
FEATURE

Prop boxes: Tools for empowering dramatic play

Early care and education teachers are familiar with interest centers and their importance in early childhood classrooms. The dramatic play center, in particular, offers children unique opportunities to try on roles, make choices, verbally and symbolically interact with other children, solve problems creatively, and develop responsibility in caring for the tools in their community of young learners.

Experienced teachers recognize the potential of the dramatic play center as a special tool for children to use in constructing knowledge—about how the world works and their place in it. For toddlers, the home and its equipment and tools invite exploration across domains. Pots, dishes, mops, cell phones, brooms, mirrors, credit cards, and baskets are familiar—children see these objects being used by respected

adults every day. They are also a bit mysterious—tools that must be mastered through sensory exploration and mimicry. (Has anyone ever used a broom and dustpan effortlessly or mopped a floor without a spill?)

With increasing experience children need and want to expand their tool mastery—managing more of the objects, equipment, and materials evident in the world. Prop boxes make offering new and diverse tools easy, smooth, and responsive to children’s changing interests and skill levels.

Keep a few rules in mind as you build dramatic play prop boxes.

- Match the developmental levels of the children with the play. Younger children need realistic and familiar props, while older children may be able to use abstract symbols—a used cell phone versus a unit block, for example. While there are no firm rules on the best number of children who can engage in the dramatic play script simultaneously, developmentally younger children tend to be more comfortable in smaller groups and older children appreciate the challenges of negotiating the roles and social challenges of a larger group.
- Try to build play experiences that offer multiple roles for

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multiple children. A flower shop, for example, might have a cashier, flower arranger, wrapper, and customers, allowing all interested children to try on each role. A police department, in contrast, will demand adult intervention as children tend to segregate into good guys and bad guys.

- Make sure the materials are interesting, engaging, safe, and in working order. If the box contains a clip board and pencil, for example, make sure there is paper clipped to the board and the pencil sharpened.
- Be attentive to overt and covert cultural and gender messages. Hair salons, fix-it shops, and medical offices should appeal to both boys and girls across cultures.
- Plan for storage. Most programs

store prop boxes in a central location so that all classrooms have access to the supplies. Collect identically sized cardboard or plastic bins that can stack securely. Label the boxes for simple identification and make a list of the items contained in the box. If you borrow a single prop from a box, remember to return it. If materials are used up or broken, find replacements immediately.

- If specialized vocabulary is related to the play (*inoculation, vaccination, and appendectomy* in medical center play, for example), place a list in the box as a reminder to introduce the words. Similarly, if you have a brainstorm of brilliant extending activities or related books, make a note that other teachers can appreciate.

Use the following ideas and lists to start or augment your dramatic play center.

Bakery

Table/counter space, cash register, cookie sheets, cooling racks, wire whisks, hand-crank beater, bowls, cookie cutters, spoons, measuring tools, rolling pins, oven mitts, hot pads, paper chef hats, flour sifter, aprons, boom with dustpan

Idea: Modify the center so that preschoolers can prepare snacks. Include plates, spreaders, whole wheat bread or crackers, peanut butter, and jelly.

Airline

Packed hand luggage, tickets, uniforms (recycled with drawn insignia) for pilots and attendants, life vests, travel brochures, instrument panel, maps, chairs, counter for TSA inspection, security wand (tube covered with foil), microphone

Garage sale

Price stickers, pencils, clothesline and clothespins or a rack and hangers, table for display, advertising signs, sale items (small appliances, plastic toys, books, art work, kitchen tools), cash box, play money, newspaper advertising circulars

Bank

Paper deposit slips, checks, pretend paper money, actual coins, counter space for tellers, coin sorter, small cardboard lock boxes (with treasures), clipboards and pens, printed forms, keyboards, waiting chairs, large identification sign, direction signs, calendar, rubber stamps

Idea: Add a drive-up feature with a drive-up window (large

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painted box) and plastic air tubes

Picnic

Blanket, utensils, lawn games (bean bags and target), shade umbrella, cardboard or plastic food, cooler, cups, straws, cutting board, basket/hamper, sunscreen container, hats, fishing poles, butterfly net, camera, large plastic ants and other insects (for older children only)

Repair shop

Repair manual, aprons, cash register, play money and credit cards, receipt book, pencil, tape measures, safety goggles, small appliances (cords removed), price tags, signs, tape, wire, tools (screwdriver, pliers, clamps), magnifiers, flashlight, rags, sandpaper, scissors

Idea: Modify as a toy repair shop with needle and thread and

fiberfill to repair stuffed animals; soap, water, and drying rack to clean doll clothes; and water, soap, and rags for an outdoor wheel-toy car wash

Fitness center

Upbeat music recording, balance beam, balls, yoga mats, directional signs, exercise charts, mirrors, timer, barbells (PVC pipe with milk jugs on each end), hollow blocks (stair-stepping), nutrition charts, hula hoops, water bottles, towels, fitness charts (for children to track success)

Post office

Blue shirts (draw USPS insignia on pocket), envelopes, paper, postcards, sticker stamps, ink pad and stamps, mailbags (brown grocery bags with handle stapled in place), play money, scale, card-

board mail boxes (street and house size), calculator, postal rate chart, wrapping supplies (paper, tape, string, boxes),

Paint store

Cash register, play money, color chips in cardboard box display, drop cloth, paint rollers and brushes, paint trays, paint stirrers, paint cans, latex gloves, rags, sponges, rags, "Wet Paint" signs, goggles, white shirt and pants, head scarves or hats, masking tape, spray bottles

Idea: Dilute tempera and provide a length of fabric so children can paint a mural. Or secure an appliance box, cut out windows and a door, and invite the house painters to decorate. ■

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