The provision of role play is vital in every early years setting. It provides opportunities for the development of all areas of learning. With careful thought and planning, all role play situations can provide children with mathematical adventures.

Many examples of good quality role play had been observed in a variety of settings throughout Norfolk. The early years childcare partnership (EYPF) and the education advisory service decided to work together to organise a series of workshops to promote role play in the foundation stage and celebrate good practice.

Why is role play important?

‘In play a child behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself.’ (Vygotsky, 1978)

It fosters all aspects of development because it offers children the chance to:
- develop their understanding of the world in their own way and make links between home / community experience and the setting
- represent and act out their ideas and feelings in a safe environment
- live through someone else’s experience and develop empathy
- communicate with others in a range of ways including spoken language
- gain access to a broad curriculum in enjoyable, practical and meaningful ways
- develop physical and creative skills and gain a sense of achievement
- develop social skills through collaborating with others

How did we plan to promote role play?

A group of early years advisers invited a group of teachers, pre-school providers, traveller education and social services to plan a series of workshops. These were intended for children and their parents and carers, pre-school providers, teachers and representatives of other agencies working with young children.

The aims of the workshops were:
- to share ideas and enjoyment through successful role play scenarios both indoors and outdoors
- to promote children’s learning and creativity through role play, based on real and imaginary experiences
- to enable all parents and adults who work with young children the opportunity to view a variety of role play scenarios

Thirty practitioners, from a range of settings, were involved in planning and presenting the role play scenarios, which included:
- a garden centre
- travel agents
- health centre
- the three bears’ cottage
- the jungle
- under the sea
- a trip to the moon

They also had a chance to experience being a lighthouse keeper, getting married, taking a driving test and exploring a traveller’s trailer. Refreshments were available in the beach café and the Chinese takeaway. It was important to ensure...
we included a variety of different role play scenarios, which would develop the children’s real and imaginary experiences as well as developing role play outdoors, for example, the driving school and garage.

Each practitioner provided plans to illustrate how they developed the role play scenarios with their children. Here are two examples:

**Exploring pattern in the jungle**

**Mathematics**
- Sorting animals (shape, size, colour and pattern).
- Ordering animals to size (big, bigger, biggest) etc.
- Count and make sets of animals up to twenty.
- Add by combining two sets of animals together.
- Develop mathematical language through sand and water play.

**Physical development**
- Make animal movements.
- Create jungle habitats.
- Cut, stick, paint, fix and make.
- Use a variety of tools to create different effects, (pencils, thick/thin brushes, printing with natural objects).
- Use African instruments.
- Dig in sand and mud.

**Knowledge and understanding of the world**
- Investigate animals with pets, stories and patchwork patterns.
- Investigate life in the jungle using reference books, TV and videos.
- Understand the term grassland and jungle.
- Create Africa on the globe and world map.
- Compare Africa with the UK.

**Language and literacy**
- Develop descriptive vocabulary to describe patterned animals in the jungle.
- Write simple sentences about jungle animals.
- Write a daily diary about jungle life.
- Listen to a variety of jungle stories and rhymes.
- Act out different scenarios based in the jungle.
- Read fiction and non-fiction books to gather information about jungle life.

**Creative development**
- Create a jungle habitat.
- Explore and make patterned animals, using different materials and media.
- Develop role play through different scenarios within the jungle.
- Make African music.

**Personal and social development**
- Share equipment and resources within the jungle.
- Take turns and co-operate in jungle games.
- Try jungle and jungle toys at the end of play.
- Develop an understanding and respect for the African culture.
- Discuss hunting, exploring and going on safari.
- Make their own judgements and opinions.

Stripy sashes made by the children helped develop number sequencing, but could be adapted for a number of purposes.
Top left:
The travel agent.
Top right:
Booking a holiday requires a lot of forms to be filled in.
Centre left:
Under the sea.
Centre right:
At the garden centre pet food could be weighed, then bagged up and sold.
Below:
The beach cafe.

The dressing area. Numbered parking spaces were allocated to the correspondingly numbered vehicles.
Example two: travelling to the moon

The second example illustrates how the trip to the moon was first developed through key questions:

- What do we know about the moon?
- What would we like to know about the moon?
- How can we find out more?
- What have we found out?

The children found out the answers to their questions in a variety of ways, for example, verbal discussion, pictures, books, technology such as, ICT, TV and video. Visitors were invited into school to talk to the children. They were also encouraged to talk to their parents.

The ‘space travellers’ needed a ticket, space currency and a packed lunch before they left. They also needed a health check at the surgery to ensure they were up to the trip.

