

Supporting Conflict Resolution through Structured Dramatic Play

by Rekha S. Rajan

At the beginning of circle time, Lily, a five-year-old girl in my class, shares with us her experience in the park yesterday:

Lily recalls how she wanted to pretend to play in a music band and she was playing drums (using sticks) while her sister was being a singer. Another boy asked to join their band and said that he was going to be the band leader, but that Lily could not be the drummer in the band because “girls don’t play drums.”

I ask Lily to share how she felt, and she described feeling ‘sad’ and ‘even a little angry’ because she wanted to be the drummer. As the children and I are seated in a circle, I address my class, asking them to consider, “What would you do if you were the band leader?”



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The preschoolers and I then devote 20 minutes of class time to their sharing stories from their lives — things that make them happy, sad, upset, angry, or excited. Based on these experiences, I create a scenario where we take turns acting, and by doing so, the children solve a ‘problem’ or ‘conflict’ through structured dramatic play. Acting out specific, pre-determined scenarios — or engaging in structured dramatic play — is an important part of our daily routine, and so the children not only expect these discussions, but welcome the opportunity to participate.

In its many forms, play has an important place in early childhood education. It has long been recognized as the activity that is most natural to children’s development. Many types of play have been documented, researched, and implemented in early childhood settings, including free play, musical play, parallel play, cooperative play, and dramatic play.

While all types of play support children’s personal and social learning, dramatic play encourages children to resolve conflicts, consider alternative perspectives, and recognize the various roles and responsibilities individuals have in our society. As is evident in

much of the literature on the benefits of play, cognitive and social skills are strongly connected and can be fostered through dramatic play, where children enact scenarios and find their own solutions.

Structured and Unstructured Play

What is the difference between structured and unstructured dramatic play? While most types of play are unstructured and children are free to create, interact, and engage in play without direction, structured dramatic play has specific guidelines: children are presented with a pre-determined scenario within which they have to make choices and find solutions to a given conflict. Through structured dramatic play, children are encouraged to consider a specific problem and propose their own solutions.

Cognitive Development in Social Settings

As children’s cognitive skills continue to develop dramatically into their school-aged years, they increase problem-solving skills, self-awareness and perception, and a deeper understanding of

their culture (Eccles, 1999). Children also develop a reflective self-awareness, which is defined as their awareness of themselves in relation to others (Modell, 2003). Children's ability to reflect not only assists them in recognizing their personal goals, but enables them to understand alternative perspectives. Recognizing their own feelings, which can be defined as the "private, mental experiences of an emotion," enable children to distinguish how others feel and perceive situations as they begin to understand their own (Damasio, 1999, p. 42).

Children also begin to develop a sense of order, planning, and scheduling. These skills "require the ability to reflect on what one is doing and what one wants to accomplish" (Eccles, 1999, p. 33). In elementary classrooms, reflecting on one's actions is often used in problem-solving or conflict resolution (Epstein, 2003). While inextricably linked to cognitive development, problem-solving can be fostered within a social context.

There are many ways that teachers can encourage young children to solve problems through discussions, class meetings, and one-on-one conversations (Vance & Weaver, 2002), yet these methods are limited by their focus on talking, sharing ideas, and viewpoints. What do we know about how young children learn most effectively? Learning occurs when children are actively engaged — when they are moving, doing, and feeling the choices they make.

Social Learning through Dramatic Play

Dramatic play is a natural part of children's personal and social explorations. In any context, you can find children re-enacting a favorite show, imitating an adult or peer, accessorizing with costumes and props, or simply

engaging in a fantasy world of their own. In fact, most early childhood classrooms have designated centers replete with materials that foster dramatic play. Children love to dramatize and play, fantasize, and explore mythical stories (Sheiman & Slonim, 1988), and dramatic play augments children's self-awareness and beliefs about themselves in social settings (Singer & Singer, 1990).

In her story-acting approaches, Vivian Gussin Paley (1991) outlines enacting child-created stories helps children cognitively and socially. In this technique, the teacher gathers information from her students' stories, and notes which characters each child wants to portray in contribution to an entire class presentation. While useful for engaging children in active participation, this process can also be modified to incorporate dimensions of conflict resolution. For example, while notating the students' stories, the teacher can modify the context of the final 'play' to highlight a theme that would allow children to discuss problems, and provide solutions.

When observing children engaged in dramatic play, it is apparent that this is an inherently social experience as children choose to interact with their peers to create new environments, scenarios, and stories. Specifically, dramatic play encourages children to explore alternative perspectives as they learn about societal roles through interactions with peers. In the guidelines for Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009), children birth through age 8 should be in environments that support and foster positive, collaborative relationships. Dramatic play fosters interpersonal and intrapersonal skills as children begin to understand the different roles and responsibilities of their peers, and recognize their own feelings (Chenfeld, 2006).

