

Sensorimotor to Symbolic:

Intentional Dramatic Play Experiences

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Intelligence is forming as babies use all their senses to perceive the world and find patterns.

The pleasure babies receive from their caregivers enables them to decipher patterns in the caregivers' voices and facial expressions that reflect the caregivers' feelings and intentions. Thus begins the journey of learning to recognize patterns and organize perceptions into meaningful categories.

Engaging Autism. Greenspan and Wieder, 2006.



Brain research tells us that:

Emotions are critical to patterning. What we learn is influenced and organized by emotions and mindsets involving expectancy, personal biases and prejudices, self-esteem and the need for social interaction. Emotions and thoughts literally shape each other and cannot be separated. Emotions color meaning. An appropriate emotional climate is indispensable to sound education.

Caine & Caine, 1994

Brain research tells us that:

Intelligence is dependent upon the child's ability to see patterns in his world.

In patterning we include schematic maps and categories both acquired and innate. The brain/mind needs and automatically registers the familiar while simultaneously searching for and responding to novel stimuli. Effective education must give learners an opportunity to formulate their own patterns of understanding.

Caine & Caine, 1994



**Jean Piaget (1972, p. 27) speaking
about how children learn said:**

“Children should be able to do their own
experimenting and their own research.

Teachers, of course, can guide them by
providing appropriate materials, but the
essential thing is that in order for a child to
understand something, he must construct
it himself, he must re-invent.”

The young child engages in three kinds of play:

- Sensorimotor or Functional
- Dramatic or Symbolic
 - Macrospheric
 - Microspheric
- Construction
 - Fluid and Structured



Microspheric Dramatic Play

Miniature play materials

Examples:

- Doll house with furniture & people
- Tractors & farm animals
- Zoo setting with wild animal figures
- City street with people & cars

Macrospheric Dramatic Play

Life size props that children use to create and take on roles

Examples:

- Home & family
- Farmer
- Scientist
- Chef, party guest
- Grocer, shopper



Play Intensity

The amount of time the child is allowed to experience the three kinds of play during each day and throughout the year.

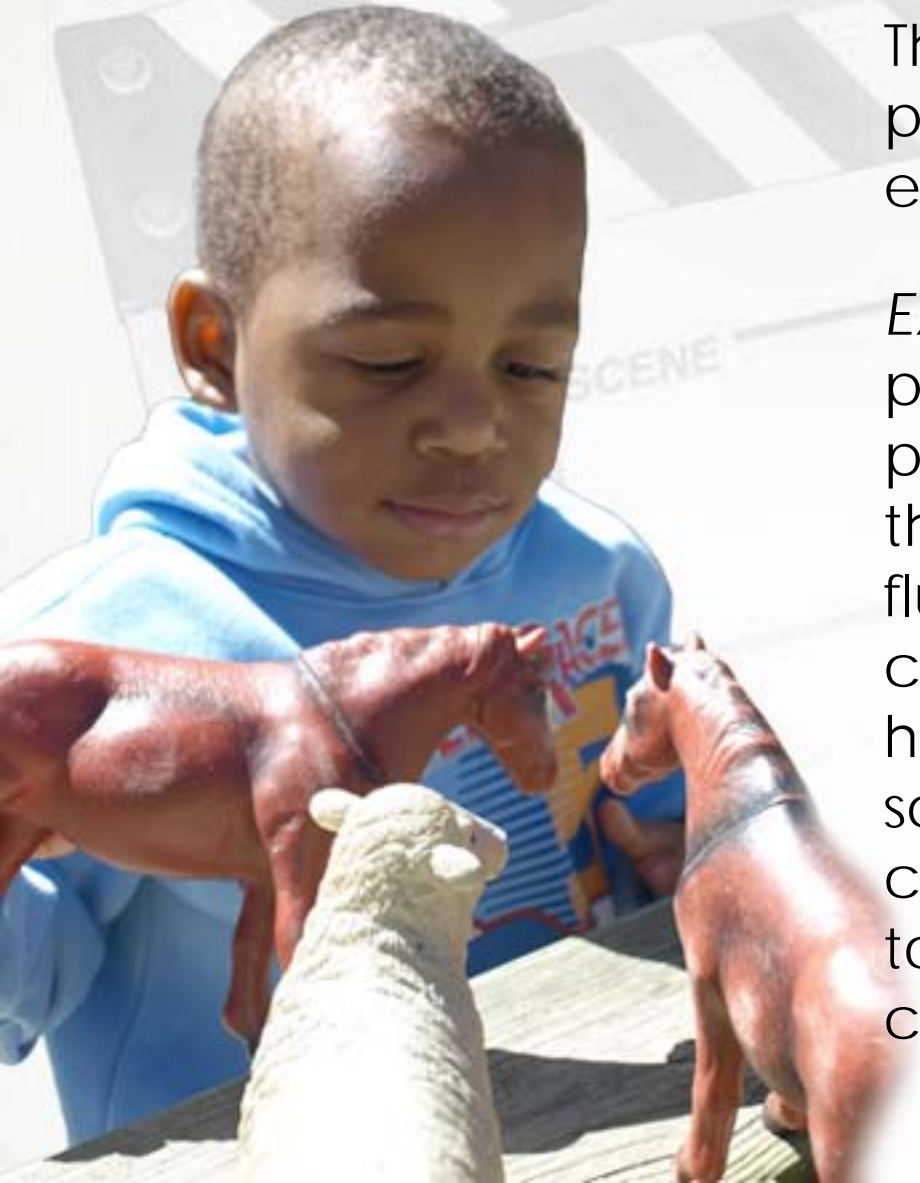
Example: Children are allowed to choose from an array of activities everyday that provide opportunities to engage in dramatic, construction, and sensorimotor play.



