



# Questions of play

In this article, **Dr Sarah Young** and **Dr Rebecca Lewis** write about children's socio-dramatic play, in which children use their imaginations to role-play and improvise narratives, and invite educators to become co-players with children.

Early childhood teachers and educators understand that play is central to practice and governed by the policy context (AGDE, 2022; Hadley et al., 2021). However, the process of play and the role of the educator in children's play are less clear. Using a cultural-historical lens of socio-dramatic play, we offer three questions to conceptualise children's play and the role of the educator in play to create opportunities for collaborative learning.

## *What are the rules and structure of play?*

Socio-dramatic play, where children use imagination to take on roles and improvise narratives, is a highly esteemed vehicle for children's self-expression, agency and creativity, as well as an everyday occurrence in early childhood settings. This type of play creates a collaborative space for multiple voices and imaginings. Children take on 'dual roles', which gives them two perspectives simultaneously—of being themselves and being a character (Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010). For example, children can be both superheroes flying around the room and themselves as they walk across it, consciously playing the role.

This type of play, while improvised, is also bound by rules and structure. When children play 'superheroes', they imitate how they have seen these characters behave in books, cartoons and digital games (Wohlwend, 2016). This imitation is not a direct copy of the character; instead, children develop the role to make it their own. A child in role as a superhero might pretend to rescue someone, travel to another planet, have special powers, and so on. These are the unspoken 'rules' of play and form the 'structure' of the narrative. They are brought into the play from the children's lived experience but are not fixed. Play's rules and structure are negotiated and reworked in the moment of the action. For example, when children play 'shops', a common sight in preschools, they imitate how shopkeepers and customers interact. Children playing customers might pretend to line up, order their ice cream and pay with tanbark; these 'rules' of the play come from the children's daily activities (i.e. shopping, watching TV, eating meals, playing digital games, going to the park, reading books) to inform the narrative structure.



## How is play a creative process?

Children's play does not come from nowhere; it comes from their imagination. Children's imagination is informed by what they have experienced in their lives. The child's experiences and imagination create the conditions for improvisation to occur. Being in play requires children to be in a process that is not yet formed; it is the making stage, it is in motion (Vygotsky, 1930/2004). For example, a child who watches *Bluey* might enact elements of what they have seen and heard in the show, creatively reworking them with other parts of their lived experience to form their play. This is improvisation.

In play, children are improvisers creating opportunities to steer and be steered in the unfolding narrative. These improvised moments become the building blocks of an evolving play episode. The participants in this type of play have created something new; this is the creative process. For example, one child says, 'I'm a two-headed dragon' as they pretend to breathe fire, and the other three children run and hide under the slide, raising their arms as shields saying, 'You can't come into our cave!' Here the children are using their knowledge of dragons as the play rules and structure and context to improvise. They intentionally change the meaning of their actions and objects to suit their play needs: they wave their arms to simulate dragon fire and they transform the slide into a cave. The children are co-creating on the spot: one child is offering something to the play, and the other children respond to the pitch.

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## What is the role of the educator in play?

Educators do many things to support children's play: they supply props, guide behaviour, and listen and observe for assessment and documentation purposes. However, when it comes to educators joining in children's play, some might hesitate due to a fear of taking over and diminishing the children's voice (Pyle & Danniels, 2016).

However, when educators join children's play, they have the capacity to help them develop problem-solving and collaboration skills—capabilities that are just emerging in young children (Yogman et al., 2018). We invite educators to think about socio-dramatic play differently, to become a co-player contributing to the shared imagined situation. To be in collaboration with children in play, the educator, like the children, takes on 'dual roles' (Kravtsov & Kravtsova, 2010). They are educator and character simultaneously, holding two points of view, relating to the child as educator and also as character. For example, an educator may say, 'Let's buy another rainbow ice cream' as the character, while supporting the play to develop as the educator. The child can imagine the adult as a customer and interact with them as an educator at the same time.

In shared play, educators become co-players in the narrative with children, creating learning opportunities for children to participate, lead, express, see other perspectives and be exposed to new ideas. When educators join children's play, they are able to weave together the multiple perspectives of 'dual roles', which is the collaborative experience (Loizou, 2017). In this case the educator is enriching the children's play, as their involvement can develop the play episode and

model the creative process. When educators are in the play, they are consistently improvising to facilitate the process, thinking about all the players. Educators are hearing and seeing the children's imagination in action.

We are not suggesting that educators join in children's play all the time; this is often not possible or appropriate. Instead, we are advocating that when educators do join children's socio-dramatic play, they become co-players with children, sharing the same imaginary world.

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