

**Arkansas Children's Week**

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**Imaginative Play:  
Setting the Stage for Learning**



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**Sponsored by**

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**Thank you for sharing your ideas,  
inspiration, and expertise!**



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# Ages and Stages of Pretend Play

Pretend play is a universal element of childhood but how and why children play changes as they grow.



## Pretend Play with Toddlers

### I usually play to...

Imitate what I have experienced at home.

Explore my independence and understand my ability to interact with my world.

### My play themes most often include...

Familiar objects, such as telephones - "Hello?"

Babies, mothers and fathers.

## Pretend Play with Younger Preschoolers

### I usually play to...

Imitate what I have experienced at home.

Act out bits of favorite stories from books, movies, and /or television.

### My play themes most often include...

Familiar objects, such as kitchen sets and cookware.

Babies, mothers, fathers, siblings, cats, and dogs.

Cartoon and storybook characters.

Themes of getting sick, getting hurt and getting lost.





## **Pretend Play with Older Preschoolers & Kindergarteners**

### **I usually play to...**

Imitate what I have experienced at home and in my community.

Tell my own stories, often borrowing characters from stories /media.

Process new and/or scary ideas.

Feel powerful and capable.

Explore my budding interests.

### **My play themes usually include...**

Families in more complex situations such as getting married, celebrating birthdays, and going to work.

Familiar places such as grocery store, beauty salon, or restaurant.

Cartoon characters, super heroes, princesses, bad guys.

Themes of getting sick, getting hurt, getting lost, going to jail, dealing with monsters and bad guys, and even death – though usually not taken too seriously.

Topics of special interest such as trains or camping.

***Children need the freedom and time to play.  
Play is not a luxury.  
Play is a necessity.***

*-Kay Redfield Jamison*

## **Pretend Play with Schoolagers**

### **I usually play to...**

Tell my own stories, sometimes with characters from stories /media, and sometimes with my own, unique characters.

Process strong ideas – things I’m confused by, worried about, or scared of.

Explore my possible future roles.

Feel powerful or talented.

Seek belonging within a group.

### **My play themes usually include...**

Fantastic places such as outer space or back in time.

Superheroes and characters with special powers.

Dramatic themes such as kidnapping, serious illness, bullying or social exclusion, natural disasters, war.

Career play beyond immediate community, such as marine biologist, sportscaster and fashion designer.

Performances such as singing or dancing.

Clubs, teams, or other alliances.



# Snapshots of Learning

Pretend play is linked to big benefits for learners!



## Sense of Self

*Imaginative play connects children to their own home, family, and community culture.*

*As they play with peers, children also come to understand other cultures.*



## **Imagination**

*Children engaged in fantasy play build mental flexibility – an important executive function skill.*

*Creative aptitude in adulthood is linked to pretend play in early childhood.*



## **Communication**

*Through pretend play, children often use more words and more complex language structure than at any other time in their day!*



## **Emotional Regulation**

*Children process strong feelings and powerful ideas through pretend play.*

*Children who have ample opportunity to explore through dramatic play are better equipped to handle and express their feelings.*



## **Narrative Ability**

*Children learn to think in stories and communicate these with peers.  
Children make sense of their world through this repetitive play.*



## **Abstract & Symbolic Thinking**

**Imaginative play is linked to strong reading comprehension and reasoning skills in years to come!**



## **Organizational Skills**

*Like an air traffic controller at a busy airport, the child plans, multi-tasks, recalls, and prioritizes as she engages in complex play.*

*This structured thinking will serve her well in elementary school and beyond.*



## **Social Navigation & Flexibility**

*As they join in social pretend play, children learn to lead and follow appropriately and show an increased capacity for empathy.*

*They grow to understand the point of view of others.*

## Create a “Snapshots of Learning” documentation board for your classroom or program in three, easy steps:

1. Take candid photos of children engaged in imaginative play, such as:
  - Enjoying dress up clothes
  - Playing pretend with dolls or soft animals
  - Interacting with puppets
  - Exploring playsets, such as dollhouse, barn with animals, or garage with cars
  - Using active pretend play prop such as stick horses, ride-in cars, and superhero capes
2. Design a sign explaining ways in which imaginative play facilitates child development. The preceding pages of this book list eight important benefits that you might include on your sign, or you might think of your own ideas.
3. After obtaining permission from families, display the photos and sign in a high-traffic area, such as in an entrance lobby or near the classroom cubbies. As families enjoy seeing the fun photos of their children at play, they’ll discover the children aren’t just playing when they pretend – they’re learning and growing, too!



# **First Friends:**

## **Dramatic Play Materials for the Littlest Learners**

Imitative play begins around 10-12 months of age. In the months to come, true pretend play and role play will emerge.

Here are some top imaginative play toy picks for infants and young toddlers.

- Dolls**
- Doll bed and simple accessories**
  
- Easy-to-manage pots and pans**
- Stackable stainless steel or plastic bowls**
  
- Hats**
- Simple dress up clothes, such as skirts with elastic waistbands and vests**
- Telephones**
  
- Large, chunky farm animals – vinyl or wooden**
- Play buildings with props, such as a garage with chunky handheld cars**
  
- Soft stuffed cats and dogs**
- Simple puppets**
  
- Cardboard boxes, round laundry baskets, and other "sit-ins"**
- Small blankets or squares of cotton cloth**



**This is the Way  
(to the tune of  
Mulberry Bush)**

This is the way the bunny hops,  
The bunny hops, the bunny hops.  
This is the way the bunny hops on a sunny springtime morning.

*Additional verses:*  
Butterfly flies, earthworm crawls, and bullfrog leaps



**Imaginative**

---

**for toddlers, 2's & 3's**

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**Action Songs**



**Way Up High in the Apple Tree**

Way up high in the apple tree,  
Five red apples I could see.  
I SHOOK that tree as hard as I could!  
Doooooown came an apple...  
And 'm-m-m-m' was it good!

*Additional verses:*

Count down to the last apple – 5, 4, 3, 2, 1

**Ms. Polly Had a Dolly**

Miss Polly had a dolly who was sick, sick, sick,  
So she called for the doctor to come quick,  
quick, quick!

The doctor came in his coat and his cap,  
And he knocked on the door with a rat-ta-tat-tat!

**And don't forget...**

**The Itsy Bitsy Spider**

**Old McDonald Had a Farm**

**Row, Row, Row Your Boat**

**The Wheels on the Bus**

**Five Little Ducks**

**Hurry, Hurry, Drive the Firetruck**

Hurry, hurry, drive the firetruck.  
Hurry, hurry, drive the firetruck.  
Hurry, hurry, drive the firetruck - ding, ding, ding, ding, ding!

*Additional verses:*

Hurry, hurry, climb the ladder...  
Hurry, hurry, spray the water...

# Setting the Stage for Successful Play in the Dramatic Play Learning Center

The arrangement of our space helps children find and use materials and play together. When spaces are carefully arranged, there are fewer conflicts between children. Play is more focused and complex in a well-organized play area.

## Location, Location

Place the dramatic play center in most active part of the play area, well away from quieter places like the classroom library and puzzle areas. Placing the center in a corner of the room may help create a cozier, homelike feel.

## Room to Move

The dramatic play center is a busy, social space. It should provide enough space for three or more children to play together without “traffic jams” or crowding. Placement of furnishings should allow children to move around freely.

## The More (Materials), the Merrier

Conflicts occur when children compete over toys and materials. Avoid unnecessary upset by having duplicates of the most popular items: several dolls, a collection of telephones, and so on.

## Storage Solutions

Play is rarely purposeful when children must dig through jumbled bins of toys to find materials. Store materials on low, open shelves to make play props easy to see and reach. Sort different types of toys into baskets or bins and hang up dress up clothes on hooks.

## Picture This

Labels with pictures and words help children return materials to the correct places when play is done. Labeling promotes organization and literacy in a “real world” way.



# Everyday Magic: Over 50 Nifty Collectibles for Authentic Dramatic Play

1. Baby food jars, wipe boxes, preemie diapers for dolls, stroller
2. Bucket with sponge, scrub brush
3. Calendar
4. Cameras
5. Canisters, tins, baskets
6. Clothesline and clothespins
7. Cookbooks
8. Costume jewelry
9. Coupons and sales fliers
10. Dress clothes: hats, jackets, vests, clip-on ties
11. Eyeglass frames (lenses removed) and sunglasses
12. Flashlights
13. Food packages, such as cereal boxes and salad dressing bottles
14. Gift wrap, gift bags, gift cards
15. Grill grate, apron, tongs
16. Hair dryer (cord removed)
17. Hand broom and dust pan
18. Keyboard, calculator
19. Keys on a keychain
20. Kitchen scale, tape measure, measuring cups
21. Lab coat, scrubs, shoe covers
22. Lifejackets and sun hats
23. Lunch box and thermos
24. Mailbox
25. Maps



26. Menus
27. Microphone (cord removed)
28. Notepads and pencils
29. Oven mitts and cook's tools: whisk, spatula, etc.
30. Paint brushes and rollers, paint cans and trays
31. Pet bowls, toys, bed, carrier
32. Pizza boxes, take-out containers
33. Placemats, napkins, napkin rings, coasters
34. Pots, pans, muffin tins
35. Purses and wallets
36. Raincoats, rain boots
37. Remote control
38. Scarves, small blankets, fabric pieces
39. Short length of garden hose with nozzle
40. Silk flowers, plastic vases
41. Soap and detergent bottles (empty)
42. Spice bottles
43. Steering wheel
44. Suitcase
45. Tea kettle
46. Telephones
47. Tent
48. Tickets
49. Wrist watches, clock, kitchen timer
50. Work wear: hard hat, clerk's vest, safety goggles, etc.



