

# Enhancing Children's Language Development in Preschool Classrooms

## Increasing The Use of Decontextualized Language

The dramatic play area is the best center in the classroom for children to practice newly acquired language skills as well as further develop children's abilities to talk about remote events. The key to creating a dramatic play area that continually appeals to a wide range of children is very simple; the center needs to receive a "make-over" on a regular basis, becoming a different "place" with new props. Most dramatic play areas center around a familiar housekeeping theme. With minimal support, most children are able to easily assume pretend roles, use appropriate dialogue, and successfully reenact life routines (i.e., the children know how to pretend to be the mother or the sister). However, if a dramatic play area always retains a housekeeping theme, the dialogues and play routines become fairly predictable and fewer children find it appealing.



### **Goal: Increase the use of decontextualized language**

- Children talk about objects/events beyond here and now
- Children experience extended conversations
- Children learn perspective-taking through basic social scripts for different individuals in various settings

**When:** In the dramatic area during free choice play

**How:** Teacher becomes the ultimate playmate and adopts a role during play

### **Strategies:**

- Create interesting settings in the drama area with corresponding props and clothing.
- Develop and use scripted dialogue to model appropriate language forms and social interaction for selected scenarios.
- Model stories that provide rich detail for children so they can learn more about typical experiences in this dramatic scenario.
- Introduce vocabulary words and concepts related to play theme.
- Make ties between immediate experience and past events.
- Facilitate dialogue among several children, possibly indirectly assigning pretend roles for children joining ongoing play.
- Praise and comment children's language use.



Teachers can retain the magic and appeal with a regular infusion of new props, costumes, and furniture arrangements. Children find the novelty inviting and their curiosity will lead them to visit the center. Although children should initially be able to guess what "place" the dramatic play area resembles by considering the props, signs, and arrangement, their limited world experience and knowledge may not be sufficient to know how to use the props or what dialogue people might use in this setting. A teacher's responsibility extends beyond designing a fun play area. By assuming a pretend role in this setting and modeling the appropriate language through active dialogue, a teacher indirectly facilitates the correct use of the props, expands children's knowledge about this real world place, models appropriate social dialogue, and introduces new vocabulary and language forms. Teachers need to become the nurse in the doctor's office, the customer in the beauty shop, the owner of the flower shop, the kindergartner in the classroom, or the pet's caretaker in the veterinarian's office.

*Wilcox, M.J., Murphy, K.M., Bacon, C.K., and Thomas, S. (2001). Improving language teaching practices in preschool classrooms. Infant Child Research Programs, Arizona State University, Tempe Arizona. <http://icrp.asu.edu>*