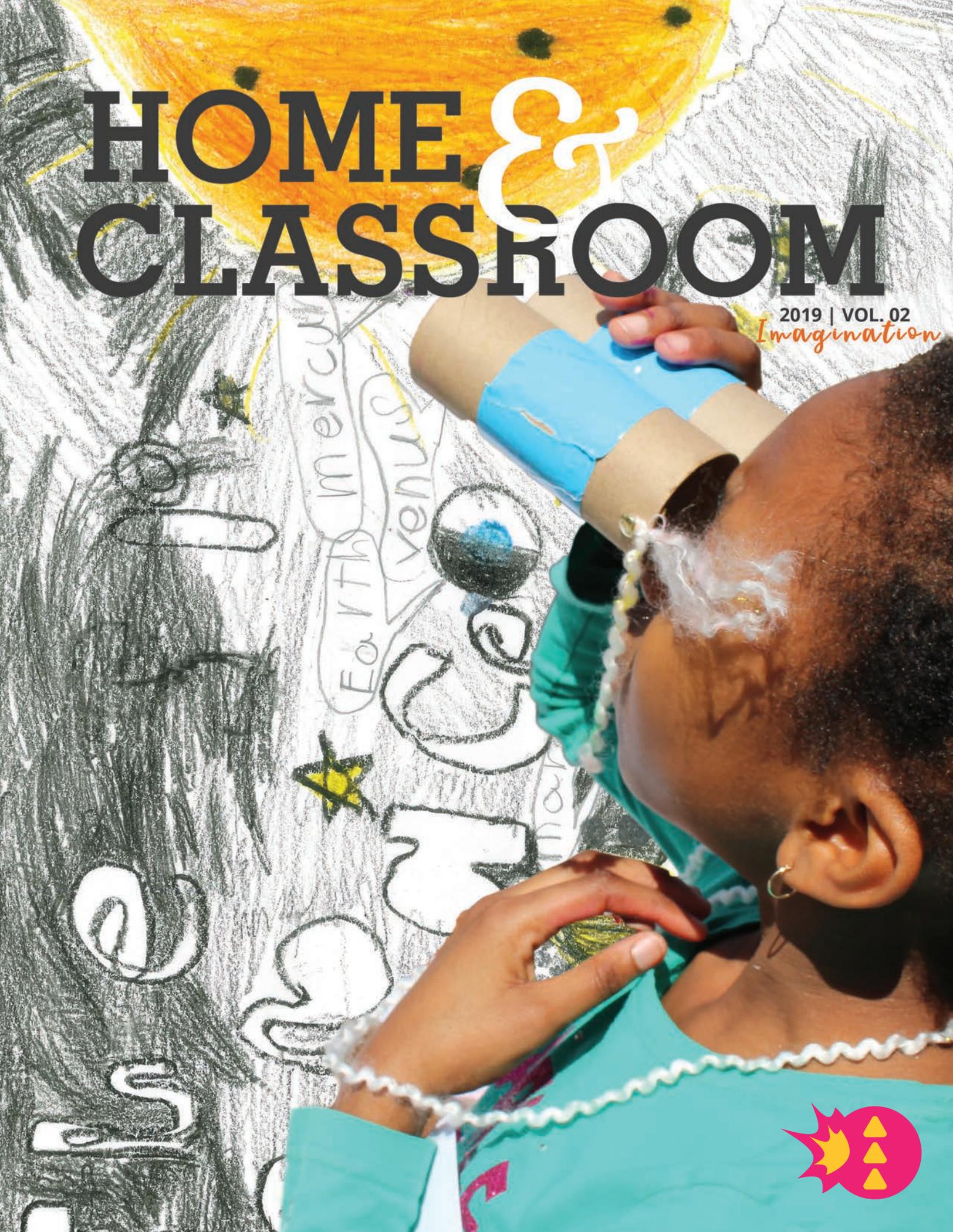


# HOME & CLASSROOM

2019 | VOL. 02

*Imagination*





**GASP! WHAT DID THAT CHILD SAY? 8**

How to honor our feelings while still encouraging child-centered play.

**SLEEPING ON THE JOB 10**

What happens when our brains don't get enough sleep?

**JUST LOOKING 12**

How pre-readers power imagination through books.

**MINDFUL MOMENT 17**

Imagine a safe space.

**PLAY WITH YOUR FOOD 18**

And eat it too!

**CHARADES AT EVERY AGE 20**

Good, quality family fun.

**MEDICAL DRAMA 21**

Tips for effective medical play.

**IMAGINARY FRIENDS EXIST 22**

Imaginary friends are no cause for concern.

**WAITING ROOM WONDER 26**

Simple games to keep children occupied during the mundane.

**IT'S NOT JUST FUN & GAMES 28**

Play has a role in a child's processing.

**HONORING CHOICES 36**

Whenever possible, honor children's choices to feed imaginations.

**LET'S BUILD THIS 40**

A story of building, animals and measurement.

**FORTS, TENT CITIES & HIDEAWAYS 46**

Homes for the imagination.

**IMAGINING ANOTHER'S PERSPECTIVE 52**

Teaching empathy through baby doll play.

**YOUR ORDER HAS SHIPPED 54**

Open-minded, imaginative play with cardboard boxes.

**WEAR YOUR BOOKS 56**

And other ways to inspire imagination through reading.

**REFERENCES 58**

**SPOTLIGHT 60**

A day in the life of an infant teacher.

Wello

# New and Noteworthy

## **BRIGHTSIDE UP**

A world where all children are understood

### NEW NAME, SAME INTRINSIC VALUES

Our old name, the Capital District Child Care Coordinating Council was long, confusing and didn't accurately represent who we are. It lacked the softness and playfulness that we needed.

After extensive brainstorming sessions, we have narrowed our focus while keeping our values fully intact. Brightside Up: It means forward thinking. It means focusing on children's strengths. It means not viewing "failures" as things to be ashamed of or avoided, but as mere opportunities for growth and learning; a lens through which we can strive to be better parents, providers, educators and children.

Through every success, obstacle or hurdle, we are there with you and for you every step of the way, cheering you on as you do this very meaningful work.

### LOGO

Our new logo is light-hearted, playful and designed to stress the collaborative spirit and forward thinking of our community of child care providers and educators. Our brand identity is dynamic and fluid by design; meant for use across multiple platforms yet recognizable whether you see our burst icon standing alone or deconstructed and interweaved with our agency name as a combination mark.



*Out with the old*

**OLD SIGNAGE REMOVAL AND INSTALLATION OF THE NEW SIGNAGE & VISION DOOR WRAP**



# THE BRIGHT SIDE

*of a name change*

by Kate Smith,  
Communications Director

Welcome to Brightside Up. Thank you for calling Brightside Up. Where do you work? Brightside Up. We're still getting used to the change, how about you?

Next year will be this agency's 40th birthday. Our story began with the need for child care support services and training way back in the '80s. Some of us were in high school back then, others weren't born yet. Those who remember the early days of the Child Care Council remember the need to collaborate on the annual conference and handing out child care referrals from a Rolodex.

As the community grew, so did we. Expansion into services grew far beyond the simple referral phone call and became parenting education, support, and family outreach. Training became professional development, diving deep into the world of child brain development, social and emotional needs, health concerns, and the physical and nutritional needs of children.

All of these important developments occurred through our responsiveness to the needs and desires of our community. We grew because you did. We changed because you did. When we reflect back on the name, "Capital District Child Care Coordinating Council, Inc." we see a company with a long and confusing name, that was limited to serving only the needs of child care, only in a specific area, and only to

coordinate services. What we strive to offer and what we've grown to become is so much more. Over the past few years, we've been working diligently on our rebranding. A passion project intended to better reflect our core values. In the process, it became apparent that the capstone of the rebranding project would be a name change. We knew it would be risky, but after endless hours of research, creative work, focus groups and meetings, we embraced Brightside Up.

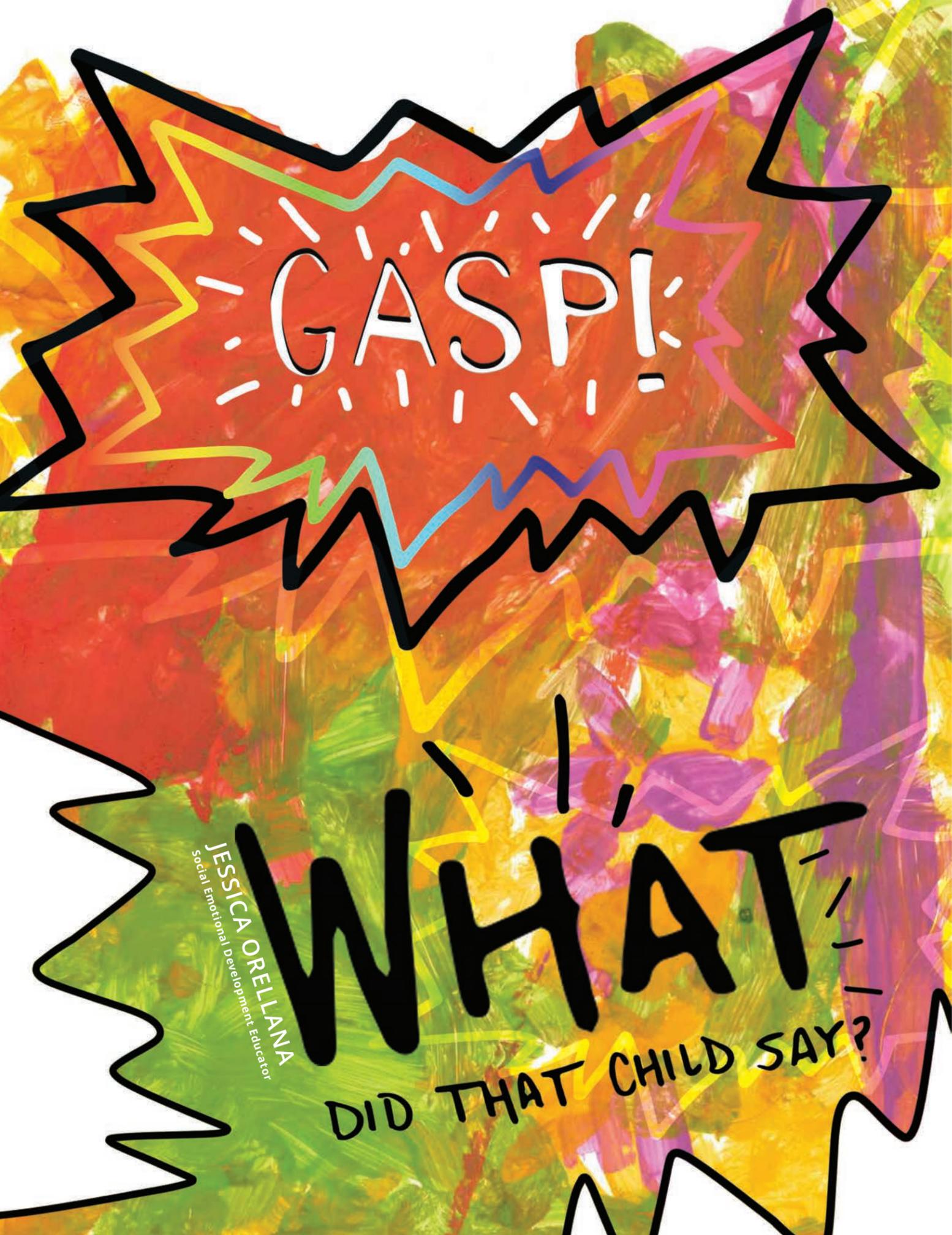
The new name allows us the flexibility to continue to grow without geographical or categorical restraints. With Brightside Up, anything is possible and creating a world where all children are understood becomes an attainable goal.

