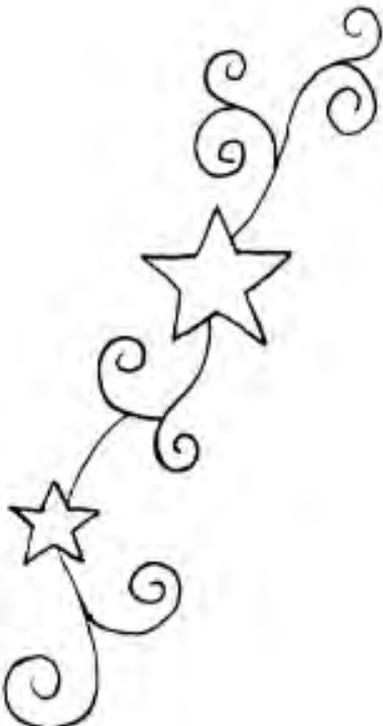


# Let the elves and fairies come out to play

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“About midnight the elves came in, dancing and skipping, hopped round the room, and then went to sit down to their work as usual. But when they saw the clothes lying for them, they laughed and chuckled, and seemed mightily delighted.

“Then they dressed themselves in the twinkling of an eye, and danced and capered and sprang about, as merry as could be, until at last they danced out the door, and away over the green.”



In this excerpt from the familiar Brothers Grimm story “The Elves and the Shoemaker” (Grimm 2008), we smile at the antics of two elves finding the clothes the shoemaker has made as thanks for their help in making shoes.

Stories containing elves and fairies have long delighted children—and adults. Walt Disney made several fairies famous by turning old stories into animated films: Cinderella’s fairy godmother, Snow White’s seven dwarfs, and Peter Pan’s Tinker Bell. This story-to-screen tradition has continued with more recent stories, such as J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, in which Harry helps free Dobby the House Elf from his cruel master.

## Fairyland: A cognitive milestone

Elves, fairies, and similar creatures belong to the traditions of folklore and fantasy. In children, beginning around age 3, the ability to engage in stories about imaginary little people marks a cognitive milestone that is critical for thinking and learning.

The ability to imagine allows us to understand events we don’t directly experience (a sister’s birthday party going on in another state, for example), including happenings in the past (history). Imagination enables us to plan (such as next week’s meeting), organize (tasks and supplies needed for a project, for example), and solve problems (such as how to repair the roof). Scientists use their imagination to make discoveries and generate theories. British biophysicist Rosalind Franklin, for example, contributed to genetics by envisioning DNA as a helix.

The ability to imagine is also important for social and emotional development. Imagination allows us to take another person’s perspective (Mary’s happiness about her new baby, for example) and to anticipate consequences of behavior (“If I work until midnight ....”).

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We see the development of imagination in preschool children when they express fear about the gorilla in the closet and the alligator under the bed. We see it as they eagerly await gifts from Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy, when they engage in pretend play, when they re-enact the battles of superheroes, and when they talk to imaginary friends. Children move easily in and out of fantasy and reality but are often unable to distinguish between the two until age 7 or 8.

Beyond developmental benefits for children, the best fantasy offers something more—the enduring pleasure of a good story. “Some fantasies laugh; some are full of nonsense; others are breathless with adventure and brave deeds,” says Gladys Hunt (2002). “If you listen, you will hear more than the obvious story line.”

## What are elves and fairies?

The word *fairy*, according to *Funk and Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* (Leach 1972), is “a term loosely used to denote a type of supernatural being, usually invisible, sometimes benevolent and helpful, sometimes evil and dangerous, sometimes just mischievous and whimsical, dwelling on the earth in close contact with man.”

The word *elf*, according to *Spirits, Fairies, Gnomes, and Goblins: An Encyclopedia of the Little People* (Rose 1996) originally meant all types of fairies in Anglo-Saxon but later denoted a special class. In England elves were described as little old men who can shift their shape at will.

The Funk and Wagnalls dictionary also notes that the term *fairy tale* has unfortunately been applied to many stories that contain no mention of fairies at all. “Most tales about fairies are actually traditions and relate real beliefs” (Leach 1972). Indeed, they are often folk tales or wisdom anecdotes that have been handed down for generations. In the early

his mischievous pranks and humorous mistakes.

