

CO-WONDERING IGNITING CHILDREN'S IMAGINATIONS THROUGH SMALL WORLD PLAY

As an advocate for child-centred approaches to play and learning, I want to promote the vital importance of imagination in children's lives and highlight our role as being 'co-wonderers' in their imaginative development.

Hello, I am Dr Alistair Bryce-Clegg, an Early Years consultant, author, and trainer.

Throughout my career, I have been passionate about supporting play-based learning experiences that nurture children's creativity and imagination.



CULTIVATING IMAGINATION



Imagination is a boundless resource that allows children to explore new worlds, invent possibilities, and make sense of their experiences. As early childhood educators, we have the privilege (and responsibility) of nurturing this innate capacity and helping it to grow. Children are not born with a fully formed imagination, just the capacity to develop one, so the question for me is...How do we successfully cultivate and grow an imagination in the children we care for?

UNDERSTAND THE ROOTS OF IMAGINATION

It's essential to understand that the capacity for imagination is innate. Even in infancy, children show glimmers of pretend play, hinting at the imaginative potential within (Carlson, White, & Davis-Unger, 2014). However, while the seeds of imagination are present from the start, their growth depends heavily on the nourishment they receive.

Imagination isn't a static trait, but a dynamic process that evolves through experience, interaction, and exploration (Vygotsky, 2004). As children engage with the world around them, they gather the raw materials of imagination - sensory details, emotional connections, stories, and symbols. Our role is to provide an appropriate environment in which these elements can combine and develop.



CREATE AN IMAGINATION-RICH ENVIRONMENT

One of the most powerful ways to cultivate imagination is to create an environment steeped in creative potential. This means surrounding children with open-ended materials that invite exploration and invention. We can offer a diverse array of resources - blocks, fabrics, natural materials, recycled objects, and more. The more multi-purpose the materials, the more room there is for imaginative play (Neill, 2013).





Consider the physical space as well. Design inviting play areas that spark curiosity and storytelling. Set up provocations - carefully arranged materials that pose questions and ignite imagination (Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). A tray filled with sand, pebbles, and miniature animals might inspire an adventure, while a collection of tubes, funnels, and water could prompt an investigation of flow and motion.

ENGAGE AS 'CO-WONDERERS'

As adults, we have a unique role to play in the imaginative process - that of co-wonderers. Rather than directing or controlling children's play, we can engage alongside them as curious, enthusiastic partners in discovery (Wohlwend, 2011). This means asking open-ended questions that stretch children's thinking: "I wonder what might happen if..." "What do you imagine this could become?" These types of prompts invite children to exercise their imaginative muscles and consider new possibilities. The trick is to use them sparingly, making sure we give children opportunities (and space) to think for themselves.



We can also model imaginative thinking in our own interactions. Share your own ideas, speculate about alternative scenarios, and express genuine delight in children's creative ideas. By embodying a spirit of imagination, we validate and nurture this same capacity in the children we work with (Eckhoff & Urbach, 2008).

PROVIDE PLENTY OF PLAY TIME

Imaginative play thrives when children have lots of time to immerse themselves in their creative worlds. In a busy, (often) timetable driven world, it's essential to protect long stretches of uninterrupted playtime. Although it can be hard, we need to resist the urge to constantly direct or intervene in children's play. Instead, trust in the imaginative process and give children the space to explore, experiment, and create at their own pace (Bergen, 2002).

This doesn't mean abandoning children to their own devices entirely. We can still observe, and support play as needed. But our role is more that of a facilitator, setting the stage for imaginative adventures and then stepping back to let them unfold.



CELEBRATE THE PROCESS, NOT THE PRODUCT

In imaginative play, the journey is more important than the destination. As adults, we can reinforce this by focusing our attention and praise on the process of creation, rather than any end products. Value experimentation, effort, and originality over realism (Hoffmann & Russ, 2012). By adopting a process-oriented mindset, we create a safe space for children to take risks, make mistakes, and let their imaginations develop.

PROVIDE DIVERSE INSPIRATIONS

Imagination is fuelled by exposure to new ideas, experiences, and perspectives. Offer children a varied selection of stories, both from books and oral storytelling traditions. Discuss the characters, settings, and plot twists in these tales to deepen children's narrative understanding and inspire their own storytelling (Nicolopoulou, 2010).

Encourage pretend play that draws on diverse roles and scenarios, from everyday experiences like going to the shops to fantastical adventures with dragons, spaceships and unicorns. The wider the range of imaginative possibilities children encounter, the more expansive their own creative thinking becomes (Lillard et al., 2013).



TRUST IN THE POWER OF IMAGINATION

Ultimately, nurturing imagination requires a leap of faith. It means trusting in the innate creative capacities of children and having confidence in the value of imaginative play. In an education system that usually prioritises measurable outcomes and tangible products, championing imagination can feel like swimming against the current.

But the rewards for the children are vast. Through imaginative play, children develop cognitive flexibility, problem-solving skills, emotional resilience, and a lifelong love of learning (Singer & Singer, 2005). They learn to think beyond the literal, to see multiple perspectives, and to envision new possibilities for themselves and the world around them, they become truly creative and critical thinkers.