Hearing the new name spoken aloud for the first time was like coming home. Other name suggestions felt forced and artificial, but not this one. Brightside Up felt exactly right. When shared with colleagues and coworkers for feedback, the response was always a lovely little sigh, like a breath of fresh air; and we knew it was just right.

So as we approach 2020 and our 40th birthday, we proudly present to you and invite you to celebrate with us, our new name...Brightside Up.



OUR NEW NAME REVEAL PARTY SPEAKERS AND SIGNAGE DROP



GASPI!

WHAT

DID THAT CHILD SAY?

JESSICA ORELLANA  
Social Emotional Development Educator

As a Kindergarten teacher I often heard children say the darndest things during play. Sometimes their comments made me laugh and other times they made me gasp. One time in particular I was sitting in the dramatic play area with a group of children when one of my students said, "...and then she has to die!" My initial reaction was, "What! No! Why does she have to die?" My gut reaction stemmed from my own personal experiences with death and the feelings associated with it.

This immediately transformed the play from child-centered to adult-centered. Although our feelings can be strong, they are often an innate response and predominantly an unconscious process. We may not be able to predict what themes bring up strong emotions until that experience is activated in our brain. During these moments when we are caught off guard, we can take note of our responses and practice mindfulness for the future.

For young children, play themes are often linked to memories and activities children have experienced directly such as birthday parties or "house." Other times, play is generated from knowledge acquired indirectly, such as through the media or adult experiences. For instance, shared themes of children's play and adult life might involve going to work, arguing or death. The origin of play as a social entity was largely researched by social psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky recognized the importance of social interactions and the major role more skilled individuals have in children's construction of knowledge. This interaction is called scaffolding.

Scaffolding is the process in which someone with knowledge and skills beyond the learner provides support to expand their understanding. As children play with adults or more experienced peers, they create new themes and play serves as a way for children to express desires, negotiate rules and practice daily and cultural traditions. The themes children explore progress and change with development and through their interactions and environment. As adults we all have our own

boundaries and triggers that may be confronted as children explore the world around them. Maybe we are comfortable facilitating play related to death, but we feel uncomfortable when children engage in gun play, fighting or romantic themes.

For example, what is your reaction when children give their peer a kiss? Kissing is a form of affection that children often share with those that they love. We interact with others in the ways we are taught and express both positive and negative emotions based on our previous interactions. When children are in safe and secure environments, they are more likely to form positive attachments to their peers.

Physical affection such as kissing and hugging are developmentally appropriate ways children express their feelings before learning the language. If we do have a strong reaction, it is important to consider if we are applying the adult context of kissing, resulting in oversexualizing a developmentally appropriate behavior. Our reaction might ultimately discourage the child's process of play and willingness to explore a familiar theme of love and family.

So what can we do when we are uncomfortable? How do we honor our feelings, but encourage play? **Ask questions:** Children might not have the same intentions that you think they may have. **Use parallel talk:** Provide an ongoing description of the play detailing what you have noticed. For example, if two children are role playing house and both want to be the daddy, you might begin by describing their roles. For example, "Elijah is going to be the daddy and so is Mason. Elijah is feeding the babies and Mason is making breakfast." **State things in a matter of fact way:** For example, if a child pretends to be a parent yelling at a child you might say, "Sometimes adults get upset." **Notice your feelings when they come up** and reflect on the story you tell yourself. It is okay to have strong feelings and the more we recognize our own, the better we can support our children.

# SLEEPING ON THE JOB

## HOW THE BRAIN PREPARES FOR WORK

Maggie Hartig, RD, CDN, CLC; Growth and Nutrition Educator

Lack of sleep is more than simply feeling tired. Believe it or not, sleep can impact almost every system in the body. Infants and young children need to get plenty of rest, but as we get older and take on more responsibilities, we often compromise our sleep in order to get things done.

### WHAT HAPPENS TO OUR BRAINS WHEN WE DON'T GET ENOUGH SLEEP?

The ability to think, make decisions, and concentrate is impaired. Have you noticed that you don't feel very creative or productive after a night of poor sleep? Do you say "brain fog" is the reason for poor attention, concentration, and indecisiveness? Research shows that sleep plays key roles in our ability to think logically and determine the appropriate way to handle a situation.

Short-term memory is weakened. Our brains hit the reset button when we sleep. Everything we learned and experienced during the day is moved into our long-term memory storage. Have you noticed that you tend to be more forgetful when you're sleepy? If we cannot concentrate, short-term memories aren't solidly formed, and the information won't make it to long-term storage when we sleep.

Learning is more difficult. When we are rested we are able to focus, form new ideas, and are more likely to have "a-ha" moments. During sleep, memories are reactivated and connections in the brain are strengthened which makes learning easier.

Slowed reaction time. Sleep improves our ability to make split-second decisions. This is a scary one. If we aren't alert and decision-making ability is reduced, then our reaction time is also impaired. That's why sleep-deprived or drowsy driving is almost as hazardous as drunk driving. If a child were in danger or if an object was falling, do you think you would be able to react in time?

Mood, ability to cope with stress, increased risk for depression. When we're deprived of adequate sleep, we are often cranky, irritated, and easily frustrated. Our ability to cope with stress is impacted because there is a rise in stress hormone production which can lead to feelings of anxiety and tension. We may be more likely to snap at coworkers, family, or children. Furthermore, increased stress during the day often leads to difficulty falling asleep or poor sleep quality which leaves many of us trapped in this negative cycle.

If it continues there is a concern for increased risks of depression, illness, and digestive issues. Getting enough sleep enables us to be more positive, confident, and better equipped to tackle the day.

### HOW MUCH DO WE REALLY NEED?

Sleep needs vary by age and are impacted by lifestyle and health status. Keep in mind these are averages. You may feel your best with more or less sleep.



AGE RANGE	AVERAGE HOURS OF SLEEP NEEDED
NEWBORNS (LESS THAN 3 MONTHS OLD)	14-17 HRS.
INFANTS (4-11 MONTHS)	12-15 HRS.
TODDLERS (1-2 YRS.)	11-14 HRS.
PRESCHOOLERS (3-5 YRS.)	10-13 HRS.
SCHOOL-AGE (6-13 YRS.)	9-11 HRS.
TEENS (14-17 YRS.)	8-10 HRS.
YOUNG ADULTS (18-25 YRS.)	7-9 HRS.
ADULTS	7-9 HRS.
OLDER ADULTS (65 YRS. +)	7-8 HRS.

(Data from the National Sleep Foundation)

When you sleep better, you feel better. It's time to start making sleep a priority!

Tip: If you're having difficulty with getting children to sleep or getting them used to their bedtime schedules, why not add a 'bedroom' to your dramatic play area? Children can practice rocking toys to sleep, tucking them into bed, and other bedtime routines.

For more information on sleep and tips on sleep routines visit the National Sleep Foundation at: [www.sleep.org](http://www.sleep.org).



# JUST LOOKING

HOW PRE-READERS POWER  
IMAGINATION THROUGH BOOKS

BY LAUREN COHEN, CREATIVE DIRECTOR OF THE WONDER ROOM

# JUST LOOKING

Imagination is more than just “playing pretend.” Children are using their imaginations when they give themselves new powers and abilities (think superheroes and princesses) or when they attempt to replicate the world they see around them (think playing house or school), and these forms of play are valuable. However, they only describe one way in which children learn to develop imagination. Sometimes, even for non-readers, simply sitting down with a book can provide just as strong a burst of imagination.

When I see children sitting on the floor with a book, holding the pages out and flipping back and forth to refer to earlier pictures, I know they are making connections and developing a sense of the world that is distinctive to the experience art and literature provide. Combine this with lots of conversation and time for adults to read with children, “book look” time powers the imagination. “Book look” time also gives children tools for addressing situations with multiple points of view, innovative ideas and a sense of the world outside their own.

A strong imagination is a critical component of problem solving. Humans have a unique capacity to think about and consider different possibilities without trying each one. We can conceive of situations and decide ahead of time which might work and which probably won't. We can talk ourselves through new social situations, we can solve technical problems, and we can create completely new ideas in this way.

We gain the capacity for this kind of thinking in large part through experience. The more we know and see of the world, the more data we have stored and can call upon when we encounter a novel circumstance that requires a response. Adult experiences are limited in time and space. We haven't seen all the places, we don't know all the words, and we aren't experts in everything. Children have even less experience. They have had less time and less autonomy to gather all the information they might need to make decisions. Also, the world children live in largely functions in spite of them. It isn't designed for them. The counters are too high, adults use vocabulary that is beyond their understanding, and they are constantly seeing completely new things flying by the car windows at 60 miles an hour. Children often experience new situations when they are hungry, or tired, or at the end of



“PICTURE BOOKS OFFER CHILDREN A SPECIAL WAY TO GATHER NEW KNOWLEDGE. THIS KNOWLEDGE WILL STAY WITH THEM AND BECOME A PART OF THEM, AND WILL BE ACCESSIBLE TO THEM IN SOME OF THE SAME WAYS AS ACTUAL EXPERIENCE.”

designed specifically for children, is newer, but it affords the same benefits.

Books can be looked at again and again; by a child alone, by children in groups, or by adults and children together. Each setting offers different opportunities for digging deeper.

their self-control rope. New situations aren't always presented in the right time, space and speed for learning. In real life, things happen fast.

Picture books offer children a special way to gather new knowledge. This knowledge will stay with them and become a part of them, and will be accessible to them in some of the same ways as actual experience. For young children, caregiver-led reading is not the only way to stimulate deep understanding and in-depth study of emotions, people, places and new ideas. In my experience in the preschool classroom, simply having books available and providing the time and space for children to explore and re-read the books they love on their own or with peers often has an even greater impact.

For thousands of years, humans have used stories and pictures not only as art, but also as ways of remembering and transferring information. The idea of the picture book,

Good picture books offer repetition and rhythm. The words are careful and precise and written just for children. They may be rich in vocabulary and develop complex ideas but they are made with children in mind.

“Rhyme builds up an expectation for the sounds of upcoming words even if they are unfamiliar, and added to other cues like the story narrative or illustrations, can give a child clues about the form of a novel word at the end of a line before it is even read.” (Read, 2014)

Art in picture books is varied and may involve a multitude of mediums and artistic styles, but art itself follows stable rules that are dependable. Horizontal surfaces are stable and calm, diagonal shapes imply motion and tension. (Bang, 1991, 2016, p. 58) These structures are carefully studied by children and evoke emotional response and deepen understanding.