Other authors merely borrow characteristics of traditional elves and fairies or invent their own to suit the purposes of their stories. Popular culture, including movies, music and illustrations, further elaborate the form and function of these magical creatures. The notion of Santa’s elves, for

*If you listen, you will hear more than the obvious story line.*

1800s, the Grimm brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm, collected stories in their native Germany and published them under the original title *Household Tales*, which later became *Grimms’ Fairy Tales* (Grimm 2008).

Elf and fairy characters appear in the folklore and literature of countries around the world and date back many centuries. One theory holds that fairies are the “personification of the old primitive spirits of nature,” while another theory says they arose out of beliefs about “the spirits of the dead” (Leach 1972).

Through history, authors have chosen commonly known fairies for characters in their stories. In the 1500s, for example, William Shakespeare immortalized three fairies in his play, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Oberon and Titania are the fairy king and queen, and Puck is the sprite or hobgoblin who moves the action along with

example, originated in European stories about Saint Nicholas and his helpers (*New World Encyclopedia* 2008). The modern American version of elves as toy makers in Santa’s workshop evolved through a number of stories and illustrations, including a cover for *The Saturday Evening Post* painted by Norman Rockwell in 1922.



A cursory look at fairy-related books in bookstores and libraries will reveal many titles that purport to define and classify folk and fantasy characters, perhaps in an attempt to make sense of an enormous and complex subject. *The Fantasy Encyclopedia* (Allen 2005), for example, groups elves and fairies in the category of “little people,” along with leprechauns, fairy godmothers, dwarfs, brownies, hobgoblins, and gremlins.

Distinctions remain elusive, however. What’s the difference between a sprite and a pixie, for example, or a dwarf and a gnome? It depends upon the author and the sources cited, and in many cases the definitions overlap or contradict.

Two encyclopedias (Allen 2005 and Rose 1996), for example, claim the gremlin originated in World War I as British pilots sought to explain their difficulties in operating the new-fangled flying machines. Two decades later, Roald Dahl, a member of the British Royal Air Force, wrote a novel (*The Gremlins*, 1943, now out of print) explaining the gremlins’ mischief as revenge for the destruction of their forest home (Allen 2005).

But the Funk and Wagnalls dictionary insists this explanation is an error. Its *gremlin* entry says gremlin-like characters have appeared as technicians “imparting knowledge to man since the beginning of the world.” Indeed, some were artisans “who provided the knights of the Middle Ages with wondrous steel blades, helmets, and weapons.”

Given such differences, we can approach a unit on elves and fairies with an appreciation of the embellished interpretations of folklore balanced by a respect for the scholarly study of folk traditions. As folklorist and storyteller Lise Lunge-Larsen has said in *The Hidden Folk* (2004), “the emotional truth of a story is more important than its literal truth.”

As teachers, we can engage children in stories of fantasy and folklore not only to enhance their imaginative skills but also to encourage their love of reading and literature.

Consider setting up learning center activities using the elves and fairies theme. Use these ideas to get you started.

## Literacy

Gather books from your school or home collection and the public library. Review books carefully before presenting them to children. Avoid books that portray fairies as female stereotypes who value beauty and fashion over brains and courage. Look for stories and pictures that show diversity in race and ethnicity.

Read stories aloud during circle time and lead children in a discussion, with questions like these:

- What kind of elf or fairy is in this story? Describe its size and

appearance.

- Where does it live?
- What does it do? Was its action in the story helpful or harmful?
- How does this elf or fairy compare to others we have read about?
- Have you ever seen an elf or fairy? Are elves and fairies real?

A sampling of children’s books:

- *The Blueberry Pie Elf*, by Jane Thayer, 2008. Elmer, a house elf, jumps into the middle of a blueberry pie freshly baked by the family. After gorging himself, he wants another but cannot tell the family because he’s invisible. Then presto! He finds a solution.
- *Diane Goode’s Book of Giants and Little People*, 1997. This collection of 17 stories and poems includes the classic “Shoemaker and the Elves” as well as “Anansi and the Plantains” (from Africa), “Lovesick Lopez” (California), and “Three Strong Women” (Japan).
- *Nell’s Elf*, by Jane Cowen-Fletcher, 2006. When a little girl finds herself bored on a rainy day, she draws an elf. Surprisingly, it comes to life.
- *The Hidden Folk*, by Lise Lunge-Larsen, 2004. The author has fleshed out nine stories told by her mother, aunt, and grandmother to make them “engaging to today’s children.” The stories feature flower fairies, gnomes, hill folk, elves, dwarfs, water horses, river sprites and selkies.

