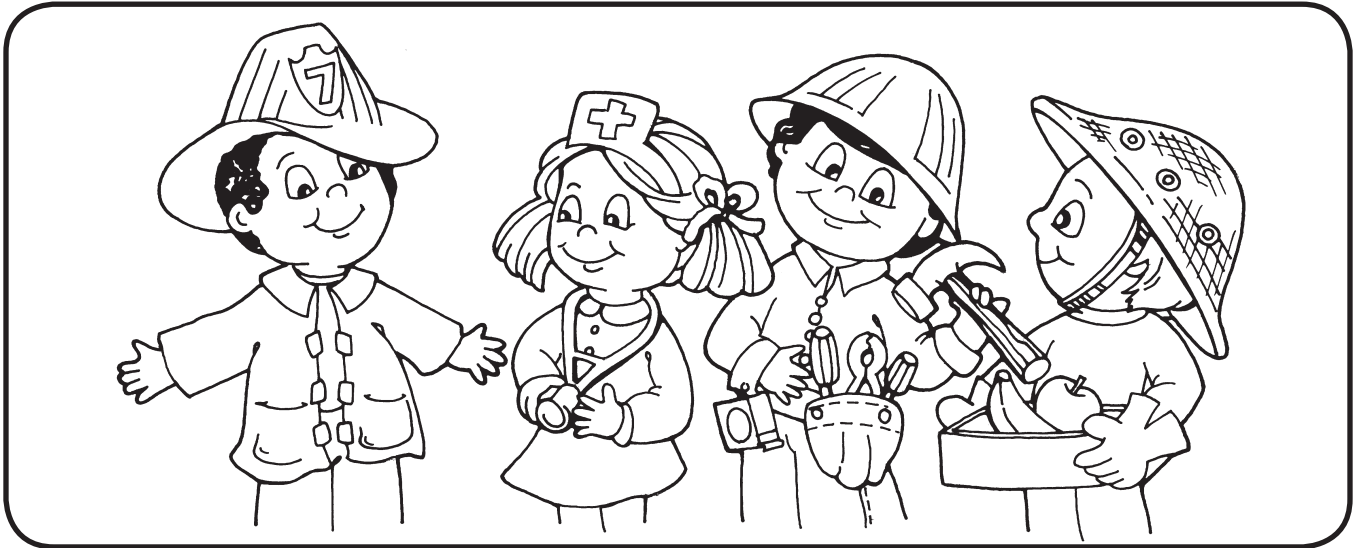




Chapter Eight

Getting Along: The Dramatic Play Center



The dramatic play center can be the hub of all social activity in the classroom. In this center, children can be anything their imaginations aspire to—from roles that they see every day like parents and teachers to imaginative ones like astronauts, firefighters, and zookeepers. It also gives children the chance to explore nontraditional roles. Every other center contains items that can contribute to the dramatic play center, making it easy to enrich this center with a wide variety of props and scenarios.

Note that often in this center children will act out potentially stressful situations, and their play may be more realistic and even a little more harsh than usual. For example, a child may put a doll into “time out” or send the doll to its “room” or may even threaten a spanking. Monitor any potentially inappropriate play but remember that children learn to deal with the unkind realities of life through dramatic play and should be given some leeway to act out what is in their imaginations, as long as it is not harmful or disturbing to other children.

Where to Set it Up

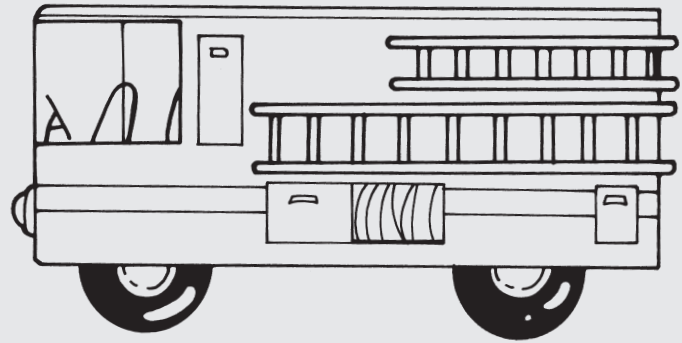
The placement of the dramatic play center is often defined by the furniture and larger props located in it. For example, if you have a play kitchen unit that needs to be close to wall shelving, or a play garden that needs to be out in the open, this will help dictate where the center needs to be. There usually needs to be plenty of storage in this center for clothing and props, so try to provide space for stacking bins or drawers. You can also create more space if you switch out theme boxes. (Read more about theme boxes on pages 90–96.)

Dramatic play is another loud center. It can work near any other loud center: blocks, sensory table, or music. Carpeted areas are not necessary for this center, although they will help buffer some of the noise. But, space is necessary! More than in any other center, children will get up and move around as they pretend. And, children may need longer stretches of time in this center than in other centers. Complicated scenarios are created in this center, and because it can be very frustrating for the children to stop what they are doing just for the sake of moving to another center — try to be sensitive to their time needs.



Theme Box 4: Fire Station

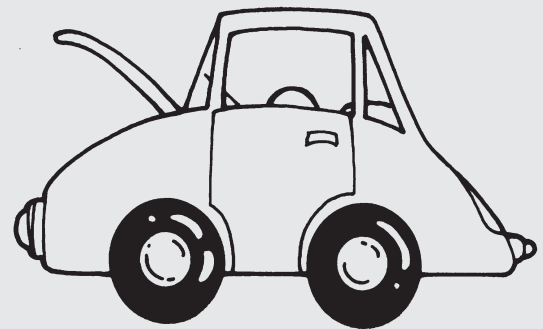
Although the supplies for this center are sparse, children will love playing with them. Use this box just for fun or to inspire practice for school fire drills and learning to “stop, drop, and roll.” Purchase a package of fire helmet party hats or use the Fire Hat reproducible (page 105).