Books offer mirrors and doors – “Through creative envisioning, poets, authors, and illustrators propel readers to travel back and forth in time

and place, relate the familiar to the unfamiliar, and ponder never-before-considered possibilities” (Giorgis, 2003).

Consider adding a “book look” space to your home, school, or child care setting. In addition to a place to be quiet, cozy and develop literacy skills, you’ll find the pages of the books have the power to engage children’s minds and to teach them about the world they live in. The pictures and the memories of the words, even for non-readers, will answer questions and build bridges. They will give children more data, more experience, more knowledge. And this, in the end, is what powers imagination.

References on page 58



# mindful moment

with Kim Polstein

## IMAGINE A SAFE PLACE

Let's take a moment to pause our day and be mindful together.

Start by finding a quiet place to sit. Sometimes this can even be challenging, but consider a place where you might be able to take a few minutes to sit. Perhaps it might be your car, your bedroom, or even the bathroom. Anywhere you can have a few minutes to yourself.

Once you find a quiet place, get comfortable. Sit or lay down in a comfortable position. If you're sitting, plant your feet firmly on the floor, place your palms down on your lap or on the floor/bed next to you; lying with your palms down helps to ground you.

Now close your eyes, or take a soft gaze, not focused on anything in particular. Take a slow deep breath in through your nose, feeling your belly expand with the breath, and breathe out even slower through your mouth. Breathe in again through your nose and then back out slowly through your mouth or through your nose. The goal is to feel your belly rise and fall while taking slow deep breaths.

Imagine yourself in a place that feels safe. Where are you? Are you on a beach? Or your couch? Are you alone or with others? Imagine you're in this place and you feel the warmth of the sunlight on your skin.

Focus on the feeling of warmth. As you breathe in and out imagine how your skin feels in this warmth. What do you feel inside? Imagine you hear waves crashing, water trickling down a fountain, or a warm breeze rustling leaves on the trees. Listen to the sounds around you, notice how these sounds make you feel. Imagine in this space you see something beautiful in front of you. Focus on that beautiful thing. How do you feel when you see this? Focusing on the space you've created in your mind, take a few more slow deep breaths.

When you're ready, open your eyes and return to where you are; notice how you feel. Are you more centered? Do you feel ready for the day ahead? Remember, this place you've created in your mind is a place you can come to whenever you need to. It's a space you might share with your child and help them to access when they're feeling unbalanced.

Mindfulness: a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations.

Try this practice once a day and see where it takes you! Feel free to share your experiences with us on our Facebook page or by emailing [homeandclassroom@brightsideup.org](mailto:homeandclassroom@brightsideup.org).

# PLAY

with your



and eat it too

Megan Morrow, RDN, CDN

When we think of someone playing with their food it's often a scene with frustrated parents trying desperately to get their child to eat broccoli or green beans. On the other side of the table the unhappy child pushes the vegetable around on his plate. It seems to be the eternal struggle between the adult and child, with neither side giving in. The child goes hungry or the adult gives in and resorts to the same old favorite foods just to end the stalemate. However, as the adult, maybe it's time to rethink your strategy for the benefit of all. Do you want to play with your food? Go for it!

Rather than engaging in a stalemate over eating unwanted veggies, invite children to explore and play with their food first. This is a great strategy for enticing children to try a new flavor or taste. While this approach seems counterintuitive, studies show that children who play with their food are less likely to become picky eaters, making our jobs as parents and caretakers easier.

A small study in the U.K. found that children who are more apt to get their hands messy in the kitchen are less likely to develop a condition termed "food neophobia".<sup>1</sup> Food neophobia means a fear of trying and tasting new foods. This description might sound familiar to a few of our readers; not only for their own children, but their students as well. Another study published in *Developmental Science* found that young children who played with their food were faster to learn words associated with food textures than those who didn't.<sup>2</sup> After all, children learn through touch and play and there is no exception when learning about new foods. By playing with their food, children get the opportunity to explore the new textures, smells and noises that new foods make. It goes beyond simple taste for the child and makes the food more of an experience, one that's more likely to have them coming back for more.

If the thought of allowing your child the freedom to play with their food seems like the last thing you would want to do, structure the experience by creating food art.

Making faces, forming shapes, grouping colors or sizes together are all examples of food art that can be used at the kitchen table. "Food art is a great way to encourage a sense of curiosity and fun about food. The idea is to help children feel more comfortable using food on their own terms. Playing with their food gives them a sense of control over their food choices, diffusing the battleground that many kitchen tables have unwittingly turned into"<sup>2</sup> states Maxabella from *Kidspot*.

Food play can also help children feel more comfortable about trying new foods before it even hits their mouth. This is because they have the chance beforehand to explore all the sensory properties a new food offers them.<sup>3</sup>

**It is important to emphasize that after playing with food, the child should also eat the food.**

Food and nutrition is to young children so we don't want to waste those nutritious and delicious bites of food just on play alone. Encourage children to eat the food they have just explored. Providing some boundaries and keeping play constructive will assist with this. Be a role model. Eat what is on your plate and it's similar (if not the same) to what is on the child's plate, they will be more apt to eat it as well.

If playing with food isn't an appealing option for you here is a list of other ideas to encourage eating new foods:<sup>2</sup> **Let them help you cook; Take them shopping; Draw their food; Match up the colors; Taste testing; Listening to the food; Blend a smoothie.**

Yes, things can get messy and mealtimes might be longer as you begin to use food play. However, once children get a few new foods under their belts, your options for meal prep increase and things begin to get easier. Young children see that new foods aren't something to fear even if they don't care for the taste. Exploration and curiosity increase, while hesitation to try something new goes down. Even if a few dinners go long but the end result is watching your student or child try a new food and actually enjoy it, isn't that priceless?

References on page 58

# CHARADES AT EVERY AGE

by Bonnie Schultz, Registered Dietitian

Feeling tired? Children still full of energy and looking for playtime with you? My go-to suggestion for my grandchildren, “how about we play charades?” From the comfort of my living room couch I can watch them act out all sorts of things. When my turn comes around, I mime a task or try to stump them with a movie title. Somehow the laughter always boosts my energy. It gives me permission to be silly.

As very young children, they loved acting like animals, or sometimes they would choose to act out routine tasks they had seen earlier in the day. Whatever popped into their imagination was okay with me. As they grew, they decided that we had to put an animal and an action together, picture a bear playing golf, for example.

As they entered their sophisticated school-age years, they started adding more complex rules. They used their fingers to set up the number of words, and for some of the tougher concepts, they might give silent clues about what the words sounded like.

When I am in need of some inspiration, I thumb through a magazine to find something

to act out, or I would go to Pinterest, where the Internet has come up with all sorts of smart ideas, like adding emotions to the mix. Imagine acting out being picked first (or last) for a team. Acting this out might mean working with a partner and could really lead to some good discussion about kindness and feelings. Pre-made lists of charade topics add to the challenge. How can I be London Bridge? What does everybody know about London? When I taught public school, one of my favorite vocabulary activities was asking the students to act out the vocabulary we learned in science. Their partner(s) would try to identify which word it was and how the movement related to the word.

Vocabulary got you down? How about a game of vocab Pictionary?

Most living room sessions ended in a show of tumbling gymnastics. The children’s attention span let me know that the charades game had ended. Like Pictionary is to drawing, charades is to movement. It never seemed important to keep score. Typically by the end we were all tired and smiling.



# MEDICAL DRAMA

by Rachel Mandel, RN



Medical play is often used for pediatric patients in hospitals but can be helpful for all young children. A recent study showed that children who engaged in medical play had less anxiety surrounding their medical encounters and were more cooperative with procedures and medical staff interactions. It has also been shown to decrease the child’s stress response to medical situations (less sweating, crying, clinging to parents, etc.). When we play with children in this way we give them the opportunity to express their concerns and ask questions about things they do not understand.

## TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE MEDICAL PLAY

Creating a doctor’s office in your classroom or playroom is an easy and helpful way for children to explore the emotions they may have about visiting the doctor. Provide props that look and feel like the tools the child may see a doctor or other medical professional use. For example, you may want to buy a real blood pressure cuff and stethoscope from the pharmacy rather than a toy version. Pretend tools are also, of course, useful in many situations. For example, you would not give a child a real needle to give pretend shots but a plastic toy “shot” can be helpful in role-playing the common fear many children have regarding shots.

Let the children dictate when they engage in this sort of play. If you are a provider using medical play in the classroom it is important to note that all children have very different medical experiences. It may be highly stressful for a child who has been hospitalized, for example, to play with medical equipment. Providing the tools for medical play is wonderful but it should be an option among other dramatic play opportunities. It is also important for parents using medical play with their children to let the child determine when and for how long they will engage in this type of dramatic play. Children can become overwhelmed when confronting emotions and concerns they have through their play. Let them do this on their own time.

Be available for questions and to address concerns. You may find that children act out things that are not based in reality. It is fine for a child to make the doctor a dinosaur but you should correct the child’s thinking if they state something like “when we get sick we die”. Reassure the child that being sick is a normal part of life but don’t rush past the conversation. Listen carefully to what the child is saying and answer any questions they may have in an age appropriate way.





*Imaginary Friends Exist*  
by Abbe Kovacic

**IMAGINARY FRIENDS EXIST.** No kidding! In fact in 2015, London's Heathrow Airport acknowledged that one in three children have an imaginary friend, and over two thirds of those take their invisible playmates on family holidays with them. At Heathrow invisible friends fly free.

According to developmental psychologist and researcher, Dr. Marjorie Taylor, children's imaginary friends come in all shapes and forms; some are completely invisible, others take the shape of personified dolls or plush animals, and still others are based on a character in a book or television program. My younger sister Laura had an imaginary friend of the first variety; invisible. Her name was Darlene. Darlene was stylish, outgoing,

victimization. All untrue! Fortunately, as a result of the work of Dr. Taylor and her colleagues, researchers now say with few exceptions that the earlier view could not be more wrong. If we are to create a world where all children are understood, then we need to ask hard questions about past psychological research and have the courage to admit that we were mistaken.

Sixty-five percent of children through age seven have had an imaginary friend resulting in rich and elaborate pretend play. The idea that something can be real and fantasy at the same time is amazing! Children who create imaginary friends are often less shy than other children, possess heightened social understanding, demonstrate increased

“Some imaginary friends are invisible boys or girls; however imaginary companions can take the form of almost anything... pretend friends can be a fly that sits on your shoulder, a bird outside your window, or a little can of tomato paste.

wealthy, and quite bossy. She generally joined our family on trips to the department store. Darlene really enjoyed shopping.

Although Darlene was created out of Laura's school-age imagination, children as young as two years of age have the capacity to create an imaginary friend from whom they derive comfort, support, and love. At the start of her research, Dr. Taylor found that invisible friends were thought to be rare or a red flag indicating shyness or difficulty making real friends. Historically researchers considered imaginary companions harmful or evil; a sign of social deficit, emotional fragility, or

empathy, and display greater creativity. The creation of whimsical, engaging invisible companions is not just fun; many researchers see this type of play as an important developmental stepping stone.

