

Dramatic benefits



How can drama help our little people practise their social skills? **Laura Sydonie** makes some suggestions...

Drama is and can be many things – from a large West End show to a moment of interaction in a drama therapy setting. Indeed, one of its advantages is its flexibility: it adds value as a structured session or as opportunist moments we work into our every day practice. It can be spontaneous or planned. For many years drama has been used as a vehicle to teach other subjects in cross-curricular learning across the ages, and as drama specialists, we at Theatre tots often see drama used to develop social skills.

So how can it be employed with our youngest people in nurseries and preschools?

Using drama

Drama can be an invaluable means of introducing and sustaining social skills in any early years setting. As outside providers, our first sessions are always about reflecting on the existing social skills in a group and what settings have already established. This enables us to maximise the sessions and meet expectations. Our checklist looks like this:

- Sharing
- Team work
- Listening
- Emotional articulacy
- Non-verbal communication

Sharing

Learning to share is a huge part of early years education. This goes beyond the more obvious sharing of toys and food to the sharing of ideas, talk time and space. At the centre of much drama work is positive

communication; therefore, talking and sharing are vital to understanding any drama game. A simple drama exercise, passing round a puppet for children to whisper their name to, is an effective way to build up the idea of sharing. The imaginative layer of the puppet creates an environment where children can experiment with the simple situation of telling someone their name. The sharing of the puppet as it's passed round is inherent to the game and having it as a visual stimulus makes it easier for children to understand when their turn will be. Once confident with names, children can also tell their ages, feelings and activities, therefore building up a relationship with the puppet at the same time.

Sharing ideas can be more challenging. The skill of the adult facilitator is to set up a safe environment where everyone wants to contribute their thoughts. Then it is crucial to validate each idea by ensuring it's heard. In a drama context the imaginative layer makes it a lot easier to sustain the interest of the group. This can be set up in a simple mirroring game. Ask a question, e.g. "Is this person happy or sad?" The children turn to face each other and tell each other their answer; then ask them to show each other their answer and copy each other's actions, e.g. happy face, sad face. Once this pattern is established it can be used over and over.

Team work

Related to the idea of sharing with others is children's developing sense of the world outside them. Those under five see the world from their own, self-centred point of view. Linked to this is their growing sense of themselves and their own self-esteem. Drama offers many opportunities to be part

of a team and to learn to empathise with others' points of view. The pretend play is 'practice' for real life experience as they grow older.

This storytelling exercise is a good example. Read a story that the children can act out as a team with actions. Explain that you need everyone to be part of the story or it might not work as well, and that as a team the children need to look after each other so no one gets left behind. Tell the story with actions and words, and ask the children to join in and contribute their ideas; where possible these ideas should be taken on board and used by the group. Afterwards, congratulate the children for their excellent team work. The emphasis is on the ability of the group as a whole to take on other people's ideas and use them as a team.

Listening

Of course, no structured session works without a focus on the building of listening skills. If drama is about communication then listening is a crucial ingredient. Drama can take things beyond listening to words to also listening to the emotions behind the words and understanding why someone might be saying something. Role play is an excellent way of experimenting with this. Children role play naturally, so in a structured session the adult facilitator is just giving it context and direction.

Using simple sock puppets can be a successful structure. Give each child a puppet – it could be an animal or character from a story. The children should work as a team and be encouraged to ask questions to the adult's puppet. You might have to offer a lot of guidance with the questions, but the process of thinking of a question, asking the question and then listening to the answer is great practice for conversation. You can push it further by then asking, "How does your puppet feel about it? Is he/she happy or sad?"

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Emotional articulacy

This moves us on to emotional articulacy. This is where drama practice really excels. Drama sessions create opportunities for people of all ages to practise their emotional experiences. They learn to try something out in a safe environment and that it's okay to feel and express a range of emotions. Younger children can be very free to express their own emotions; the challenge for them is learning to identify emotions in themselves and in others.

There are many exercises that can focus on this development. One of the key factors is connecting a child's feeling with 'what it looks like'. A successful approach can be asking the children to draw in the air a happy/sad/angry face. Then ask them to take hold of that drawing and 'put it' onto their own face to show everyone. Once everyone has put on their face, then everyone stands up as a team and moves in the way their face makes them. This gives children time and space to consider the emotion they've chosen as a visual and physical sensation. They attach a word to it, which enhances their emotional vocabulary. Drama exercises allow many opportunities for facilitators to ask gentle questions about emotions, and not just about people. Animals, objects and situations can also have feelings and there is something freeing about thinking that way. This level of imaginative play engages us with our world around us and makes us consider how we affect it.

Non-verbal communication

Drama is not just about words; communication with others involves words, expressions and body language. For preschool children, communication with their peers and teachers prior to going to more formal settings is invaluable for building self-esteem and relationships. We have talked about expression and body language as being just as important as what is being said when trying to work out what people mean, and 'Guess how I feel' is a simple game to introduce this idea. Ask the children to sit in a circle. Someone goes into the middle and pretends to feel a certain way. The next child gets up and asks them, "How are you feeling?" They then have to say a completely new emotion that the second person has to act out. It doesn't give them time to overthink what they are doing, often evoking a high-quality response.

Non-verbal instructions in drama sessions are often preferable. They can help to create a calm, attentive environment. Teaching children the difference between 'showing' and 'telling' is really important. For this, a game similar to 'Simon

says' can be used. The children have to 'show' with actions and 'tell' with words. To make it more complex they can be asked to show and tell at the same time.

Final thoughts

Drama is built on social interaction. It's therefore the perfect vehicle to introduce and develop social skills with younger children. In my view, a fun, structured and consistent approach is vital if practitioners are to sustain the educational opportunities that drama offers.

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Theatre tots offers drama sessions and shows for early years children and children with additional needs, and has branches in the UK, China and the USA. Its team also offer Inset training days called 'The drama in our everyday', equipping teachers with simple but effective games and exercises to weave drama into their practice. Visit theatretots.com

**about the author**

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