Play Density

The variety of ways each kind of play is presented for the child to experience.

Example: Children can use paint at the easel, on finger paint trays, with small brushes on the table-top, etc., to practice fluid construction skills. Children can use the unit (Pratt) blocks, hammers with nails and wood, scrap construction materials with cool melt guns, and Legos™ to practice structured construction skills.



Four Scaffolding Components

- Scaffolding the Dramatic Play Environment
- Scaffolding the Pre-Dramatic Play Experience
- Scaffolding the Individual Child's Dramatic Play Experience
- Scaffolding the Post-Dramatic Play Experience

Scaffolding Children's Learning

Vygotsky believed that higher mental functions have their roots in social interaction and collaborative activities.

Taken from *Scaffolding Children's Learning, Vygotsky & Early Childhood Education* by Laura E. Berk and Adam Winsler (NAEYC Research into Practice Series, Volume 7).



Vygotsky's Theory

Make-believe play supports the emergence of two complimentary capacities:

1. The ability to separate thought from actions and objects
2. The capacity to renounce impulsive action in favor of deliberate and flexible self-regulatory activity

Taken from Scaffolding Children's Learning, Vygotsky & Early Childhood Education by Laura E. Berk and Adam Winsler (NAEYC Research into Practice Series, Volume 7).

Stages of Sensorimotor & Dramatic Play

This observation system combines the play scales of Howes (1980) and Rubin (1989) and the social categories of Parten (1932) with the cognitive categories of Piaget (1962).

When observing a child's behavior using dramatic play materials a decision must first be made whether the behavior is symbolic or strictly sensorimotor. If the play is sensorimotor and not symbolic it should be scored according to the following scales Sensorimotor 1-4.



Sensorimotor 1

Repetition of an action several times in order to continue some type of bodily sensation; primary circular reaction; only the child's body is involved; toys and other objects are not used.

Examples:

- Splashes in water with hands
- Pats the sand
- Claps or waves hands



Sensorimotor 2

Repetition of an action with an object, or objects, several times to maintain some interesting environmental visual, auditory, or tactile event; differs from Sensorimotor 4 in that the same action is repeated; it is a secondary circular reaction.