Using drama and theater for conflict resolution has been successful with both children and adults, participating as actors and audience members alike (Hinitz & Stomfay-Stitz, 1999; Rohd, 1998; Sternberg, 1998). Importantly, it is through dramatic play that children learn "how other people think and act . . . it is a significant and meaningful learning experience" (Sheiman & Slonim, 1988, p. 26). When children observe and re-enact a scenario based on their own experiences, they are able to find solutions to problems, provide suggestions for how a conflict could be resolved, and recognize alternative ways of answering questions. This further empowers children to make choices, be independent in their thinking, and take ownership over their actions — invaluable skills inside and outside of the classroom.

Children Making Choices

The simplest question — What would you do? — engages and empowers children, giving them a choice and a chance to find their own answers to a conflict or situation. When children act out these solutions, they are going beyond just descriptions, as they feel, move, and make those choices within a specific context. The central components here are acting and re-enacting a scenario — either one shared by the children or one created by the teacher. For each scenario, the children are guided through the following four steps of conflict resolution:

1. Identify the conflict/problem
2. Discuss and share possible solutions, ideas, and feelings
3. Re-enact the scenario
4. Find a solution — individually and collectively.

Let us revisit the beginning scenario to consider some of the perspectives that the children shared. In response to my question — What would you do if you

were the band leader? — the children suggested:

“I would have let everyone play.”
“It’s not fair to only have girls.”

“What about a boy band and a girl band?”

“Don’t be mean.”

“Take turns being the band leader.”

These responses show a wide range of resolutions to the conflict that Lily experienced, one that could quite easily be found in any early childhood setting.

After sharing their responses, the children and I discussed why alternative solutions were better choices than the one the boy originally made in the park. I invited three children to re-enact the same scenario, which unfolded as follows:

Max collected several drums and said that he was going to be a band leader and start his own band.

Julia said that she wanted to join the band too, and Max said that she could play the tambourine.

Julia asked if she could play the drums and Max shrugged.

Aiden asked if he could also join the band, and Max nodded, but insisted that he remain the band leader.

In reenacting this scenario, the children indicated their willingness to accept one another but still demonstrated uncertainty in their roles. The children were able to transfer their experiences from observers of a conflict, to our group discussion on resolution, and finally to their individual choices of action.

In each scenario, the goal is to allow children to:

- 1) observe.
- 2) discuss.
- 3) participate in resolving a conflict.

Children are not just discussing the problem; they are acting, feeling, and making choices.

Teachers can use structured dramatic play as a venue for discussing a variety of common topics and issues. It is important to begin each activity with an emphasis on pretending and play: everyone works together to share their ideas of how to solve a problem. Children cherish the opportunity to contribute their own ideas, and appreciate that their perspective is valued within the classroom. Here are some suggestions teachers or caregivers can use for integrating structured dramatic play throughout the day:

How does it Feel?: Children relate most to their own feelings. During each activity, ask children how it feels to them when acting out a situation. Follow up by asking how they think the other person feels. This encourages children to recognize their own feelings and to understand alternative perspectives.

Taking Turns: Allow children to take turns in providing solutions to the conflicts that are presented. This is perhaps the most important component of supporting problem solving through structured dramatic play.

Swapping Roles: Teachers and parents can engage children in structured dramatic play and role playing activities in any context. Children will love the opportunity to be the ‘teacher’ or act as the ‘parent’ in school and at home. This is particularly useful when a child deems a guideline or responsibility unfair.

Conclusion

Structured dramatic play is a natural and collaborative way to support conflict resolution with young children. Guided by research documenting the contribution of play on children’s cognitive, physical, and social skills, my experiences in the classroom confirm how children make meaning through structured dramatic play by acknowledging their own feelings, making choices, and recognizing alternative perspectives.

While open discussions and class meetings are effective for talking and listening to children, structured dramatic play encourages children to become actively engaged in problem solving as they express their feelings, make meaningful decisions, and respond thoughtfully. These collaborative experiences are invaluable for reinforcing classroom guidelines, social skills, and creating a safe environment where children can improvise, develop, and practice conflict resolution.

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Parent Involvement AT ITS BEST

by John Campin

Drumming With Dads

Need a way to get father figures involved? Start a Drumming With Dads program. We are in our third year of Drumming With Dads at Gomez Heritage. I hired a local artist, Michael Fitzsimmons, to lead our students and father figures in a very engaged and inspirational program at its conclusion.

At the first meeting, Michael plays some energetic pieces of music on his own instruments. Next, we hand out materials to make a basic drum, a 12" x 12" wooden square that students and fathers decorate. Then they take packing tape and wrap it around the square as tightly as they can. By using wooden dowels as drumsticks, the fathers and children can make wonderful deep sounds.



PHOTO BY JOHN CAMPIN

Michael teaches different beats throughout the next three visits over a period of six months. To wrap up the program, all father figures and children who participated perform for the finale of the Spring Music Concert. What an amazing sight to see over 40 smiles and enjoyment shared between fathers and children by basically beating a drum — they really connect through Nature's heartbeat — the drum! Drumming With Dads is a must! It just takes a little extra effort to get something unique like this started. To begin, contact a local artist in your community who works well with people and is passionate about a gift they have and wants to share it with others.



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