Assessing and Scaffolding Make-Believe Play

Deborah J. Leong and Elena Bodrova

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It is the third week that Ms. Sotto's preschool classroom has been turned into an airport. The literacy center is a ticket counter, with a travel agency complete with child-made passports, tickets, and travel brochures. In the block area the children have constructed a walk-through X-ray scanner from cardboard boxes. A smaller box with openings on both ends functions as the screening device for carry-on luggage. There is an airplane cockpit made out of a big piece of cardboard with child-drawn instruments, an upside-down egg carton for a keyboard, and a paper plate that functions as the steering wheel.

Sophia tells her friend Vince that she is going on a trip and that she is going to forget to take out her water bottle. Then she won't be able to get through security. Vince says he is going to go to Puerto Rico where his grandmother lives. Sophia puts on her backpack and stands in line behind Vince. Finally it's her turn.

"Where are you going?" asks Tanya, the child behind the counter. "I'm goin' to Puerto Rico too." "OK. Here's your passport and your ticket to Puerto Rico. Your flight leaves at 77 o'clock." Tanya hands two pieces of torn construction paper to Sophia. Sophia goes to another center and takes off her shoes. She puts them in a basket with her backpack, then pushes the basket through the scanner. Amir, who is the security guard, waits until Sophia walks through the X-ray frame, then waves a paper towel roll wand over her head. "OK," he says, "you can go now." Another security guard, Milda, is standing with Sophia's backpack, holding the bottle of water that Sophia "forgot" to take out of her backpack. "This is more than three ounces!" "Oh, I forgot. I'll put it in my cubby," says Sophia as she takes the bottle and runs to her cubby. Her next stop is the passenger lounge.

What is happening in Ms. Sotto's classroom is an example of what most early childhood educators mean when they talk about make-believe play—a fantasy world created by children where their imagination soars, their language expands, and their social skills develop. Unfortunately, play observed in many early childhood classrooms rarely reaches this level; often children act out a series of simple and stereotypical scripts with little or no interaction with their peers. Research provides more and more evidence of the positive effects that well-developed play has on various areas of child development, such as children's social skills, emerging mathematical ability, mastery of early literacy concepts, and self-regulation (see Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek 2006). It is also becoming increasingly clear that without adult support, the play of many children is destined to never reach this fully developed status. Teaching children to play has to be as intentional and

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systematic as teaching literacy or math and at the same time must take a form very different from adult-initiated practices often used to teach these content-related skills.

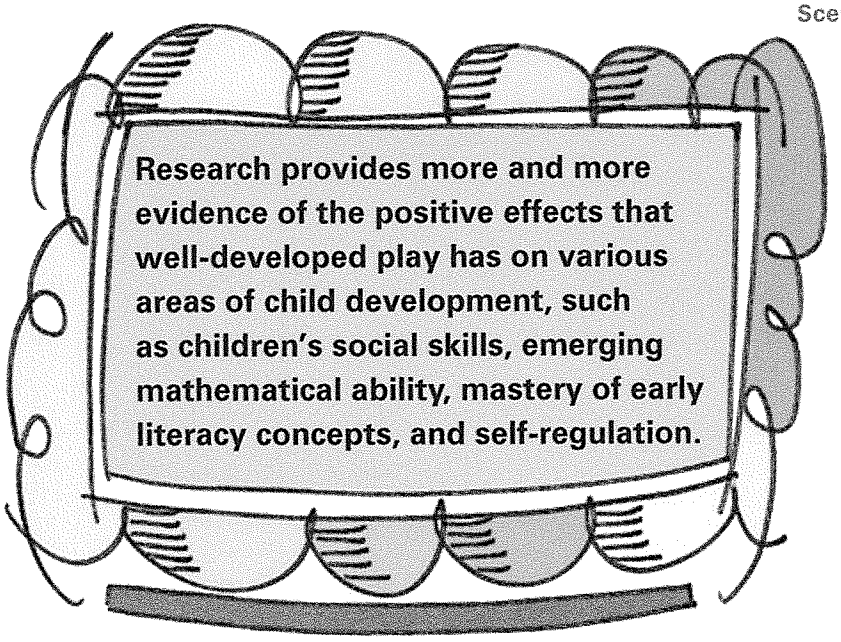
A Vygotskian approach to scaffolding play

True to the saying that everything new is the "well-forgotten old," the answer to today's challenges comes from the past—from theories of play developed in the last century by Lev Vygotsky and his student Daniel Elkonin. These theories, along with the work done by students of Vygotsky and Elkonin, are the foundation of the approach to scaffolding play we (the authors) currently use in our work with teachers in early childhood classrooms.

