

PRETEND PLAY

Pretend play is the genesis of creativity and imagination. Self-directed pretend play begins around age two when a toddler uses one object to represent another – a block of wood becomes a car as the toddler zooms around the room. This is the beginning of symbolic thinking, an essential component of higher-level thinking skills.

Young children use what they know and understand of the world around them as a resource for pretend play. They will often place themselves in the role of mother, father, or baby. Even in the early stages, children use their burgeoning imagination to rework what they have experienced into new sets of actions. Through pretend play, children create new roles and situations. As the ability to play develops, these new situations become increasingly complex and beyond the realm of their own experience. For example, children give their favourite characters from a storybook or TV series different roles and new adventures.

Until approximately age four, pretend play tends to be personal, that is, it revolves around what the individual child brings to the play. They may cooperate in sharing space and even toys, but the actions are personal rather than collaborative. Collaborative play happens when children join together around a common theme with interrelated actions and roles. Young children want others to join them at play, but each player is working through his own story. It is not until the primary grades that children have sufficient language and social skills to truly engage in collaborative play.

Sociodramatic play is a unique form of collaborative play. It is both imaginative and highly social. An episode of sociodramatic play is a sequence of make-believe in which two or more players collaborate to construct roles and actions around a common theme. The episode begins when a player signals a transformation, either through an explicit statement or an implicit action. The episode continues so long as two players remain with the theme. It ends when all the players abandon the theme or time runs out.

An episode of sociodramatic play involves four basic elements:

- theme: what the episode is about;
- action plan: a series of actions or rituals appropriate to the theme;
- roles: theme-appropriate characters; and
- language: both language about the episode and in-role language.

Sociodramatic play is so much a part of childhood that parents and teachers often remain unaware of the complexity and depth of the learning that takes place. It is not a play as adults understand it but a sequence of make-believe that is spontaneous and controlled by the children themselves. It has implicit rules that are understood by the players although they are not able to articulate them. In the older elementary-age children, sociodramatic play evolves into improvisation, but is quite different to preparation for putting on a play. Improvisation evolves from each child's own background knowledge and experience.

Within the classroom, an area has been created for a 'radio station' with microphones and headphones. This has become a favourite choice as children improvise various scenarios: being the talk show host or the guest, reading the news, providing musical interludes. The action changes daily depending on children's focus and interest.

