



## The Seeds of Dramatic Play – Enhanced by Adults

PHOTOGRAPH BY BONNIE NEUGEBAUER



A ten month old picks up a toy telephone and holds it to her ear, happily babbling into it. A toddler pushes a truck along the floor making the engine roar and the brakes squeal. A two year old lifts up her shirt and holds a baby doll to her chest as a quiet, peaceful expression crosses her face. Either a boy or girl may now become a powerful “parent” as they tenderly tuck their baby into a doll bed. Why are they doing this? How do they know how?

Early childhood educators know the value of dramatic play with

preschoolers. Children learn empathy as they practice literally putting themselves in someone else’s shoes. Language is enhanced as their play characters express themselves to their peers and social relationships are strengthened. They increase their cognitive skills when they use objects of their own choosing as symbols or props in their play. Their imagination grows as they play out scenarios they create in their minds. Most notably, they come to terms with all forms of emotional experiences, from fear of separation at bedtime, to family conflict, to power struggles as they take on roles and act out these scenes in their play. But do infants and toddlers play like this? Should we be doing anything to encourage it?

The infant year is spent in close and intense observation of the human species. The baby learns to *read* every expression and gesture of the important adults around her. Toward the end of that first year, imitation begins. It’s as though the child is declaring herself a member of the species. You notice it first in the simple babbling as the child imitates the sounds and intonations of language. Gestures may follow — pointing, waving, holding out hands. And finally, gestures and sounds are combined with objects the

child has seen adults use — talking into a telephone receiver, feeding a teddy bear with a spoon.

Toddlers have *object hunger*. They love objects of all kinds and use them in every conceivable way. This shows up in their early pretending. As long as the toy looks like an object they have seen, even if it is not exact, the child will use it in the intended way. Examples are plastic lawn mower push toys or shopping carts. Hats, wigs, goggles, baby dolls, pots and pans, and toy tools will be used with enthusiasm. However, toddlers will not usually use abstract objects as props in play like a four year old will, such as using a paper plate for a steering wheel or talking into a block.

Toddlers and twos enjoy miniature props and environments, such as sets like play houses or barns and the small plastic people and furniture. This gives the child feelings of power, being a *giant*, able to manipulate a small world. Sometimes a child will take a dollhouse bed and lie down on it! Perhaps the toddler doesn’t really know how big he is or where he will fit. He is just finding out about his body and all the things it will do. However, he might also be demonstrating his knowledge of what the small object symbolizes. The child is saying, in effect, “I know what this is used for.” What these young players do not do is create elaborate scenarios, plan ahead, use language, and interact much with other children playing roles, or sustain the play for very long. Enter the teacher!

A teacher, parent, sibling, or older playmate can greatly enhance the complexity and value of early dramatic play with toddlers simply by playing along. Wouldn't this be a fun focus for a parent/child social function? Briefly explain the value of this important kind of play, then provide a rich assortment of props and invite the parents to get down and play with their children. We know that toddlers are delighted whenever an adult joins in their play. That alone will increase the length of time the child engages in the activity. Through modeling as a fellow player, the adult can teach the child how to talk for a teddy bear, cry for a baby, make truck noises, change voices to speak for a character, use objects for pretend, take on different roles, and even use abstract objects for props. You could remind the adults that besides being a great way to bond with their child, this could also be a great *de-stressor* for them. Challenge them to generally follow the child's lead. Be a supporting cast member rather than the main character. Another homework assignment you could give them is to see how much they can increase the length of time the child will play at this type of activity with them over time, increasing the child's attention span and complexity of thought.

The more experience a child has with pretend play, the more skillful they become. A five year old who has been isolated from other children and simply placed in front of a television or a computer, or who has been given mainly toys that do everything for him, will not have this wonderful tool for learning, emotional development, and imagination. Early exposure makes a difference. It's worth doing . . . and a whole lot of fun!

If you would like to join the informal e-mail network for this column, make a comment, or suggest future topics, just send a message to:

Karen Miller

PO Box 97, Cowdrey, CO 80434-0097  
(karenmiller2@msn.com)



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BONNIE NEUGEBAUER

Karen Miller is the author of (among other titles) *Simple Steps: Developmental Activities for Infants, Toddlers and Twos* and the newly revised version of *Things to Do With Toddlers and Twos*. Karen Miller's newest book is *Story Stretchers for Infants, Toddlers, and Twos: experiences, activities, and games for popular children's books*, co-authored with Shirley Raines and Leah Curry-Rood (Gryphon House, 2000).