Examples:

- Bangs a shovel in the sand
- Pours water from a container over hand
- Splashes a toy in the water

Sensorimotor 3

Repetition of simple cause and effect sequences in which the goal is chosen first, then the means for achieving it are selected. Empty/fill, hide/find, build/destroy.

Examples: Fills a bucket or other container using a shovel and/or hands (child appears to have a goal of filling the container and uses simple cause/effect sequences (i.e. scoop to fill the shovel and dump to fill the container) to achieve the goal.

Pours water into a pitcher with a goal of filling up the pitcher.

Hides and finds objects in the water or sand.

Stacks blocks up, then knocks them down.

Sensorimotor 4

Trial and error experimentation. The theme or general goal of the play is maintained, but the behaviors to achieve the goal are flexibly varied by the child during the repetitions. Behavior may have an "I'm trying to figure this out" quality.

Examples: Child fills bucket with sand using a shovel, but uses the shovel in various ways during play

Child empties pitcher of water by pouring in various ways while watching the water pour from the pitcher

The Early Development of Symbolic Play

CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLES
Pre-Pretense	Child engages in approximate pretense but gives no confirming evidence of pretense	Child briefly touches telephone to ear; briefly puts bottle to doll's mouth
Pretend Self	Child engages in pretense behavior, directed toward self, in which pretense is apparent	Child raises cup to lip, tips cup, makes drinking sounds
Pretend Other	Child engages in pretense behavior, directed away from child toward other; pretends the behaviors of other people	Child feeds doll with toy baby bottle or cup; pushes truck on floor and makes truck noise

CATEGORY

DESCRIPTION

EXAMPLES

Substitution

Child uses a “meaningless” object in creative or imaginative manner, or uses object in pretense act in a way that differs from its usual use

Child feeds doll with block as “bottle”; puts piece of play dough on plate and calls it a hamburger

Imaginary
Objects
or Being

Child pretends that an object, substance, person, or animal is present

Child tips empty teapot over cup and says, “coffee,” moves around the room making motor sounds, as though riding an imaginary motorcycle

Active
Agent

Child animates a toy (e.g., doll, toy animal) that represents a being so that toy becomes an active agent in the pretend activity

Child hops toy animal across rug as though it were running, puts doll’s hand to its mouth as though it were feeding itself; talks in a high voice as though the doll were talking

CATEGORY

DESCRIPTION

EXAMPLES

Sequence
No-Story

Child repeats a single
pretense act/scheme with
multiple receivers

Child gives mother a
drink from the cup, then
gives doll a drink from
the cup

Sequence
Story

Child uses more than one
related scheme in pretense
activity

Child stirs in cup, drinks
from cup, and says
“Mmm, tastes good”

Planning

Child engages in pretend
play preceded by evidence
of planning

Child says that she will
feed the baby before
putting toy baby bottle
to doll’s mouth

Social Definitions for Dramatic Play (Parten, 1932)

- Unoccupied
- Onlooker
- Solitary
- Parallel
- Associative
- Cooperative



Sara Smilansky
(1990) found that
children's ability to
engage in dramatic
and socio-dramatic
play was directly
linked to many of
the skills needed
for success in
later school.



- ★ Better verbalization
- ★ Richer vocabulary
- ★ Higher language comprehension
- ★ Higher language level
- ★ Better problem-solving strategies
- ★ More curiosity
- ★ Better ability to take on the perspective of another
- ★ Higher intellectual competence
- ★ More playing with peers
- ★ More group activity
- ★ Better peer cooperation
- ★ Reduced aggression
- ★ Better ability to take on the perspective of others
- ★ More empathy
- ★ Better control of impulsive actions
- ★ Better prediction of others' preferences and desires
- ★ Better emotional and social adjustment
- ★ More innovation
- ★ More imaginativeness
- ★ Longer attention span
- ★ Greater attention ability
- ★ Performance of more conservation tasks

As children begin to engage in symbolic play they start to develop the skills and knowledge necessary to persist in the playing of a story with other children.