Make a copy of the fire hat for each child to color and cut out. Then tape or staple the ends together to fit each child. In the theme box, place heavy child-sized raincoats or black smocks (decorated with neon yellow electrical tape), lengths of hose (use garden hose cut into two or three sections or pool noodles), a bell to be the fire alarm, toy fire trucks, a large cardboard box that can serve as the fire truck, toy phones for calling 911, and sheets of orange, yellow, and red tissue paper to represent flames. Children can either pretend that the kitchen area is the firehouse, or they can put out a “fire” in the kitchen area. Include a stuffed dog that looks like a Dalmatian to be the firehouse mascot.

Theme Box 5: Car Repair Shop/Carwash/Gas Station/ Carpentry Shop/Building Site

Nurture your budding do-it-yourselfers with a theme box dedicated to tools. In this box place tools of all kinds (make sure they are all child-friendly and safe), tool belts, mechanic’s overalls, wrenches, toy cars, cardboard boxes to represent cars being repaired or houses being built, pretend oil cans, empty paint buckets, paintbrushes and rollers, paint stirrers, pieces of wood, a child’s tool bench, hard hats, metal lunchboxes, rags, blocks for building, lengths of hose for pumping gas, and even an old tire if it has been thoroughly cleaned.



If you are creating a gas station, make pumps out of pool noodles and tall boxes, and let children “fill up” the riding toys in the classroom. The pool noodles can double as hoses for a carwash. If it is a mechanic’s shop, place boxes decorated to look like cars on top of two tables or chairs and let children lie underneath to do their work.



Theme Box 6: School

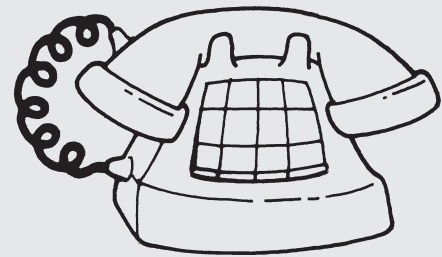
Older children or those with older siblings usually love to play school. It's a reality they live every day, and most children enjoy being the teacher in charge of the classroom.



Children may not know exactly what being in school as an older child is like, but they will have fun pretending all the same. Supply this theme box with notebooks, pencils or crayons, a chalkboard and chalk, a teacher's old plan book, old textbooks, flash cards, a calculator, a calendar, a globe, and plenty of dolls or stuffed animals to be the students. Arrange the center like a traditional classroom, with the board in the front and seating for students around it.

Theme Box 7: Office

Many children watch their parents head off for work to an office setting and have visited their parents' places of business. Help them connect with the places their parents go every day through dramatic play.



This theme box can contain typing paper, toy computers, old keyboards and office phones, a real typewriter, folders, office supplies (paper clips, binder clips, tape, empty staplers, and folders), old office memos, telephone books, binders, and pens or pencils. If you have access to large cardboard boxes, cut off one side and place a chair inside of each of them. Then place them next to each other to create cubicles.

Theme Box 8: House



Playing house is perhaps the most common scenario you will find in the dramatic play area. In addition to what has already been mentioned, include toy appliances, brooms and dustpans, mirrors, clothing hangers, plastic plants, flowerpots, watering cans, pillows and blankets, laundry baskets, a toy iron and ironing board, remote controls with no batteries in them, bathrobes, pajamas, slippers, bath towels, and flashlights. Almost anything that parents have around the house is fair game for this center, as long as it is safe for children to play with.

Also, for this age group, you may want to include an unused potty. Children who have already been potty trained will enjoy explaining its purpose to those who haven't, and children at all potty training levels can pretend to help a doll use this potty. Be sure to explain that it is only for play!





Teaching Tricks

Use these special modifications to heighten the drama in the dramatic play center.

❑ **Changing the atmosphere in the dramatic play center**

Place indoor or synthetic plants around the center to create a jungle or forest feel. Attach dark blue or black paper around the walls to make it feel like nighttime or on the floor to create a lake or ocean. Cover the floor with packing peanuts or cotton batting so that children can pretend to play in the snow. Play atmospheric music or sounds of thunderstorms and rain, birds singing, or even traffic rushing by.

❑ **Pushing children's creativity to the limit**

If you are having a theme day in the dramatic play center, send a few children at a time out to the other centers. Instruct each of them to bring back an item from another center to use with the theme in the dramatic play center. When children return, have them tell you what the items are and demonstrate how to use them.



❑ **Children's books as a jumping-off point in this center**

Even if children can only look at the pictures, they may get ideas for things they would like to play. Almost any children's books are appropriate, but the best books to inspire play are ones that show characters doing things. The characters can be animals or people, and the books can be fiction or nonfiction. Baby books that show only objects are designed to help children identify things, learn colors, etc., and are not usually the best inspiration for dramatic play.

❑ **Puppet theater**

If you are lucky enough to have puppets in your classroom, create a puppet theater. Turn a table on its side and have children with puppets hide behind the tabletop. Add a curtain backdrop by hanging a sheet over the table so that the bottom of the sheet is at the height of the top of the table, but is at least a foot back from the table so that children have room to move the puppets in front of the curtain. If a table is not available, hang a sheet from a clothesline and cut out a square hole in the center to be the staging area. You could also purchase puppet sets that include a constructed theater.

