

## Assessing and Scaffolding Make-Believe Play

Make-believe play is the fantasy world children create with others. It is highly social in intent. In these imaginary worlds children’s creativity soars, their language expands and their social skills develop. Research shows that highly developed play contributes significantly to children’s social skills, emerging mathematical abilities, mastery of language and self-regulation.

Teaching children how to play has often been limited to children with special needs. Yet we know that for most young children, make-believe play never reaches a high level of maturity. The disappearance of multiage groups, the increase in time children spend in adult-directed activities after school, and limited time for free play during preschool hours has ushered in dramatic changes to early childhood (Leong & Bodrova, 2012).

Early childhood programs that stake the claim of being “play based” can use assessment of children’s play to scaffold the learning.

<b>Five Stages in a Child’s Make-Believe Play</b>					
	<b>1. First Scripts</b>	<b>2. Roles in Action</b>	<b>3. Roles with Rules and Beginning Scenarios</b>	<b>4. Mature Roles, Planned Scenarios, and Symbolic Props</b>	<b>5. Dramatization, Multiple Themes, Multiple Roles, and Director’s Play</b>
<b>Plan</b>	Does not plan during play.	Does not plan during play.	Plans roles; actions are named prior to play.	Plans each scenario in advance.	Plans elaborate themes, scenarios, and complex roles. Spends more time planning than acting out the scenario.
<b>Roles</b>	Does not have roles.	Acts first and then decides on roles. No rules are revealed.	Has roles with rules that can be violated.	Has complex, multiple roles.	Can play more than one role at a time. Roles have social relationships.
<b>Props</b>	Plays with objects as objects.	Plays with objects as props. Actions with a prop result in a role.	Needs a prop for the role.	Chooses symbolic and pretend props.	Can pretend rather than actually have a prop. Does not need a prop to stay in the role. Objects can have roles.
<b>Extended time frame</b>	Explores objects, but not play scenarios.	Creates scenarios that last a few minutes.	Creates scenarios that last 10–15 minutes.	Creates scenarios that last 60 minutes or longer. With support, can create scenarios that last over several days.	Creates scenarios that last all day and over several days. Play can be interrupted and restarted.
<b>Language</b>	Uses little language.	Uses language to describe actions.	Uses language to describe roles and actions.	Uses language to describe roles and actions. Uses role speech.	Uses language to delineate the scenario, roles, and action. Book language is incorporated into role speech.
<b>Scenario</b>	Does not create a scenario. Can copy what the teacher does and says or will follow the teacher’s directions if script is simple and repetitive.	Creates a scenario that is stereotypical, with limited behaviors. Can incorporate modeled roles and actions into play, with support.	Plays familiar scripts fully. Accepts new script ideas.	Plays a series of coordinated scenarios that change in response to previous ones or the desires of players. Describes unfolding scenario, roles, and actions.	Plays a series of coordinated scenarios that change in response to previous ones or the desires of players. Uses themes from stories and literature.

# Teaching Strategies

**Scaffold Play Planning:** Elkonin (1978) identified play planning as one of the features of mature play. Planning consists of lengthy discussions of who is going to do what and how, followed by brief periods of acting out.

The teacher can start by asking children what they want to play or what they want to be, encouraging them to discuss the choice of roles with their peers.

Later the teacher can ask children about more specific details of future play scenarios, including props they might need or whether they need to assume a different role.

**Scaffolding Development, Maintaining Roles and Following Rules:** Elkonin (1978) points out that mature play focuses on social roles and relationships.

Teachers can development children's knowledge of roles and relationships by talking about behaviors, cause-and-effect relationships and sequence of events. For example, what are the steps ordering a pizza at a restaurant? What roles do customers play? What role does the chef play and so on.

Rules in make-believe play mimic real-life situations. Knowing how these scripts will play out (planning) helps children practice self-regulated behaviors. Teachers should model rules for scripts, allowing time for children to develop their own rules and roles with occasional adult support.

**Scaffold the Use of Imaginary Props:** Many young children play mostly with realistic toys and have limited experience with open-ended materials. This makes it difficult for them to develop a broad range of symbolic substitutions associated with mature play.

Teacher should introduce by modeling imaginary props—gradually expanding to different uses for the same prop. Over a period of months, teachers can introduce unstructured, multifunctional props while removing overly realistic ones.

**Scaffolding the Use of Language in Play:** As open-ended props functions change—so do their names. For example the paper plate is a steering wheel one day and a spaceship the next.

Teachers can introduce “role speech” in literature and storytelling—modeling the use of vocabulary, sentence structure and intonation that fits a specific character or role.

Teachers introduce new vocabulary into the play. One way to do this would be to take on a temporary role, playing along side the children. Field trips, interviews with knowledgeable people and literature help students expand vocabulary.

**Scaffold the Development of Play Scenarios that Develop Over Time:** Mature players have scenarios that evolve and change as they play. Play themes develop over several days and weeks.

Teachers help children extend the play by engaging them in discussion about what they know about roles people play in society. For example, what they know about a dentist, a police officer, a teacher. Teachers provide opportunities to investigate these role through literature, field trips and project work.

Learning is demonstrated when children are able to transfer the knowledge to the play scenarios. Teachers can support this learning by modeling (briefly) the role with pretend actions and speech.