

Dramatic Play – drama games to facilitate creativity

compiled by Polly Greeks

Class Rules:

You may break the rules of any exercise if you want to.

You may tell lies and exaggerate.

You may speak to things like flowers and chairs and give voices to clouds.

You may not compare yourself to anyone else.

You may enjoy yourself.

Creativity is play. It's an act of letting go of the 'shoulds' to explore the 'coulds': what might happen if we try this, or do that?

We're all creative beings, but so often as adults, we stop ourselves being creative because we fear we won't do it right – we'll get it wrong. Many times, if we look at the stories we carry about why we can't do something creative like singing, or writing, or painting – there's a memory of someone telling us we weren't good at it. Frequently, we picked up this message as children.

As adults, we reinforce these negative messages by adopting an inner Censor. When it comes to picking up a musical instrument, or opening our voice, or writing poems, or stepping on stage, this voice tells us we lack talent; that we can't, or shouldn't, we're wasting time. Deep down, our Censor is trying to protect us but sadly, it acts as a creative block.

In a very real way, our artistic selves are our inner children. They love to play, to explore. Get them young enough, and they're not focused on the outcome of their experimentation. They'll swish a brush through paint, or bang on a drum, or clomp about in high heels because they're having fun. They aren't afraid to take risks and they don't take things too seriously.

As adults nurturing creative children, our job is to hold safe spaces for them – to provide resources, give positive feedback and make sure we never shame.

Sometimes, however, entering imaginal realms can be unfamiliar for children. If they've grown up always watching screens for entertainment and been loaded with games or toys that prescribe ways of playing, making stuff up might not be well explored. Dramatic play might be alien.

Yet we know role playing is an essential part of a child's learning, while the power of imagination can lead to the opening of limitless possibilities.

Luckily, there are plenty of drama exercises and games which can help even very young children open their imaginations and embrace dramatic play.

It's important to emphasise there's no right or wrong way to act in these spaces. Remember, creativity flourishes in places of safety and acceptance.

Ice breakers:

Stand up if you... have ever eaten a worm, fallen out of a tree, felt scared of a dog, found a weta on you, found a slug in your salad, cut your own hair, lost some money, been lost in the supermarket, been told off by a stranger, sneaked a piece of chocolate, seen a wild dolphin, been on a plane, hates ice cream, is wearing socks, have licked a snail...

The Human Barometer – One end of the line is always/agree; the middle is maybe/sometimes, while the other end is never/disagree. Move accordingly to various questions:

I love chocolate, breakfast is my favourite meal, I like the rain, I'm scared of spiders, I'd like to be famous, I love going to bed, I love hugs etc

Movement:

How would you move if you were a tiger? An elephant/snake/rabbit/bird/dolphin/frog/cat/dog

Pulling faces: frightened, surprised, angry, excited, scared, sad, happy

Add body actions (and sounds) – thinking of being expansive, contracting, loud, quiet

How do we hold ourselves when we're shy and timid, vs if we're the ruler of the world? Walk around as each.

Stop/Go/Jump game:

When you say GO, the children walk around a designated area, filling up all the space.

When you say STOP, they stop. Try this out a few times.

When you say CLAP, they should clap. When you say JUMP, they should jump.

Try this out a few times, then add in STOP and GO.

When you say KNEES, they should touch their knees. When you say SKY, they should reach upwards. Try this out, mixing in all the other commands.

After they've gotten the hang of it, make every action the opposite. GO means STOP. STOP means GO. CLAP means JUMP. JUMP means CLAP. KNEES means SKY. SKY means KNEES.

(this game helps with listening, but also takes kids out of their comfort zone into doing things that feels unnatural. They LOVE it once they've got the hang of it.)

Encouraging Collaboration/ dealing with dominators.

Some children can become very excited in drama and tend to dominate exercises. Reminding them to collaborate and build trust and support is enhanced by these exercises:

Holding hands in a circle and all leaning out. What happens? What could happen?

Standing tightly in a circle, all with right shoulder in. Now sit on each other's knees.

Physical experimentation:

Imagine you are very proud, with your nose stuck in the air. Walk around being led by your nose.

Imagine you're very greedy. Walk around led by your belly.
Walk around led by your elbow..., your bottom, your tongue

Mirror work:

In pairs, have one child move their hands and face slowly while the other mirrors it. Play with speed

Acting Exercises:

Give children simple familiar routines to mime, such as brushing their teeth (squeeze on the toothpaste, brush, spit etc). Now get them to do it very slowly. Now sped up.

