

Using Socio-Dramatic Play to Support Oral Language and Early Literacy

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Children develop concepts, dispositions and skills in relation to:

Oral Language

- Engagement, listening and attention
- Social conventions and awareness of others
- Sentence structure and grammar
- Acquisition and use of vocabulary
- Comprehension
- Requests and questions
- Categorisation
- Retelling and elaborating
- Playful and creative use of language
- Information giving, explanation and justification
- Description, prediction and reflection

Reading and Writing

- Engagement
- Motivation and choice
- Reading vocabulary/Vocabulary
- Purpose, genre and voice
- Response and author's intent (Writing)



Introduction

Socio-dramatic play supports children's language and literacy development. *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2009)* highlights the importance of this for children in their early years of primary school. The play is led and controlled by children and supported, as appropriate, by the teacher. Opportunities to practise language and literacy occur naturally in contexts devised by the children.

Language is fluent in play because children are at ease when playing. Vocabulary develops well during socio-dramatic play because children are intent on communicating what they mean to one another (Harris, Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek, 2011).

In play, children imitate language and literacy behaviours that they have experienced in the wider environment. They chat on the mobile phone, make appointments, interview one another for

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jobs, serve in shops, banks, post-offices, bakeries, airports and railway stations, deal with customer complaints and role-play a myriad of professions and trades. Literacy contexts include reading and writing signage, e.g., *Special Offer!*, *No Parking!*, *Dogs must be kept on a leash*, writing shopping lists and to-do lists, making timetables, invitations and appointments, filling forms, writing letters and emails, devising advertisements and sending invoices.

Socio-dramatic play is improvisational in the sense that it is not scripted in advance but, in socio-dramatic play, young children communicate about the play as well as being involved in the play. They move in and out of role to alternately plan and play roles. For example, Molly breaks the play to declare she is changing roles, *Okay, I'm the customer now. My chips are cold. Can you take them back please...?* This movement out-of-character to suggest ideas for advancing the play is called **meta-play** (Sawyer and DeZutter, 2007; Williamson and Silvern, 1991) and is strongly connected to children's ability to comprehend, to retell stories, and to understand concepts about print.



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This Support Material

- guides you through the **types of activities** that you might provide for children in their socio-dramatic play scenario (see the suggested planning framework on page 4)
- gives practical advice on **how to set up** a play scenario in the classroom and includes **examples of signage and literacy materials** to ensure that children's play is supported by a print-rich environment.

The ideas and strategies included in this Support Material are not prescriptive. Teachers need to adapt suggestions to their own classroom circumstances.

Choosing a Topic for Socio-Dramatic Play

The topic selected for socio-dramatic play and the activities chosen within the topic are decided **in collaboration with the children** and **supported by you**, the teacher. The idea might come from an event in the community or a visit from a professional to the school. Ideally, the topic will integrate with work in other areas of the curriculum. See the list for examples of suggested topics. This Support Material uses the suggested topic *The Paint Shop*, which integrates oral language and literacy with visual arts and mathematics. The example illustrates how socio-dramatic play might be adapted into a classroom situation.

Suggested Topics for Socio-Dramatic Play

Ideas for topics to support oral language and literacy through socio-dramatic play:

- Building an extension to your house, school, shop
- The airport
- The restaurant
- At the bus station
- At the train station
- Going camping
- The baker's shop
- The garage
- The paint shop
- The dentist's surgery
- The doctor's surgery
- Visiting the vet's clinic
- Visiting the moon/outer space
- On the boat
- In a submarine
- Locations from fairy-tales or nursery rhymes

Add your own ideas based on your children's interests.

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Suggested Planning Framework for Socio-Dramatic Play

1. Give children the opportunity to **talk about their own experiences** and knowledge about the topic.
2. Think about using non-fiction as well as fiction.
3. Plan **oral language lessons** based on the topic. Think about pair-work and strategies such as role-play, hot-seating and interviews.
4. Gather **resources** for the socio-dramatic play on *The Paint Shop*, e.g., colour-charts, pencils, paints, brushes, paper, a paint-mixing machine, overalls, rollers, trays, paint scrapers, wall-paper stripping machine, a queue ticket-dispenser machine.
5. Create **laminated signs** to make the play area a **print-rich environment**, e.g., shop directions such as *Queue here, Pay here, Toilets this way* →, *Customer Service, Paint mixing area, Please take a colour chart, Please take a number and wait to be called*. These signs can be shared with the children during oral language lessons based on the topic. The children will also want to make their own signs as part of the play.
6. Think about **poems, rhymes, jokes** related to the topic.
7. Play **language games**, e.g., *I spy, Spot the difference, Find the odd one out* to familiarise the children with new vocabulary which they can use in their play.
8. Organise a **visit from a professional** in the field. Prepare questions with the children before the visit.
9. **Visit** a paint shop.
10. Model **literacy activities**, e.g., booking a painter to give an estimate, using a calendar to make appointments, creating signs for a business premises, sending invoices, reminder letters, notices of upcoming sales and special offers, writing the painter's curriculum vitae and testimonial letters from previous clients.
11. Give children **time to play freely** with the different resources. During this time, the teacher observes, documents, gives guidance (e.g., reinforces new vocabulary and models the language register used in the play situation) and sometimes participates in the play by taking on a role.

