive self-concepts, and greater feelings of power (Frost, Wortham & Reifel, 2001).

"Children have this amazing capacity to generate ideas with their own imaginations." (Corley Peterson Brooke in Fedorczak, 2001)

Promoting Dramatic Play in Outdoor Environments

Dramatic play on playgrounds offers important benefits for children. However, creating play spaces that promote dramatic play is a complicated process and one that has generally been ignored on public and school playgrounds. As Frost (1992) suggests, "outdoor play environments, particularly public school and city park playgrounds, are frequently barren of needed props for dramatic play--play houses, water and sand areas, wheeled vehicle areas, dress-up clothes, containers, tools, and so forth" (82). Considering the environment of the playground is important because where children play directly impacts how children will interact with each other, and their environment will affect the cognitive level and intensity of play.

Designers of play spaces and playgrounds need to consider the individual, cultural, and social needs of children and adults in order to create environments which promote dramatic play out of doors (David & Weinstein, 1987). Designers and researchers over the last three decades have sought to influence playground design and development to increase the play value of manufactured play equipment (Friedberg & Berkeley, 1970; Hewes & Beckwith, 1975; Rivkin, 1990; Thompson, 1996; Frost, Wortham & Reifel, 2001). Playgrounds continue to evolve as new materials and research is introduced. One area of playground equipment development that continues to evolve is how designers can promote dramatic play. Three areas of importance for the promotion of dramatic play are the thematic playground equipment, arrangement of space, and the creation of unique play features.

Thematic Playground Equipment

In the Novelty Era of playground development, designers attempted to promote dramatic play by designing play structures that were supposed to appeal to the imagination. Designers of play equipment built play equipment shaped like space ships, submarines, covered wagons and animals. Since the 1970's, modular equipment with decks, links, and new materials has replaced novelty equipment as the preferred equipment on playgrounds (Frost, 1992). Modular equipment tends to be abstract, because designers follow the early childhood principle of "open endedness." As Talbot and Frost (1990) wrote, "Forms which are overdefined tend to dictate meaning, and this is the antithesis of the magical state of mind we are seeking" (221). Mason (1982) suggests that play environments need to be flexible and adaptable: "A cubby which can be a house one day and a fort the next day is far better than one which looks very much like a castle and wouldn't inspire the children to treat it as anything but a castle" (17). The emphasis on abstract, open-ended designs has resulted in manufactured play equipment which is abstract, colorful, and which encourages functional physical activities like climbing and sliding over dramatic play activities.

Recently manufacturers have begun to return to the designs of the Novelty Era. The possibilities of modern plastic molding allow for shapes which were impossible to manufacture previously. Some of the possibilities currently being manufactured include tree shaped, dinosaur shaped, and pirate ship designs. Unlike their metallic predecessors from the Novelty Era, these materials can be made to more closely approximate the objects which they are meant to represent.

The importance of realism and abstractness is important for children's play in that play experiences with open-ended abstract materials and closed-ended realistic materials affect how children think. Research on the importance of realistic and non-realistic materials on children is not conclusive. Exposure to open-ended materials results in ideational fluency as children are more able to reason divergently and have more varied ideas for interactions with materials (Fisher, 1992). On the other hand, Trawick-Smith (1993) found that children's use of realistic and non-realistic play objects for dramatic play changes as children mature. He found that more realistic props were important for 2- and 3-year-olds, while 4-year-olds liked a mixture of realistic and non-realistic play objects and that 5 and 6 year olds preferred non-realistic play props. Ihn (1999), found that realistic outdoor play equipment like pirate ships and play houses were enhanced by loose parts, but that the shape of the play equipment was not sufficient alone to enhance dramatic play on the playground. Finally Hartle (1996), found that a playground with minimal materials encouraged more dramatic play than conditions where materials like dolls and blocks were added to the playground.

The implication for playground designers of these studies is that realistic playground equipment does not necessarily detract from children's play, especially for toddlers and young preschoolers. On the other hand the realistic nature of the material may not have much of an effect on older children's development of dramatic play. A middle ground between total abstraction and absolute realism may be a safe alternative. Playgrounds which have both abstract and realistic elements may appeal to a range of users and thus extend the possibilities for dramatic play on the playground.

Arrangement of Space

Spatial arrangement is fundamental to children's play environments. Frederick Froebel, the father of kindergarten, believed that outdoor play and gardening was very important for children's development (Brosterman, 1997). At the turn of the 19th century, Maria Montessori designed child-sized tables and chairs for the comfort of the children (1964). Moore (1987), in describing the importance of environment for cognitive development wrote, "The environment involves physical components that have measurable impacts on cognitive development" (63).

The influence of spatial arrangement in the play environment is especially important in that different spatial arrangements change how children behave and think. Findings from studies of indoor environments have shown that modified open designs promote positive cognitive behaviors. Modified open-plan classrooms have partial dividers, like shelves, that define spaces; however, they also allow children to move freely from space to space. The children in modified open design classrooms stayed on task longer, explored more and spent less time withdrawn than children in completely open or closed plan classrooms (Moore, 1987).

Some general principles for spatial arrangement have greatly influenced playground design. Integrated and linked equipment is much more desirable than separated and isolated play features (Friedberg & Berkeley, 1970; Mason, 1982). Playgrounds which encourage small semi-private spaces also encourage dramatic play. Ihn (1999) found that children often preferred to play underneath a pirate ship play structure as children chose to use the area "under the ship deck area as a private gathering, resting, and even dramatic play area" (4) more often than the top of the play structure.

