Children enjoy acting out and putting themselves in a story even better than hearing one. Michael Jones describes an exciting role-play project

Young children often take part in role-play: creating play sequences that are based on their own experiences, such as cooking, going to a cafe or shopping. As they get older, these scenes can become very sophisticated, and take on an imagined dimension, such as ‘going to the shops and meeting an alien’. We also encourage children to get involved in small-world play, usually with small wooden or plastic animals and figures. This type of play can help children to move on to creating imagined stories without objects: a skill that will be needed later for, among other things, creative writing in school.

Lisa Pepper and Sam Roy, early years practitioners leading the Every Child a Talker (ECaT) project in their setting, along with their colleagues at Chapel Street Children’s Centre and Nursery School in Luton, are constantly looking for imaginative ways to extend children’s involvement, storytelling, vocabulary development and social skills. Like other ECaT settings in Luton, supporting children learning English as an additional language is a high priority, and staff are committed to extending the language development of all children, including those at risk of language delay.

Lisa and Sam have been particularly keen to support children’s use of language in imaginative play. They were able to use ECaT funding to invest in large and small puppets, and resources for small-world play. The puppets included large creatures such as dragons and sharks, as well as child-size, human-like characters that children have given personalities and names.

‘Timmy’ is particularly popular, and children use him in their fantasy play: putting him to bed, reading him a story and occasionally saving him from being eaten by the shark! Some children made up play routines where they included themselves in a simple story with the large puppets. They would spontaneously tell themselves the story as they acted it out – for example, ‘I’m taking Timmy with me on holiday and we are going swimming.’

This was great fun, but Lisa and Sam were keen to encourage the children to create imaginary scenes and stories, in the hope that this would further increase the children’s storytelling skills and use of imaginative language. This led them to create a new twist to a familiar idea, and introduce an activity that shows infinite possibilities for expanding children’s play and imaginative language – as well as being relatively cheap and simple to make. Lisa and Sam explain how ‘Our World: Our Story’ came about.

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**SELF IN THE STORY**

There have been some very interesting and unexpected developments. Some children take the photos of themselves and their favourite characters and play with them in the sand, or incorporate them in their play with the train track. One child built a small house made from sticklebricks, and put a photograph of himself inside. ‘The children took the activity to another level, where they were developing stories about themselves as they played. For some of the younger, and particularly the older, children, this was a very sophisticated activity, and a great help for their language,’ says Sam.

As children could now fantasise about themselves as part of a play sequence with cartoon characters, it seemed a natural step to explore whether they could imagine themselves as part of their favourite stories. Sam and Lisa cite the example of Anousha. ‘Anousha’s favourite story was The Gruffalo, and she could retell the whole story more or less by heart. We drew pictures of the background and the main characters in the wood. As she told the story she replaced the word “mouse” with “Anousha” and her friend Liam used the pictures to act out the story. When we gave Anousha a photograph of herself, we were delighted to see that she took the mouse character away and replaced it with her photo. She then retold the whole story, where Anousha meets the Gruffalo and has adventures in the wood. As she told the story she replaced the word “mouse” with “Anousha” in exactly the right places. Such experiences are a real sense of achievement.’

Lisa and Sam have recorded the children’s stories, to share with other children, and to celebrate their achievements. ‘We photographed the children as they made up their stories, and wrote down exactly what they said. We weren’t sure whether to change the children’s words, so that the stories were more grammatically correct. However, in the end we decided to write down exactly what they said. “Ryan’s story was: “Noddy say hello to Postman Pat. Say hello Noddy and hold hands. Elephant say Noddy.” As he has grown up he finds it really amusing to look back on how he used to talk! We put the story in his profile so that we can see the progress in his language and vocabulary.

“We encourage some of the older children to give their story a title and to draw a picture of it. Some will automatically have a go at writing as well. Obviously we don’t want to turn the whole activity into “work”, but for a lot of children this is a natural extension of their story, and gives them a real sense of achievement.’

**SOCIAL SKILLS**

There are also important social dimensions to these activities. Staff at Chapel Street have been able to use the complexity of children’s ideas and language, and particularly their language, to help children build relationships with each other. A comment from Julia Miller, Chapel Street’s headteacher, should finish the story. She says, ‘This work has really sparked the children’s creativity. They have been amazed and inspired to hear them tell their fascinating and sometimes highly inspired imaginary stories. It made me realise that we need to help the children develop verbal storytelling skills as a precursor to writing as they grow older. After all, if they cannot imagine an exciting, real-life story, where Anousha meets the Gruffalo and has adventures in the wood, as she told the story she replaced the word “mouse” with “Anousha” in exactly the right places. Such experiences are a real sense of achievement.’

Michael Jones is an early years trainer and writer. From 2008 to July 2010 he worked as a consultant for Luton’s ECaT project. He is currently consultant for the ECaT projects in Bedford and Thurrock.

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