Some imaginary friends are invisible boys or girls; however imaginary companions can take the form of almost anything. According to Dr. Taylor, pretend friends can be a fly that sits on your shoulder, a bird outside your window, or a little can of tomato paste. Imaginary friends seem to have independent agency, such as behaving badly even when the child prefers social conformity. That was the case

with Darlene. She would speak in a derogatory and a mocking manner in spite of Laura's pleas for civility.

Navigating the world of fantasy and reality is complex. From a very young age, children use many of the same cues as adults to differentiate reality from pretend. They distinguish reality from dreams. They know the difference between imagining something and thinking it. Make no mistake; imaginary friends are not real and the children who create them know it.

Regardless of their understanding of reality, children can be vulnerable to the emotional intensity of fantasy; particularly with regard to their imaginary companions. Researcher, Dr. Tracy Gleason describes it as “an imaginary bubble in which the children and their imaginary companions live. They know that the bubble exists and they choose not to pop it.” I was careful not to pop Laura's bubble. As an adult Laura guesses that Darlene was created as a means of aiding her in becoming more outgoing. As an older sister, I remember that Darlene was created shortly after six-year-old Laura was lost among clothing racks in a department store; perhaps as a means of coping with fear.

Creating imaginary friends is fun. Imaginary friends are readily available, good listeners, and excellent for role playing. Child created imaginary relationships mirror real life. Imaginary relationships are often hierarchical such as a parent/child or egalitarian such as a peer. The creation of such relationships can aid children in practicing positive interactions or conflict resolution. Children with imaginary relationships have a forum to practice perspective taking. Dr. Gleason found that children who pretend to be a powerful character (Batman) while faced with a frustrating task take on the coping skills of that character, easing their own frustration.

Most imaginary friends disappear before puberty. However, our ability to imagine relationships never goes away. So the next time you meet a child's imaginary friend take your cue from Heathrow and play along!

References on page 58

## WE ARE LOOKING FOR YOUR VOICE

**We want to hear from you. Share your stories, perspective and expertise in early childhood development by submitting articles to Home & Classroom.**

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Doctor's offices, restaurants, and big brother's piano recital, why do all of these settings fill the caretakers of preschoolers with unease? The answer: unpredictably long wait times. Enter the tablets and smartphones. Given the ability of screens to captivate children and adults alike, they often become the default activity when faced with those sudden long waits. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, pre-school age children should not have more than one hour of screen time per day. Over the course of a day of errands those minutes can quickly add up. Next time you are faced with a sudden need to occupy your pre-schooler harness children's desire to act out activities of daily life with simple pretend play activity bags instead. The following four kits can be assembled in a half-hour or less with many items you may already have around the house.

## A TRIP TO THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE

### Supplies:

- 1 small doll or stuffed toy
- 2-3 tools from a toy doctor set
- Masking tape (for band-aids)
- Aluminum foil or a small piece of sturdy plastic to store the band-aids on
- 1 small piece of paper or 4x6 index card
- Scissors
- Markers
- Laminator (optional)
- Cotton balls
- Craft or popsicle stick
- Gallon size resealable plastic bag

### Assembly:

1. Create a check-up list by drawing pictures of a head, a mouth, an ear, a belly, a leg, and an arm (or cutting out pictures from a magazine) on the paper. Laminate the list if desired.
2. Cut small pieces of the masking tape and place them on the foil or plastic. Shade in the tape to resemble band-aids.
3. Place doctor kit items, small doll or stuffed toy, craft stick, cotton balls, and the check-up list into the resealable plastic bag.

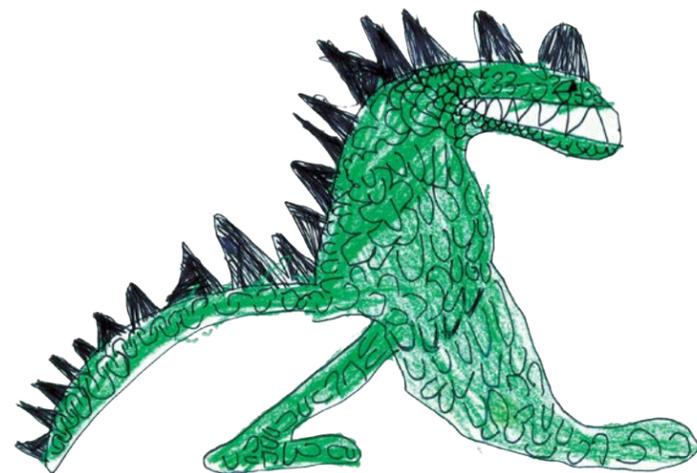
## DINOSAUR HUNT

### Supplies:

- 4 to 6 small plastic dinosaurs
- Aluminum foil
- 1 small toy hammer
- 1 small toy rake or brush
- 1 small figurine
- 1 small toy car/truck (optional)
- 1 gallon sized resealable plastic bag

### Assembly:

1. Loosely wrap each dinosaur in a piece of aluminum foil like a rock covering a fossil.
2. Place the 'dinosaur fossils,' hammer, rake (or brush), figurine, and optional car into the resealable plastic bag.



## TRAIN RIDE

### Supplies:

- 2-3 mini figurines (small enough to fit in an egg carton)
- 1 empty egg carton
- Felt scraps of various colors
- Green felt or play money
- 1 small piece of card stock or an index card
- Marker (any color)
- 1 small empty metal mint container (such as Altoids)
- Scissors
- Strong glue (such as tacky craft glue or super glue)
- Gallon size resealable plastic bag

### Assembly:

1. Cut a three cup section out of one side of the egg carton without separating the individual cups. This will be the train.
2. Cut out 3-5 smaller pieces of the cardstock or index card of roughly the same size. Write the word 'ticket' on them.
3. If you do not have any play money, cut out 5-10 pieces of the green felt to roughly the same size as a dollar bill. Decorate the felt with the marker to resemble play money.
4. Cut out small pieces of felt to glue to the lid and bottom of the metal container. Cut a small narrow strip of felt and glue each end onto one edge of the lid to resemble a suitcase handle.
5. Cut out small pieces of the felt scraps into clothing shapes (ex. shirt, skirt, pants, etc.) and put them into the 'suitcase.'
6. Place the completed suitcase, tickets, money, small figurines, and train into the resealable plastic bag.

## BEDTIME

### Supplies:

- 1 Small picture book
- 1 Figurine (small enough to lay down inside an open large metal mint container)
- 1 Large empty metal mint container (such as Altoids)
- Felt scraps of various colors
- 1 piece of blue felt large enough to cover the lid of the mint container
- Markers
- Scissors
- Strong glue (such as tacky craft glue or super glue)
- Gallon size resealable plastic bag

### Assembly:

1. Cut out a piece of blue felt to fit the lid of the metal container and glue it on. Cut out four narrow pieces of white (or another contrasting color) and glue around the edges of the blue felt. This will serve as the bathtub.
2. Open up the metal container. Cut out a scrap of felt to fit the bottom of the inside of the container and glue it in place. Cut out one scrap of felt to look like a pillow and another scrap of felt to look like a blanket. Optionally glue the pillow in place. This will serve as the bed. Decorate the inside of the lid as you wish.
3. Cut out small pieces of felt in the shapes of a cup of water, a comb, a toothbrush, toothpaste, a towel, and a washcloth. Use the markers to decorate as necessary. Place the small felt items inside the metal container.
4. Place the completed bed/bathtub, figurine, and book into the resealable plastic bag.

Ring around the  
rosie in a pocket  
full of posies  
ashes, ashes  
we all fall down

**It's Not Just  
Fun & Games**  
by Barbara Mitchell, Social  
Emotional Development Educator

*The world of children is full of wonder and delight!* Their perspective is different from the grown-ups around them. They are full of new discoveries and exploration, without the pre-judgements, cynicism, and distrust of adults. Time with children can be a refreshing and a joyful window into our world, but sometimes as adults we have a hard time seeing their perspective. As adults we want to avoid imposing our own view of the world on children in a way that inhibits their exploration and discovery. Instead, we want to help them flourish by facilitating and encouraging natural expression and growth. Understanding the role that play has in a child's processing can help adults understand how to communicate with and understand children in order to improve their relationship with them and help lay a foundation for critical life skills.

In the weeks following September 11, 2001, New York City pre-school and kindergarten classes removed airplanes from play areas, wanting to avoid triggering children who had experienced tragedy up close. Airplanes appeared in the play area anyway. Hands with thumbs and pinkies out like wings were transformed into jets. Hotwheels cars took to the air as towers of blocks and Legos came crashing down.

In WWII Germany, a little girl standing in line for the gas chamber pushed a doll in a miniature stroller, and a little boy skipped rope as they awaited their own murders. Children encamped in the Jewish ghettos collected and organized empty cigarette cartons, categorized by color and size.

"Ring around the Rosie" is purported as the invention of a child mind during the black plague in Europe; the lyrics, dark in content,

rhyiming and liltng to a cheerful tune. "Rosies" referring to lesions seen on those who were ill. "Pocket full of posies" referred to the practice of placing flowers in the pockets of those who died to cover the stench of a posthumous body. "Ashes, ashes" referred to the burning of the plague patients who had passed.

Today, the play and cherished toys of children in refugee camps around the world is well documented.

Children, in every culture, every time period, in every circumstance, play. Play is universal and boundary-less. Play is a spontaneous outpouring of the internal self. Play is enjoyable and done for the purpose of experiencing the process.

The adult perspective might label play in the midst of great tragedy or crisis as inappropriate, bizarre, or see it as an indicator of the child's lack of understanding, but advocates for the value of play argue just the opposite. It is through play that children make sense of their world, as they move between the objective and subjective, concrete and abstract, verbal and nonverbal. It is in play that children experience a spontaneous and self-initiated mastery over their world in such a way that they can begin to make sense of their world in order to process and communicate.

Children make sense of their world primarily through play because it provides a preoperational or pre-verbal mechanism to process and organize thoughts and feelings. Play precedes language development and allows children to physically interact with and manipulate that with which they are already facing in their real world. Adults usually do this through abstract thought and verbal reasoning; for children, their natural medium

for communication and processing is in play. To understand this, we first have to reflect on how we as adults make sense of our world. Once we have left childhood, we often find it difficult to enter the child's world, although the experiences and questions of childhood follow us into adulthood. It may be challenging to view play as a child's primary language, and even harder to enter that language unless we find the common processes.

As adults our understanding of ourselves is often unconsciously ruled by the story we tell ourselves about who we are. This story, or narrative is usually anchored by where we have been, and where we see ourselves going; our current behavior is determined within a framework of past and future. The psychological ability to create a narrative comes through the connection of abstract words and a concept of time and place. Think of the many fairy tales that immediately jump into a time (once upon a time), a place (in a land far away), and a character (a beautiful princess).