In Vygotsky (1977) and Elkonin's (2005) view, make-believe play reaches its highest level of development in the preschool and kindergarten years. However, this fully developed or "mature" form of play does not emerge overnight. In fact, its earliest prerequisites develop in infancy, as babies learn to imitate other people's actions and begin to communicate by using gestures and vocalizations. Mastering language and forming emotional bonds with their caregivers both prepare infants to learn from adults who are their first "play mentors." It is important to make sure that infants have ample opportunities to engage in playful interactions with adults during which they can practice their first pretend actions. In this sense a simple peek-a-boo game with an adult carries more educational value than any "smart toy" one gives to a child to play with alone.

Toddlers take more steps toward developing mature make-believe play as they move from mastering simple acts of putting on their clothes or brushing their hair to applying these acts to their dolls and stuffed animals; sometimes they even attempt to turn their pets into play partners. This is the time when adult play mentoring and—even better—toddler's participation in play with older children can change play from being "toy oriented" to "people oriented." As Daniel Elkonin (1978, 187) put it, "A child starts with feeding herself with a spoon; then she uses the spoon to feed everyone; then she uses the spoon to feed her doll; and finally feeds the doll pretending to be the 'mommy' who feeds her 'daughter'" (trans. by Bodrova). At this later stage, the play is no longer about the spoon and not even about a specific doll—it is about the relationship between mother and daughter.

Reaching preschool age does not guarantee, however, that a child's play stops being toy oriented. In fact, too many preschoolers continue to engage in play that would be appropriate for a 2-year-old but is something that 4-year-olds should have long outgrown. To help teachers support higher levels of play in these children, we have developed an approach to assessing and scaffolding play—PRoPELS—that focuses on its most critical elements (Bodrova & Leong 2007).



Minding one's p's and r's when playing

PRoPELS is an acronym that stands for the most critical elements of children's play that can be assessed and scaffolded by the adults.

- **Plan**—children's ability to think about play in advance of playing
- **Roles** children play—including the actions, language, and emotional expressions that are associated with a specific role
- **Props**—the objects (real, symbolic, and imaginary) children use in play
- **Extended** time frame—play that lasts for long stretches of time: within one play session for an hour or longer or extending over several play sessions and over several days
- **Language**—what children say to develop a scenario or coordinate the actions of different players as well as speech associated with a particular role
- **Scenario**—what children act out, including the sequence of scripts and interactions between roles

Using PRoPELS to assess play gives teachers an idea of how mature play is in their classrooms. On the continuum from most immature to most mature, children's make-believe play goes through five stages, with all of its elements (outlined above in the acronym PRoPELS) developing and expanding:

- The earliest stage—first scripts—is best described in terms of object-oriented pretend actions, such as a child playing with toy cars while making "vroom-vroom" sounds.
- An example of the next stage—roles in action—would be a child walking back and forth in high heels and, when asked, labeling her actions as playing "mommy."

• More mature play appears by stage 3—roles with rules and beginning scenarios. Children begin to coordinate their pretend actions with their play partners, making sure that these pretend actions go with the roles chosen by each of the players. When children are at this stage, it is common to hear them correcting each other's behaviors when the behaviors are not in line with the roles the children are playing. For example, a child might comment if the patient starts playing with the doctor's stethoscope or the sales associate walks off wearing shoes she was about to sell to a customer.

• An example of stage 4 play is found in the opening vignette describing the airport play in Ms. Sotto's room. Children engage in multiple pretend actions, all being consistent with the roles they are playing while acting out complex scenarios.

• Finally, at stage 5, planning and negotiating pretend actions starts to take more time than actually carrying them out. It is at this stage that children sometimes play multiple roles without actually having physical partners as they both "direct" and "act out" these roles with stuffed animals or even imaginary partners.