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Let's imagine that a new paint shop has opened in the community which the class will be able to visit with their teacher. One of the children's parents is a house painter by profession and she has agreed to visit the classroom to talk about her job. The class teacher explores the children's current knowledge of paint shops and house painting and, using this, she/he plans a number of oral language experiences based on the topic. The planning framework on page 4 lists the activities and resources the teacher uses to enrich children's socio-dramatic play. This work takes place **prior to** as well as **concurrently** with the actual socio-dramatic play scenarios.



Classroom Organisation and Layout

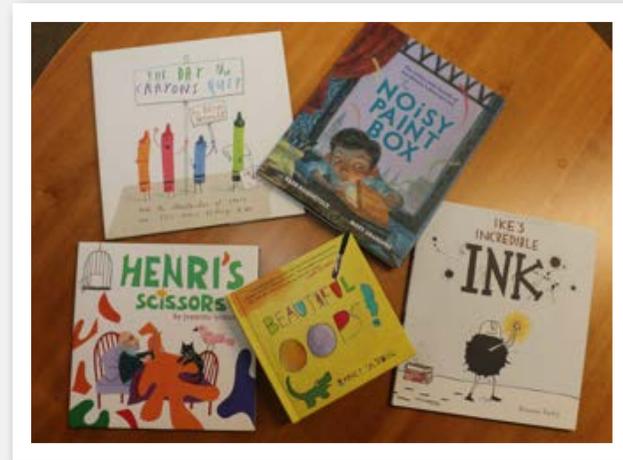
Classroom organisation will vary in accordance with each class context. For the purpose of this example, children are divided into groups, e.g., five groups of five children, and all groups are involved in some form of play. Use the perimeter of the classroom to create a series of areas for the children's play. At least one group is in the socio-dramatic play area which is based on the topic *The Paint Shop*. Other groups can build constructions with blocks, work in the small-world area, work with sand, playdough and use the reading and writing area in their play. For more information on this, see the Support Material, *Organising for Play: Time and Routines*.

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Step-by-Step Guide to Develop Socio-Dramatic Play

Steps taken so far

1. The topic *The Paint Shop* was selected and stories about colour, paint and painting were read by the teacher. A non-fiction book about a day in the life of a painter was also read.
2. The teacher planned and taught a number of oral language lessons during which the job of the painter was discussed and the tools of the painting trade explored. Vocabulary in the form of signage, e.g., colour chart, paint mixing area, brushes, rollers, white spirit, paint stripper, *Please take a colour chart*, *Please take a number and wait to be called* and *Sale now on*, was introduced and used. The children tried out role-play as part of their oral language lessons. This is important language preparation for the socio-dramatic play later.
3. A house painter visited the classroom, bringing with her some of the tools of her trade. She explained to the children about tendering for a job and how the painting process happened. The children asked her questions that they prepared in advance, supported by their teacher.
4. A visit to the new local paint shop is planned for the following week. It is now time to get working on the paint shop in a classroom play context.



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Next Steps – Children Planning Orally and in Writing

The teacher gathers the children for a brainstorming session to discuss what they might do at the different play areas. The children put forward a number of ideas; not all of them will be embraced. Children often change their minds once they are in the play area. The teacher supports and works with the children's decisions. The following ideas for play are proposed by the children, and supported and guided by the teacher:

- A **paint shop** stocked with labelled painting materials and manned by two assistants. Paint rollers are made in the shop with household roll cylinders.
- A **paint mixing area** where paint scientists create new colours and colour charts.

- A **painter's workshop** where children are using rollers and brushes to paint a large surface. They are also experimenting with painting with sponges and potato cuts. This work has been done previously in an art lesson so the children are skilled in the area.
- A **painter's office** where the secretary takes queries on cost, and job descriptions. The secretary draws a gate, a door, a wall as appropriate to indicate the location of the job, and then books in the client for the painting job. She takes telephone queries, and makes up bills. A **queue ticket dispenser** is needed and can be created in the junk art area for use in the paint shop.
- Children can build **internal walls of a house** in the construction area and visit the colour-chart designers to decide on colours for their walls.