For adults, vocabulary and language is required to construct these narratives, labeling emotions with words, people and places with names, and chronicling time with a shared lexicon. This is the concept of meaning making; with abstract language comes the ability to map together a system and identify what is happening, why it is happening, and determine a way to navigate that particular event. Children have this same need to make sense of their world through story, however they have little access to this vocabulary and therefore have a different, yet parallel process for meaning making.

*In play, children do not have to translate their thoughts into a pre-existing medium (language). instead in the freedom of imagination and fantasy there is no limitation. therefore thoughts and feelings come out spontaneously in their purest form.*

This pure form allows for a natural process of accommodating information, allowing them to grasp their world in a way that makes sense to them in a developmentally appropriate manner. Requiring anyone to describe what they are feeling, instantly requires them to assign a word to a feeling and brings them out of the emotional and into the logical. Already the feeling is forced out of its pure form into a pre-existing construct.

Language's primary function is to be understood, play's primary function is to be. When we choose to see play as the child's language we can enter into their world, allowing us to more clearly seek to understand them, instead of forcing the child into our world via a means of communication that they have limited access to.

As adults we have the benefit of fluently moving between abstract (representational

thought) and concrete reality. For example “gentle touch” is an abstract phrase used to represent the concrete reality of physical contact with another person in a non-harmful manner. With abstract thought comes the ability to hold a representational world or an “in-between” world in our thoughts that acts as a bridge between abstract and concrete.

We use this sophisticated process constantly without any awareness because the part of the brain that bridges these two parts together (the Corpus Callosum), is fully formed in adults, but still forming in children. No wonder it is so hard for us to understand children who are just beginning to build this internal process; children connect the abstract with the concrete through a different medium!

For example, a child who is experiencing the transition of a new sibling being born and experiencing feelings of displacement is not going to directly communicate that experience. But what we might see is that child playing with a doll house recreating in a smaller, manipulate-able version of the world that he experiences. He might select a doll who he identifies as the “mommy,” a doll who he identifies as “daddy,” and another doll, the “new baby.” He might then select a tent for himself in the yard because there is no room for the little boy.

Or a little girl whose parent travels for work frequently for long trips might rehearse her understanding by playing dress-up and “going to work,” putting on “work clothes” and packing a “cell phone” in a “brief case,” moving to a different room in the house and unpacking the briefcase before repacking and “traveling” again. She might repeat this play until the parent comes home, or until she resolves her feelings and curiosity about what the parent is doing while they are away.

Children play out their interior world the same way adults do when they call their best friend to talk about getting pulled over for a ticket or something going on with their children or marriage. The difference is in brain development. It is not until age eleven or twelve that children have enough mastery of language and abstract thinking to process and verbalize thoughts and feelings.

Renowned Play Therapist Gary Landreth, in *The Art of the Relationship* describes, “Play is the way children explore and orient themselves to the actual world of space and time, of things, animals, structures, and people. By engaging in the process of play, children learn to live in our symbolic world of meanings and values, at the same time exploring and experimenting and learning in their own individual way.” This limited access to abstract expression lays the foundation for a fluency in the language of play where concrete medium acts as the holding place for representational thought.

## HOME & CLASSROOM Application

Given what we now know about play and child brain development, any adult that has a relationship with a child can use this understanding to enhance their quality of interaction through simple steps. Asking a child to enter our world of vocabulary is asking them to do something they are not yet prepared to do, so we as the adults must in a sense

lower ourselves and enter their world on their own terms. With this framework we reach to understand the child and enter their play in order to make the child feel understood and provide scaffolding to help the child grow into the fullest version of themselves.

Experts have identified ways of communicating with children during and in their play that help promote self-efficacy, confidence, initiative, problem-solving, and many other skills that are important for life. To do this we will use the guiding principles of Gary Landreth who translated his work into everyday applicable skills for any adult with children in their lives. Using some of the guiding principles and techniques adults can make changes to the way they respond to children’s play to create an ideal environment for rich play. First, we start with a certain disposition regarding children: that all children should be respected and honored as the valuable beings that they are. Landreth borrows the term “Unconditional positive regard” from psychologist Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person*, to describe the **four assumptions**: *Children have inherent value; Children are self-actualizing beings; Children know what they need; All parts of the child are accepted.*

With this attitude toward children, the adult can then determine **four needs** that a child from a relationship that can be communicated and supported in play. This lays the foundation for the sense of being uniquely understood. Adults can seek to communicate the following 4 messages through their behavior and verbal responses (Gary Landreth, *The Art of the Relationship*): ***I’m here; I hear you; I understand; I care.***

There are three practical skills that adults can integrate into their interactions during play to communicate these messages (Sue Bratton

& Gary Landreth, *Child Parent Relationship Therapy Treatment Manual*).

### TRACKING BEHAVIOR

***Reflecting nonverbal play behavior – stating what is seen or observed***

SCENARIO: Child picks up trucks from the shelf  
*“You’ve decided to play with the trucks.”*

SCENARIO: Child’s energy picks up and they run back and forth between two sides of the room.  
*“You’re running back and forth.”*

### REFLECTING CONTENT

***Reflecting child’s verbalizations or meaningful actions in a paraphrase***

SCENARIO: The child makes the dollhouse figures say “oh no, everyone run into the house, he’s coming!” and the dolls go inside.  
*“Everyone inside the house is safe.”*

SCENARIO: The child verbalizes “Yesterday my sister and I went to the fair and we went on all the rides and ate cotton candy!  
*“You got to do something really fun with your sister yesterday.”*

### REFLECTING FEELINGS

***Reflecting the child’s feelings either through verbal or nonverbal cues.***

SCENARIO: The child runs up to you with the painting they just made and says “look, look!”  
*“Wow, You’re really proud of yourself.”*

SCENARIO: The child goes to the bucket to look for more blocks, finds that it’s empty and throws it on the ground and whines.  
*“You’re feeling upset that there are not more of those to play with.”*

Let’s look at an example of using these skills in response to a child’s specific play scenario in the image on the next page.

This is a recreation of an 8 year old boy's play. He recently moved to a new state and school due to his father's job, and was experiencing bullying at his new school. We can observe several aspects of his play from which we can pull these skills. It is often the case that you know details and context of the child's life, assuming you have a relationship with them. In this case, the boy had recently moved with his family for his father's job. He was experiencing a lot of difficulties with the transition and was being bullied at school. The only part he liked about this new school was his teacher, who he said sometimes saw the bullies and sometimes didn't.

We can observe several things in this play. In the top left corner, we see trees (often an intuitive symbol of growth and life), gems with vivid colors (beauty and abundance), a house figure, and four animal figures that look very similar (we know from his identification, that this represented his family). We see a path made from fences with a minivan in the middle, and on the other side of the path we see a different scene. On this side (the bottom right) everything is darker and lacking color. Compared to the top left, the bottom right is barren both in color and number of figures. We see fences and barriers that look different from the fences making the path (they are barbed wire fences) positioned to act as a barrier. And we see a built up structure that looks like a



fort or an unwelcome space with a flag. There is one animal figure that is bigger than almost everything in the play (this is often an indicator of power).

Examples of tracking behavior might include:

"I notice you put lots of trees over here."

"You placed all these horses together."

"There is a house over here on this side."

Examples of reflecting content might include:

"The lamb is larger than and higher up than all the other figures."

"Everything over here is colorful and there is a lot going over here." "This part looks darker and there are fewer things over here."

Examples of reflecting feelings might include:

If the child identified the feelings of a figure such as the horse that he has already identified as representing him "He feels sad going to the new place." "Oh, this one is very unhappy when he has to go over here" (gesturing to the referenced area).



If the child identified "This horse wishes he could stay over on this side" (the left side) forever." "This horse wants to go back where he was happy and felt safe, he doesn't feel very happy over here on this side (the right side). These skills are the foundation for communicating genuine and authentic interest in the child, and seeking to understand and enter the child's world. They demonstrate to the child that what they are playing is seen, and honors their play as communication and a way for them to make sense of the world. When we as adults put on this lens, we can then enter the child's world and facilitate rich play that results in a foundation of emotional wellness.

A WORLD WHERE  
all children  
ARE UNDERSTOOD



## HONORING CHOICES

by Sara Baldwin

**M**y parents had a particular knack for honoring choices and cultivating an environment where my sister and I felt comfortable exploring our imaginations. Our entire living room was quite often turned into a fort city constructed from every single blanket, pillow and cushion in the house. We created our own worlds in these forts, assigning characters to our friends and playing dress-up with “dress-up clothes” as well as any material we could find around the house. On nice days we might drag my mom down to the end of our Albany city block to an area we had named “the jungle” that was actually a small cluster of trees with a fence behind it. Dolls or stuffed animals often came with us, and although these items often became dirty my parents allowed us to play how we liked and we gained the understanding that once something got too dirty, no amount of washing would make it new again. This natural consequence equipped me with the skills to make my own decisions about which toys to bring outdoors.

Fast forward a few years and I was in second grade celebrating my first communion. Family and friends gathered outdoors in our backyard for a party (we’d moved to the suburbs the year before) and I had my mind on two things: the pretty dress and white satin shoes I’d been galloping around in all day, and the fun my friends and I would

have in the woods just behind the backyard.

Before venturing into the woods I let my parents know that’s where I’d be. My mom asked, “Don’t you want to change out



of your dress and shoes?” “Nope!” I responded. I adored the outfit and wanted to wear it for as long as possible. “Your shoes will get dirty Sara and you won’t be able to wear them for your photos.” A voice chimed in, “We’ll do the photo shoot barefoot, just paint her toes!” My parents’ friend Trish, who would take my communion photos offered. My parents and Trish knew that aside from the photos, I’d never wear these shoes again. My mom admits that allowing me to wear them knowing they would likely be ruined was a challenge for her. The shoes ended up dirty but I felt confident, happy and capable of making my own choices with the support of the adults in my life. The day was filled with creative, imaginative play in the woods and I had the opportunity to feel like a magical fairy princess which was the identity I chose to try on for that moment in time.

Honoring a child’s individual choice is an excellent example of following their lead. Play is the work of children, it’s how they learn. Through imagination and discovery they begin to make sense of the world around them. Allowing children the freedom to explore in this way promotes independence, self-discovery and supports the formation of their self-identity. Next time a child asks to do something that you, as an adult, might instead offer another choice or say “no” to, I encourage

you to take a moment to self-reflect. Would it be possible to honor the child's choice? This might mean something as small as "two more minutes" or as big as providing an appropriate setting for a child to engage in a super-messy sensory activity. Observing what happens could provide you with opportunities to ask open-ended questions, both during and after.

It would be unrealistic to expect adults to allow children to do what they want one hundred percent of the time. Naturally, factors such as safety, time, and numerous others must be taken into account.

Reflecting on my family dynamic around honoring choices, it's important for me to check my privilege - I grew up within a family context that allowed my parents the freedom and flexibility to honor many of my choices. Families and child care settings are all different, and as such my advice would be to begin with self-reflection and start small. Think about what you might instinctively say "no" to and consider how a "yes" might be possible. Then, reflect on what skills and concepts your child had the opportunity to explore. Each of us, adults and children alike, are constantly growing and changing. Honoring choices can be an excellent way to learn, explore, grow and imagine alongside the children in our lives.