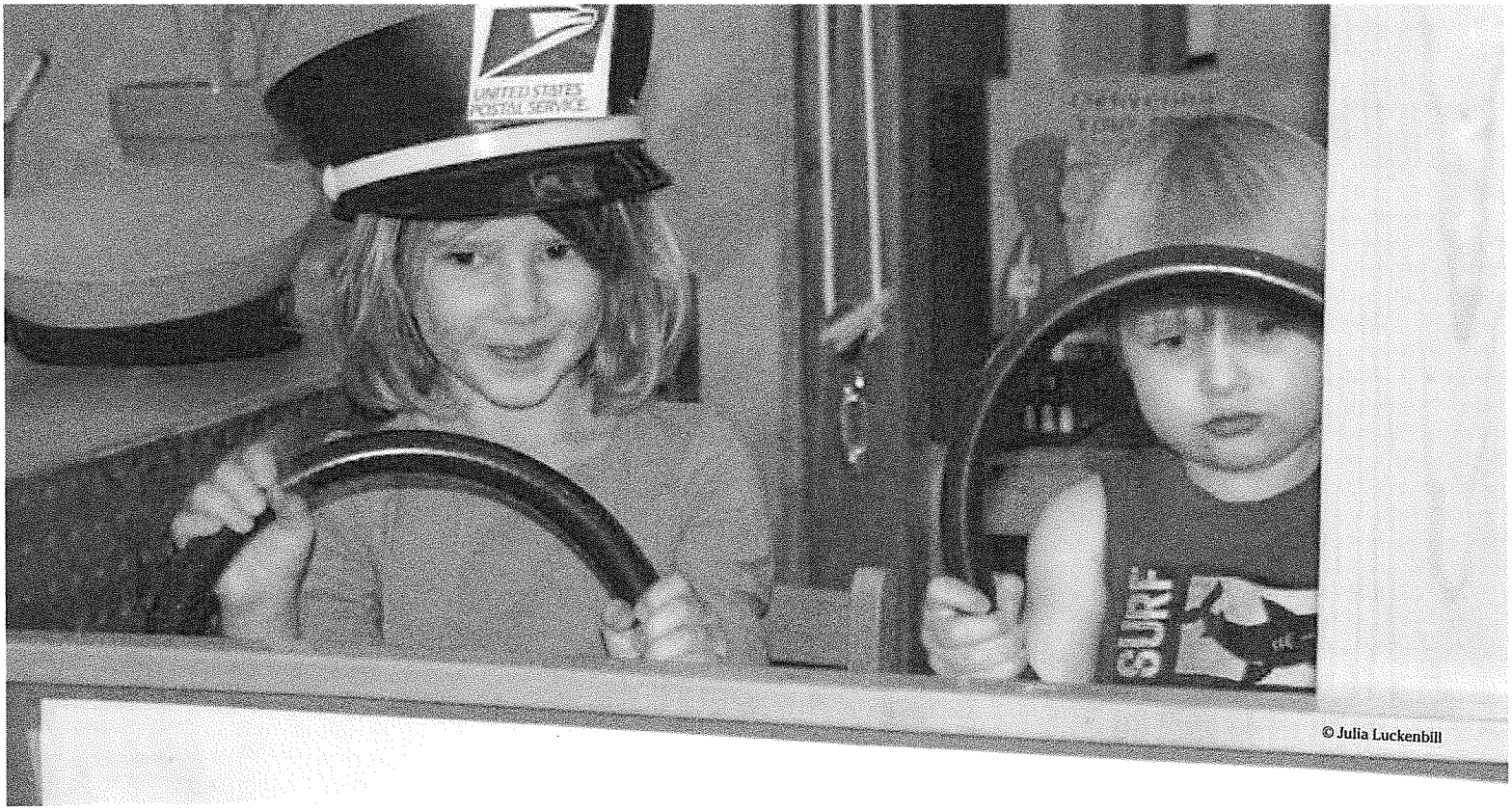
The table below summarizes the changes in the PRoPELS elements across different stages of play.

What "PRoPELS" play to new heights?

The idea that we need to teach young children how to play is not a new one; until recently, however, it has been primarily discussed in terms of enhancing or facilitating play that has already reached a certain level of develop-

