



Tristan walks in the park with his mother and climbs on the fallen tree trunks with her supporting hand, enjoying the physical challenge.

Tristan decides that one arrangement of trunks makes a pretend boat and as they sit in it together he offers her pretend apples from his hands.

PRACTICE IN PICTURES

Let's pretend

Tuning in to children's imaginative play will encourage language development, says *Anne O'Connor*

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Tristan and his mother have walked from their house to the park. They find a place to play among some fallen tree trunks. His imagination is stimulated by the space and Tristan spots something that reminds him of a dinosaur. Mum responds, recognising and tuning into what he is thinking. As he clambers up the stump with her help, he comments that 'it's too steep', although he clearly enjoys the effort and risk involved.

From there he spots an arrangement of fallen trees that reminds him of something else and he gets his mother to join him in his 'boat'. They sit together and sway as though they are 'chugging along' in the water.

Tristan leaves the boat, telling her he will be back soon. He runs a little distance saying 'Tristan get apples'. Mum calls him back and he returns as if holding something in his hand, saying over and over again, 'Tristan's got

apples'. As he sits back in the boat he tells Mum he's going to 'chop it up' and then offers her a 'little piece'.

GOOD PRACTICE

The outdoors is a great place for imaginative play. The natural environment is open-ended and the possibilities for imagining and creating pretend situations are endless.

As well as providing opportunities for physical exploration and active climbing, balancing and jumping, the fallen tree trunks stimulate Tristan to develop a narrative that both he and his mother can share. As Helen Huleatt writes in *I Made A Unicorn – Open-ended play with blocks and simple materials* (2008), 'Children's favourite climbing frames are trees, boulders, and logs which through imagination become mountains, horses, fishing boats, castles, fire engines...' Tristan and his mother can both fit inside the boat so that they too become part of

the symbolic play, and Tristan leads the action and decides the 'story'.

2 Using one object to represent another is an important feature of symbolic play. But there's more to it than that – Tristan knows that he is pretending.

Many experts feel that symbolic play is closely linked to the development of language and signifies an important stage in a child's cognitive development.

'The ability of children to communicate symbolic meanings, and know that those meanings are symbolic yet interact as if they were not, may be considered an evolved form of communication,' wrote Inge Bretherton in her book *Symbolic Play: The development of social understanding* (1984).

Tristan is familiar with boats, as are many young children even if they've never been in one. The way the fallen trees are lying on the ground triggered that familiarity in his brain and reminded him of a boat. He knows it isn't a boat but if he sits inside it and talks of it as if it is a boat, then it becomes one. And he communicates this very effectively to his mother.

She instantly gets what he means and climbs in with him. She knows it isn't a boat either, but is very happy to play along with the pretence and add to it with sound and movement, all of which not only delights Tristan, but also reinforces his sense of himself as an effective communicator. He is the chief 'actor' in this pretend play – but

he is the 'director' as well. He controls and leads the story and can take it off in any direction, as he does when he gets out of the boat to fetch apples.

3 The open space in the park gives Tristan space to run and he extends his pretend play beyond the boat and the fallen trees.

He tells his mother he will be back soon and runs off up the path, 'to get apples'. Mum is his secure base, and her relaxed presence enables him to experiment and take risks. She calls him back before he gets too far away and he returns, holding out his hand with an 'apple' in it. Symbolic play doesn't have to involve an object – Tristan is able to pretend he has an imaginary apple in his hand and to mime chopping it up and giving Mum a piece to eat.

4 Mum is a willing partner in Tristan's symbolic play. She is tuned in to him so can understand his emerging language and the things that interest him.

She can happily climb into the boat and take the play a step further by providing Tristan with sounds and action to mimic the sensations of riding in a boat. She turns it into a song, which further reinforces the experience.

As practitioners we need to build this same level of familiarity with children and their interests so that we can do the same. Tuning in to children



REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- *I Made A Unicorn – Open-ended play with blocks and simple materials* by Helen Huleatt, Community Playthings, 2008, www.communityplaythings.co.uk/resources/downloads/i-made-a-unicorn.pdf
- *Symbolic Play: The development of social understanding* by Inge Bretherton. Academic Press, 1984
- *Stages and Components of Presymbolic and Symbolic Play* by Maggie Watson PhD, University of Wisconsin, 2008, www.speechpathology.com/articles/article_detail.asp?article_id=346
- *Playing and Learning Outdoors – Making provision for high quality experiences in the outdoor environment* by Jan White. Routledge, 2008

and their developing use of language ensures that we are ready to respond and get involved with their symbolic play. Reinforcing with sound, music and action helps impress the experience in Tristan's brain as well as providing feel-good sensations.

5 Pretend play and language development are closely linked because they both depend on symbolism and one supports the other.

As children get older they often explicitly frame their pretend play with role designations and a 'script' – for example, 'I'm the mum and you're the dad and we are going shopping...'

Tristan isn't at this stage yet. He frames his symbolic play more implicitly with a simple statement – 'a boat, Mum' – and then a question, 'climbing in the boat?', to which Mum responds with a ready understanding.

Playing in the park has stimulated Tristan's language development as well as his imagination and physical skills. Pretend play facilitates language learning and pretend play makes good opportunities for language development. ■



LINKS TO THE EYFS

- **UC 1.1** Child Development
- **PR 2.3** Supporting Learning
- **EE 3.3** The Learning Environment
- **L&D 4.1** Play and exploration
- **L&D CREATIVE** Development