## Art

Talk with children about the pictures of elves and fairies in books as well as those you find on the



Internet. Emphasize that the pictures were drawn by artists using their imagination. That means that elves and fairies can be depicted in many variations; there is no right or wrong way.

Invite children to create an elfin figure out of clay or to draw one using crayons, paint, markers, or colored pencils. Encourage children to make the elf or fairy any

description of a fairy (Leach 1972): "He usually lives underground in a burrow or under a hill, or in a heap of stones. Usually he is clothed in green; sometimes his skin and hair are green."

In choosing props, consider using the artwork the children have created in the art activity. Note that their creations may

- with a feather or flower
- fabric caps with a yarn ball or bell on the end
- cone hats made from stiff paper and decorated with stars, ribbons, or glitter
- tunic made from a burlap rectangle about 36 inches long, with a hole cut in the middle to slip over the head
- rope or cord belt
- large green or brown T-shirts, dotted with one or two contrasting color patches (iron-on type or sewn)
- beard made from cotton or yarn
- beaded necklaces

*Allow plenty of time for children to engage in pretend play.*

way they like. As children work, invite them to talk about the colors and shapes they choose.

If children are interested, invite them to make fairy clothes and props listed below in dramatic play. School-age children may be willing to make these props for preschoolers, using instructions they find on the Internet or visions they create in their own heads.

## Dramatic play

After reading "The Elves and the Shoemaker," transform the dramatic play center into the shoemaker's shop. You'll need a table and chairs, an assortment of shoes, wood mallets, pounding bench, elf caps and jackets, and sewing supplies, for example. Encourage children to assume the roles of the different characters and act out the story.

Set up a dramatic play area outdoors using props that follow this

depict elves and fairies as children have seen them in books and movies (features such as pointed ears and gauzy wings, for example) or as children have invented them (purple hair or combat boots, for example).

Invite children to dress up either as elfin people or as humans who will interact with them. Allow plenty of time for children to engage in pretend play.

A sampling of props:

- feather boas
- leaf or flower hair garlands
- crowns
- wings made from paper or net
- skirts made of net or chiffon
- wands
- aprons
- bells or battery-operated lights on shoes
- pointed ears made from felt or paper
- triangular paper hats adorned

## Math and manipulatives

Print out the Norman Rockwell illustration, "Santa With Elves," from the Internet (Google the name of the painting and search images). This illustration, used on the cover of the Dec. 2, 1922, issue of *The Saturday Evening Post*, shows a tired Santa surrounded by eight tiny elves. Find another picture, in a children's book or on the Internet, of Santa with larger elves.

Place copies of the two pictures along with a ruler and a yardstick in the manipulatives center. Invite children to *estimate the height* of the elves. The Rockwell elves, for example, appear to be about 3 inches tall. Other pictures often depict elves at about half Santa's height, or 30-40 inches tall.

Ask children to demonstrate the height of each elf with a ruler and yardstick. Then *compare* the two heights: How many tiny elves standing one on top of the other would it take to *equal* the height of the larger elf? How does your height compare to the elves' heights?

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Glue the two pictures on cardstock, and then cut them into 6 to 12 puzzle pieces. Place the pieces in an envelope or basket and leave them in the manipulatives center for children to put together during free play.

## Blocks and construction

Talk with children about the kinds of structures in which elves and fairies might live. Might they sleep in a cave, an underground burrow, the hollow of a tree, or a shed in the schoolyard? How many elves or fairies are there in a group? How big are they and how much space will they need?

During outdoor play, set aside a dry, protected area where children can build a miniature house or shelter where elves or fairies might live. Encourage children to gather natural materials, such as rocks, sand, sticks, leaves, and acorns, to use for building. Or add these materials to the block center indoors. Provide matchboxes or spools for furniture and fabric or paper scraps as linens.

If children want to build a structure for larger elves, you may need to provide boards, bricks, and canvas or a sheet. Allow plenty of time for children to engage in play.

## Cooking

At snack time, set out slices of freshly baked bread, sugar-free blackberry jam, and lowfat milk. Explain that a long time ago, humans expressed their appreciation to elves and fairies by leaving out a little bread and a small container of milk after milking a cow. In addition, when picking berries in the woods, they would often

leave a few berries hanging on the vines for elves and fairies.

