The Role of Adults in Pretend Play

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Often children engage in pretend play that is complex, symbolic, social, and language-rich without any assistance from adults. However, now and then children need a little help in order to play in the most developmentally beneficial ways. This need for adult support is greatest for children with special needs. In these cases, intentional adult interactions in play can be appropriate and valuable. Care must be taken, though, not to disrupt or overdirect children’s activities. Below is an example of a supportive adult pretend play interaction.

A pretend airplane has been created in the dramatic play area of a preschool classroom. A child, Annie, sits by herself in the pilot’s seat, making loud engine noises and rocking back and forth, but doing little else. A teacher watches for awhile to understand what Annie is playing and to determine what kind of support she needs. He then enters the play.

Teacher: Annie, I see you’re flying the plane. Do you need a copilot?

Annie: What?

Teacher: There are sometimes two people that fly planes. A pilot and a copilot.

Annie: Okay. You sit here (she gestures for the teacher to sit next to her).

Teacher: (Squeezes into the cardboard box, points to dials painted on the cardboard box) Where are you flying in your plane today?

Annie: To the airport.

Teacher: Should we check to see if we have enough gas to get there?
Annie: I’ll do it. (Looks carefully at a dial painted on the cardboard box) We have some gas, so we can fly to the airport. See? We’re flying. (Works a plastic steering wheel back and forth and resumes engine noises)

Teacher: And what about our radar? (points to another dial) That shows us what’s up ahead. We want to make sure we don’t run into any other planes.

Annie: Oh. Okay, but . . . radar? This? (Points to a painted screen).

Teacher: That could be the radar. Are there any planes coming our way?

Annie: No, no planes, so we can fly this way. We’re going to the airport now.

Teacher: Ah. Will we be landing there soon?

Annie: Let’s say the airport is here and we have to land now and we have to tell them we’re coming, okay? (Speaks into a microphone provided as a prop). Hello, hello, we’re landing now, so you need to tell us how to get down. And this copilot needs to get down, too.

Teacher: (After a pause) What did they say?

Annie: They said just land now, so, I’ll do it (pretends to land the plane).

Teacher: Nice landing. I’m going to get off here now. This is my destination—where I live. But maybe Liza would like to be your copilot now (gestures toward a peer who has been watching them).

Annie: Okay but, Liza, you’re the copilot so you have to listen to me so we don’t crash.

The teacher observes from a distance as the two children begin to play together.

The OREO Method

The teacher in this example is using a method of promoting pretend play called OREO. Each letter in the name stands for a different step in this approach:
O = Observe

The teacher in the example observes first before interacting with the child. What is the child currently playing? How much and what type of help, if any, does she need? Is she interacting with peers or using language? Is she engaged in much make-believe? Does she need some help with any of these things? Without first observing, the adult might have interrupted a very meaningful play activity or given the wrong kind of help.

R = Respond

Based on his observations, the adult responds to the child’s play needs. He encourages more elaborate make-believe, since the child was previously only rocking and making noises. He models and encourages more language, including new challenging words (e.g., “radar” and “copilot”). Eventually, he invites another child to join the play. Note that the word respond in this method suggests that the teacher supports what the child is currently playing—airline pilot. He does not initiate a new play theme, but takes a role in the child’s current play and gives indirect guidance. Only if the child were in great need of guidance would the/ teacher assist the child more directly. If the child were playing independently and needed no help, the teacher might not even have entered the play at all.

E = Exit

It is not the goal of an adult play interaction to continually play along with children. The hope is that the interaction will enrich a child’s independent play. So, after a few minutes of providing support, the teacher in this example withdraws. He integrates his departure into the play theme, itself (“This is my destination”), and invites another child to take his place. This assures that this enrich play activity will go on without him.

O = Observe

After exiting, the teacher in the example takes the most crucial step in OREO—and one that is often forgotten: He takes a moment to observe the effects of his interactions on the child’s play. He notices that the child is using more language and make-believe and is interacting with a peer. So, he determines that his goals for interaction were achieved.
Tools for Scaffolding Pretend Play

*Scaffolding* refers to methods that adults use to support children in their learning and play. One type of scaffolding involves using specific tools that guide children in becoming more elaborate pretend players. Several scaffolding tools—ways of interacting with children—are especially useful.

Open-Ended Question Asking

Question asking is one of the most common play scaffolding tools. However, some types of questions are more effective than others in enriching pretend play. Compare the possible effects on play of the following three questions asked of four-year-olds in the dramatic play area:

1. Are you grocery shopping?
2. What are you playing?
3. Why is your baby crying so hard?

Question number 1 can be answered with a yes or no, or even with a nod of the head. The second question causes children to think a little more, but can still be answered in a single word or two. The third question is open-ended and requires children to reflect on and talk about their play. The question might even lead children to extend their pretend play theme: the baby is sick, is lonely because her parent left for work, or is hungry.

Modeling

Another tool adults use to scaffold play is modeling. This is a strategy in which teachers engage in pretend play, themselves, to demonstrate more complex role playing and make believe. Modeling is less disruptive if adults just begin playing quietly parallel to children. Children can observe and copy the adult, join them in play, or ignore them altogether. The following is an example of modeling:

Two preschool children are in the dramatic play center of their classroom. One sits in a small rocking chair, holding a doll, and saying nothing. The other child holds another doll, half-dressed, and is staring off across the room. The teacher watches for a moment and then enters the play area.

Teacher: (Speaking to herself) I’m so hungry. I think I’ll make some spaghetti for dinner. (Takes out a pan and places it on the make believe stove top. Begins to stir imaginary spaghetti
sauce with a spoon.) Let me taste the sauce. Hm. I think it needs some oregano.

Child 1:  (Watches intently, then moves over to the teacher) And we need to make some coffee, too. I’ll make it.

Child 2:  Yeah, and I’m going to eat the dinner. So I’ll put out dishes (begins placing plates on a table). And our babies eat too, all right?

Child 1:  Yeah, but they’re too little. They can only have milk.

Teacher:  (Continues stirring at the stove for a few more minutes, then quietly leaves the play area as the children continue their make believe dinner).

The teacher in this example simply began to model make-believe behaviors. Children watched, then copied her. She didn’t intrude at all on what children were doing, but simply demonstrated a more elaborate play activity. Children chose to join her.

Hint-Giving

When children are faced with challenges in their play, teachers sometimes give hints. Hint-giving is a strategy in which teachers give just the right amount of information or guidance so that children can figure things out on their own. This is an ideal strategy for helping a child make a difficult puzzle or complete a complex building with blocks, but it also is very useful in supporting pretend play, as the following example shows:

Three children are playing in the dramatic play center. One of the children begins to search the area for a prop. A teacher observes.

Child 1:  (Searching) Hey where is the phone, I have to call the police.

Child 2:  (Begins to look around) There isn’t one.

Child 1:  But I have to call the police.

Teacher:  Our play phone isn’t out in the center today, is it? Is there something else we could use as a phone?

Child 3:  (Holds up a toy cup) How about this?

Child 2:  No.
Teacher: What would be something we could use for a phone that is just the right shape?

Child 2: (Retrieves a rectangular block from the block area) Here, this is the phone.

Child 1: (Accepting the block) Okay, but it has to be a cell phone.

Scaffolding pretend play requires practice. Playful adults need to resist playing along with children for too long, so they are able to play independently.


Selected References


Columbus, OH: Pearson College Division.