Five Stages in a Child's Make-Believe Play

	1. First Scripts	2. Roles in Action	3. Roles with Rules and Beginning Scenarios	4. Mature Roles, Planned Scenarios, and Symbolic Props	5. Dramatization, Multiple Themes, Multiple Roles, and Director's Play
Plan	Does not plan during play.	Does not plan during play.	Plans roles; actions are named prior to play.	Plans each scenario in advance.	Plans elaborate themes, scenarios, and complex roles. Spends more time planning than acting out the scenario.
Roles	Does not have roles.	Acts first and then decides on roles. No rules are revealed.	Has roles with rules that can be violated.	Has complex, multiple roles.	Can play more than one role at a time. Roles have social relationships.
Props	Plays with objects as objects.	Plays with objects as props. Actions with a prop result in a role.	Needs a prop for the role.	Chooses symbolic and pretend props.	Can pretend rather than actually have a prop. Does not need a prop to stay in the role. Objects can have roles.
Extended time frame	Explores objects, but not play scenarios.	Creates scenarios that last a few minutes.	Creates scenarios that last 10–15 minutes.	Creates scenarios that last 60 minutes or longer. With support, can create scenarios that last over several days.	Creates scenarios that last all day and over several days. Play can be interrupted and restarted.
Language	Uses little language.	Uses language to describe actions.	Uses language to describe roles and actions.	Uses language to describe roles and actions. Uses role speech.	Uses language to delineate the scenario, roles, and action. Book language is incorporated into role speech.
Scenario	Does not create a scenario. Can copy what the teacher does and says or will follow the teacher's directions if script is simple and repetitive.	Creates a scenario that is stereotypical, with limited behaviors. Can incorporate modeled roles and actions into play, with support.	Plays familiar scripts fully. Accepts new script ideas.	Plays a series of coordinated scenarios that change in response to previous ones or the desires of players. Describes unfolding scenario, roles, and actions.	Plays a series of coordinated scenarios that change in response to previous ones or the desires of players. Uses themes from stories and literature.



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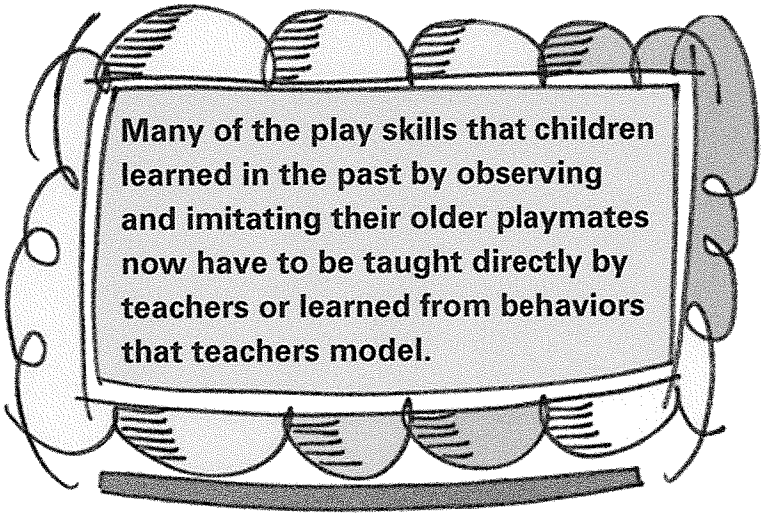
ment. Explicit play instruction is often limited to the context of special education. While children with language delays or emotional disorders are thought to benefit from play interventions, children without such delays or disorders are usually expected to develop play skills on their own. This approach, while valid in the past, can no longer be adopted if we want all young children to develop mature play. Massive changes in the culture of childhood—such as the disappearance of multiage play groups, the increase in time children spend in adult-directed activities after school, and so on—mean that, for many young children, early childhood settings are the only place where they have the opportunity to learn how to play.

It is important to note, however, that learning how to play in the classroom will not look the same as learning to play within the informal neighborhood peer groups of yesterday. In the past, most play occurred in multiage groups in which younger children could learn from older "play experts," practice their play skills with peers of the same age, and then pass their knowledge on to other "play novices." Under those conditions, even preschoolers could act out elaborate and imaginative scenarios like castles or space travel, because the play skills of older children would buoy their own skills. In today's early childhood settings, children are almost always segregated by age and have to interact with play partners who are as inexperienced as they are. As a result, many of the play skills that children learned in the past by observing and imitating their older playmates now have to be taught directly by teachers or learned from behaviors that teachers model.

In addition, unlike the unstructured play of the past that often lasted for hours or days, playtime in today's early childhood classroom is limited and rarely exceeds one or two hours. This means that to achieve rapid progress in the quality of play, play scaffolding in the classroom needs to be designed to strategically target its most critical components: children's play **P**lanning, their ability to take on and maintain **Ro**les, use of **P**rops, **E**xtended time frame, children's use of **L**anguage, and the quality of play **S**cenarios. In mature play, all of these discrete components are intertwined. However, we have found that at different levels of play, children will have more difficulty with one aspect or another. Using PRoPELS is best when you first observe children's play without intervening. After assessing the level of children's independent play, you can then decide what kind of scaffolding is the most appropriate. By highlighting the different areas in which you as the teacher can scaffold, you can be more efficient in providing scaffolds that support a given child or group of children.

