

Real or MAKE-BELIEVE?

Kirstine Beeley takes a fresh look at role-play and suggests some exciting new ideas to try in your setting...



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KIRSTINE BEELEY

Imagine the scene: a small child sits behind a desk taking details of another child's plans for a round-the-world adventure. The cosy corner with its telephone, booking forms and glossy brochures has been a staple in nurseries for decades. The sign above the entrance reads 'Welcome to the travel agents'.

This scenario is one I have witnessed numerous times this summer. It is usually developed to support a theme of summer, travel or holidays, and is often justified as a real life role-play scenario where children can book a holiday (speaking, listening and

mark making), offer customer service (speech and language) and even, in some cases, create their own brochures (creative development and problem-solving).

Stop! How many people do you know who actually book their holiday at a travel agents these days? And if they do venture offline, they would, in my humble opinion, be mad to do it with a small child in tow (it gets done while their precious little bundles are in our care!). So, how exactly does a travel agents reflect real life for our children?

Please don't give me the answer that "We

took the children on a visit to the local travel agents so they could see what it was like". What is real to our under-fives on a walk along the high street is not a room full of glossy brochures and glamorous assistants (or should that be the other way round?); they will remember the big red shiny bus that their mate's dad was driving, or the puppy that slobbered over their teacher. We need to take a step back and question whether the real life role-play experiences we are providing our children with are really real life for them or merely an echo of childhoods gone by.

Keep it relevant

Many of us, me included, have been guilty of developing a themed role-play area in our settings without fully acknowledging the real reasons for its provision. The themes which can be found in settings across the UK year after year tend to fall into two camps: those which we have provided to develop imagination and creative storytelling experiences (the fantasy role-play scenario), and those which reflect real life experiences and hence build confidence and understanding of the world (real life role-play scenarios). The problem is that many people haven't readjusted which category

their role-play area falls into based upon modern society and the lives of the children in their care.

So, what future for the travel agents? Well, the themes often used to justify its existence can be covered with other, more relevant real life role-play areas. Why not develop a beach, complete with buckets, spades, inflatables and rock pools; a beach shop with ice-creams and beach balls and fishing nets; or an airport with security, check-in and duty free (maybe even a plane)? All of these ideas are far more relevant to children.

With this in mind, how relevant to the young children in your care today are a café, a flower shop, a garden centre, a baby clinic, a corner shop grocery store or even, sadly, a post office? How about trying a McDonald's (they do actually serve healthy foods, you know, and can provide an ideal chance to encourage healthy choices), a pizza delivery outlet (excellent for outdoor role-play with bikes used to deliver), a Sainsbury's, Asda or pound shop?

I should add that I don't have a problem with a café, garden centre or even a travel agents as long as practitioners acknowledge that what they're actually developing is primarily a fantasy role-play scenario, not a real world experience.

A new approach

FIVE WAYS TO OFFER IRRESISTIBLE ROLE-PLAY IN YOUR SETTING...

- Review your reasons – are they outdated?
- Make role-play relevant – base themes on children's interests and experience.
- Build it together – involve children in the planning and development of role-play areas.
- Indoors and out – plan for imaginative role-play provision outdoors as well as indoors (see next issue's article).
- Let them lead the way – deconstruct your role-play occasionally to let children take the reins.

find out more

Kirstine Beeley is an independent trainer and consultant, with experience of teaching in early years, primary and SEN settings. Places on her EYFS science course 'Bugs, Balloons and Bananas', running from February 1st next year, are available now from Osiris Educational. Visit osiriseducational.co.uk/catalog/product/view/id/2583

Familiar faces

Our approach to creating imaginative role-play experiences is also not without its issues. For one, we tend to rely on trusted favourites such as castles, moonscapes, rainforests and the like. In this instance, if it works then great, carry on! But reflective practice should be encouraging you to think "Can I make the role-play area more exciting, engaging and relevant for the children?". The answer is probably yes!

Here is a golden opportunity to expand on what we know about our children. Can we develop imaginative role-play areas which truly embrace their interests? Areas which embrace children's popular fiction are exciting and those rooted in popular characters are engaging and inspiring. The rainforest can become the Gruffalo's wood, the spaceship can become Ben 10's base camp, and how about creating your own *Fifi and the Flowertots* garden outside, or the very hungry caterpillar's snack café? By embracing popular culture we can make our creative role-play areas even more magical and amazing. Just think what possibilities a blue police telephone box door could hold? Or a plain old wooden wardrobe door?

Do I need a theme?

Traditionally, settings have looked to provide role-play based around a theme, often closely related to a planned topic and frequently resulting in the same role-play areas being wheeled out year after year. In today's child-centred settings there is still a place for themed role-play, but there is also a place for deconstructed role-play where the children drive the theme themselves.

Deconstructed role-play literally means dismantling your existing themed role-play area and restocking it with an array of open-ended resources, including boxes of all shapes and sizes, cardboard tubes, hats and drapes, which children are then free to develop into whatever scenario they like, real or fantasy. We as practitioners can then observe their play and add enhancements to help them take it forward. You can even put large plain paper on the walls so children can draw and develop their own scenery backdrop to their play.

With the benefits of role-play to children's learning across all areas widely accepted, there seems to me to be a lot more we can be doing to make our planning for it relevant to the children in our care – and in doing so we can make their experiences more exciting, imaginative and creative.

A new role

DOWN ON THE FARM

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