THE ROLE OF THE 'CO-WONDERER' IN SMALL WORLD PLAY

The role of the adult in supporting small world play is multifaceted and crucial for maximising the learning potential of this type of play. Here is a recap of some key ways we can support and enrich small world play experiences:

• Providing Resources and Materials

Adults are responsible for offering children a diverse array of open-ended materials that inspire imaginative play. This might include natural items like stones, sticks, and shells, as well as miniature figures, vehicles, and buildings.

• Creating Inviting Play Spaces

Adults can intentionally design and arrange the physical environment to invite small world play. This might involve setting up provocations - carefully arranged materials that spark curiosity and storytelling.

• Observing and Documenting Play

One of the most important roles of the adult is to carefully observe children's small world play. By watching and listening attentively, adults can gain valuable insights into children's interests, developmental progress, and emerging skills. This can inform future planning and help adults tailor the environment to children's needs.

• Asking Open-Ended Questions

While small world play is inherently child-led, adults can enrich the experience through thoughtful, open-ended questions. Rather than directing the play, these questions should aim to extend children's thinking and encourage them to articulate their ideas. For example, we might ask, "I wonder where that boat is going on its journey?"

• Encouraging Problem-Solving and Collaboration

Small World play often presents natural opportunities for problem-solving and collaboration. We support this by offering gentle prompts and encouragement as needed. If children are struggling to share the resources, it is a great opportunity for us to scaffold different ways of negotiating an effective resolution to their conflict.

• Valuing the Process over Products

In small world play, the journey is more important than the destination. We can reinforce this by focusing their language and attention on the process of play, rather than any end products.

• Modelling Imaginative Thinking

Adults can support small world play by modelling imaginative thinking in their own interactions. This might involve joining the play as a co-conspirator, wondering aloud about the lives and adventures of the miniature characters, or expressing genuine delight in children's creative storytelling.



REFERENCES

BERGEN, D. (2002). THE ROLE OF PRETEND PLAY IN CHILDREN'S COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT. *EARLY CHILDHOOD RESEARCH & PRACTICE*, 4(1), N1.

CARLSON, S. M., WHITE, R. E., & DAVIS-UNGER, A. C. (2014). EVIDENCE FOR A RELATION BETWEEN EXECUTIVE FUNCTION AND PRETENSE REPRESENTATION IN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN. *COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT*, 29, 1-16.

ECKHOFF, A., & URBACH, J. (2008). UNDERSTANDING IMAGINATIVE THINKING DURING CHILDHOOD: SOCIOCULTURAL CONCEPTIONS OF CREATIVITY AND IMAGINATIVE THOUGHT. *EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION JOURNAL*, 36(2), 179-185.

HOFFMANN, J., & RUSS, S. (2012). PRETEND PLAY, CREATIVITY, AND EMOTION REGULATION IN CHILDREN. *PSYCHOLOGY OF AESTHETICS, CREATIVITY, AND THE ARTS*, 6(2), 175-184.

LILLARD, A. S., LERNER, M. D., HOPKINS, E. J., DORE, R. A., SMITH, E. D., & PALMQUIST, C. M. (2013). THE IMPACT OF PRETEND PLAY ON CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT: A REVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE. *PSYCHOLOGICAL BULLETIN*, 139(1), 1-34.

NEILL, S. (2013). OPEN-ENDED MATERIALS BELONG OUTSIDE TOO! HIGH SCOPE, 27(2), 1-8.

NICOLOPOULOU, A. (2010). THE ALARMING DISAPPEARANCE OF PLAY FROM EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION. HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, 53(1), 1-4.

SINGER, D. G., & SINGER, J. L. (2005). IMAGINATION AND PLAY IN THE ELECTRONIC AGE. HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS.

STRONG-WILSON, T., & ELLIS, J. (2007). CHILDREN AND PLACE: REGGIO EMILIA'S ENVIRONMENT AS THIRD TEACHER. THEORY INTO PRACTICE, 46(1), 40-47.

VYGOTSKY, L. S. (2004). IMAGINATION AND CREATIVITY IN CHILDHOOD. JOURNAL OF RUSSIAN & EAST EUROPEAN PSYCHOLOGY, 42(1), 7-97.

WOHLWEND, K. E. (2011). PLAYING THEIR WAY INTO LITERACIES: READING, WRITING, AND BELONGING IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM. TEACHERS COLLEGE PRESS.

The Department for Education Early years Child Development Training offers free training modules for practitioners on brain development and how children learn.

<https://child-development-training.education.gov.uk/>



Department
for Education

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Evidence Store provides evidence informed approaches and practices to support self regulation and executive function and understanding child development.

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/support-for-schools/evidence-for-the-early-years/early-years-evidence-store>



Education
Endowment
Foundation

Produced by Dr Alistair Bryce-Clegg on behalf of the
East Midlands Early Years Stronger Practice Hub.