Once these ideas are discussed and decided upon, the play session proceeds using the four-step approach outlined in the Support Material, *Organising for Play: Time and Routines*. Children sit in their groups on the floor and discuss how they will proceed with the play. Using clipboards, they draw and write their play plan. After a few minutes, the teacher invites children to share their play plan with the group before going to the various play areas.

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The Teacher's Role in Socio-Dramatic Play

The teacher observes the socio-dramatic play for a while before entering into role. This observation is essential so that she/he can evaluate what type of intervention will progress the play and support the children. The teacher's involvement helps to extend the play and enhance the language and literacy used in the interactions taking place. The teacher's aim is not to interrupt the play or take on a starring role but to intervene in a way that develops the play and enhances the language and literacy interactions that are taking place. If control of the play is taken over by the teacher, it is no longer children's play but teaching disguised as play – *chocolate-covered broccoli* – as Bruckman (1999, p.75) called it. The teacher's work in documenting learning experiences during play will help to assess their language learning and plan for further steps in developing their oral language and literacy skills.

Review

At the end of the play session, the children review and give feedback. Sometimes they give feedback first and then tidy up and sometimes the order is reversed. The children gather on a mat in front of the interactive whiteboard.



The teacher shares photographs taken during the play and uploaded to the computer. The children use these photographs to support them as they share the story of their play with the whole class. The teacher guides the feedback further by providing prompts to the children, e.g., *What went well in your play? What bit was really fun? What would have been better...?* The children give feedback to one another initially and then a number of them are invited to report to the whole class. This brings the play session to an end.

See pages 9–11 for a teacher's story of how she used a topic approach to play.

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A teacher describes her children's play session on the topic of 'The Dentist'

*The topic of 'The Dentist' was introduced by inviting the children to talk about their experience and knowledge of the dentist initially. I then read some books about the dentist, fiction and non-fiction. We visited a local dentist's surgery and met with a dentist and dental nurse. Back in the classroom, we made a plan for our dentist's surgery. We also had a creative writing lesson and a visual arts lesson based on the visit. We participated in the SPHE programme, **Mighty Mouth**. Using this programme, the children used a chart to record their daily brushing of their teeth. They received a certificate and a new toothbrush and toothpaste on completion of the programme.*

*During SESE, we made a **Think Before You Drink** display to demonstrate how much sugar there is in well-known drinks. This integrated well with our dental topic and the children moved the display to their dentist's surgery. The child in role as dentist pointed out the sugar levels in the drinks to clients as he worked on their teeth.*



Having consulted briefly with me, the children decided to paint roads on a large sheet of paper and to build a community of 'People who help us' integrating with geography. I helped them to lay a large piece of white construction paper over a table. The children made a list of services in the community such as hospital, school, church, shopping centre, hairdressers, dental clinic, chipper and playground, etc. Each day the group of children working in the small-world area added to our community and checked off the services that they had made on the list. One boy, who was a member of the Traveller community, was asked to make a camp in the community and he was very proud to do so. He answered lots of questions from both me and his classmates about life in the camp.

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Junk art area

At the junk art table, the children made various items for the dentist's surgery including a telescopic toothbrush, flosser, mouth camera, as well as dinosaurs, dolls and flags. One of the girls made a mouth with egg-carton teeth featuring green paper and foam as the germs in the mouth.



I placed the mouth and the telescopic toothbrush in the dentist's surgery so that he could demonstrate to the patients how to brush their teeth properly. I asked open-ended questions such as, 'That looks interesting...', 'I wonder how you did that?' or 'I love that you put green on your piece; can you tell me why you chose to do that?' I found that the children engaged more in conversation when invited in this way.

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Review

The children had an opportunity to give feedback on their play. If I noticed a child playing particularly well with his/her group or making something special, I asked the rest of the class to gather around that person so that he/she could explain what was happening. It was on one of these occasions that the boy, mentioned earlier, spoke about life at his camp.

There was also an opportunity to give feedback at the end of the play session. I rang the wind chimes ten minutes



before feedback time. I had a large sheet on a flip-chart which read, 'What went well...' and on the other side, 'Even better if...' I invited children from each group to report back about their play, based on these two criteria. I used photographs taken during the play and uploaded to my computer. These acted as an aide memoire for the children when they were describing their work. It also made them feel proud to see their work displayed on the interactive whiteboard.

This account was developed in collaboration with Elaine Carton, primary school teacher

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