# Prop Collections for Purposeful Pretend Play

During the preschool years, children’s pretend play grows more complex. The focus of play expands beyond the familiar home to include experiences at school and around town.

By offering collections of props, adults can encourage children to fully explore a variety of pretend play scenarios. One week may find the preschoolers immersed in farm play, while the next week finds them exploring a grocery store theme. Vocabulary and concept knowledge blossom as children discover each new topic.

## Do’s and Don’ts for Prop Play

**Don’t offer a random set of props without clearly defined themes.**

If a dramatic area includes a mix-and-match assortment of single props – such as a firefighter hat, hula skirt, cash register, baby doll stroller, and paint can – children’s ability to explore any given theme with depth will be limited. The teacher’s intent may be to provide variety, but in reality it is hard for children to find materials to support their play.

**Do create sets of thematic props that can be changed over time.**

Each of the props listed above can be grouped with other materials to create identifiable themes. For example, the firefighter hat might be paired with work boots, firefighter jackets, lengths of hose, and walkie-talkies to create a pretend *fire station*. Or, the hula skirt might be paired with a suitcase, travel brochures, camera, Hawaiian shirts, and other props to support a *vacation* theme.

Themes can be selected to support the season, topics of learning in the classroom, and, especially, children’s interests. A sizable dramatic play area may be able to support two or more themes, such as *office* and *home*. Rotate themes periodically to spark fresh interest in the dramatic play area and offer new play experiences for children.

***Seasonal and holiday props allow children to reflect current events in their play. Expect repetitive play as children live favorite moments over and over!***



**Don't limit props to toys.**

Although there are some wonderful playsets available for the dramatic play area, they are often costly and may actually limit children's play.

**Do include open-ended materials and authentic materials.**

In the hands of an imaginative child, a simple silk scarf can become a superhero cape, a sling for a baby doll, or a fantastic fashion accessory. Open-ended materials like cardboard boxes and pieces of fabric promote creative play.

Children also seek out authentic materials, such as real pots and pans and old computer keyboards. Play with these materials appears to feel more real to children. Why spend money on plastic toy imitations of telephones, car keys, and dress clothes when the actual goods are readily available?



*Boxes, baskets, and fabrics can be repurposed in many creative ways.*

**Don't select themes just because they seem cute and pleasing to adults.**

It may be adorable to see the three-year-old group dressed up like astronauts, but is this really a relatable theme for them? Sometimes adults are tempted to set up extravagant themes that are outside the realm of children's actual experiences, but they soon find that children don't seem to know what to do with the props.

**Do select themes that children can relate to: places and things that are a part of their immediate world.**

Most three-year-olds don't know much about space exploration, but almost all of them have been to a gas station!

## More to Do to Support Prop Play

- **Do select themes based on your observations of the children.**  
Children's interests can inspire new prop collections. Families and staff can often work together to make a new theme come to life!
- **Do involve children in planning when possible.**  
Have conversations to find out what children know. Brainstorm, and make lists together. Draw inspiration for books and real world observations.
- **Do arrange materials in purposeful ways.**  
Ideally, the theme is evident as soon as children approach the dramatic play center.
- **Do take time to introduce materials.**  
Talk together about what has been added to the dramatic play center, and why. It can be helpful to model the use of tools and materials that some children may not have handled before, such as a kitchen scale or a paint roller
- **Do support imaginative play themes with photo displays and picture books.**  
These broaden children's understanding of the topic. Pictures can be found in magazines and the local library is a great resource for books.
- **Do incorporate meaningful math and literacy materials into prop collections.**  
For example, as part of a restaurant theme, children might make menus; count out change with play money; choose between small, medium, and large cups; and more.
- **Do think of creative storage solutions for extra thematic materials.**  
Large, plastic totes can keep props clean and dry in a storage shed or attic. Or, sets of props might be rotated between classrooms on a regular basis.

## Prop Collection Ideas

On the pages that follow, you'll find 15 different themes for pretend play.

Each includes a list of props to be gathered. Families, friends, and co-workers may all be willing to help gather props, and many materials can be found inexpensively at thrift stores, yard sales, and discount stores. Don't worry if you can't find everything on the list - these are simply ideas to get you started. You'll probably also find your own, unique props to support each theme.

Each section lists vocabulary words that can be introduced or practiced as you play alongside children. Adults can expand on children's statements and introduce new words as they join in play. There are also ideas for photo displays and suggestions for thematic picture books to add to the classroom library or share at story time. Lastly, each section describes optional ways to connect thematic play to children's real world experience through field trips, guest speakers, and special projects.

### Baby Care Prop Collection

Baby dolls	Blankets
Doll clothes	Baby bathtub, baby shampoo bottle, sponge
Baby bottles	Small board books
Baby food jars and spoons	Rattles
Bibs	New baby greeting cards
Preemie-sized diapers	Mobile hung from ceiling
Wipe container with squares of cloth	Music player with lullabies and active songs like <i>Pat-a-Cake</i>
Small lidded trash can (diaper bin)	Stroller
Doll bed and high chair	
Child sized rocking chair	



#### Vocabulary

Meaningful words to share as you play alongside children:

*infant, nurture, hungry, sleepy, rocking, fussy, feeding, lullaby, gentle, comfort, parent.*

### Picture It

Display photos of real babies being fed, diapered, rocked, and played with.  
Hint: Look for photos in parenting/housekeeping magazines.

### Book Look

*The New Baby at Your House* by Joanna Cole

*Peter's Chair* by Ezra Jack Keats

*We Have a Baby* by Cathryn Fallwell

### Real World Connections

- Invite a parent to bring a baby to visit. The big brother or sister in your class can help tell how old the sibling is, what the sibling likes to do, and how they (big brother or big sister) are helpful to the sibling.
- If your program includes infant care, take children in very small groups to visit this area. Each group can have a special mission to find out how and where babies eat, sleep, and play. They can talk to caregivers, help take photos and make lists to share with the rest of the class.

## Bakery Prop Collection

Muffin tins, cookie sheets, cake pans

Baking tools: whisk, spatula, mixing spoon

Rolling pin and cookie cutters

Measuring cups and spoons

Graduated mixing bowls

Aprons, oven mitts

Cookbooks, recipe cards

Sprinkle containers, frosting tubs, bread mix boxes

Kitchen timer

Cash register with play money

Notepad and pencil for taking orders

Chalkboard or child-made menu sign

Play oven – can be made from cardboard box

### Vocabulary

Meaningful words to share as you play alongside children:

*baker, recipe, ingredients, batter, dough, mix, knead, order, shopkeeper, customer.*

This theme also offers an opportunity to compare and contrast many different kinds of baked goods – biscuits, muffins, cookies, pies, bagels, loaves of bread, and more!

### Picture It

Display photos of baked goods, people baking, and a bakery shop.

### Book Look

*Bread, Bread, Bread* by Ann Morris

*Jake Baked the Cake* by B.G. Hennessy

*Tony's Bread* by Tomie de Paola

### Real World Connections



- Bake banana bread or blueberry muffins with your group.
- Have a baked goods tasting party where children can sample different kinds of bread - such as wheat, sourdough and rye - or various baked goods such as bagels, ciabatta bread and pita bread. How are they similar? How are they different?
- Take a field trip to visit a bakery or the bakery department of your local grocery store.

## Birthday Party Prop Collection

Birthday banner

Gift bags

Invitations

Birthday cards

Birthday-themed paper plates

Cupcake or cake box

Party hats

Music player with *Happy Birthday* song

Crepe paper streamers, safety scissors, and tape for decorating

Gift wrap, boxes, ribbon or bows, safety scissors, and tape for wrapping presents

Camera

Large number candles

Small Mylar (foil) balloons on sticks

Toy or flannel board birthday cake/cupcakes and pizza

### Vocabulary

Meaningful words to share as you play alongside children: *birthday, celebration, invitation, welcome, guests, party, treat, surprise, grateful, thank you*

**Picture It**

Display photos of people of various ages celebrating birthdays: eating cake, opening gifts, playing party games, etc.

**Book Look**

*Flower Garden* by Eve Bunting

*Hooray, a Piñata!* by Elisa Kleven

*Moira's Birthday* by Robert Munsch

**Real World Connections**

- Invite children to help throw a surprise party for a special adult, such as a teaching assistant, program director, or cook. Children can decorate with streamers, make cards and even help decorate a cake.
- Mark children's birthdays on your classroom calendar or make a monthly birthday chart with names, dates, and photos.