Try hair brushing, reading a book, licking an ice-cream, putting on a jersey etc

Silently mime: that you've been given a present and when you unwrap it, you find a baby dragon

that you're swimming in the sea when you see a giant shark

that you're licking an ice-cream when the ice-cream falls off the cone

that you're running to catch a bus but you miss it

that you're a baby having a tantrum

Photo Albums:

Put children in groups of four or five and tell them you're a photographer and they need to pose for a group photo as a group of: pirates/cowboys/bears/wolves/fairies/witches and wizards/trees/dinosaurs/clowns/babies etc

Only give them a few seconds to form the pose so they can't think about it too hard. Adds the element of performance for each other.

Acting Out Stories (dramatic play):

This exercise can go on for an extended period. It's great played outside where there's more space for spontaneity and movement. In it, you provide the scaffolding of the story, and step in as director to keep it flowing. First, gather the children to sit around an imaginary campfire. Tell them it's dark and cold. Warm your hands and toes. Now tell them the scenario. Eg: You've all just been shipwrecked and washed up on an unfamiliar island. You're wet and shivering. Does anyone have any food? Can you share it? What about a flashlight? Who's got a pocket-knife?...

Suddenly you hear a terrible sound. What do you do? What do you look like? Show me...

Call FREEZE. Add to the story. Eg: the sound seems to have come from over there. What do you think it was? A witch? A dinosaur? Are you happy? Scared? Show me...

FREEZE. It's starting to get light. You look around and notice a forest behind you. On the other side is the beach, full of sharp rocks and big waves. Do you enter the forest? (invite them to do so, if they say yes, or send them back to the beach) Are you creeping? Are you helping each other? Are you sticking together, just in case?

FREEZE. Suddenly you hear the sound again. It's like a scream. You cluster together. Looking up, you see a tower (for example). Do you want to explore it? Who's going first? Has anyone got a stick? You have to fight through thick thorns. Suddenly a swarm of ferocious birds

swoops at you and you have to dive down for cover. How do you get them away?

FREEZE. You arrive at the tower. It's got no door but there's a window high above. A voice calls out, 'help me'. DO you decide to rescue the person? How will you get up there? Can you build a ladder? How? Does anyone have an axe? Or a rope?

FREEZE. You arrive at the top of the tower and climb through the window. There's a person curled up in the corner. You move towards her when she leaps up, cackling. It's a witch. Run! You have to escape.

FREEZE. You all run for the forest where you make a plan to catch the witch. Who has a good idea?

FREEZE. (pick one idea and run with it). You build the witch trap (or whatever it is) and lure her out.

You catch her (or the dinosaur or whatever it was). You realise it's a water witch who will die if you tip a bucket of water on her. Quickly you do so and she shrinks to nothing. (This could be the end of the game or it can go on and on)

As children warm to these sorts of dramatic games, they are able to sustain them for longer periods without the Director stepping in. They can also become increasingly complex, with children giving themselves a character name beforehand, and even selecting a superpower to use in the game.

Building a story together:

Introduce an object (a pen, a hat, a book) and give it a story. It might have a superpower. Eg, this hat belongs to a queen in another world. You might not know it, but it's woven from elvish silver and protects the queen from the goblins who want to steal her head for a spell. The queen desperately needs the hat back but now it's in our world and she can't come here. How can we get it to her?

Making a recipe:

First, get the children miming making a cake as you talk them through it. You need a big bowl. Crack in two eggs. Mix with a cup of honey (be careful, it's sticky!). Add flour and cocoa. Melt some butter on the stove. It's hot, remember. Mix together. Pour into a cake tin. Put in the oven. Now it's ready to eat. Yum!

Now, get them to write a recipe together being creative... (you might want to write it as they say it)

We need a recipe for a happy day. What shall we add? A scoop of sunshine? What else for a happy day? A cup of laughter? See what they suggest. Get them to add the ingredients and mix them.

What about a recipe for a dragon? A teaspoon of fire? Some claws? Two red eyes? What else?

A recipe for a good holiday? A wicked witch?

Magic Glasses:

Give the children an imaginary present each to unwrap. In it's a pair of magical glasses. Put them on. What do you see? (If they're very young, make suggestions: Suddenly everyone has a tail. Suddenly there's a rainbow around everything. Suddenly you can see through

walls. Suddenly everyone has a dog's head, or an elephant's nose, or a giraffe's neck...)
Invite them to draw/paint what they saw

Imagine: (these scenarios are fun to discuss in a circle, or to act out)

You wake up with a mermaid's tale,

You put on a hat and you shrink to the size of an ant

You have a pet alligator as a pet

Your friend has been turned into a slug

Dogs have taken over the world

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