

Preschool Insights & Research

How play helps us discover our community

“This is a big, big world. Even this city is too big for a child to understand. So finding their place in it is important. We choose play to get us there. The children play games to help see how they fit together.”

– Susan, preschool and afterschool provider, Shanghai, China

“If my friends fight, I like to be the policeman.”

– Jian, 6

Enter any preschool space and it is likely you will see a display about ‘local community’. Early years educators know the importance of helping children discover and understand the roles of responsible citizens. This goes hand-in-hand with communication and collaboration skills taught through communal activities. Local professionals visit the school to talk about their job and why they do it. Children roleplay scenarios set outside their classroom walls, pretending to be builders, firefighters, and vets, for example. They love to imitate adults.

Imitation is an important process to ensure an understanding of future interactions. A process which revolves around play.

It is also imperative that children understand how such roles and responsibilities play out in their own classroom. There is a ‘real world’ outside the classroom walls. However, no space is more essential to the child than the one they occupy here and now. Preschool children will get more value learning to navigate the demands of school, than they will trying to learn how to be a doctor. Or more directly, by recognizing how the behaviors of a doctor are relevant to their own actions. They can adapt and utilize competencies they see in adults to help them self-regulate and cope in the classroom. In this endeavor, children need adults to guide them.

Community starts in the preschool classroom. A group of children, no matter the number, are a community. They learn about the tolerance, respect, care and confidence that community helpers have, and provide others. They mimic the authority of a teacher, the compassion of a nurse, or the eye-for-detail of a mechanic, often while in dress-up clothes, holding props and following cues. These cues can be used to illicit a similar response to actual class situations.

When a child has knowledge of adult roles, concurrent with applying those responsibilities in their own lives, they generate a deeper understanding of adult behavior, and the purpose behind behaving that way.

What does the research say about play?

Obviously here, play is the first step. Pretense play around different community members is something that is naturally happening at this age. Vygotsky says that through play, children recreate situations that reflect their sociocultural world. His early evidence suggests that their understanding and competencies are more advanced when in playful situations, than in contexts outside of play.

The research cited by Hirsh-Pasek, et al., in *A Mandate for Playful Learning in Preschool*, supports Vygotsky’s views. Make-believe play contributes to:

- Emotional understanding
- Considering cause and consequence
- Acting out feelings
- Displaying considerate and friendly behavior

All of which comes through imitating positive role models, such as those in the community, during sociodramatic play. Cues which researchers corroborate significantly improve peer-to-peer interactions. Adults in and around the preschool classroom give these cues, providing opportunities for children to take what they produced during pretend play, and reproduce it for real.

What the teachers say

“When they leave us, the children will know how to talk to each other, how to act with each other. They learn it from us. From parents and people they meet. We have many parents and grandparents who visit our school. They show us their jobs. Then we let the children play, as if they were the speaker. Then we have ‘circle time’ to find out what we now know about being responsible, about having a job. Then they must pay it forward. They use this new understanding of community to be better with each other”

- Ruby, preschool and afterschool provider, Shanghai, China

References

Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R.M., Berk, L.E., and Singer, D.G. (2009) *A Mandate for Playful Learning in Preschool: Presenting the Evidence* (New York: Oxford UP)

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978) *Mind in society: The development of higher mental processes* (Ed. And Trans. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP) (Original work published 1930-35)