The teacher then explained to the children that they were going to use their knowledge to create a role play area in the classroom. More questions were asked:

- How can we use what we have found out?
- Who travels to the moon?
- How do they get ready?
- How do they get there?
- What’s it like on the moon?

Travelling to the moon

- people who travel to the moon – astronauts
- getting ready to travel on the moon
- protective clothing and equipment

Health checks

- health centre
- doctors, nurses clothing and equipment
- appointment book
- testing eyesight, hearing and fitness
- finger prints
- taking Xrays
- waiting room
- asking ‘patients’ questions
- make posters related to healthy eating
- labels, notices and signs
- looking after pets in space

The rocket

- structure of the rocket, eg. design roof and windows
- numbered, sequenced seats
- seating plan – matching numbers on ticket to seats
- space maps
- in-flight video, taped music
- count down

Journeying to the moon

- special clothes
- booking office, tickets
- making labels for duty free shop
- exchanging money into ‘space money’
- travelling in the rocket
- finding seat number
- buying food and oxygen cylinders, etc
- activities to complete during long journey!

On the moon

- enclosed space area
- space café
- souvenir shop – weighing and money etc
- aliens
- making music

The children were helped to identify the different areas that they would need to develop. They were encouraged to share ideas, plan, design and make each aspect of the role play area.

All the children were involved in the development and therefore the quality of play enabled children to practice skills and develop their thinking.

The workshops

Children and practitioners from pre-school settings, nurseries, reception classes and childminders were invited to attend the Friday workshops and offered hourly sessions during the day. During the session, the children were able to play in the different areas. Each role play area was supported by adults who were able to extend the children’s play, provide a good role model, and explain the rationale to the accompanying adults.

We were inundated with requests from settings to attend the workshops and unfortunately had to disappoint many applicants. It was necessary to limit the number of children attending each session to 70 to ensure the different areas were not overcrowded. A total of 750 children accompanied by 200 adults attended the Friday workshops. It was a tremendous response.

The Saturday workshops were also well attended by parents, carers and other practitioners. It was encouraging to see so many parents, carers, grandparents and other family members. Many of
the children who had attended the previous day
were eager to share the experience with members
of their family. All stayed for a considerable length
of time, and many adults took part with their
children in the activities. Many children were
reluctant to leave. The willingness of the adults at
each role play scenario to talk with the parents
about the value of play was very much appreciated
as was the handout, giving further practical ideas
about how they could encourage imaginative play at home.

The evaluation of the project

The role play scenarios created had been tried and
tested with real children and therefore enabled
participants to replicate the ideas in their own
settings. The enthusiasm generated by those who
provided the role play was both infectious and
inspiring for all involved. We were amazed by the
range of people who visited including educational
officers, advisers, colleagues from other counties
and other agencies, teachers and practitioners from
a wide range of early years settings, parents and
carers, grand parents and other family members and
last but not least children of all ages!

The children were very excited but some were
slightly overawed initially and tended to gravitate
towards familiar activities. As they became more
confident they began to explore and investigate new
experiences. Gender differences became very
apparent in some areas; for example, the boys
tended to monopolise the train set which was
available in the small world play area. However it
was good to see both boys and girls happy to expe-
rience all the other areas. The children displayed a
high level of sustained involvement in activities,
indicating the extent of their learning. The quality
of the children’s previous experience of role play
was apparent through their response in the different
areas. For example some children were able to
sustain a high level of involvement in the jungle;
cutting up and tasting fruit, sorting the animals,
creating their own musical patterns and talking
about the sizes and weights of the animals.

Comments received on the evaluation forms
completed by practitioners who attended with their
children were very positive:

“We had a fantastic time”

“The children wanted to come again the next day”

“Wonderful helpers who supported the children in
their play”

“Good accompanying pack”

“Super afternoon — all children and adults thor-
oughly enjoyed it”

“I think this was a really great experience for the
playgroup”

“Very well set up with helpful friendly staff — well
worth the journey”

“We loved it”

“BRILLIANT — EXCELLENT — FANTASTIC”

The children found it a valuable experience
because:

“I learnt to drive it was great!” — Ngaio

“I went to the jungle and sorted out the animals”
— Paul

“It was brilliant in the rocket. I counted lots of
stars” — Amanda

“I learnt how to play music in the jungle” — Harry

“I learnt to climb up the lighthouse — it was very
high” — Jordan

The whole project confirmed our belief that
good role play can develop children’s experiences in
all six areas of learning. It was a privilege to work
with so many committed and dedicated practition-
ers who gave so generously of their time and
expertise. But most of all it was the response from
the children, the joy on their faces as they entered
the wonderful world of make believe that made it
all worth while. I hope that you will also be inspired
to provide similar opportunities for your children.

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