Classroom Activity: Pretend Play

When preschoolers play, they show that they have symbolic thinking when they use one thing to stand for something else. This experience with symbolic thinking can actually help when children learn to read because part of learning to read is coming to understand that words on a page are ‘symbols’ that stand for something else. For example, the alphabet letters D-O-G stand for the animal that we all know as a dog. Children who can play symbolically are more likely to make connections between the words on a page and the ideas that those words represent.

By watching the video and talking about Pretend Play, children can be encouraged to use their imaginations and develop symbolic thinking just as Daniel and his friends do at their school.

Children Are Working On

- Imagination
- Language skills
- Symbolic thinking (creativity)

Materials

- 11 ½ minute episode: “Pretend Play.”

Set Up the Topic

- We pretend play at school all the time. So do Daniel Tiger and his friends.
- Today we going to watch a video of how Daniel and his friends play make-believe with a big box their teacher put out in their dress-up corner.
- Any ideas about how you think they’ll use that big box? Did you ever pretend play with a big cardboard box?
- Let’s see what happens.

Watch

Watch the episode: “Pretend Play.”

Talk About It

After watching the video, you could ask the children the following questions:

- Teacher Harriet brought in a big cardboard box for the children to use. How did they use it?
- What were their pretend ideas?
- What play idea did they decide to play all together? How did they decide that?
- What did O the Owl think the box was? Did he play too? Why?
- What did the other children say to O’s idea?
- How did O finally play with the other children?

Sing the Strategy Song: 🎵 When you pretend, you can do anything! 🎶
**Play & Explore**

- You might bring in a big cardboard box and put it in your dress-up corner and help the children to think about and act out pretend play ideas.

- Review the props and dress-up clothes you have out. Do they call out “Play with me!”

**Activity: Keys to an Imaginary Land**

**Materials:** An old key on a keyring that’s large enough to catch the children’s attention.

**Directions:**

- Place the key somewhere in the dress-up corner so that it is quickly visible to the children who select that area during free play.

- Let the children examine the key on their own for a few minutes. Watch and see if they think of an idea for using it in pretend play.

- If you need to facilitate the play, you could say something like: “You could pretend that the key opens doors to an imaginary land. I wonder where it could be in our room? What would the door look like?”

- Let the children pretend to open the door.

- Ask questions like: “What do you see in this land? What does it look like? Who lives here? What are they doing? What would you do if you were there? What is this place called?”

- If the children start to turn this into a “scary place”, you could re-direct them by saying something like: “Oh, this is what I see.” Point out pretend things that shift their focus.

- Once they have established who lives there, suggest that they take on roles of those characters. Continue to help the children imagine and build out their ideas until they can take over the play on their own.

- The more they do, the more child-directed the play becomes. All you may need to do is occasionally offer guiding suggestions or questions.

Later, you might extend the play by suggesting that children draw what the imaginary land looks like. You could record their remarks and attach them to their artwork. Now, you’ve moved pretend play into a literacy activity as well.

You can use this strategy anytime, in any area of your classroom. You may even want to encourage the children to sing the strategy song when they are thinking of ideas for pretend play.