

# It's fantastic!

Play with small, fantasy figurines is an ideal way to address language impoverishment and help to meet the aims of the 'Every Child a Talker' project, says *Michael Jones*

The Every Child a Talker project (ECaT) was introduced as a response to concern about children with 'language impoverishment', who have insufficient language skills to achieve well in school and beyond. Luton borough's approach to ECaT has been to emphasise the need for all young children to have well-developed language skills, as well as focusing on the needs of children at risk of language delay. There is also a shared belief that children who start school with well-developed vocabularies, or what I call 'word power', are very likely to achieve well. After all, children with an advanced vocabulary are likely to have had rich experiences that have provided them with knowledge and understanding of the world and a means to express their ideas. These often include taking part in appealing activities that generate high involvement with adults and other children.

While 'word power' is a vital element of children's language, they also need to develop their imaginations and express imaginative ideas. Activities that involve small-world play, with miniature wooden or plastic figures, are particularly important for helping children to create and talk about worlds that are usually beyond their normal day-to-day experience. Most settings will have collections of small-world play figures and these usually include farm animals, African jungle animals, dinosaurs and, possibly, sea creatures.

My own view is that it is important for children to know about more than just basic farm animals and jungle creatures. We need to extend children's word power, so that they know, for example, about donkeys as well as horses, and lizards as well as snakes.

Emma Pobjoy is the early language lead practitioner for the ECaT project at Pastures Way Children's Centre and Nursery School in Luton. She shares the view that we need to have very

high expectations for all children's language development. However, Emma has taken small-world play much further and she invited me to participate in an activity.

## FANTASY WORLD PLAY

Emma had been looking at the possibilities of extending children's language through what she describes as 'fantasy world play'. This involves children as young as three years old playing with fantastic creatures such as unicorns and dragons, knights and princesses and elves. 'If children can get excited about fantastical creatures such as dinosaurs and learn what they are called, then we should reasonably expect them to be just as enthusiastic about dragons.'

'Young children are already interested in characters such as Snow White and Beauty and the Beast, as well as cartoon characters such as Ben 10 and Pokemon. Ben 10 is a boy whose watch provides him with the power to summon up enormous aliens with super powers, so he can defeat monsters that are intent on causing destruction. This type of concept is very popular with four-year-olds, so playing with elves and wizards can be seen as a natural extension of this.'

Pastures Way has invested in resources that develop this highly imaginative play. These include figurines such as wizards, dragons, elves and knights from the Schleich collection. They are highly detailed, which gives the children plenty to talk about, and robust enough to endure rough handling. The centre has also bought castles and bridges to provide a setting for play, as well as including cloths and scarves and a builder's tray for backgrounds, with a 'mirror box' to incorporate in the play and to store the resources in.

The children particularly enjoy using a collection of small coloured glass beads that came from a pet shop and that were originally intended for the bottom of fish tanks!



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## ADULT ROLE

While it is important to have resources that stimulate the children, it is crucial to plan how the adults will be involved. This includes setting the activity up with the children, thinking about how they will interact together, and defining clear boundaries, so that everyone is aware of what is expected of them. An important consideration for planning is that at least one adult needs to be able to remain with the children throughout the activity: to develop children's play, co-operation and language and to ensure that the small items are well cared for. Emma and colleagues also think about where the activity will be sited, and how many children can be involved.



Fantastic, detailed creatures provoke highly imaginative play and talk

On the day I visited, Emma had decided to set up the 'fantasy world' in a small room that is normally used for group time and stories. She had a group of five children who were very willing to join in. The first activity involved taking the background materials and some of the figurines out of the mirror box and deciding how the world might look. Immediately, two boys became involved in getting the dragon and the knight to fight and kill each other. Naturally, I told them to stop. And, naturally, Emma stopped me: 'What else are a dragon and a knight supposed to do? Just watch the boys and see what happens. They have to go through this "banging and crashing" stage before they can start to talk about why their characters are fighting.'

And that's exactly what happened. After an intense battle, with the boys standing up and trying to leap around the room, they sat down and explained to each other why they were having a fight: 'The knight is going to rescue the princess from the dragon, and then kill it with his

gigantic sword. And then he's going to have his lunch.'

But it wasn't just a question of setting up a fantasy world and letting the children get on with it. Emma was clear that she needed to interact with the children and support their play. Three-year-old Jessica was clearly fascinated by a unicorn and wanted to ask Emma all about it: 'What's it called? What can it do? Can it fly? Is it real? The princess is going to ride on her unicorn to the shops, to get milk.'

Sean wanted to keep all of the figurines for himself, but Emma encouraged him to share and join in with the other children's play. Meanwhile, Ali wanted to set up a little world of his own in the corner of the mirror box, using the glass beads and a small wooden bridge: and Emma decided to leave him to his own devices.

After around 45 minutes, the play session gradually came to a natural conclusion. Emma and I let the children move to another activity, while we tidied up. This allowed the children to leave their world intact, and gave us a chance to discuss their



- Every Child a Talker (ECaT), <http://nationalstrategies.standards.dcsf.gov.uk/node/153355>
- Further information about Michael Jones at: [www.talk4meaning.co.uk](http://www.talk4meaning.co.uk)
- Schleich fantasy figurines are available from good retailers and on the Internet, including at [www.platform8.co.uk](http://www.platform8.co.uk)

responses, check the equipment and pack it away carefully, and make sure no small pieces were left lying around.

## EXTENSION LEARNING

The children were clearly fascinated and highly absorbed in their play: using their imaginations and imaginative language, developing their word power and learning about playing with other children. These are powerful experiences, but Emma uses fantasy-world play to extend children's learning further. She showed me a storybook that she had developed with four-year-old Shakia. It featured a shark and a princess and was made up of photographs of the figurines in a fantasy world that Shakia had created. These were accompanied by Shakia's drawings and her attempts at writing the story. The whole book was laminated, for other children to share. By involving Shakia in this rich play experience and preserving her ideas in a book, Emma had provided her with a powerful learning experience that could be shared with her family, as well as inspiring other children.

## VALUE OF BEING SPECIAL

Sets of figurines can be expensive and practitioners may be reluctant to leave them out for children to use as part of child-initiated play. But that is their strength: because they are very special, children and adults can use them as part of highly valued play activities. But do we need a large collection of figures for children to get maximum benefit? It is entirely possible to have one or two pieces and to involve children in collecting natural materials to make up the world that they want them to inhabit, such as sticks, stones and leaves, as well as playing outdoors.

Practitioners in other settings are experimenting with using laminated photos of superheroes and other fantasy characters. This can take the children's play on to another level, as they fantasise using pictures. With enriched word power, well-developed imaginations and the means to express themselves imaginatively, the children are likely to be able to move into the worlds of imaginative books and creative writing. ■

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