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  17. Throughout the article we use "parents and caregivers" and "caregivers" interchangeably. Where we use "caregivers" alone, we are using a broad definition that encompasses parents and other types of caregivers.
  18. For more information about the locale classifications, please visit the following resource: <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/Geographic/LocaleBoundaries#:~:text=A%20locale%20is%20a%20general,or%20proximity%20to%20populated%20areas>.
  19. The library locale classifications were pulled from the IMLS data catalog: <https://www.imls.gov/research-tools/data-collection>.

# Practice the Practices

## Kids Learn Big in Dramatic Play Areas

TERRY EHLE, TAMI FEUERSTEIN, AND SALLY TAYLOR

**A** moving child is a learning child. Playing is the best way to learn. And the number one factor in preparing children for success is loving interaction between them and their primary caregivers—the parents or “embedded” persons who are their first, favorite, and most important teachers.

Those research-based beliefs are the foundation of the Lester (Two Rivers, WI) Public Library’s (LPL) early literacy approach, and we build upon it by incorporating into all programs, including dramatic play, the American Library Association’s Every Child Ready to Read (ECRR) five early literacy practices: read, talk, play, write, and sing.

What children and families need are the opportunities to *practice* the practices. Dramatic play—or pretend play—is so much more than fun; it’s a learning experience that engages virtually every part of a child’s developing brain. Kids love to take on role-playing scenarios like parent and child, cashier and customer, or characters in a book.

This kind of play is an integral part of a child’s social, emotional, and cognitive development. It strengthens crucial skills like self-regulation, helping children inhibit their impulses, coordinate



with others, and make plans. Disagreements between children crop up naturally in dramatic play, offering the chance for conflict resolution—working through their differences and arranging a compromise. It provides opportunities to see functional print like words and numbers on envelopes, mailboxes, menus, and signs, giving them experience with the many ways we use text every day. And it increases reading comprehension; children often act out scenes from favorite stories, and that helps them gain deeper understanding of a story.

The city of Two Rivers has a population of 11,300. According to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 49.4 percent of students are economically disadvantaged.<sup>1</sup> While we’re located in a beautiful natural setting on the shore of Lake Michigan, options for play are not numerous, particularly during long, cold winters.

We identified a need for a safe (and weather-proof!) space for families to play. We set out to fill that need and create life-long library users, so we actualized an environment that families want to be in and return to frequently.



**Terry Ehle** is Youth Services Coordinator at the Lester Public Library in Two Rivers, WI. She holds a masters of library and information science from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and has been advocating for youth in her community for twenty-six years. **Tami Feuerstein** is Lester Public Library’s early literacy specialist and has been implementing research-based playful early childhood education for almost four decades. **Sally Taylor** (not pictured) is Lester Public Library’s Public Relations Assistant and has been making Terry and Tami sound good since 2016.



Dramatic play at LPL started small. In 2016, we erected a post office that consisted of a table, an old wooden shelf with compartments (formerly for tax forms), paper and envelopes (staff collected junk mail for months), and a mailbox made from a big box and blue paper. It was a hit!

From then on, we made the decision to incorporate dramatic play as an *intentional* component of youth programming. When we received a donation from an early childhood association, we purchased a kitchen set that debuted as a hot cocoa stand (such a set can be enough to create countless scenarios if you need to stay small!).

Nowadays, we create a whole environment that encompasses book displays, lots of props, wall art, giant trees, and dangling words, clouds, airplanes, tools, or giant fluffy ice cream cones that enhance a playful experience. We introduce three new scenarios each year.

A sampling of our centers:

- **LPL Air:** an airport with security gate, luggage scanner, ticket counter, a snack center. And a plane, of course. Featuring a cockpit with switches, knobs, gauges, and lights (it was built from spare parts donated by the city's public works department).
- The **Building Readers Construction Zone**, inspired by *Tap Tap Bang Bang* by Emma Garcia: dozens of big wrapped boxes for building, and a foreperson's trailer with hard hats, tool belts, coffee, clipboards, and blueprints.
- **Heartsville Post Office**, inspired by *The Day It Rained Hearts* by Felicia Bond: a writing center, package sorting, a community of paper houses sporting dollar-store mailboxes, and a pen-pal partnership with the senior center.