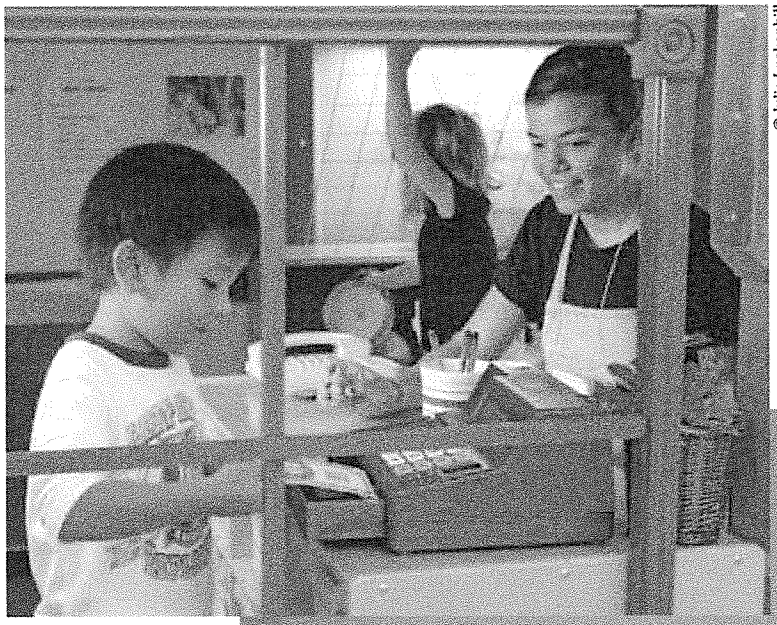


Scaffolding children's play *Planning.* Elkonin (1978) identified planning as one of the features of mature play, describing play of older children as consisting mostly of lengthy discussions of who is going to do what and how, followed by brief periods of acting out. As with other components of play, role and scenario planning can benefit from adult scaffolding. The teacher can start by asking children what they want to play or what they want to be, encouraging them to discuss the choice of the roles with their peers. Later, the teacher can ask children about more specific details of their future play scenarios, including what props they might need or whether they need to assume a different role.

By making planning a necessary step in play, the teacher directs children's attention to the specifics of their roles and to the existence of rules associated with them. Many arguments that happen during play are over the fact that two children have chosen the same role or because the prop associated with that role is being used by another child. Planning prior to children going to the center can help prevent potential conflicts. Children can talk about the possible conflict instead of fighting over the prop. Planning allows children to discuss what might happen if there are two people who want to be truck drivers and only one truck. Having children agree to take turns before going to the center teaches social problem-solving strategies and starts the play off with positive interactions.

The planning process can take place orally, but if children represent their plans in drawing or pretend writing, this process produces even greater benefits. First, as children engage in drawing, they are able to focus on their future play for a longer period of time, thus thinking over more details of their pretend scenarios. Second, having a tangible reminder helps children to regulate their own and their partners' behaviors; if a child has a picture of a veterinarian with her name on it, it becomes harder for another child to usurp this role. It also makes it easier for the teacher to troubleshoot possible conflicts and to engage children in brainstorming solutions. If two children want to be veterinarians, the teacher can introduce different kinds of veterinarians, such as the ones who take care of pets and those who treat large animals.