Encourage children to imagine they are elves and fairies and consider what they might eat. If they live in the woods, they might eat berries, nuts (such as pecans and walnuts), and honey made by wild bees. If they live in a person's house, they might eat what a family eats, except in tiny portions.

Invite children to make an elfin snack or lunch. Be creative. Use cookie cutters, such as star, heart, flower, and butterfly, to cut shapes in bread or to shape gelatin. Spread the bread with peanut butter, hummus (made from mashed chickpeas), or lowfat cream cheese and dot with tiny, cut-up pieces of dried cranberries or crushed nuts. For safety, make sure each fruit and nut piece is smaller than a grape to prevent choking.

Spread whole wheat tortillas with pimento cheese, mashed beans, or guacamole. Roll up each tortilla, and cut across each roll in 1-inch sections to make coin shapes. Insert a toothpick in each coin to hold the layers in place. Serve on a plate garnished with parsley or cilantro.

## Science

Talk with children about rainbows. Ask questions such as the following:

- Have you ever seen a rainbow? What kind of day was it? (Rainy)
  - Are rainbows magic or real?
  - Name the colors in the rainbow. (Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and violet, in that order)
- Read a children's science book, such as *Rainbow and You*, by Edwin C. Krupp (2000), or a fic-

tional story such as *A Rainbow of My Own*, by Don Freeman (1976). After reading, explain that a rainbow is colored light that appears when rays of the sun hit raindrops in the air.

Encourage children to make their own rainbows with these activities:

- Hold a glass prism to sunlight against a white background. The prism separates white light into the colors of a rainbow.
- Place a small mirror in a glass of water. Hold the glass so the sun shines on the mirror, and turn the glass until a rainbow is reflected against the wall.
- Go outdoors, and stand with your back to the sun. Spray a mist of water from a garden hose into the air, and watch for the rainbow to appear in the spray.

## Music

In folk tales, elves and fairies often play music and dance. People once believed that mushrooms growing in a ring followed the paths fairies made by dancing in a circle.

Look through your CD or tape collection for dance music. Invite children to wear props from the dramatic play activity and dance to music. Or arrange children in a circle, each with a colorful scarf, and have them wave the scarves as they dance to the music.

Sing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" from the *The Wizard of Oz*. Invite children to make up actions that go with each line or use those below.

Somewhere over the rainbow,  
way up high (spread hands in an arc overhead)

There's a land that I've heard of  
once in a lullaby (cup ear with hand)  
Somewhere over the rainbow,  
skies are blue (spread hands in an  
arc overhead)

And the dreams that you dare to  
dream (bend head to side and fold  
hands underneath)  
Really do come true.

Someday I'll wish upon a star  
(point to sky)

And wake up where the clouds  
are far behind me (hand to mouth  
in a yawn)

Where troubles melt like lemon  
drops (close hands into fists)

High above the chimney tops  
(raise fists into air and open)

That's where you'll find me (point  
to self).

Somewhere over the rainbow,  
blue birds fly (spread hands in an  
arc overhead)

Birds fly over the rainbow (link  
thumbs and wave hands up and  
down)

Why then, oh why can't I? (move  
head side to side)

If happy little blue birds fly  
beyond the rainbow (spread hands  
in an arc overhead)

Why then, oh why can't I? (move  
head side to side)



Introduce children to different  
styles of music using the fairy  
theme. Check your local public  
library for music like the following:

- "Fairies Lamentation and  
Dance," instrumental by the  
Chieftains, an Irish folk group,  
on their *Chieftains 7* album (7  
minutes). It opens in a sad,  
wistful style and transitions  
midway into an energetic jig.  
Listen for the Irish bagpipes  
and tin whistle (recorder).
- "The Wedding March and  
Dance of the Fairies," by Franz  
Liszt, composed for  
Shakespeare's *A Midsummer  
Night's Dream* (10 minutes). This  
march might have been per-  
formed between acts or during  
action on the stage. It has  
become a classic accompani-  
ment for brides making their  
wedding entrance.
- "The Dance of the Sugar Plum  
Fairies" from *The Nutcracker* bal-  
let, composed by Pyotr Ilyich  
Tchaikovsky (2 minutes). The  
dance is one of the best-known  
works that makes use of the  
celesta, a keyboard instrument  
that sounds like a xylophone,  
only softer.  
You can preview these and  
other selections online at [www.  
myspace.com/music/](http://www.myspace.com/music/).

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