- **Camp ReadALot:** campsites with firepits containing real logs and stones, crocheted s'mores, and trails throughout the youth area delineated by painter's tape.
- **Ocean Research Center:** a lab submerged into a marine habitat, a cardboard submarine reading nook, and a sea turtle rescue center.
- **Sweets Bakery:** a plethora of crocheted sweet treats, including cookies, cupcakes, macaroons, fruit tarts, and more.
- A **Farmers Market** with pumpkins, tomatoes, carrots, zucchini, honey, and jams for sale.

## Dramatic Play in Progress

Where do we get our ideas? The internet. We're not convinced we've had a single original idea. Search for "airport dramatic play" to find all the inspiration needed.

How it comes together (for us). Tami and I are the 1.6 employees that make up the youth staff. I come up with the general vision for the new center, then Tami and I collaborate to sketch it out in sophisticated detail (*um, it's actually been a scratchy pencil drawing on scrap paper every single time*).

Continuous collaboration ensues as we think carefully about details that scaffold learning, or offer multiple ways of learning—like laminated LPL Air boarding passes that can also be utilized

## Dramatic Play Myths

- *A large budget is required.* You can make anything out of boxes and paper (including all that packing paper contained in book deliveries). Raid staff basements and garages. Crocheted items like food and animals hold up better than plastic toys! Folks offer to crochet items for us often! Find the crafters in your community and take full advantage of them. Our original 2017 donation for dramatic play was \$4,000, and it's still funding the center today! We use those funds to purchase items we use again and again like hard hats and serving trays. We have received subsequent donations with which we've purchased more furniture. Paint and paper come out of our program budget.
- *A huge staff is required.* Our youth room is not staffed. Volunteers help put everything up.

## Dramatic Play Pitfalls

- *It's messy—but not always.* We reset for fifteen minutes every morning, though some days we're too busy. To guide patrons, we post photos of where everything belongs.
- *Items get broken—always.* Don't use your best china. If you borrow items, tell the lender it will likely get damaged (we rarely borrow from the public). Your dramatic play mantra must be "let it go." Focus on the 98 percent who play nice.
- *It's noisy.* But your staff will grow to love that joyful noise as delighted patrons bestow accolades upon the library pretty much every day.
- *Children will not want to leave.* Provide timers to help families transition, both for cleanup and departure. Plus, you know that if they don't want to leave, it means they'll want to come back again and again; GOAL ACHIEVED!

Find pictures of our centers in action at [www.flickr.com/photos/lesterpubliclibrary](http://www.flickr.com/photos/lesterpubliclibrary).

for a wall-mounted letter-matching activity (families often tell us they discover new ways to play at every visit). Scenarios reflect experiences to build background knowledge: LPL Air passengers run boarding passes under a (nonfunctioning) scanner as they board; small suitcases are manipulated along a conveyor belt and through x-ray (pictures of scanned bags are posted to show examples); the body scanner contains the image of a skeleton; airport employees load suitcases onto a baggage cart (an old wagon) and load them into the cargo hold; air marshalls don vests and manipulate the safety wands; and tarmac and runway activities are depicted beyond the airport windows.

We literally go big with artwork because we can; we have wall space and a high ceiling that art can be attached to and hung from (and a lift to do it with). We blow up art with an old-school overhead projector and then paint and paint... and paint.

Manual labor is delegated to two *lucky* husbands who excel at everything from hanging big pieces of art to cockpit construction.

A question often asked by other youth staff: How do I get my director on board? We're fortunate; ours supports us 100 percent. We suggest you go all *Field of Dreams* on your director: *If you build it, they will come.* And not just patrons and visitors; monetary donations supporting a dramatic play center may come your way too, as they did for us.

Another word of advice: It helps to know your stuff; review research on the importance of play. Whenever the opportunity arises, it's valuable information to share with your director, caregivers, educators, community outreach organizations, and

service organizations (who may be looking for projects to support).

To maintain participation statistics, help desk staff are requested to count the number of people in the center once per shift. Counts are only taken during non-programming times—when folks are there simply to play on their own.

Participation in youth programming rose from 8,583 in 2017 to 15,522 in 2023. The number of programs offered has remained about the same. What has changed is participation in the dramatic play center.

A recent one-month snapshot: In February 2024 when LPL Air opened, staff counted 34 times throughout the month and recorded 445 participants.

Oh, the dramatic exploits we've overheard. The delighted facial expressions, gasps, and exclamations when children rush in and encounter a new scenario is a joy to witness. We have out-of-town visitors who make regular treks to see what we've created. Grandparents tell us their grandchildren prefer a trip to the library over all other activities. We had at least one family whose children's first real-life plane trip went smoothly after flying LPL Air. &

## Reference

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