Planning also occurs during play when children change the scenario, the props, and the roles. Mature players discuss what is going to happen prior to it happening. For example, children might discuss what will happen at the fire station now that the fire is out. What other problems might happen? Children at the higher levels of play are able to plan on the fly, discuss possible directions for the scenarios, incorporate the ideas of the different players involved, and create props to match the changes in the play.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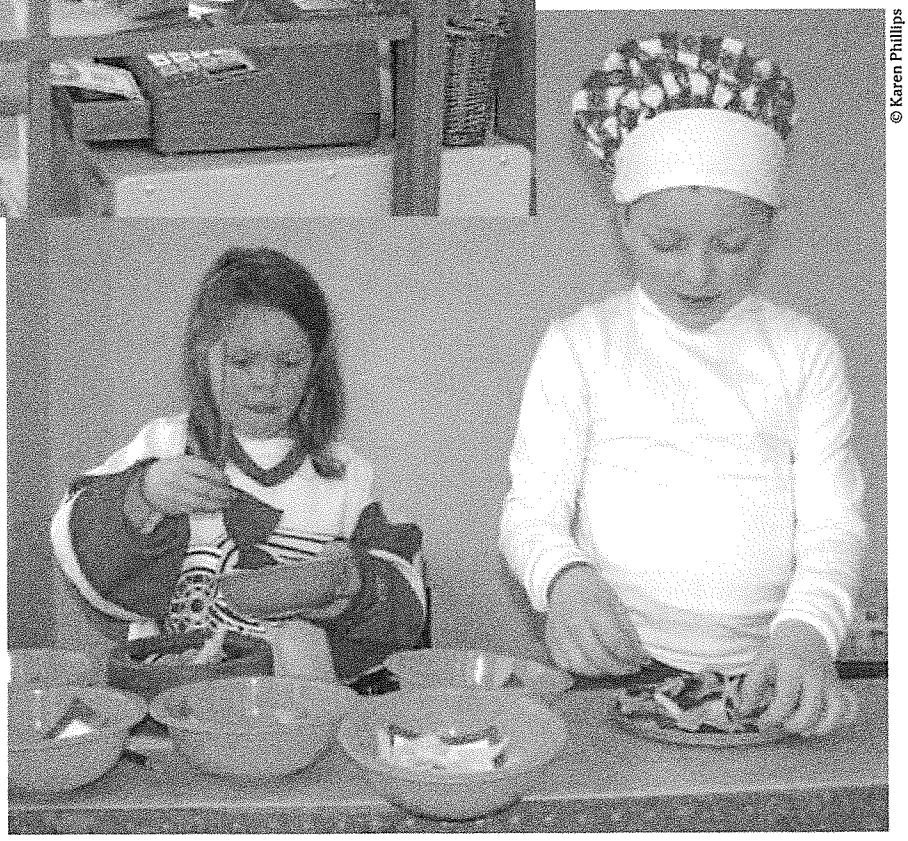
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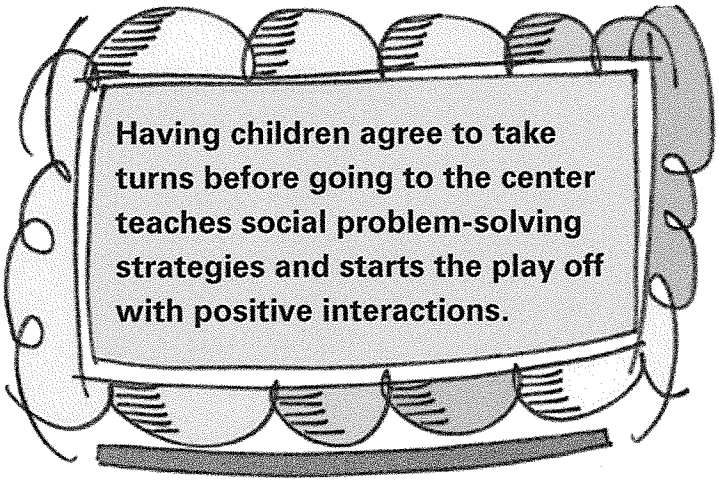
Scaffolding development and maintaining play *Roles and rules.* As Elkonin (1978) points out, the focus of mature play is the social roles and relationship between people—something that children cannot learn by simply observing adult behaviors. Therefore, to promote mature play, teachers need to explain the purpose of these behaviors, their sequence, the cause-and-effect relationships between different behaviors, and so on. For example, a teacher may explain that a customer in a restaurant cannot simply go to the kitchen and get a pizza—first he needs to give his order to a waiter. The waiter will take the order to a chef, and only



then will the customer be served the pizza. It also helps to discuss with the children what happens if the normal sequence of events gets disrupted; a chef who has not waited for the waiter to bring him a specific order may cook something different from what the customer wants to eat.

The rules that hold make-believe play together are not arbitrary but are based on the logic of real-life situations. Therefore, not knowing how these life scripts unfold will keep children from practicing self-regulated behaviors by following these rules. Helping children learn about scripts, and the rules that these scripts follow, calls for greater involvement by early childhood teachers in children's play than most teachers are used to. However, for most children this involvement needs to last for a relatively short time: soon they are able to use models provided by the teachers to build their own roles and rules, requiring only occasional adult support.

Scaffolding the use of *Props* in a symbolic way. Many young children today grow up using mostly realistic toys and having limited or no experience with using open-ended materials (for example, a rock, stick, or paper plate) in play. This makes it difficult for them to develop a broad range of symbolic substitutions associated with higher levels of make-believe play. For these children, teachers need to model how to use props in a symbolic way, gradually expanding the repertoire of different uses for the same object. Over the period of several months, teachers can introduce more unstructured and multifunctional props while at the same time removing some overly realistic ones, such as plastic fried eggs. Older preschoolers and kindergartners can start making their own props, while teachers can show younger preschoolers how to make minimal changes in the existing props to change their purpose. For example, a teacher can say, "Look at this big toy dog. We used it as the Big Bad Wolf when we played fairy tales. Do you think we can use it as the dalmatian in the fire station we are building now? What can we do to make this dog look like a dalmatian?"