**Fairy Tale Castle Prop Collection**

Robes, capes, and gowns

Thrones (old wooden chairs painted gold or silver)

Crowns

Hats for knight, squire, princess, jester

Play silks

Costume jewelry

Child-safe mirror

Fairy wings, dragon hat, magic wands, or other fantasy props

Scrolls of rolled paper with "feather pens" (pencils taped to feathers)

Treasure chest with coins and/or jewels

Plastic "crystal" goblets

Plastic cauldron

Child-sized straw brooms

Homemade pretend torches or fireplace

Stick horses

**Vocabulary**

Meaningful words to share as you play alongside children: *fantasy, pretend, imagination, castle, fairy tale, story, character, adventure, hero, long ago*

This theme also offers an opportunity to discuss many different castle characters – king, queen, prince, princess, knight, squire, jester, and more.

**Picture It**

Display photos of real castles such as the Neuschwanstein Castle in Germany, a cottage with a thatched roof, a horse drawn carriage, a stone hearth, and people putting on a fairy tale play.

**Book Look**

*Brave Irene* by William Steig

*King Bidgood's in the Bathtub* by Audrey Wood

*The Usborne Book of Castle Tales* by Heather Emery

**Real World Connections**

- Take your group to see an age-appropriate children's theater production.
- Invite a group of older students or scouts to put on a non-violent fairy tale skit for your children.
- Invite a storyteller to visit.

Special note: *The fairy tale castle theme departs from the usual guideline of selecting topics that are a part of the child's real world. However, because story and media depictions of castles are so prevalent, many older preschoolers relate strongly to this theme.*



## Florist Shop Prop Collection

Assortment of silk flowers, cut into individual stems

Non-breakable flower pots and vases

Smock and gardening gloves

Watering can and spray bottle

Tissue paper, ribbon

Order pad and small cards with pencils

Florist advertisements

Telephone

Cash register and play money

Purses and wallets

### Vocabulary

Meaningful words to share as you play alongside children: *florist, blossom, bloom, stem, petals, customer, shopkeeper, advertisement, arrangement, vase*

### Picture It

Display labeled photos of common flowers, such as roses, sunflowers, daisies, and violets.

### Book Look

*The Flower Alphabet Book* by Jerry Pallotta

*Flowers* by Vijaya Bodach

*Planting a Rainbow* by Lois Ehlert

### Real World Connections

- Take a field trip to a florist's shop, or invite a florist to visit to demonstrate how she/he creates a simple flower arrangement.
- Place one or more arrangements of real flowers in a place where they can be easily seen by children. Encourage children to look closely, smell the flowers, talk about what they notice, and make sketches.



## Grocery Store/Farmer's Market Prop Collection

Cash register and play money

Purses and wallets

Carts or baskets

Coupons and sales fliers

Clerk's smock

Paper or fabric grocery bags

Play food, especially fruits and vegetables

Food boxes and clean empty containers

Balance scale and/or kitchen scale

Chalkboard or child-made signs

Checkout conveyor made from table or large cardboard box

Grocery lists or list-making supplies

### Vocabulary

Meaningful words to share as you play alongside children: *aisle, customer, label, list, receipt, cashier, fruit, vegetable, basket, purchase*

### Picture It

Display photos of various people shopping at a farmer's market or grocery store: browsing, selecting and weighing produce, making a purchase, and loading a car or riding on the bus with bagged groceries.

### Book Look

*At the Supermarket* by Anne Rockwell

*Bebé Goes Shopping* by Susan Middleton Elya

*To Market, To Market* by Anne Miranda

### Real World Connections

- Invite children to bring clean, empty food containers, such as cereal boxes and juice jugs, from home to add to their pretend store.
- Take a field trip to tour a farmer's market or grocery store.



## Home Repair Prop Collection

Toy tool kit

Tape measures

Level

Work gloves, tool belt

Hard hat, safety goggles

Paint brushes, rollers, trays, empty paint cans

Fliers from home repair stores

Telephone

Work bench or saw horse

### Vocabulary

Meaningful words to share as you play alongside children: *plan, construct, repair, hammer, wrench, broken, fixed, carpenter, plumber, painter*

### Picture It

Display photos of people working on a variety of home improvement projects and repairs: painting, repairing appliances, plumbing, and more.

### Book Look

*Tool Book* by Gail Gibbons

*The Tool Box* by Anne Rockwell

*Whose Tools?* by Toni Buzzeo

### Real World Connections

- If you can do so safely, take children on a walking trip to visit repair or construction work being done in or near your program.
- Take a field trip to tour a home improvement or hardware store.



## Ice Cream Stand/Cart Prop Collection

Large cardboard box made into concession stand, or smaller box mounted in a child-sized wheelbarrow to make an ice cream cart

Clean, empty ice cream tubs

Clean, empty syrup bottles

Ice cream scoop

Chalkboard or child-made signs

Very large pompoms (pretend ice cream)

Cones made of cardboard or felt

Bowls, spoons

Apron

Cash register and play money

Napkins

### Vocabulary

Meaningful words to share as you play alongside children: *dessert, treat, once-in-awhile food, scoop, dish, flavor, topping, vendor*

### Picture It

Display photos of a collection of various sweet treat shops: an old-time soda fountain, a bicycle-mounted ice cream cart, a roadside snow cone stand, and more.

### Book Look

*Curious George Goes to an Ice Cream Shop* by Margaret Rey

*Should I Share My Ice Cream?* By Mo Willems

*The Sundae Scoop* by Stuart J. Murphy

### Real World Connections

- Churn your own ice cream. Children can help measure ingredients, slice soft fruits with a butter knife, and even work a manual churn. Encourage predictions about what they think might happen to the ice cream mixture as it is churned.
- Host a family ice cream social.
- Invite an ice cream truck to visit your center. Working in small groups, each child can take a turn to make an order and pay for a treat.



## Lake Day Prop Collection

Child-sized beach chairs

Beach towels

Flip flops, sandals, wading boots

Life jackets

Fishing set – toy or homemade

Turtle and frog toys or puppets

Hats, sunglasses

Picnic set

Binoculars

Empty sunscreen bottle

Maps and brochures from state park

Wildlife guides: fish, reptiles, birds, insects

Cardboard boat or inflatable raft

### Vocabulary

Meaningful words to share as you play alongside children: *lake, vacation, sunshine, relax, explore, dock, wildlife, habitat*

### Picture It

Display photos of Arkansas lake wildlife and/or people enjoying the lake in many different ways: canoeing, water skiing, fishing, swimming, hiking, etc.

### Book Look

*A Day at the Lake* by Stephanie Wallingford

*Have You Seen My Duckling* by Nancy Tafuri

*Morning on the Lake* by Jan Bourdeau Waboose

### Real World Connections

- Take a field trip to a local nature center, or ask a mobile display to visit your program.
- Invite families to join you for a fun day at a local nature area.



## Laundromat Prop Collection

Washers and dryers – toy, or made from large cardboard boxes

Clothes pins

Clothes drying rack

Clothes hangers

Laundry baskets

Clean empty detergent bottles

Baby doll clothes and/or dress up clothes

Hand towels or wash cloths to fold

Socks – colorful pairs to match

Toy iron and ironing board

Cash register and play money

### Vocabulary

Meaningful words to share as you play alongside children: *laundry, customer, coin, wash, detergent, stain, dry, tumble, iron, press, fold, match; wrinkled, smooth.*

### Picture It

Display photos of various people doing laundry: carrying baskets of laundry, matching socks, ironing, and so on.

You might also want to include photos of children with messy clothing, such as a toddler with spaghetti on his shirt and a young ball player with grass stained knees.

### Book Look

*Knuffle Bunny: A Caytionary Tale* by Mo Willems

*Mrs. McNosh Hangs Up Her Wash* by Sarah Weeks

*A Pair of Socks* by Stuart J. Murphy

### Real World Connections



- Invite children to help fold fresh laundry or match real socks.
- Set up a station, indoors or out, where children can actually wash baby doll clothes and hang them up to dry.
- Demonstrate an old fashioned washboard for your group. Set up a space where children can try scrubbing towels or other sturdy items on the washboard.

## Post Office Prop Collection

Jackets for mail carriers and postal clerks or blue button up shirts to represent uniforms

Visors

Tote bags for mail carriers

Mailbox

Address book

Junk mail, magazines, toy catalogs

Blank stationary, postcards, and greeting cards with writing tools

Envelopes of various sizes

Ink stamp

Stickers to represent postage stamps

Postage scale or kitchen scale

Cardboard boxes (packages) in at least three, graduated sizes

Tape

Cash register

Keyboard

Telephone

Wall clock

Open/closed sign

### Vocabulary

Meaningful words to share as you play alongside children: *mail, mail carrier, postage, letter, address, envelope, stamp, message, greeting, correspondence, sender, office, clerk, customer, deliver*

### Picture It

Display photos of a customer at the clerk's desk, mail delivery vehicles, urban and rural mailboxes, and a person writing or reading a greeting card.

If possible, take photos of the outside of your local post office(s) to display. Do children recognize the building(s)?

### Book Look

*Dear Mr. Blueberry* by Simon James

*Delivering Your Mail: A Book About Mail Carriers* by Anne Owen

*With Love, Little Red Hen* by Alma Flor Ada



### Real World Connections

- Workings with individuals or very small groups of children, help children create greeting cards for their families. Children can place these in envelopes, seal, and stamp. After a teacher helps with addresses, the children can walk together to place their cards in the mailbox. Follow up later with a discussion about the cards arriving at home.
- Does your group get mail? Subscribe to an age-appropriate magazine such as *National Geographic Little Kids*, *Ladybug* magazine, or *High Five* magazine. Each month's new magazine will give adults and children a chance to talk about how the mail is delivered.