*let's*

# Counting

*this*

a story of building, animals,  
and measurement

by Debbie Markland, Early Childhood Educator, LEARN AS YOU PLAY

**E**ach year our classroom is different. We know that, right? We remember some years for being full of children who loved to play dress up, or we may remember a year when the creativity table was always busy with children pulling up extra chairs every day. This past year in our classroom, our passion was blocks.

From day one in August, our entire Pre-K class was building, building, building. Luckily we had set up our classroom in a way that allowed us to keep structures intact overnight in case the little construction workers wanted to continue on something the next day, which, of course they would. They loved to build. Their imagination drove their structures. Most popular was creating a home for a favorite stuffed animal, and sometimes it would turn into a very detailed home with pools, decks and play equipment. One day, a group of boys built a jet ski for a stuffed tiger - because as anyone knows, every tiger needs a jet ski!



The preschool where we teach is part of an infant-Grade 12 school, and the proximity of the construction of a new upper school building meant that we could walk across to watch, witness, and learn from the construction of a new upper school building. And on top of that, we were lucky enough to get our hands on the real blueprints! This added another exciting element to our obsession with building. Now students would often draw a blueprint for their structures and from the blueprint, they would build- just like we had seen being done across the street. We are a curiosity/project based school, and this excitement about building continued to morph into our project. Through this excitement and interest for building, we would create opportunities that enabled our children to learn and develop essential developmental skills.

At the same time as our love for blocks and building grew, we also were involved in a preschool-wide project to study and learn more about our local community. When our class of 14 Pre K students visited a local park, the children became obsessed with determining how long the hiking trail was. No one knew.

How could we measure it? The list the class generated of ways to measure the trail was amazing. We could line the entire trail with children. We could use a tape measure. We could use string. The most exciting idea was: let's measure the trail with blocks! Of course! Blocks! Our favorite thing! Before loading an entire class set of unit blocks into our bus and heading to the park, we thought we would do a trial run and measure the hallway with blocks. The kids loved this! Every child was so excited to grab blocks from our block center and line them up from one end of the hallway to another to determine just how long the hallway was. Would we have enough blocks? Yes we did. We counted every single one of them: all 446 blocks.



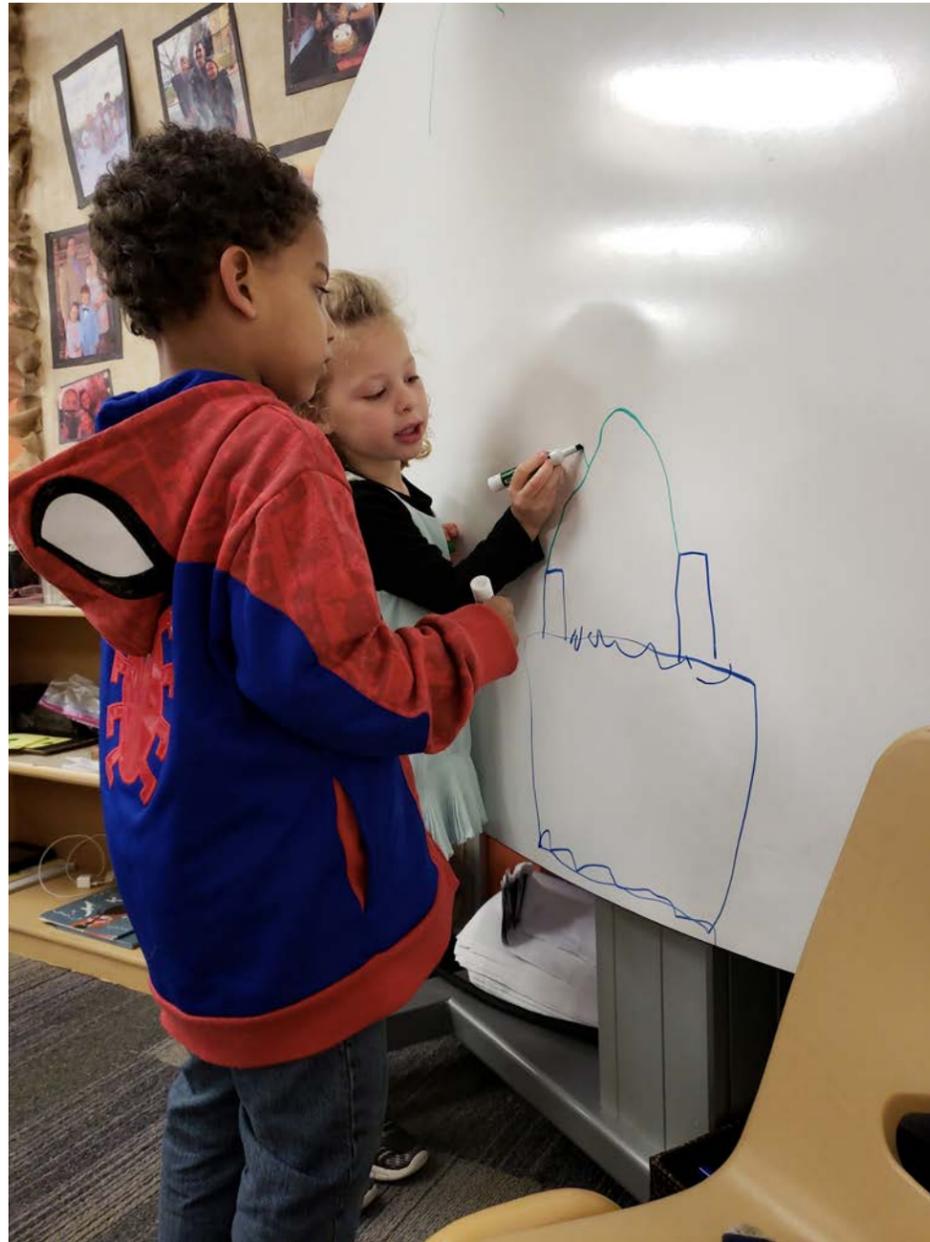
As teachers, we wondered at this point: how could we weave this all together? Blocks. Building. Animals. Measuring. Logic and our own imagination led us to the answer. Measurement is necessary if we wanted to plan and build a structure that provided shelter for an animal.

In small groups, we had a building challenge. Can you build a structure for large stuffed tiger or bear using just items found in the room? As collaboration and imaginations collided, it didn't take much time before we had amazing

structures built out of blocks, furniture, blankets and napping mats. And we heard inquisitive conversations, "how can we make this wall longer?", "why won't the roof stay?", and "how would the animal get out?" Our students were learning from their imagination!

After the first building challenge, our class reflected on what worked and what didn't. What problems did we have? What worked well? What was missing? What was hard? What could we do better? We used those reflections to improve our first structures. What made a good structure? We wove in vocabulary - floor, wall, level, roof, entrance. We completed another challenge in different small groups. We used smaller blocks (Kapla blocks) and smaller animals. Each time the children built a structure, we heard new vocabulary being used, and "aha" moments like "these two blocks equal one of these big blocks." Learning was happening.

After building and building and building in the classroom, we decided it would be only fitting to find a real animal structure. This led us to a friend's doghouse. After the excitement of the bus ride to visit the doghouse, we did observational drawings of the doghouse. We took photos of the doghouse. We made sure the walls and floors were level. And, of course, we measured the doghouse - with blocks!



Even as we practiced for end-of-year programs, and we sent home full bags of artwork and photographs from the year, the block center was still a busy place. Earlier in the year, I had purchased a stuffed dog for the classroom. But in May we were nearing the end of the school year and I had taken it home. One of my students asked where the dog was. After telling her that I had taken the dog home for the summer, she replied, "That's ok - I will just use my imagination." ***Yes, keep imagining my friend, keep imagining!***

**FIND DEBBIE AND HER TEAMMATES ONLINE AT [HTTPS://LEARNASYOUPLAY.NET/](https://learnasyouplay.net/)**



# FORTS, TENT CITIES & HIDEAWAYS

HOMES FOR THE IMAGINATION

by Mary Miranda, Legally Exempt Educator

The summer of my ninth year was spent underground. Our dog had dug a hole the size of a large kitchen table for himself. One day, my three brothers and I chased him out of it, filched some scrap plywood slabs from behind the garage and laid them over the hole for a roof. We spent the rest of the summer expanding and perfecting our structure. We built side tunnels, and wall compartments to hold toys, snacks, and books. Hours were spent cracking stones between two boulders, hoping to find the special ones with the sparkly crystals inside that looked magical embedded into the walls of our structure. We christened our summer home the Cave Mine.

We had amazing adventures in the Cave Mine as we hid from and battled imaginary bad guys, played spy games, and re-enacted disturbing news stories from Vietnam about people called the Viet Cong. The Cave Mine became a neighborhood clubhouse, with a secret call that would bring members running from their yards to gather for important meetings. At times it was a peaceful retreat where I could read and escape from my very large and boisterous family. In short, we had a wonderful summer in a wonderful home built from our own creativity and imaginations.

We had so much fun, and yet we learned so much! Socially and emotionally, we gained self-confidence and developed self-esteem as we successfully solved problems. Our cave provided opportunities to work out concerns through play; such as what was happening to our babysitter's son who was drafted to Vietnam. We learned how to resolve conflicts and practiced leadership skills, while also learning when to follow another person's idea. We experienced how to be a part of a team. Physically, we developed fine and gross motor skills and eye hand coordination as we hauled supplies, used tools to dig and build, and ran, climbed and crawled everywhere. Cognitively, opportunities for creativity and imagination ruled the days. Daily problems required creative solutions - we designed new support systems for the frequent cave-ins, insect traps were created, and leaking rainwater was redirected. We became mini-engineers. And our imaginations exploded into exciting play adventures.

My story is not unique. I am sure that most of our Home and Classroom readers can fondly recall their own childhood homes of creativity and imagination; their own caves, tent cities, cardboard castles, tree houses, and blanket forts. And while the Cave Mine was an outdoor

structure, indoor tent cities and blanket forts were frequent inside our house as well. Holly Buchanan of Lil Firecrackers Family Daycare in Amsterdam told me how much her program children loved making blanket forts in her living room play space. They would just drape some blankets between her two pretend grocery stands, bring in a few favorite toys, and play all morning. She would even allow them to have their snack time in there on days when the play was going especially well. It was so interesting to her that they actually enjoyed playing with this simple, inexpensive play structure more than with several other toys that were very expensive, but ended up sitting on the shelf collecting dust after only a few uses. She also reported to me, with rueful laughter, that they played longer, and seemed to enjoy this simple, self-chosen, self-created, and self-imagined activity more than the structured learning activities that she had spent so much time planning and setting up!

