

# Symbolic play



The foundations of literacy can be found in symbolic play, which nurtures young children's social and cognitive development. During symbolic play, young children enjoy using their bodies, materials and spaces to share their ideas with others and to create narratives as they play. These are elemental features of literacy.

In order for young children to develop a range of literacies, including reading and writing, they need lots of opportunities to imitate and mimic others, use objects to represent imaginary things, and create stories that they act out in their play. These pages will help you to embed these features of literacy within your practice.

## Imitation and mimicking

From birth, children imitate and mimic their carers to instigate [social interaction](#). Babies, toddlers and young children are careful observers. They replicate and practise the actions they see others do and through play, they try out what they are able to 'say' and 'do'. Nurturing playful imitation and mimicry with young children helps them to become sociable.

Importantly, babies and toddlers learn to imitate when they are [imitated by others](#). Babies engage with carers for longer periods of time if adults imitate their behaviour. This is because their expressions and actions are being acknowledged and valued. The interchange of thoughts and feelings ([intersubjectivity](#)) between the child and carer is very emotionally rewarding and enjoyable and can be extended when sharing a book and mark-making together.

To support what a baby or toddler is telling you, mirror and copy their movements and speech sounds. Encourage them to watch your facial expressions and respond to smiles, laughter and looks of surprise. You could also:

- sing back the sounds that they make, and imitate their gestures or actions;
- babble back when they babble;
- take advantage of times when you are close e.g. nappy changing, to blow kisses and raspberries;
- mimic babies' and toddlers' movements;
- move your hands and feet in rhythm when you share songs;
- maintain eye-contact and encourage joining in and repeating simple rhymes;
- make animal sounds, encouraging them to copy.

When babies and very young children are frequently imitated, they begin to mimic others' actions and speech. Through mimicking others, children are developing a sense of autonomy and performance and building skills that can be extended into other representational forms, such as writing. You can support children to develop mimicry by encouraging them to:

- hand out cups at drink time;
- place books back on shelves and tidy up;

- copy actions from book and finger rhymes;
- move around like characters from their favourite shows and digital games.

## Gestures and expressive actions

A gesture is a physical representation of something a child is thinking and feeling which can be interpreted by others. Gestures can be expressive of emotion, e.g. jumping up and down with excitement, and they can carry specific meaning too, e.g. pointing and waving. Gestures often support children's early vocalisation and speech and can also be extended into mark-making. Gesturing helps children to tell 'stories' about objects, people and what excites them.

Children should be supported to use gestures for different purposes:

- *iconic gestures* to help others to picture the objects and actions they are imagining e.g. pretending to play the drums;
- *beat gestures* to help follow aspects of sound and speech e.g. using hands to emphasise words and rhythm;
- *deictic gestures* to direct someone's attention to something by pointing or turning their gaze towards it.

As young children are highly expressive they often combine different types of gesture with other ways of communicating, especially speech. These combinations support joint shared attention, where children are able to share an interest and understanding about an object or event with another person. Be aware that some children may be talkative at home but [quieter in an early years setting](#), so mimicking a child's preferred mode of communicating can also help them to settle.

Children need encouragement to expand their gestures through adult imitation — so remember to exaggerate and emphasise your movements, expressions and language when you sing, read stories and play action rhymes with them.

Children's gestures can be encouraged to enhance literacy skills when you:

- ask children to move, stamp and clap along with you as you sing songs so that they can tune into the timing of language sounds;
- share stories, poems and rhymes and animate the repetition, alliteration and rhythm within them by combining actions;
- highlight the dramatic features and characterisation within stories by for example, roaring like a lion, or hiding away like a tiny mouse.

## Representation

When children are able to use one or more objects to represent or symbolise something else they take a significant step in their literacy journey. When a child can imagine that materials can be transformed from what is 'real' into something else, e.g. a brick can become a mobile phone, they are beginning to understand that it is possible to represent things symbolically (Engel, 2005). This is important because written language is symbolic — it represents sounds that form words in order to create shared meaning making between the reader and writer. To grasp this complex idea,

young children need lots of rich symbolic play experience where they can practise representation.

