

Boys and Dramatic Play

The dramatic play area is a staple in most early childhood environments. In many programs it is one of the most popular areas with children. Often, early childhood dramatic play spaces consist of housekeeping items such as a kitchen set, food, dishes, baby dolls, baby accessories, etc. But dramatic play can be so much more!



Dramatic play provides opportunities for language development and social skills. Children are able to work together to create and act out storylines. This is also a great time for teachers to get involved in children's play. With all of these opportunities for growth, we want ALL children to participate.

By diversifying the dramatic play area, teachers are creating chances for children to try out new language and vocabulary, improve motor skills, and be creative. This, in turn, leads to more opportunities for teachers to do observations.

Gender Biases

Many people have an unconscious gender bias about dramatic play. A statement that is often heard is that "the girls love dramatic play!" But what about boys? As early childhood professionals, what are we doing to encourage and interest boys in dramatic play?

Whether we realize it or not, gender biases play a big part in childhood. There has been much research done on the gendering of children's toys and the effect it has on children. By three-years old children begin to show preferences towards toys geared to their gender and peers of their same gender. The reason behind this lies within the age-old argument of nature vs. nurture. Are children biologically attracted to toys geared towards their gender? Or do we, as a society, encourage them by only providing girls with baby dolls and boys with toy cars?

Parents can play a part in this as well. It is important for providers to be prepared and confident in explaining why dramatic play is important for boys, should the need arise. If a parent were to say that he or she does not want their son to play in the kitchen area, remind them that their child will someday need to cook his or her own meals. Perhaps they may develop a culinary interest and become a chef. If a parent states that they would prefer that their son not play with baby dolls, a provider could mention that they may be a father or an uncle someday and this is teaching them to be loving and nurturing.

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Adding Variety

If you notice the children in your classroom are not spending time in the dramatic play area it may be time to switch things up! If we want to get the boys more involved in dramatic play, what other themes might be appealing to them? A simple way to switch things up is to turn the kitchen area into a restaurant. Have the children create menus and add some pencils and pads of paper for the servers to take orders from their customers. If you have stuffed animals in your classroom think about creating a pet store or a veterinarian office. Another idea is to create a post office. Have the children make a mailbox from a large box or container. Think about creating a fire station or police station. Also, pay attention to the types of dress up clothes that the boys are into. You could use the dress up clothes as a starting point to create a new theme.

Adding in additional themes will also help programs with preparation for an ERS assessment. The ERS looks for two themes in dramatic play areas. Think about rotating your themes to keep the children engaged!

Tips for Dramatic Play

- When adding additional themes, think about using “prop boxes”. Put together boxes of materials for different themes that you could rotate. This will help save space in small classrooms or family child care homes.
- For preschool classrooms, ask the children if they have any ideas for dramatic play. Pay close attention to their interests and pick themes based around them.
- For infants, create a dramatic play basket with materials such as baby dolls, soft food, small pots and pans, and toy phones. Introduce these items during playtimes.
- Have school age children write stories and act them out. In a mixed age environment, they could even perform them for the younger children.
- Ask parents to contribute. Old clothes and accessories could be used for dress-up. Empty boxes from food could be used for a grocery store theme.
- Incorporate dramatic play into other areas of the classroom by creating a construction setup in the block area. Add some hard hats, blueprints, paper, and pencils.
- Start with the dress up clothes in your dramatic play area. Add some props that go with the costumes. If you have a doctor coat make sure you have a doctor kit to go with it. If you have a mail carrier outfit, add a bag with some letters.
- Look at your curriculum. Are there any dramatic play ideas to go along with what the children are learning about this month? This is a great way to tie curriculum into the interest areas!

Dramatic play provides a range of opportunities for children. Be intentional about this area of your space. Focus on adding variety. Look to the children for ideas and inspiration.

Don't forget to join in the play!