Building hideaways and forts has historically been an almost universal childhood activity. But times are a bit different now and I worry that opportunities for these kinds of freely creative and imaginative pastime activities for children may truly become part of the past. Children today often have very little unstructured time in their lives. Sports teams, music lessons, and other planned activities take up more of children's free time than ever before. While these activities do have value for children, having too many of these activities will lead to a lack of free, unstructured time and will decrease opportunities for developing creativity and imagination. Technology and screen time is also becoming an increasingly dominant part of children's lives. Again, while there may be some value here for school age children in very limited amounts, it is a passive form of learning that is contrary to what we



know about children's need to learn through active involvement and play, and does little to encourage imaginative or creative forms of thinking.

So, what can parents and child care workers do to provide children with opportunities to engage in activities like fort building that allow their imaginations and creativity to bloom? You can certainly provide for space, materials, and time, but the most important ingredient perhaps is an attitude of tolerance and understanding.

These structures can take up a lot of space if you really allow the children to use their creativity and imagination to fully develop their ideas. In a child care program, you may need to reconsider room arrangement and rotate out more toys that really aren't being used all that often. Perhaps your home may not always be ready for a visit from Martha Stewart. Forts are pretty messy looking. But I will bet she never got to watch the look of joy and self-pride on her children's faces after they had successfully struggled to build a tent fort in the middle

of the living room. Kate Smith, of Brightside Up, let her child use most of her dining room, including the table, to build a wonderful fort that even had pop up doors so her daughter could surprise people. It was up for at least two weeks. Think of the changes this required Kate to make in her daily family meal routines - now that's flexibility.

The variety of materials that can be used is endless and can range from a simple blanket to throw over a table to real tools such as a hammer and nails. Again, some tolerance and reasonable flexibility will be most helpful. Perhaps they can't use the cushions off your antique couch, but how about the family room couch? Allowing children to find their own materials is a wonderful exercise for building creativity. Could you ignore the fact that your supply of clean sheets is low, you are missing a cookie sheet, and that most of your rubber bands have disappeared? What about the extra guest room pillows they found in what you thought was your secret hiding place? You might

consider developing a small hoarding habit, and start saving things like old sheets, blankets, out-of-style curtains, and even extra construction materials such as lumber scraps and tiles. You could be generous with your supply of string and rope, and allow developmentally ready children the opportunity to use real tools.

Ensuring that children have plenty of free, unstructured time is extremely important in developing creativity and imagination. Children need large amounts of uninterrupted time to plan, build, solve problems, rebuild and then still have time to actually play in their fort. We never want to teach children that there is no point to working hard and really using their brains to create and complete a project because they have learned through experience that they are going to have to quit well before they are finished. Nothing will kill creativity and imagination faster. You also need to be as flexible as possible in how long you can allow a structure to remain. At home, you certainly have a choice in how long the child can keep

things set up. You could inform them of this in advance. Maybe the cushion skyscraper has to come down by Saturday because company is coming and they need to sit on the couch. Kate Smith was able to keep her daughter's fort up for two weeks. Home child care programs also have some flexibility in how long a fort can remain standing. Holly Buchanan let hers stay up for a while, and even allowed the children to have an occasional snack in there.

Child Care Centers may have rules due to custodial routines that require floors to be cleared by the day's end. Children need to be aware of that. But could it at least be saved until after nap time, so it could be available for afternoon play? All child care programs could carefully assess their daily schedules, and see if small changes could be made that could add up to a larger free play period. Is it possible to make transitions smoother, or to shave time off routines? How long are your group times? Are all the activities that are included truly valuable, or would shortening group times by thinning

out a couple of activities provide some time that children could spend more creatively and imaginatively in free play activities?

Finally, supervision needs to be considered. While current societal norms generally censure parents who allow their children the freedom to practice safe risk, parents still have a little more flexibility in how closely they supervise their children than child care programs have. I was a child in the 1960s and my mother was completely free to practice what she called her theory of “watchful neglect.” She said she always knew where we were and what we were up to, but she did not believe in hovering, or in interfering unless assistance was requested or it appeared that there was a potential for blood to be shed. Her philosophy gave us the maximum amount of freedom to make our own decisions and use creativity and imagination to solve problems and have fun. As we grew older, and reminisced about some of our more dicey exploits, she wondered if perhaps she should have been more watchful and less neglectful. I disagree - all six of us survived to adulthood and we are all very creative with active imaginations.

Child care programs do not have any flexibility with regard to this matter. They are governed by regulations that strictly require them to provide direct, competent supervision at all times; however, there are many ways to directly

and competently supervise children without hovering. You could position yourself close to the active group and involve yourself with a simple task that makes the children think you are busy and not watching them. Maybe you could sort all the animals out of the people basket. Or, you could flesh out some of your brief observation notes. It’s a great time to have some one-on-one time with the baby. The children would probably be very grateful if you helped that toddler who loves to knock down buildings practice building and knocking down his own block towers. Of course, the whole time you are apparently ‘busy’ at your activity, you are still listening and subtly observing the children, ready to offer support if needed or invited. This allows the children to feel free to stretch their skills to the fullest, giving creativity and imagination an opportunity to flourish.

So, let children have plenty of unstructured time to play. Let them have access to materials and tools. Let them use their creative skills to find unconventional uses for materials. Let your preconceived notions of how your home should look relax a little and let yourself relive joyful memories of your own childhood play. Let children build their own caves, tent cities, cushion skyscrapers and tree houses.

*Let children build homes for their imaginations.*



# IMAGINING ANOTHER'S PERSPECTIVE

## TEACHING EMPATHY THROUGH BABY DOLL PLAY

by Kathleen Harland, Infant & Toddler Regional Specialist

When a toddler throws wood chips on the playground or when the hug of a young friend feels more like the hug of a python, caregivers and parents try and help that child see how their actions are affecting others. You might hear a gentle voice encourage, "Look at Sam's face. He looks sad; I don't think he liked getting the wood chips thrown on him." or "I see Matteo is trying to pull away, maybe you are hugging him too tight." These are helpful words that guide children to imagine another person's perspective.

Although "teachable moments" like these may be plentiful, many caregivers are also using another proactive approach to teaching empathy and relationship building to toddlers. They are making "Baby Doll Play" an extension of the one-on-one responsive caregiving routines and interactions that they are experiencing with their children. If an adult sings "The Itsy Bitsy Spider" to a young toddler as a social game with "spider fingers" crawling up the child's belly and "rain fingers" tapping back down, then the child can be encouraged to play that same game with their baby doll. Children benefit from the loving exchanges, responsive relations, and fun social games; and the benefits are reinforced as they experience them again with their dolls. The caring language

*Play is a wonderful opportunity to practice the skills we need in life.* »

often becomes part of the family or classroom culture and helps the children as they work to better understand their friend's feelings and perspectives.

Parents and caregivers of infants and toddlers work really hard to slow down and make routine caregiving tasks like diapering, soothing, and feeding, and meaningful experiences. We think through the details of hunger cues and altered sleep patterns to figure out when each child is hungry and when a nap will be needed. Sharing that thought process with the children helps them understand our responsive caregiving process. I often hear caregivers say, "You are getting really snuggly, I bet you are getting sleepy." and "You are getting really frustrated with that, are you feeling hungry?" Caregivers who talk through these feelings with their children can also model this language in baby doll play. Just as we are always thinking through the needs and preferences of the children in our care, we can focus our baby doll play around the needs and preferences of the dolls. Maybe their baby is cold and needs a blanket, maybe their baby isn't hungry yet or maybe that sound is too loud for their baby. This is a wonderful opportunity for our children to explore emotions and practice the social skill of understanding how another person is feeling.

Having caregiving supplies accessible and organized for play choices is a great way to invite and engage children in this play. When the baby dolls are put away with their faces

visible rather than piled on top of each other they are more likely to be selected for future play. Storing them in a separate container than a doll bed leaves the doll bed open for a child to "notice" that their baby might be feeling tired and have a place to soothe them to sleep. Other materials that have become mainstays in this empathy play are doll blankets, bottles, spoons, breast feeding blankets, baby baths, diapers, wipes or cloths, sensory toys, laminated photographs and books. It is not uncommon in classrooms and homes where baby doll play is intentional for the caring play responses to become the responses to friends in real life situations as well.

A very nurturing toddler in my care would pretend to feed a baby doll of ours with a spoon and would regularly stop and ask, "Ready for more? Looks like you're ready for more." The words came out in broken toddler speak but the empathy and responsive caregiving was clear as day. That same toddler was known to ask friends, "Still playing?" when she hoped to have a turn with a toy already being played with.

Play is a wonderful opportunity to practice the skills we need in life. Being able to imagine another's perspective is certainly one of those skills. As empathy and understanding become a large part of your children's baby doll play it will surely become part of their everyday play interactions. Practice makes progress!





When I was a child I lived on Long Island in a quintessential suburb with “the kids on the block.” There were about 10 of us who would play together from sun up to sun down. One of my favorite memories of playing with the kids on the block was the day we stumbled across not one, but two refrigerator boxes. Jackpot! We quickly got to work hunting down additional boxes to create our dream play fort. We cleared out our neighbor’s entire garage, leaving everything we didn’t need for our fort in the drive way, which of course left his mother to park in the street. We grabbed duct tape, scissors, boxes, packing peanuts, paint, anything we could get our hands on to create this fortress. By the time we were done we had a 4 bedroom masterpiece. We designed each “room” with different themes, brought

in snacks and bean bags to get comfy, and ensured we had ways to close off the rooms to take space from one another without having to go home. This was an elaborate creation. With no adult in sight (but I’m sure watching closely from the window) we got to work, worked together and worked hard to think about, design, and create this fortress. Have you had an experience like this as a child? Has your child had an experience like this?

With materials as simple as cardboard, we were inspired to create a fortress. We were able to practice communication, cooperation, delayed gratification, motor skills and more. Imagination is a key component of a child’s overall development. Encouraging children to engage in pretend play

supports children’s cognitive flexibility, or their ability to shift their thinking from one idea to another, which enhances a child’s creativity.

Studies show that children who engage in pretend play experience benefits in increased language skills, and theory of mind which is the awareness that the child’s own thoughts may differ from the thoughts of another person. This helps a child to see many perspectives. As children take on new roles in their pretend play, they begin to learn to take on other perspectives, aiding in the development of empathy. Children learn and grow in all aspects of development when engaging in pretend play.

Think about the social and emotional aspects of play. When given open-ended materials, like a cardboard box or a blank piece of paper, children are able to express positive and negative emotions with those materials that do not necessarily elicit a specific emotion or behavior. Open-ended, imaginative play may also help children to link those feelings with thoughts that they might be having. When we are able to link our thoughts and feelings we are more likely to understand why we’re feeling something or what thought patterns link with emotional patterns making us more likely to predict our moods and behavioral responses. This process is the beginning of self-regulation for young children. Through the use of open-ended materials and limited instruction, children working together in imaginative play learn to develop cooperation skills and increase their language.

Pretend play is also referred to as “symbolic play” because of the use of symbols. Children may use one object, such as a cup to represent something else, like a phone. Children need to practice these skills, as symbolic play helps them to understand words as symbols for our thoughts and ideas. Pretend play also helps children increase their vocabulary by exposing him or her to new words that may not come up in every day conversations, like pirate, spaceship, sword, or rescue.