To create an environment that encourages representative play in your setting:

- have easily accessible and open-ended materials that can be used to represent different things for different purposes in different spaces, both indoors and outside;
- encourage children to join you in pretending that everyday objects are other everyday objects, e.g. a napkin is a hat, a cardboard box is a fairy house, and a clipboard is an iPad;
- play alongside children with action figures and dolls that represent real people and encourage them to tell you what their 'people' are doing;
- use bowls and sticks for 'cooking' and prepare dinner by asking children to find 'cutlery' and 'saucepans';
- place painting tools and chinks in outdoor play areas so children can represent what they can see or hear in lines and marks on different surfaces.

Representational play is closely tied with imaginative play and storytelling — explore those sections on the website for further ideas.

Engel, S. (2005) *The Narrative World of What Is and What If. Cognitive Development*, 20.4., pp.514-525.

## Imaginative play

Imaginative play builds on and extends a child's understanding of symbolic representation, that is, that one thing can stand for another. Imaginative play also encourages children to be inventive and wonder 'what if?'. This sense of wondering is essential if we want young children to be creative storytellers. One of the most powerful ways of supporting a young child's imagination is to be a co-player and follow a child into their fantasy worlds. By supporting children's imaginative play, you can help them to discover [different ways to communicate](#), through gestures, actions and words, gradually extending their vocabulary and helping them to foster varied speech.

### Illustrated books

Storybooks are a brilliant way of inspiring young children's imaginative play. You can select books that introduce children to imaginative scenarios with rich language and enthuse them to re-enact their favourite stories, pretend to be different characters and develop their own story ideas. Encourage children to choose stimulating and diverse books themselves to use in their self-initiated imaginative play.

### Small world play

Young children find miniature worlds fascinating and immersive. Small objects and toys have lots of imaginative potential as they are easily mobile and small play spaces

can be transformed by children with little adult help. This type of play encourages multimodal communication: speech, gesture, movement and touch, as children 'act out' their stories alone or with others. Providing young children with combinations of manufactured toys (e.g. dinosaurs, and cars) alongside natural or multiuse materials (e.g. shells and stones) enables them to combine materials in imaginative ways. Small worlds can involve many different [inhabitants and habitats](#), some are more fantasy based, for example a [fairy garden](#), and some representative of real life experience (e.g. car tracks and farms).

## Collaborative storytelling

*'Amazingly children are born knowing how to put every thought and feeling into story form'* (Paley, 1990, p.4).

Stories or narratives are what shape young children's thinking (Bruner, 1986). Children love being told a story, especially one which is expressed well with props, gesture, humour and of course, dramatic tension. Helping children to make and tell their own stories gives us a deep connection and understanding of their unique language and ideas. Creating a story together encourages children to embellish and extend what they already know and explore different possibilities. Creating stories together takes time but can be the most rewarding way to connect with children's imaginations as you support their shared meaning making. Stories can help children to structure and organise the random features of play and this in turn supports them to identify narrative elements that they can use in their writing.

Helicopter Stories is an approach where children are encouraged to tell their individual stories which are then acted out in groups. First, a child tells their story to an adult who writes the story *exactly* as it is told, with no corrections to any non-conventional use of language. Later in the day, each child's story is acted out by the children in their group in a designated space, so each child's story is shared with a wider audience. The adult is responsible for making sure all children's [stories are heard and acted out](#), and for fostering a story acting space where everyone's ideas are respected. Importantly, this approach means that young children's stories can be seen, not only when they are staged and performed, but also in everyday, quieter moments in the story books where they are scribed by the teacher.

There are lots of different materials, both analogue and digital, that you can introduce to children so that they are able to tell their stories in a variety of ways.