Scaffolding the use of *Language* in play. An important part of adult scaffolding is monitoring children's language to make sure it is used in the service of play. For example, an adult's language should change to match the new ways props are used: the same paper plate that is a steering wheel in a fire truck today was a pretend pizza in the play restaurant last week. Since the appearance of the prop has not changed, the new name given to the paper plate is the only way the players will know that now it is being used in a new way. Assigning new names to the play props as these are used in new functions helps children master the symbolic nature of words, leading to children's eventual realization of the unique relationship that exists between words and the objects they signify. This emergence of metalinguistic awareness is associated with children's mastery of written language.

Language also touches some of the other elements of play described in PRoPELS. Adult scaffolding is needed to help children engage in "role speech," that is, using vocabulary, sentence structure, and intonation that fit a specific role. Teachers first introduce children to the ways people doing different jobs talk to each other during book reading or on a field trip. For example, children would learn that a 911 operator tries to reassure the person calling that the fire truck will arrive soon by saying, "Help is on the way." As the play unfolds, children may also need to be reminded of new vocabulary words they can use when playing a particular role. One way to do this is for a teacher to temporarily assume a secondary role, such as a customer or a patient, and make requests that prompt the children playing the leading roles of chefs, doctors, or vets to use these new words. For example, if the play in the pretend restaurant gets a little stale, a teacher can freshen it up by pretending to place a call to make a reservation. This would be a perfect opportunity to inquire about today's specials, the hours when the restaurant is open, whether kids' meals are available, and so on.

Scaffolding development of play *Scenarios* that can unfold over *Extended periods of time*. A play scenario is what many people call the theme of play. It is the story line that the children are acting out. Children explore the social interactions of their roles through the play scenario. What happens when you go to the doctor's office? Your baby might be sick or you might have a broken leg. What will you say to the doctor? What will he or she do to help you? Mature players have scenarios that evolve and change as they play, hence the importance of extended periods of time.

Scaffolding play scenarios has several components. First, children often lack background knowledge to build their scenarios. Even to play "family dinner" or "grocery store,"

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Conclusion

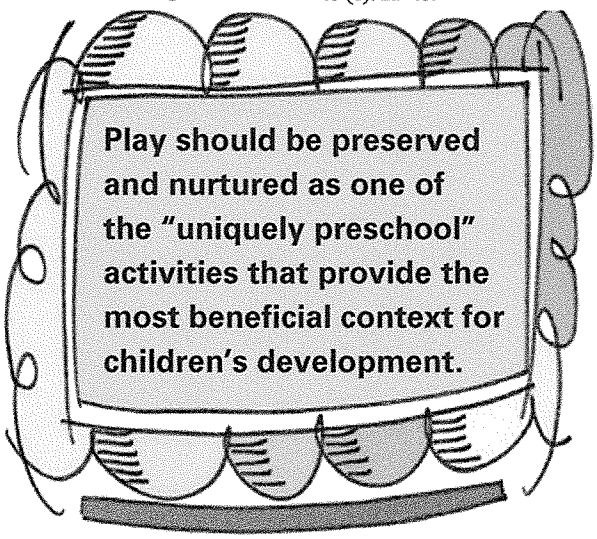
Mature make-believe play is an important and unique context, providing opportunities to learn not afforded by other classroom activities. It should not be considered something extra that can be cut to accommodate more time for academic skills, nor should it be used as a means of adding "entertainment value" for inherently boring and decontextualized drills. Instead, play should be preserved and nurtured as one of the "uniquely 'preschool'" (in the words of Vygotsky's colleague and student Alexander Zaporozhets) activities that provide the most beneficial context for children's development:

> Optimal educational opportunities for a young child to reach his or her potential and to develop in a harmonious fashion are not created by accelerated ultra-early instruction aimed at shortening the childhood period—that would prematurely turn a toddler into a preschooler and a preschooler into a first-grader. What is needed is just the opposite—expansion and enrichment of the content in the activities that are uniquely "preschool": from play to painting to interactions with peers and adults. (Zaporozhets 1986, 88)

which all children are expected to be familiar with, requires knowledge of the setting, roles, and actions associated with these scenarios. To build background knowledge about less familiar topics, teachers use field trips, guest speakers, and books and videos. To promote mature play, the choice of places to take children on a field trip and the choice of books and videos need to be guided by how well these activities and tools will help children to learn about people and their activities.