Too often we see adults directing children’s play, and worrying that a child’s play may not be setting them up to meet the developmental and academic milestones we want to see. However, we know that pretend play is actually setting the foundation for strong academic learning. Albert Einstein said, “The truest sign of intelligence is not knowledge, but imagination.” How often do we encourage children to use their imagination? The next time you get an email that says “your order has shipped” get ready! Save the box and see what wonders unfold.

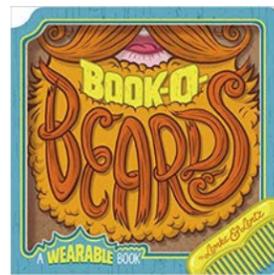
Quick tips for parents to encourage imagination

- Sometimes join your child’s play, other times stay back and let them create. If your child doesn’t know how to pretend yet, you might start the play and then watch to see what your child does.
- Simply observing what your child is interested in and encouraging those interests help the child to explore their environments and learn new things.
- Ask open-ended questions or use open ended phrases like, “tell me about what you’re making” rather than closed ended like “is that a dog you’re drawing?”
- Let children explore materials other than traditional toys like cardboard boxes, containers, paper towel tubes, pots, pans etc.
- Allow children some down time to encourage their open ended play, rather than scheduling activities with or for them.
- Read a book and encourage exploration (see book suggestions on page 56)

# WEAR YOUR BOOKS

Engaging in imaginative play with children will help them develop their problem-solving skills, organizational skills, social skills, and their sense of identity. Picture books are an excellent way to inspire children's imagination while increasing their vocabulary. The following are a few examples of books to read with children.

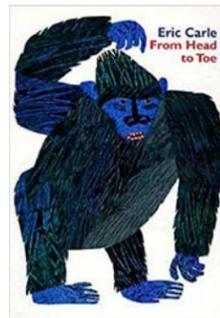
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## **Book-O-Beards: A Wearable Book** by Lemke & Lentz

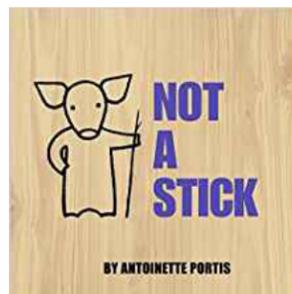
This board book has a cut-out for your nose at the top of the book so you can try on 6 different beards. You will become a pirate,

sailor, police officer, and more. The beards take up most of the book, but simple rhymes are included that describe the illustration. Pirate beard: "This black beard is braided and large. Squint one eye and let out an "ARRRG!" Open the book and prepare to laugh. Younger children benefit from a mirror to see themselves transform into different characters. Other wearable books by the author and illustrator: Book-O-Hats, Book-O-Masks, and Book-O-Teeth.



## **From Head to Toe** by Eric Carle

With simple collage illustrations and narrative, children can pretend to move like animals. The book is excellent for older infants and toddlers because it encourages children to try movements as they listen to the story. Children can practice waving their arms like a monkey, arching their backs like a cat, and kicking their legs like a donkey. Since this is a beloved classic picture book there are countless ideas online to extend learning with additional activities. The Mixed-Up Chameleon by Eric Carle is another excellent book to read with 3- and 4-year old children.

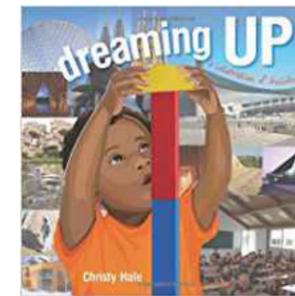


## **Not A Stick** by Antoinette Portis

Blank backdrops with simple drawings portray a little character with a big imagination. The book's narration draws the reader into a conversation with a pig that is playing with a stick, "Hey, be careful with that stick," says the reader. The pig explains, "It's not a stick," with illustrations showing how the pig imagines using the stick as a fishing rod. This book can demonstrate to children that everyday objects can represent something else. Other books to read by this author: Not a Box and Super Princess Kitty.

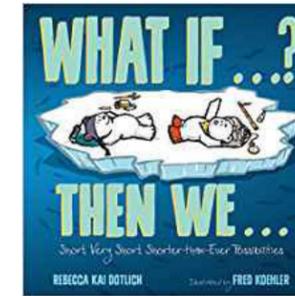
# & OTHER WAYS TO INSPIRE IMAGINATION THROUGH READING

BY COLLEEN STERLING, EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT EDUCATOR



## **Dreaming UP: A Celebration of Building** by Christy Hale

This book explores the connection between children's play and architecture. On the left side of the book there is an illustration of children playing with stacking cups, building bricks, blocks, or a blanket fort. On the right side is a real photograph of a building from various countries that resemble the lines of the children's play. For example, one illustration has children building with recycled cardboard and paper tubes, and pictured next to it is the "Paper Tube School" built in China in 2008 out of recycled plywood and heavy-duty paper tubes. The back of the book has more information on the buildings and their architects. This book is an excellent way to prompt children's imagination while playing with blocks and other building materials. The following article, "Block Play: Classroom Essentials" is a great place to reassess what materials you are adding in with your blocks to help encourage children's imagination: [www.childcarequarterly.com/summer09\\_story2b.html](http://www.childcarequarterly.com/summer09_story2b.html).



## **What If...? Then We...: Short, Very Short, Shorter-than-Ever Possibilities** by Rebecca Kai Dotlich and Illustrated by Fred Kohler

Show children that imagination can take you on endless adventures. In this book, two polar bears imagine their way through an Arctic landscape. The book is beautifully illustrated and provides short scenarios for children to think about. "What if...every crayon in the world melted? Then we would grab our pencils and fall in love with gray." "What if...the clocks stopped tick-tocking? Then we would have no bedtime." Extend this activity with your child with your own What if... scenarios to answer and older children can think of their own What if... scenarios to share.

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Feature Article Illustrations by Lindsay Clark, Graphic Designer, Brightside Up  
Photos courtesy of the author unless otherwise noted



Tune in to the new season! If you would like to be a guest on the Home & Classroom Podcast, have questions about childhood development, or have a topic you think would make an interesting or fun episode, we would love to hear from you. Send us an email at [homeandclassroom@brightsideup.org](mailto:homeandclassroom@brightsideup.org).

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# Spotlight



**ANGELICA NIEVES**, INFANT TEACHER, CEO'S COMMUNITY RESOURCE CENTER, TROY NY

**7:30 AM** | Angelica arrives at the Community Resource Center and gets ready for the day. Drop-off starts almost immediately, with parents saying their goodbyes and heading off to work. There are eight infants enrolled in this classroom, seven boys and one girl, but one of the babies is out sick today, so it will only be seven total. Infants can join the class at six weeks old. The youngest currently enrolled is seven months, and the oldest is eighteen months. "It's a big age difference," says Angelica, "but we make it work." While the babies all arrive, Angelica puts out a few toys to keep the group occupied.

**8:30 AM** | It's breakfast time! Today the menu is oatmeal with peaches. Feeding the babies is a challenge; everyone is at a different stage and all still need help. Angelica cuts up the peaches and helps some of the older kids use a spoon. The other teachers help with the younger babies, and although it gets messy, everyone seems satisfied with their breakfast.

**9:00 AM** | After breakfast the babies brush their teeth (with more than a little assistance from the teachers), and those in need get a diaper change. With seven babies this is quite the feat to tackle in 30 minutes, but Angelica has been working in the infant room for ten years, and she makes it look easy.

**9:30 AM** | Once everyone is cleaned up, the group heads over to the gross motor room for some bigger active play time. During nicer weather, the teachers may take them out for a walk in strollers, or to the playground, but it's cold and snowy today. The infants immediately get to work making the most of the gross motor room. With such a wide range of large plush blocks to climb on, balls to roll, and areas to explore the room is full of movement. Angelica spends some time on one of the mats with the youngest infants, who explore on their tummies, or play with toys propped up with a pillow.

**10:15 AM** | Back in the classroom, everyone gets their hands washed and a diaper check before participating in an activity. Angelica gets out some plastic Easter eggs and lets the group explore opening and closing them, and putting them in baskets. Some of the younger babies are getting ready for a morning nap. One baby in particular settles in with a bottle on Angelica's lap while the others play. Another baby is already asleep in the lap of a Foster Grandparent.

**11:00 AM** | With the youngest babies asleep, the four older boys settle in with some books before lunch. Even with eight babies, everyone is able to get some one-on-one time with each teacher. Books are a favorite with a few in this classroom. Some days the older boys will do a more involved activity like finger painting or playing at the water table, but everyone is content with some reading today.

**11:30 AM** | Lunchtime! Angelica helps some of the older boys feed themselves at a small table, and keeps the little guys in the highchairs stocked with small grab-able bites of hamburger, mixed vegetables, and pears.

**12:00 PM** | Eating lunch is a tiring affair; one of the babies in the highchair is already asleep. Angelica leaves him be for a few minutes, and gives the other baby a bottle while she helps brush the teeth and wash the hands of the older two boys. To put two of the boys down for a nap, Angelica and one of the other teachers put them in cribs, and rub their backs, while the Foster Grandparent puts on some soothing music and lowers the blinds. Not everyone is on the same nap schedule, so two other babies spend a little time playing quietly on one of the mats before settling down a little later.

**2:00 PM** | With babies waking up from naps, Angelica takes care of some diapers and gets a few of the boys into activities on the floor before getting afternoon snack ready. Today it's blueberries and cottage cheese. Everyone is very excited about afternoon snack. With a few in highchairs, and a few at the table, everyone takes a few minutes to work on those fine motor skills and enjoy their snack.

**3:00 PM** | After everyone is cleaned up, it's back to the gross motor room. Angelica wheels four of the babies in an evacuation crib, and then helps them all find a space in the room to explore and play. The Community Resource Center is one of the only CEO centers that offers an extended day; with many of our other centers closing at 2pm. Angelica has two kids of her own, a 17-year-old and a 16-year-old, both of whom attended Head Start programs. "One went here, and the other went to the Troy FRC," says Angelica, "they are great programs, I'm so glad my kids were able to participate!"

**3:30 PM** | After a half an hour or so in the gross motor room, the teachers bring the infants back to the classroom to settle into activities until pick-up time. Blocks, cars, and books are all popular with the older kids. A few of the younger babies really enjoy a sensory board with sticky tape and other textures.

**4:30 PM** | All the babies have been picked up, and Angelica heads home for the day.

## TWO QUESTIONS FOR ANGELICA

*What do you like most about being an infant teacher?*

"I get to spend the day with them, and watch them grow and learn. It's nice to see them go through all the Head Start classrooms too. Every day we watch the preschoolers walk by our classroom, and they wave. Many of those kids were once babies in this classroom. Sometimes they come back even when they are in elementary school just to say 'hi.'"

*What would you want a perspective teacher to know about this job?*

"You can make a difference in a child's life. With their parents working all day, this is a big chance for them to grow attached to someone new. You can show them things and watch them understand and make sense of the world. That connection really matters."



# BRiGHTSiDE UP

A world where all children are understood