Here are some examples of storytelling activities:

- organise a puppet show together, write a script, video the performance and show it to other children and adults;
- encourage children to go on an outdoor adventure using go-pros and then share their 'documentary' with you;
- make story-stones with children, pop them in a bag and take turns to pick a stone and build a step-by-step narrative;

- together create a treasure map with directions and clues. Become characters and follow the map looking for items (you can disperse surprise props along the way!);
- use [digital story-telling apps](#) for young children, and make stories using photographs, words or recorded speech.

Bruner, J.S. (1986) *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Paley, V.G. (1990) *The boy who would be a helicopter*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

## Role-play

Role-play brings together all of the elements of symbolic play: imitation, gesture, representation, imagination and story-telling. Children find dressing up and pretending to be someone else very appealing and most need little encouragement in taking on the characteristics, movements and speech of different characters. There are many [benefits of role play](#) and ways for it to come to life that include fantasy, superheroes, real life events, etc.

**Children bring a wealth of knowledge** into their role-play from books, films, television and games as well as their day-to-day cultural experiences from their family and wider community. By acting in role with others, they are able to explore how to think, feel and behave differently, helping them to see the world differently and [extending their possibility thinking](#), both necessary for reading and text creation.

**Adults have an important role** in setting up stimulating materially rich role-play spaces but most importantly in co-developing joint meaning-making. So, don't stand back, become a play partner and get involved in children's role-play by:

- following the child's lead but also suggest plot ideas;
- introducing scenarios that may be new to children;
- modelling interactions and ways of imitating;
- improvising with materials and objects;
- encouraging conversation and decision-making;
- asking some 'what' and 'how' questions and using more complex vocabulary to explain the play;
- prompting children to use inventive language for names and descriptions of people and places;
- supporting group dynamics, encouraging quieter children, and those with less experience.

**Ideas for role-play areas** are [endless](#) and really enjoyable to plan and resource. Try to make them flexible so materials can be repositioned and adapted in children's play.

Essentially, role-play areas should help stimulate dramatic events and a diversity of roles. To do this:

- mark out spaces inside and out with prompts, props, costumes and pictures associated with different scenarios;
- select fabric, artefacts and images to reflect children's diverse cultures and to help extend children's cultural experience from around the world;
- include a diverse selection of texts including magazines, brochures, books, labels and instructions in languages spoken by different children in your setting;
- incorporate writing materials (pens, markers, chalks, stamps, boards and different papers and surfaces) to encourage notes, lists, sign-making, map-making and other types of mark-making and writing.

### **Embedded links to external resources**

- Website <https://theconversation.com/the-imitation-game-can-newborn-babies-mimic-their-parents-61732>
- Video <http://www.lunduniversity.lu.se/article/watch-babies-know-when-you-imitate-them-and-it>
- Article <https://reflectionsnurseries.co.uk/images/pdfs/111/5first-stories.pdf>
- Website / video <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/professionals/learning/ecliteracy/videos/Pages/gesture.aspx>
- Website <https://www.teachearlyyears.com/learning-and-development/view/boost-literacy-with-musical-movement>
- Website <https://www.sirenfilm.co.uk/laying-firm-foundations-for-literacy/>
- Website <https://www.littlehandslearning.co.uk/small-world>
- Website <https://www.communityplaythings.co.uk/learning-library/articles/building-fairy-gardens-outdoors>
- Website / video <https://www.makebelievearts.co.uk/helicopterstorieslettingimaginationfly>
- Website <https://www.scholastic.com/parents/books-and-reading/raise-a-reader-blog/inspire-creative-storytelling-story-stones.html>
- Website <https://www.communityplaythings.co.uk/learning-library/articles/role-play-making-sense-of-the-world>
- Pdf <http://oro.open.ac.uk/38391/1/MBA%20Final%20Report%20.pdf>
- <https://www.tes.com/teaching-resources/blog/resources-revitalise-your-role-play-area>
- <https://www.teachearlyyears.com/learning-and-development/view/possibility-thinking-digital-play>