## Pumpkin Patch Prop Collection

Actual pumpkins and gourds in a variety of manageable sizes

Market stand

Sign

Scale

Farmers' hats and work gloves

Cash register and/or money box, play money

Receipt pad and pencil

Baskets

Child-sized wheelbarrow

Twisted paper "vines"

Hay or straw –real if no one in the group is allergic, or get smaller, decorative bales from the craft store

### Vocabulary

Meaningful words to share as you play alongside children: *market, pumpkin, gourd, seeds, sprout, grow, harvest, crop, autumn, farmer, vine, stem, round, soil, carve, decoration, customer.*

Pumpkins and gourds also provide a wonderful opportunity to use comparative vocabulary related to size, shape, weight, and shades of color.



**Picture It**

Display photos of pumpkins growing on a farm and for sale at a market, families picking out pumpkins, a hay ride, carved jack-o- lanterns or pumpkins used for fall decoration, and pumpkin pie.

**Book Look**

*Biscuit Visits the Pumpkin Patch* by Alyssa Satin Capucilli

*Seed, Sprout, Pumpkin, Pie* by Jill Esbaum

*Too Many Pumpkins* by Linda White

**Real World Connections**

- Before setting up your classroom pumpkin patch, take a field trip to visit a real pumpkin patch. Afterwards, brainstorm with children about things they recall from their visit that might be added to your dramatic play area. How could you work together to create props from everyday items to represent the items on their list? For example, a market stand could be made from a table, while a muddy field could be represented with a long row of brown paper.
- Bring in a large, real pumpkin. What do children predict they might find inside? Carefully open the pumpkin to explore the seeds and stringy inside fibers. Talk about sensory experiences as you explore. What do children observe, smell, and feel with their fingers?

**Rescue Station Prop Collection**

Desk or work table

Fire and police hats

Fire and police uniform shirts

Firefighter’s air tank made from 2-liter bottles

Fire extinguisher made from 2-liter bottle

Walkie talkies and/or old CB radio

Phone

Clipboards with paper and pencils

Traffic cones

Desk bell

Flashlights

Short lengths of garden hose with nozzles or old vacuum hose to serve as fire hoses

Steering wheels and chairs positioned to represent vehicle(s)

Handmade stop sign

**Vocabulary**

Meaningful words to share as you play alongside children: *rescue, police officer, firefighter, EMT, firetruck, ambulance, community helper, respond, help, rescue, safety, station*

## Rescue Station Prop Collection, *continued*

### Picture It

Display photos of a fire truck, police cruiser, ambulance, firefighters, police officers, and EMTs.

### Book Look

*Big Frank's Fire Truck* by Leslie McGuire

*A Day in the Life of a Firefighter* by  
Heather Adamson

*A Day in the Life of a Police Officer* by  
Linda Hayward

### Real World Connections

- Take a field trip to tour a fire station. Afterwards, encourage children to recall what they observed.
- Invite a firefighter, EMT, or police officer to visit the classroom.



## Restaurant Prop Collection

Table with tablecloth

Dishes

Placemats

Cloth napkins

Silk flowers in non-breakable vase

Menus

Aprons

Chef's hats

Trays

Clean, empty ketchup bottle, salt and pepper shakers

Pots and pans

Kitchen tools such as measuring cups, spatulas, and ladles

Purses and wallets, play money

Cash register

Take-out containers, such as pizza boxes

## Restaurant Prop Collection, *continued*

### Vocabulary

Meaningful words to share as you play alongside children: *restaurant, menu, order, nutritious, meal, hostess, waitress, chef, cook, recipe, ingredients, delicious*

### Picture It

Display photos of diverse families eating in different kinds of restaurants. Examples include a family having pizza as part of a birthday celebration, eating with chop sticks at an Asian restaurant, and ordering a quick meal from a food truck.

### Book Look

*Froggy Eats Out* by Jonathan London

*Hiromi's Hands* by Lynn Barasch

*I Want to be a Chef* by Dan Liebman

### Real World Connections

- Take a walking field trip to your program kitchen to see where meals are made.
- Invite a parent who works in a restaurant to visit to talk about his/her job. Before the visit, help children brainstorm a list of questions for the visit, such as:
  - *How many people work at your restaurant?*
  - *What kind of food do you serve at your restaurant?*
  - *What jobs do you do at your restaurant ?*
- Plan a dramatic play prop collection about a specific type of restaurant such as pizza place or sandwich shop. In keeping with the theme, children can make their own, real pizzas or sandwiches.



## Shoe Store Prop Collection

Shoe boxes

Various types of shoes, such as running shoes, dress shoes, and boots in child and adult sizes

Shoes and socks for baby dolls

Shoe sizer – real or homemade

Ruler

Mirrors

Lacing frames

Shoe store fliers or coupons

Cash register and play money

Purses and wallets

### Vocabulary

Meaningful words to share as you play alongside children: *shoe, boot, athletic, dressy, try on, size, fit, comfortable, measure, clerk, customer, sale, display.*

### Book Look

*Pete the Cat: I Love My White Shoes* by James Dean and Eric Litwin

*Shoes, Shoes, Shoes* by Ann Morris

*Which Shoes Would You Choose?* by Betsy Rosenthal

### Real World Connections

- Sort and compare children’s own shoes. Each day, count or graph:
  - Laces or no laces?
  - Open or closed toe?
  - Boots, sandals, or shoes?
- Trace around children’s shoes on white paper. Cut out the shoe shape with crayons, then tape to the soles of the shoe to make a texture rubbing with crayons. When finished, you’ll have a class set of shoe shapes that can be matched, compared, and sorted by size.
- Organize a shoe drive so that children and families can donate old and outgrown shoes to charity.



## Veterinarian Prop Collection

Soft toy pets

Pet carrier

Pet brushes and bowls

Doctor's coat and scrubs

Stethoscope

Toy doctor's kit

Reusable bandages

Adhesive bandages

Cotton balls

Syringes without needles

Animal x-rays – real or homemade

Toy microscope

Clipboard with paper

File folders

Small table for exams

Pet care magazines

Animal ear headbands: cats, dogs, rabbits

Clean, empty pet food containers

### Vocabulary

Meaningful words to share as you play alongside children: *pet, veterinarian, assistant, healthy, well, ill, injured, caring, examination, prescription, puppy/dog, kitten/cat*

### Picture It

Ask families to donate last year's animal calendars and calendars that come in the mail from animal charities. These are the perfect source for large, full color photos of animals!

Your local veterinarian may also be willing to donate advertising posters for flea prevention medications.

### Book Look

*A Visit to the Vet* by Lori Mortensen

*Caring for Your Pets* by Ann Owen

*Sally Goes to the Vet* by Stephen Huneck

### Real World Connections

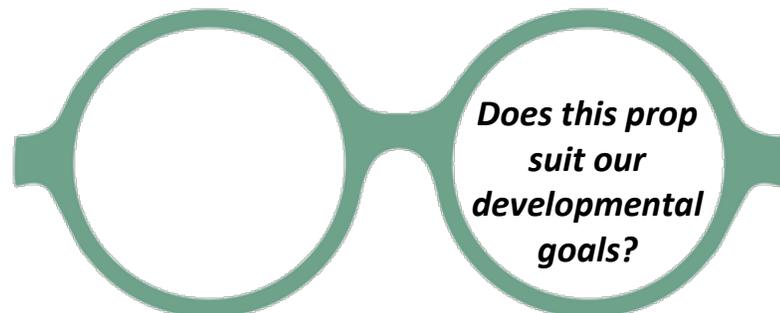
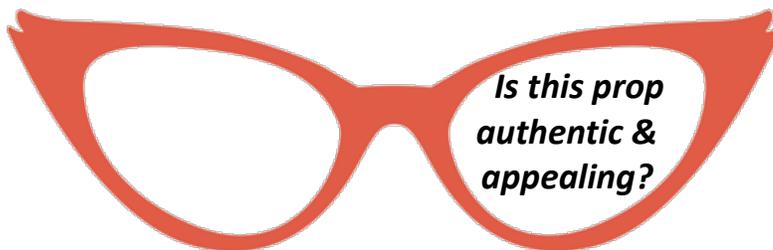
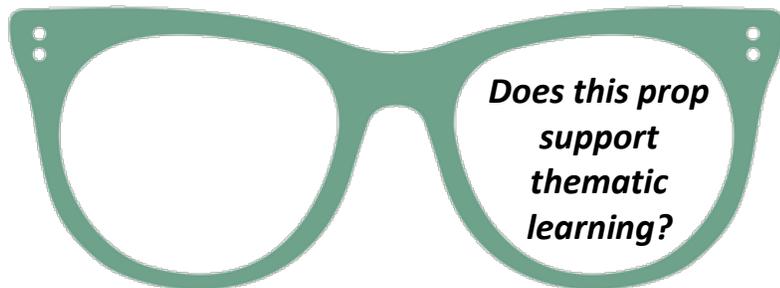
- Invite a veterinarian to visit the classroom to talk about the basics of pet care.
- With signed releases from parents, invite a therapy dog to visit the classroom. Children can talk to the dog's owner about how she/he cares for the dog.