When field trips or books center on objects or animals, such as a trip to the zoo or a book on dinosaurs, very little of their content gets reenacted in mature make-believe play. However, if a teacher supplements a book on dinosaurs with additional videos and books portraying the work of paleontologists, children are more likely to start playing pretend scenarios, such as museum or dinosaur dig, and incorporate new concepts in their conversations.

Sometimes even a very successful field trip may not provide enough information for children to transfer what they saw on this trip to their play in the classroom. In these cases teachers have to support play by modeling pretend actions and role speech more explicitly, for example, role-playing and practicing some of the pretend actions with children. For most children such intensive "play practice" is needed for only a limited time. Other children, such as children with special needs, can benefit from more extensive play practice with their peers.



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An Hour of Play—What For?

Play and young children seem to belong together like peanut butter and jelly. Or do they? Currently, with the emphasis on learning outcomes filtering down from primary grades to kindergarten and even to pre-kindergarten, teachers may feel compelled to abandon play in favor of more "school-like" activities. Is play to be viewed, then, as something children engage in only when they have no "real" educational experiences available to them?

The answer is a definite "no." As the academic content taught in school becomes more demanding, young children need to spend more, not less, time in play—to experiment with symbols, ideas, and relationships not tied to any particular content. Children who miss out on play in their early years may have gaps in their social, cognitive, and linguistic development.

Research demonstrates that make-believe play develops symbolic thinking, self-regulation, and creativity. When children play together, they get a chance to practice their social skills. Teachers will note the number of children playing, the amount of social interaction, and the frequency of conflicts. However, in determining whether their play also supports linguistic and cognitive development, it is the combination of *what* and *how* the children are playing that tells us.

Features of High-Level Dramatic Play

Children act out various themes from real life. To combine themes ("grocery store" and "hospital"), they compromise by creating a scenario that includes elements of both. (For example, a cashier in a grocery store gets sick and is taken to the hospital.) Thus, children plan and problem-solve.

Children play various roles, acting out different relationships (not just following commands, but issuing them; not only asking for help, but being the one that helps). They learn how to use their emotions and actions "on demand"—an accomplishment in socio-emotional development.

Children know the rules for playing their roles. They learn to delay immediate fulfillment of their desires and conform to the behavior expected of the role. (A child playing a patient cannot seize a toy stethoscope when it's a prop for the doctor!)

Children use nonrealistic play props with imagination, language, and symbolic thinking.

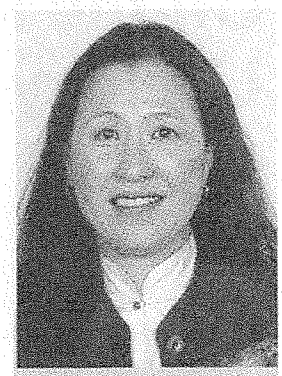
Children use language extensively. They jointly plan the scenario, negotiate the roles and actions, agree on using imaginary props, and remind each other about the rules. They try out new words, expressions, and intonations to fit their characters. They develop vocabulary, mastery of grammar, and use of language.

In the past, children learned how to play as part of an extended multi-age group within their own family or neighborhood. Nowadays, children are more likely to spend their time in age-segregated groups or playing alone. And we all know that TV shows and even computer software with carefully selected educational content cannot replace live play.

Promoting High-Level Dramatic Play

1. Provide children with experiences they can use to develop new play themes. Field trips, guest speakers, books, and videos can take play beyond housekeeping into a pet store, fire station, or spaceship. In choosing a field trip, make sure that children will observe people performing various jobs such as a tour guide at a nature center.
2. Introduce many different roles associated with each play theme. If children know just a few, they may fight over a role with more "status" (doctors and parents versus patients and babies). Children who want to play spaceship don't all need to be pilots; they can play space scientists or photographers.
3. Look critically at the toys and props children use in play. Can children make their own props? Once you take away all the ready-made props, encourage the transition from a realistic prop (plate with a fried egg on it) to a more generic one (paper plate with a circle painted on it) to a symbolic one (any circle) and finally the imaginary one (when a child indicates that she has the dish by using a word or a gesture only).

Play is indispensable in children's development. Let's give them an hour of play everyday! *ECT*



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WHAT DO YOU THINK? We'd love to hear your position regarding the topic addressed here by Dr. Leong and about each of our upcoming "From Where I Sit" pieces. Write to us at *Early Childhood Today*, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012, or e-mail us at *ecr@scholastic.com*.