The arrangement of space to include semi-private spaces for children's play encourages them to play more persistently, and lengthens the time of children's engagement in play tasks. In addition, the inclusion of encapsulated areas to serve as stimulus shelters where children can recover from active play are also important in reducing stress on children (Frost, Wortham & Reifel, 2001).

Designers need to consider children's safety during dramatic play when it occurs under decks and platforms. The safety design of the underside of equipment is as important as the safety design on the top of the decks. Play equipment manufacturers and installers should insure that there are no hazards associated with the underside of decks and platforms where children engage in dramatic play.

Designers need to consider that children from different cultural backgrounds will have different senses of what play spaces mean, so that a playground designed for children in an inner city neighborhood of Philadelphia may need to be differently arranged than one for children on the Rio Grande border between Texas and Mexico.

The Flow of Dramatic Play on the Playground

Dramatic play can be fostered or hindered by the composition and arrangement of components on the playground. Appropriately selected manufactured play equipment in the right density and arrangement, along with natural environmental elements, can positively influence the flow of children's dramatic play. Loose parts promote the most dramatic play, as children can manipulate the parts themselves during play (Frost, 1992).

Children need a great variety of play equipment that suggests either movement or stillness during dramatic play. Components such as slides, fire poles, climbers, clatter bridges, overhead ladders and rings, and spring rockers and riders all promote movement during dramatic play. Equipment such as platforms and decks, play houses, roofs, tunnels, talk tubes, bubble and mirrored panels, and most pieces that form encapsulated spaces encourage stillness during dramatic play (Frost, 1992; Fedorczak, 2001). Panels located under decks and platforms with window and door cutouts create more places for children to engage in dramatic play.

Environments that include man-made loose parts and natural materials such as sand or dirt, leaves, flowers, branches, and water also encourage dramatic play. Loose parts and natural materials give children more abundant choices when it comes to materials for dramatic play (Frost, 1992). They often carry natural materials and other loose parts with them onto play structures in order to initiate or maintain dramatic play episodes. Loose parts have been found to be 'integral to children's dramatic play.

Certain types of components actually discourage dramatic play all together. Swings have been found to promote parallel but not dramatic play. Activity panels do not seem to promote any kind of play except for exploratory/functional, during which children

spin the elements on the panel or use them as climbing structures.

The closeness of play components can help the flow of dramatic play, while distance can hinder it:

The close proximity of these structures and parts allowed a smooth, natural integration with play theme, generating wider involvement and creativity in language, purpose, thought, and action. Although dramatic play can and does take place at one point or another on almost every structure on the playground, it is more likely to be fostered by certain equipment and this equipment should be zoned into a relatively compact but functional area. (Frost, 1992, p. 147)

One of the reasons that the proximity of play structures is important to dramatic play is that “dramatic play frequently has a mushrooming effect” (Frost, 1992, p. 147). As children join the dramatic play scenario, they entice other children to join, and the play spills over from one component to another.

Unique Play Features

Determining where children will play and how they will play is not an exact science. Some designers have suggested the development of “magical playscapes” (Talbot & Frost, 1990), while others have emphasized nature and gardens (Mason, 1982). Still others suggest community involvement as the key element in designing play grounds (Hewes & Beckwith, 1975). One area that has been recently explored is the appeal of unique features of playgrounds for children’s play (Armitage, 2001; Hartle, 1996; Opie, 1993). In her seminal work on children’s play, *The People of the Playground*, Iona Opie (1993) described the changes in play over time on the playground. She illustrated the ebb and flow of games and the somewhat arbitrary nature of children’s selection of play sites for their activities. Sports tended to dominate the open courts, while games like marbles and pretend play would take place in sheltered areas. Children form a sense of place identity through affective experiences with environments (Proshansky & Fabian, 1987). The unique features of a playground become sources for the sense of place identity as children use these features as home bases for their play.

The selection of unique features for children’s play depends on the imaginations of the children on the playground. Artimage (2001) found that children would select features like gates and fences for their dramatic games. These unique features were abstract enough to allow children to adapt them to their games, while at the same time they suggested certain uses as children utilized fences for jails and an old furnace door as the doorway to the witch’s house.

Hartle (1996) also found that children used unique features of the playground to develop their high-level pretend play activities. She called these unique features “home bases” because children would play around the bases, venture out, and eventually return to the home base. Bases were agreed upon by the children and “were given agreed upon names such as ‘our house’” (77). In Hartle’s study, cement stoops, doorways, and climbers served as home bases for the children’s dramatic play.

The inclusion of unique features on playgrounds has generally been limited to the inclusion of activity panels. Activity panels, however, are rarely used by children in their play activities (Ihn, 1999). Designers looking to include unique features need to consider how gates, doorways and fences appeal to children as bases around which they organize their play. Featureless and cookie cutter play spaces can create a sense of placelessness because children may not be able to form affective relationships with the play spaces. The inclusion of unique features on the play structure can go a long way toward creating a sense of place and promoting dramatic play on the playground.

Conclusion

Playgrounds and playground equipment continues to change and evolve. The expense of play equipment and the relative permanence of today’s advanced materials require that playground equipment designers take into consideration the extended play value of the equipment. Designers who look at playground equipment through children’s eyes will see that the elements described above should be taken into consideration when designing playgrounds. Playground equipment should have a mixture of abstract and realistic play events, along with components and loose parts that encourage dramatic play. Modular playground equipment should also provide for interesting play spaces under equipment as well as on top, and the flow of dramatic play should be taken into account when designing play environments. Finally, playgrounds should include unique features around which children can base their play. When all of these factors are taken into consideration, outdoor play environments that encourage and support dramatic play can be created. Promoting dramatic play in outdoor environments will have lasting positive effects on children’s physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development.

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