# Questions

*to ask*

when selecting props for play



# Think Outside the Housekeeping Corner: Many Places for Imaginative Play

The dramatic play area, sometimes known as the housekeeping corner, is an area of the classroom especially suited for creative, pretend play.

Why stop there?

- *We know that almost all children are eager to engage in imaginative play. It can be hard for children to share floor space and wait for turns with popular materials. Will children experience fewer challenges when there is more than one place for play?*
- *We know that children's play is repetitive and cumulative; it gains complexity over time. Could we increase opportunities for learning by offering many different ways to explore interests and ideas related to imaginative play?*
- *We know how crucial imaginative play is for healthy child development. Can we help make imaginative play a substantial part of each child's day?*



A dramatic play center is a great first step for supporting children's imaginative play. Read on to discover other **five additional areas** where imaginative play can thrive!

## *Imaginative Play with...*

# BLOCKS

*Shaunda and Ty pull the longest unit blocks from the shelf. They outline the block area rug, marking off a large rectangle. "That's the habitat," Ty tells Shaunda. He's trying out a new word that the children heard at story time today.*

*"Now that we have the habitat, what about all the animals?"*

*Soon, a basket of wild animals – zebras, elephants, and rhinos – have been arranged inside the block enclosure. Shaunda reaches for a toy Jeep from the nearby shelf. "Here come the explorers!"*

Constructive play and imaginative play complement one another. Children's block work often represents structures from real life, such as roads, homes, parking garages, and fences. Well-matched pretend play props enhance the constructive play. The most advanced builders create complex block and prop arrangements, which are then used for extensive imaginative play.

### **Imaginative Additions to the Block Area**

- Realistic plastic animals
- Road signs
- Small vehicles
- People figures
- Dollhouse furniture
- Bottlebrush fir trees
- Flashlights
- Paper, writing tools, child scissors, and tape for creating signs
- Open-ended props, such as silk scarves and wooden spools
- Natural materials, such as pebbles



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*Imaginative Play with...*

# TABLE & RUG TOYS

*As playtime begins, a small group of friends head for the area of the classroom known as the table toy area. They select the bug-themed board game, “Cootie”, and empty the pieces onto the table. Their teacher moves closer to observe their play. He introduced this game to children during small group time yesterday and he’s curious about whether these children will recall the rules: rolling dice and selecting plastic pieces to make insects.*

*Instead of playing the structured game, the children assemble all of the insects at once. The insect characters soon incorporated into a pretend family game. The teacher hears Maribel suggest, “Let’s say the momma bug and the daddy bug are over here and then the baby bug gets lost in the blueberry patch. They have to come and find her before the bear gets there.”*

The world of pretend spills over into almost everything young children do. In the scenario above, the toy bugs from the board game quickly became characters for storytelling when children were permitted to use them freely. As a wise teacher once noted, “Any toy with a face” is likely to be used this way!

Dollhouses, barns, and other small buildings with props are especially appealing to children and make attractive stand-alone play areas or additions to a fine motor area. The smallest pretend play props, such as tiny animals and small people figures, can be combined with Lincoln Logs and other small building materials to promote imaginative play.

## Imaginative Additions to Fine Motor Play Areas

- Interlocking wooden train tracks with trains
- Mr. Potato Head
- Small buildings with props: dollhouse, barn, fire station
- Wooden doll figures with magnetic clothes
- Sorting sets with small figures: teddy bears, insects
- Interlocking building sets with people and wheels
- Magnetic fishing game



*Imaginative Play with...*

# SAND & WATER

*Joseph focuses intently on his work at the water table. He scoops cups of water into a metal pan and stirs briskly, first with a spoon and then with a whisk. He taps the water with a ladle, making a “bum-bum-bum” sound in rhythm with the taps. Looking serious, he discards the ladle and mutters, “What do we need, guys, what do we need?” - even though he is playing alone.*

*His tone brightens as he announces, “Ah - here it is!,” while plucking an invisible object from the air and flicking his fingers over the top of the pan. Joseph looks up at his teacher with a grin. “Soup’s ready! Want some?”*

Scooping, sifting, pouring, and pretending – sensory play and imaginative play are often intertwined. Water and sand can be used for role play, such as making pretend cakes and soups – and for powerful pretend play with small figures and props. Unlike plastic play food, sand, water, and other scoopable materials can become anything the child imagines.

## Imaginative Additions to Sand and Water Play

- Kitchen tools: measuring cups, whisk, long –handled spoons
- Pots, pans, kettles
- Dishes
- Plastic animals: insects, frogs, ducks
- Small construction vehicles (with sand)
- Small boats (with water)
- Plastic aquarium jewels
- Clean aquarium nets
- Paintbrushes
- Doll clothes to wash
- Silk leaves and flowers
- Watering can
- Natural materials such as pinecones, pebbles, and tree branch pieces



## *Imaginative Play with...*

# PUPPETS

*Josie and Noah drape a blanket between two chairs and hunker down behind it. It's a game they know well – they've been returning to this corner of the classroom to put on puppet shows for several weeks now. "Puppet time," Josie calls, and two of the younger members of the group dutifully come to watch. A teacher joins them, snuggling a child on her lap as they sit cross-legged on the floor.*

*Noah hums a tune – theme music – and Josie's hand pops from behind the blanket with a puppet on her hand. "Well, well, well, everybody," the puppet says in a deep, rumbling voice, "I'm Big-Badder-Bear and this is my show."*

Puppets present children with a chance to "become" new characters and try out many different roles. Puppet play is powerful, giving voice to children's ideas and concerns.

Although some classrooms opt to place puppets in the classroom library or dramatic play area, a stand-alone puppet theater area is recommended for at least a portion of the year. It's worth noting that some young children do not automatically know how to interact with puppets. Puppets may go unused unless an adult models use or encourages children to notice the play of others. Puppets are an especially popular plaything in groups where an adult uses puppets purposefully during group times or play.

### **Imaginative Additions for Puppet Play**

- Plush animal puppets**
- Diverse character puppets**
- Homemade puppets**
- Puppets and props to retell familiar storybooks**
- Sturdy, easy-to-supervise puppet theater**
- Seats for audience**
- Paper, writing tools, child scissors, and tape for creating signs and tickets**



## *Imaginative Play...* **OUTDOORS**

*Ava is at the front of a trio of children who sprint excitedly across the playground. “Mermaids! Let’s go,” she yells, “The Sea Witch is invading the palace!” Following Ava’s lead, the pretend mermaids race to gather ribbon wands from the outdoor music area. They’ll need these “magic wands” to save their palace.*

*A mock battle with an invisible Sea Witch ensues. “She’s taken the treasure! She’s getting away!,” call the children. Other children pause in their play to watch the dramatic group storm by. It’s Ava to the rescue again: “Get in the sea boat and we’ll go catch her!” The mermaids pile into a wagon and are off on the next chapter of their adventure.*

As they engage in pretend play outdoors, children are free to run, crawl, climb, and yell. There’s more room to move and fewer constraints about where and how to play. Quieter games happen too, with children gathering together under trees and in corners of the playground.

### **Imaginative Additions for Outdoor Play**



- Gas pumps, tool kits, and carwash supplies for wheeled toys
- Stick horses
- Easy-to-supervise playhouse with props
- Picnic or camping prop set
- Sand or gravel pit with large trucks
- Mud kitchen with pots, pans, and utensils
- Capes, vests, hats
- Dolls with strollers
- Treasure chest with plastic coins or aquarium gems
- Full-sized paintbrushes with buckets of water
- Wagons



**Come out and play!**  
Props invite active dramatic play outdoors.



# PARTNERS

## IN

## PLAY

### 1. Notice

Quietly observe the child/children at play. Look closely at the child's body language and actions.

Look for signs that the child welcomes your involvement – a smile, a comment, or a friendly gesture.

### 2. Comment

Say aloud what you see the child doing:

*"You're holding the baby doll."*

Or, to two children,  
*"You're both wearing hats!"*

The comment helps children feel recognized and invites a response.

### 3. Ask to Join

Model the social skill of joining play by asking,

*"May I play with you?"*

Sometimes children would rather *not* have the adult play, and that's OK.

### 4. Match

Match the complexity of your play to the children's. Do what they are doing.



## 6. Coach

When conflicts occur between children, help them talk together to figure out an agreeable solution.

*“It sounds like you both want to use the tea kettle. Do you have any ideas about how the two of you could solve this problem?”*

## 8. Reflect

When playtime is done, take time to reflect on your time with children.  
What worked well today?

## 5. Converse

Offer new words that are well-matched to children’s play themes:

*Child: “I’m fixing up the doll with the doctor’s thing.”*

*Adult: “I see – you’re using the stethoscope to listen to her heartbeat.”*

Ask meaningful questions to find out more.

## 7. Scaffold

Model math and literacy skills that are well-matched to the child’s developmental level.

If children struggle to master materials or solve physical problems, give them time to figure it out on their own. If it seems that your support would be helpful, provide just enough to get them started, then let them lead.

***“Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning.”***

*-Mr. Rogers*

# Aggressive Pretend Play: A Great Debate

As four afterschool club staff members at Eastville Youth Center prepare snacks, toys, and activities for the kindergarten group's busy afternoon ahead, talk turns children's gun play:

**Ms. Maribel:** *I don't know if we should even set out these Tinker Toys. All they ever seem to do with them is make guns and pretend to shoot each other – and us!*

**Mr. Rupert:** *It isn't just the Tinker Toys. Sticks are guns. Fingers are guns. Kindergarteners will use just about anything for pretend guns. The way I see it, it's just kids being kids. I did it when I was a kid. Didn't you?*

**Ms. Maribel:** *Sure, but somebody always gets mad or upset sooner or later, and we have to help them work it out. Maybe we should make it a rule that they just can't play that way.*

**Ms. Olivia:** *Would that send the right message? Guns are part of life for a lot of our kids. I don't want to teach them that all guns are bad. Isiah's dad is a police officer, and Emma's big sister just joined the Army. And lots of our families hunt.*

**Mr. Dale:** *Yeah, but most of these kids go to Eastville Elementary School, right? I heard they have a super strict "no guns allowed" policy. Our kids could get suspended just for playing that way at school. Are we sending mixed messages if they're allowed to play that way here?*



Weapon play is common for children, as are other aggressive games: ninjas, heroes vs. bad guys, zombies, and more! Even when play of this sort is discouraged or banned by adults, it seems to persist in play groups. Have you ever wondered why?

For many children, aggressive play is linked to feelings of power and competence. For young boys, aggressive pretend play may be uniquely accepted and encouraged by older male figures in their lives: brothers, neighbors, and fathers, among others. Many children are exposed to violent themes, such as superheroes battling "bad guys" - through television and movies. And, for some children, real guns are a part of the home culture.

Programs that serve children and families must often make decisions about whether or not to allow aggressive play. And, if play of this sort is allowed, what boundaries are set?

The Eastville staff members are off to a good start as they discuss their observations and feelings about children's aggressive play. Each of them has raised valid points and together they are engaged in a meaningful dialog about a topic that they feel is important. Program practices should be an intentional reflection of philosophy and beliefs, and practices may vary from one program to the next.

Some programs choose to allow aggressive play as long as it does not become dangerously rough or emotionally hurtful in nature.

Other programs allow limited aggressive play within a clear set of boundaries.

For example, a teacher might tell children, ***"You may play ninjas, but only use soft, pretend blows. Don't hit or kick hard enough to hurt one another."***

Or, ***"The children on our playground are not bad guys. You may only shoot invisible, pretend bad guys."***

Still other programs do not allow aggressive play at all, redirecting to other forms of active play. For example, a teacher might tell a child, ***"There are no guns in our classroom. What else could Batman do, besides shooting?"***

On a summertime water play day, children in this program might be offered wet sponges to toss, in lieu of water pistols.

Although program choices regarding aggressive play may differ, some practices should be universal:

- Program beliefs and boundaries should be clearly communicated to children and families.
- If rules are set, they should be straightforward and free of judgement. Consider a child who is encouraged to play roughly with his loving father and older brothers. This child may feel conflicted and confused if teacher scolds him harshly as if he has misbehaved when he plays this way with friends at school. On the other hand, a statement such as "Wrestling isn't allowed at school" – followed by appropriate redirection – can help the child learn boundaries without contradicting the other authority figures in his life.
- Adults should be keen observers of children in their care. What do they notice about the children's behavior and responses to one another? Program practices should protect children from serious or lasting physical harm or emotional upset.
- Rules and boundaries should be consistent. Each staff member who works with the children should have the same, general expectations and similar responses to child behavior.

<b>Reasons why a program might allow aggressive pretend play</b>	<b>Reasons why a program might <i>not</i> allow aggressive pretend play</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feel it is a part of home culture for many children or simply typical child behavior.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feel that it might upset or offend families; some do not want their children to play with guns or have had violent past experiences.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feel that aggressive play is inevitable; children are going to do it whether it is allowed or not</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feel that aggressive play inevitably leads to hurt feelings or escalating aggression.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feel that children’s rough and tumble play is often spirited physical fun, not always violent or mean-spirited.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feel there is a need for consistency, in keeping with “no guns allowed” rules children may encounter in other school settings.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feel that children often try to make sense of “big ideas” through pretend play. Play about heroes and villains and powerful weapons may help children make sense of scary subjects.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feel that aggressive play could promote violent fantasies or lead to playing with real guns.</li> </ul>



***Ninjas, guns, and bad guys - how do you feel about children’s aggressive play?***

# Sharing Our Message with Families

Sharing with families the many different ways imaginative play supports children's learning encourages families to provide additional play opportunities at home. Below you will find sample letters that you may share in your communications with your families.

[Insert your program name and contact information here.]

## THE PLAY-FULL PROP BOX

The ability to pretend is very important to a child's future success. In order to pretend, children must be able to recall experiences they have had and then re-create them. They must be able to picture experiences in their minds.

Children like to try on different roles, act out experiences, recall past events, and work out anxieties. One day a child may act out going to the grocery store, making a list, gathering items, paying at the checkout counter. Another day the child may pretend to be a dentist or a firefighter.

You can encourage pretend play experiences that build your child's intellectual abilities and encourage creative thinking by using prop boxes or bags. Prop boxes contain an assortment of items related to a make-believe play theme.

For a day-at-the-beach theme, a box may hold beach towels, old swimsuits, flip-flops, empty suntan lotion containers, old sunglasses, and magazines. Another box may contain a baker's hat, rolling pin, cookie cutters, play dough, pans, spoon, aprons, and dish towels.

Clearly label the containers, perhaps with pictures and words, and store them where your child can reach them. Keep adding to your collections. Yard sales and flea markets are great places to find props. As your child's interests change, start a new collection.

Your child will benefit from these collections in many ways other than just having fun. Research indicates that children who have many opportunities to participate in pretend play use more sophisticated language and become better readers and writers.

Prop boxes are almost as much fun to make as they are to play with. The only limit to themes for prop boxes is our imagination!

[Insert your program name and contact information here.]  
*This family page is for toddlers and young preschoolers.*

## **FIRST EXPERIENCES IN PRETEND PLAY**

Make-believe play is one of the greatest joys of childhood. It also offers abundant opportunities for children's development. Children learn how to relate to other people as they play. Cooperation and conflict resolution are two skills that pretend play strengthens. As they interact with others in play, children improve their language and practice problem-solving skills.

Around the age of a year old, children begin to pretend to cry, sleep, and eat. They soon include a stuffed animal, doll, or favorite toy in their play. They also begin to use objects as symbols—a simple block becomes a fast race car or a stick makes a fine horse.

As children approach 3, they begin participating in make-believe play with other children.

These first pretend play experiences often focus on home experiences—cooking, cleaning, and caring for babies. That's why our pretend play area has props and equipment that represent the home setting. These encourage children to act out roles familiar to them.

Families can encourage pretend play at home by observing the children's interests. Provide props that allow children to imitate adult actions—child-size brooms, purses, shoes, or a toy lawn mower.

When you encourage pretend play at home, you are stimulating your child's intellectual and social development. As children play, the brain forms connections that will be needed for academic tasks. We know that children who have the skills that are developed in pretend play are more likely to be successful in school. At the same time, you will be developing rich memories of your child at play—memories that will last a lifetime.

[Insert your program name and contact information here.]  
*This family page is for older preschoolers and school-age children.*

### **LET'S BE FIRE FIGHTERS!**

Make-believe play is one of the greatest joys of childhood. It also offers abundant opportunities for children's development. Children learn how to relate to other people as they play. Cooperation, negotiation, and conflict resolution are some of the skills that pretend play strengthens.

As they interact with others in play, children practice their communication and problem-solving skills. Children actually use language more frequently and more elaborately in make-believe play than they do in virtually any other activity.

The toddler's first pretend play experiences often focus on home experiences—cooking, cleaning, and caring for babies. Pretend play gradually becomes more elaborate and complex. Four- and 5-year-olds rehearse adult roles in relation to other people. Such play helps children make sense of the world. School-age children create involved scenarios of fantasy and adventure. Pretend play fosters emotional development as children work through fears and worries in a safe context.

Families can encourage pretend play at home by capitalizing on their children's interest at the moment. Develop themes from their recent experiences and from stories they have read or movies they have seen. Examples of play themes are camping, going to the baseball game, the grocery store, or the hospital. Provide simple props for children to use in their play. Have crayons, paper, and other dress up clothes handy for the children to create the items they need.

When you encourage pretend play at home, you are stimulating your child's intellectual and social development. As children play, the brain forms connections that will be needed for academic tasks. We know that children who have the skills that are developed in pretend play are more likely to be successful in school. At the same time, you will be developing rich memories of your child at play—memories that will last a lifetime.

# Out of School and Into Character: Facilitating Dramatic Play with Youth in Kindergarten and Beyond

## *Does imaginative play fade away as children move through the elementary school years?*

Not at all! In fact, children ages 5-7 pretend with even greater intensity and complexity than they did when they were younger, expanding their play to encompass more themes. The majority of youth ages 8 – 10 still engage in imaginative play on a regular basis. Both role play and play with action figures and play sets are popular. In the junior high and high school years, dramatic simulations - such as mock governments, historical reenactments, and space and flight simulators - offer opportunities for immersive learning.

Children and youth have engaged in imaginative play since ancient times. Play of this sort naturally reduces stress, fosters social collaboration, and strengthens communication skills and reasoning and problem solving skills, to name just a few. Imaginative play remains as valuable to today's youth as it ever was, yet opportunities for dramatic play are sadly lacking for many.

## **Did you know?**

- Elementary school teachers report rarely using role play as in instructional strategy, primarily because of time constraints.
- Unstructured school recess time is limited.  
Many public elementary schools provide only 15-20 minutes of recess daily.
- Youth are often involved in structured activities - such as scouting, music lessons, and team sports - during the afterschool and weekend hours.
- Fewer families seem comfortable allowing children to go outside to play.  
Many of today's children interact far less with neighbors than in past generations.



Programs serving families during out-of-school hours – such as before and after school and during summer vacation – are uniquely able to support and celebrate purposeful pretend play.

# 7 Spectacular Ways to Support Schoolage Dramatic Play

## 1. Seek out authentic, appealing props that are well-matched to the age group.

Props that feel “too young” perpetuate the idea that imaginative play is for little kids. Youngsters may feel self-conscious about using them.

Provide more realistic materials, swapping plastic pots and pans for real metal ones. Dolls should ideally be life-sized, lifelike, and accompanied by real baby clothes and accessories.

Pretend play at ages 5-10 is even more complex than in the preschool years. Schoolagers appreciate a wide variety of intriguing props. One afterschool staffer noted that his group’s most-loved props seemed to be the old computer keyboards, rock star costumes, sports jerseys, and real restaurant menus. Which props are most popular with your group?

## 2. Think small with building sets and small figures.

Not all pretend play involves dressing up and role playing. Play with action figures and small character toys is equally powerful. Some of the most popular playsets for schoolage groups include:

- Dollhouses with furnishings and people (family or fashion dolls)
- Lego sets with figures and wheels
- Playmobil sets
- Small animal toys, such as Littlest Pet Shop sets
- Action figures from popular comic and movie series



### 3. Encourage creative thinking with open-ended materials and flexible play spaces.

Creativity and imagination go hand-in-hand.

As kids pair art and construction materials with pretend play props, they develop and strengthen creative and abstract thinking skills and technical problem solving skills. Engagement soars and the complexity of play deepens.

One schoolage staffer tells how her program used to set strict limits about children's play: art materials had to stay at the art area, blocks in the block corner, and Lego figures at the Lego table. Staff noticed that children seemed restless and often tested these boundaries. They wondered if their highly structured play space might actually inhibit children's play.

A group meeting was called to discuss the possibility of allowing materials to flow freely around the room. Could the youth group commit to being safe and responsible with materials? Could they pitch in to get everything sorted and organized again at the end of each play time? They agreed that they could.

With the new system in place, staff soon notice an increase in purposeful play. Groups of players join together with intense focus. Games move around the room to accommodate new ideas and inventions. Everyone seems deeply engrossed in play.

Here's a sampling of the group's creative play on a summer afternoon:

- *Yarn and fabric are transformed into a parachute for an action figure. Plans are made to take the figure outside for a test flight.*
- *An informal talent show is takes shape in one corner of the room. Large, hollow blocks are gathered for a stage, chairs are arranged for the audience, and tickets and signs are crafted from construction paper.*
- *Paper and fabric are transformed into costumes for the talent show participants.*
- *Long pieces of cardboard and wood are constructed into ramps for a Lego skate park.*
- *Lincoln Logs become a bowling alley for a set of small figures. Hot Wheels tracks are repurposed as bowling lanes complete with handmade pins and marble bowling balls. One of the characters celebrates a birthday there. Tiny scraps of tissue paper are taped around dollhouse props – wrapped gifts for the birthday boy to open.*

## Schoolage Creative Play



*A Lincoln Log bowling alley is the scene of a small character's birthday party.*



*Above: Talent show participants work on costumes.*



*At left: Skateboarder ready for the cardboard ramp.*

## 4. Take creative play outside!

Imaginative play doesn't stop when the group goes outside. Support youth with spaces and materials for playing creatively in big, active ways.

Possibilities include:

- *Materials for building forts, hideouts, tipis and other structures: Cardboard, lengths of mesh fabric, wood.*
- *A low, wooden stage.*
- *Open-ended fixtures. With a little imagination, a simple bench or halved log becomes a horse, a train, or a diving board. A gazebo or an open, pole barn-style play structure offers a "home base" for pretend play.*
- *Loose parts: Crates and planks to repurpose in many different ways; "tree cookies" (tree branches sliced into flat rounds) and dried bamboo pieces to carry and stack.*

## 5. Block off plenty of time for play and encourage cumulative play for more than one day.

Schedule uninterrupted play periods of at least 45 minutes, and ideally 1-2 hours in length. This provides enough time for kids to become immersed in play, try out new ideas, and work through problems. Blocks of playtime increase engagement and persistence.

As playtime draws to a close, find ways to save youth-created materials to use again later. For example, a low shelf in the afterschool storage room might be reserved for Lego creations and construction paper props. These can be stored over night to allow tomorrow's play to pick up where it left off today.

## 6. Create an emotionally safe place for imaginative play.

Youth are highly aware of the actions and reactions of those around them. Imaginative play can grind to a halt if kids experience ridicule or feel self-conscious. Not surprisingly, youth identified social climate as one of their greatest concerns in the group care environment:

*"I like to play with the Barbies best but (child's name) says Barbies are for babies. So I don't usually play with them."*

-Girl, age 8

*"I hate it when the teachers always laugh at us when we're not even being funny."*

-Boy, age 6

*"We had a Dancing Show day and a lot of kids made fun of the way (child's name) danced. He went under the table and cried."*

- Girl, age 9

*"There's a picnic place outside where they have a clubhouse but they won't let me come in."*

-Boy, age 7

How do adults and peers respond to imaginative play? Strong practices should be in place to discourage exclusion and teasing. All young people need to know that they can turn to a trusted adult if they feel excluded, ridiculed, or teased.

Actively involved adult leaders set the tone and model social skills. They are attuned to body language and tone, stepping in to intervene if problems occur.

Youth can be taught to voice their concerns and talk together to resolve conflicts. When empathy is emphasized and problems are handled promptly, the schoolage group can become a place where members feel safe to share ideas and be themselves.



## 7. Introduce drama & theater experiences.

For creative kids, theater offers a chance to imagine characters and scenarios in new ways. Theater can continue into the teen years and beyond as a hobby or even a career.

Programs serving schoolagers can include theater and drama activities in many ways, including:

- Opportunities for kids to write and perform skits and plays. These can be informal performances for peers, a planned presentation for a group of younger children, or a special performance for families.
- Field trips to see age appropriate stage productions at the local high school or community theater. If a field trip isn't possible, considering encouraging families to attend an evening performance. A drawing for donated tickets can help spark interest.
- Special guests sharing theater and drama activities. Invite high school or college drama students or local community theater members to share some of their favorite acting exercises with your group.

# **True Stories: Using Biographies to Spark Pretend Play for School-agers**

Pretend play can be sparked by real life experiences or by adventures described in books. Biographies introduce real people who have had fantastic adventures and done amazing things. Best of all, it's all true. A biography project may be the perfect way to combine literacy and history learning with imaginative pretend play.

Here's how a biography project works:

- Staff select a collection of books that share a common theme or time period. Look for high interest formats - such as photo journals, picture books, and graphic novels – to appeal to even the most reluctant of readers. Books can reflect the diverse interests and reading levels of the group. On the following pages, you'll find suggestions for themes and biographical/autobiographical titles for mixed-age groups.
- Each group member selects a book to read independently over the course of the unit. An additional title may be selected to read aloud as a group . Book discussions can take place during group times or informally during snacks and social times. Staff encourage young people to talk about characters, settings, and events in their books. .
- In the dramatic play area, a fresh collection of props encourage play themes related to the current topic or theme. Additional props are added in response to ideas generated by members of the group. Kids can use art materials to create handmade props, as well.
- If desired, each unit can culminate with a final project, such as youth-created skits, a character costume day, or a mural project.



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***Props to Support  
Thematic Play***

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**Drums**

**Headphones**

**Keyboard**

**Maracas**

**Microphones**

**Old turntable**

**Platform stage**

**Sheet music**

**Tap shoes**

**Tickets**

**Top hats**

**Tutus, Grass skirts, Scarves**

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## **Meet the Music Makers**

***These biographies and autobiographies tell the tales of singers, dancers, and musicians.***

***Rap a Tap Tap: Here's Bojangles - Think of That!* by Leo Dillon**

Rhyming text introduces a famous tap dancer.

Read aloud for kindergarten; independent reading for 1<sup>st</sup> grade

***Trombone Shorty* by Troy Andrews**

Picture book autobiography about growing up as a young jazz musician in New Orleans.

Read aloud for K-1, independent reading for 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

***Tito Puente, Mambo King* by Monica Brown and Rafael Lopez**

Follow the “King of Mambo” from a childhood banging on pots and pans to a world famous musical career.

Read aloud for K-1, independent reading for 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

***Drum Dream Girl* by Margarita Engle**

The true story of Millo Castro Zaldarriaga, a Chinese-African-Cuban youth who broke Cuba's traditional taboo against female drummers.

Read aloud for K-1, independent reading for 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> grade

***When the Beat Was Born: DJ Kool Herc and the Creation of Hip Hop* by Laban Carrick Hill**

Meet a pioneer of hip hop who was changing the DJ scene at age 13.

Read aloud for 1<sup>st</sup>- 3<sup>rd</sup> grade; independent reading for 3<sup>rd</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

***Mozart: The Boy Who Changed the World With His Music* by Marcus Weeks**

Factual account of the life and influence of a musical genius who was composing at age 5 and playing for royalty by age 6.

Independent reading for 3<sup>rd</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

## Discover Doers of Daring Deeds

*These biographies and autobiographies introduce readers to adventures who went higher, farther, or faster than others had before.*

### ***The Man Who Walked Between the Towers* by Mordicai Gerstein**

The story of a daring tightrope walk between the two tall towers of the World Trade Center

Read aloud for kindergarten; independent reading for 1<sup>st</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> grade.

### ***Night Flight: Amelia Earhart Crosses the Atlantic* by Robert Burleigh**

Ride along for Amelia Earhart's first solo flight across the Atlantic in 1932.

Read aloud for kindergarten; independent reading for 1<sup>st</sup> - 2<sup>nd</sup> grade.

### ***Hanging Off Jefferson's Nose: Growing Up On Mount Rushmore* by Tina Nichols Coury**

The Mount Rushmore monument was begun by famous sculptor Gutzon Borglum, but it was completed by his young son.

Read aloud for K-1, independent reading for 2<sup>nd</sup> -3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

### ***Queen of the Falls* by Chris Van Allsburg**

A retired schoolteacher is determined to be the first person to go over Niagara Falls in a barrel.

Read aloud for 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade; independent reading for 3<sup>rd</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> grade

### ***To Space and Back* by Sally Ride**

Photo-filled autobiographical account of an astronaut's journey.

Independent reading for 4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> grade

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### ***Props to Support Thematic Play***

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**Aviator's hat and goggles**

**Bicycle helmets**

**Binoculars**

**Cameras**

**Crutches, slings, reusable elastic bandages**

**Flashlights, lanterns**

**Low balance beam or slack line**

**Old CB radio or other electronics**

**Silver emergency blanket**

**Walkie-talkies**

**Work gloves**

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***Props to Support  
Thematic Play***

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**Binoculars**

**Cardboard anchor**

**Flashlights**

**Homemade scuba tanks  
(2-liter bottles)**

**Inflatable boat**

**Knit hoods**

**Large appliance box to  
make into a pretend boat,  
submarine, or lighthouse**

**Life jackets**

**Swim fins and masks**

**Treasure chest**

**Walkie-talkies**

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## **Imagine an Ocean Life**

***These biographies and autobiographies take readers to the shore, out to sea, and deep in the ocean.***

***Manfish: A Story of Jacques Cousteau* by Jennifer Berne**

Poetic text tells the tale of one of the best-known oceanographers of all time.

Read aloud for kindergarten and first grade

***Abbie Against the Storm: The True Story of a Young Heroine and a Lighthouse* by Marcia K. Vaughan**

A young lighthouse keeper tends a remote lighthouse during a harsh winter storm.

Read aloud for kindergarten; independent reading for 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> grade

***Winter's Tail: How One Little Dolphin Learned to Swim Again* by Craig Hatkoff, Juliana Hatkoff, and Isabella Hatkoff**

Wildlife conservationists rescue an injured dolphin and nurse her back to health.

Read aloud for K-1<sup>st</sup>; independent reading for 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

***Shark Lady: True Adventures of Eugenie Clark* by Anne McGovern**

Tales of one of the first scientists to dive to research deep water sharks.

Read aloud for 2<sup>nd</sup> grade; Independent reading for 3<sup>rd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

***Dive! My Adventures in the Deep Frontier* by Sylvia Early**

Autobiography of a modern-day oceanographer features stunning photos.

Independent reading for 4<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> grade

# Take an Interest in Inventors and Innovators

*These biographies and autobiographies demonstrate how creative thinking and problem solving can change the world.*

## ***In the Garden with Dr. Carver* by Susan Grigsby**

The famous plant scientist visits a rural community to teach new farming methods.

Read aloud for kindergarten – 1<sup>st</sup> grade; independent reading for 2<sup>nd</sup> grade.

## ***Mr. Ferris and His Wheel* by Kathryn Gibbs Davis**

Mechanical engineer George Washington Gale Ferris, Jr. creates something amazing for the Chicago World's Fair.

Read aloud for kindergarten-2<sup>nd</sup> grade; independent reading for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

## ***Now & Ben: The Modern Inventions of Benjamin Franklin* by Gene Barretta**

You might be surprised how many of this colonial character's inventions are still in use today.

Read aloud for kindergarten and up; independent reading for 1<sup>st</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

## ***Balloons over Broadway: The True Story of the Puppeteer of Macy's Parade* by Melissa Sweet**

A creative man invites "upside-down sky puppets" that are still a beloved tradition today.

Read aloud for 1<sup>st</sup>- 2<sup>nd</sup> grade; independent reading for 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

## ***The Boy Who Invented TV: The Story of Philo Farnsworth* by Kathleen Krull**

It turns out that the inventor of the television drew inspiration from an unexpected source: his father's potato farm!

Independent reading for 2<sup>nd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

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## ***Props to Support Thematic Play***

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**Boxes and other recyclables for making pretend inventions**

**Clipboards with paper and pencils**

**Electronic diagrams**

**Interlocking building toys, such as Lego and marble works**

**Large dry erase board for drawing ideas**

**Measuring tools**

**Old electronics to take apart**

**Safety goggles**

**Snap Circuits sets**

**Unbreakable beakers and laboratory flasks**

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***Props to Support  
Thematic Play***

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**Backpacks**

**Binoculars**

**Butterfly or fishing nets**

**Fishing vest**

**Lantern**

**Magnifying glasses**

**Realistic wildlife puppets**

**Tent**

**Tin camp dishes**

**Trail maps**

**Walking sticks**

**Wildlife field guides**

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## **Envision Outdoor Adventure**

*These biographies and autobiographies introduce explorers and environmental heroes.*

***The Watcher: Jane Goodall's Life with the Chimps*  
by Jeanette Winter**

Follow primate researcher Jane Goodall into the forests of Tanzania.

Read aloud for K-1<sup>st</sup>; independent reading for 2<sup>nd</sup> grade.

***Mama Miti: Wangari Maathai and the Trees of Kenya*  
by Donna Jo Napoli**

The true story of a Nobel Peace Prize winner who inspired the planting of over 30 million trees in her native Kenya.

Read aloud for K-1<sup>st</sup>; independent reading for 2<sup>nd</sup> grade.

***Barnum's Bones: How Barnum Brown Discovered the Most Famous Dinosaur in the World*  
by Tracey Fern**

Meet the paleontologist who found the first T. Rex skeleton.

Read aloud for 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup>; independent reading for 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> grade.

***Summer Birds: The Butterflies of Maria Merian*  
by Margarita Engle**

In the Middle Ages, a young girl's careful observations of butterflies bring new understanding of insects.

Read aloud for 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup>; independent reading for 3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> grade.

***Lost Trail: Nine Days Alone in the Wilderness*  
by Donn Fendler**

The true tale of a twelve-year-old scout who gets lost on a mountain in Maine told in engaging, graphic novel style.

Independent reading for 4<sup>th</sup> grade and up.

## **More to Explore**

**Keep going!**

Try biography projects related to sports heroes, ancient explorers, artists, and more.

Find great book lists at <http://www.teachingkidsbooks.com/>.

# Read All About It

## Recommended reading for early childhood professionals

### ***The Boy on the Beach: Building Community through Play***

Vivian Gussin Paley  
University Of Chicago Press, 2014

### ***A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play***

Vivian Gussin Paley  
University Of Chicago Press, 2005

### ***Designs for Living and Learning: Transforming Early Childhood Environments (2nd ed.)***

Deb Curtis and Margie Carter  
Redleaf Press, 2014

### ***Expressing Creativity in Preschool***

Editors of Teaching Young Children  
NAEYC, 2015

### ***Literacy-Building Play in Preschool: Lit Kits, Prop Boxes, and Other Easy-to-Make Tools to Boost Emergent Reading and Writing Skills through Dramatic Play***

V. Susan Bennett-Armistead  
Scholastic Teaching Resources, 2009

### ***Observing and Recording the Behavior of Young Children***

Dorothy H. Cohen, Virginia Stern, Nancy Balaban, and Nancy Gropper  
Teachers College Press, 2009

### ***The Power of Play: Learning What Comes Naturally***

David Elkind  
Da Capo Press, 2007

### ***A Show of Hands: Using Puppets with Young Children***

Ingrid M. Crepeau and M. Ann Richards  
Redleaf Press, 2003

