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“Let’s play tiger babies.”

“I want to be a polar bear baby.”

“You can’t because tiger babies would eat polar bear babies.”

“That’s not true! Polar bear babies eat tiger babies!”

“That’s not true!”

Listening to the two children, I didn’t say anything, but stepped closer because it was the sort of preschool argument that could escalate, which is always a risk when “truth” is at stake. And truth is always at stake when children are engaged in dramatic play.

By definition, dramatic play, like all fiction, is about the imagination, a place where truth is, at best, subjective. The children I observed were engaged in a game in which they were asserting something that was objectively not true: that they were animal babies. In such contexts, it seems absurd to be arguing over truth, and adults often respond that way when they feel compelled to intervene, yet games like this are crucial for children seeking to understand their world.

As far as we can tell, we’re the only species that regularly engages in counterfactual thinking, the phenomenon of imagining the world in ways contrary to or different from the way it is. We’re cursed with the ability to imagine an impossibly perfect world, which too often serves to make it even more difficult to make peace with the real one. On the other hand, counterfactual thinking is always the first step in changing the world from what it is to what it could be.

BUILDING CRUCIAL SKILLS THROUGH DRAMATIC PLAY

Children are learning many things as they engage in counterfactual play. It gives them the opportunity to work on understanding what goes on in other people’s minds. It is a safe place in which to engage in higher order thinking and processing things they’ve been exposed to but don’t fully understand. It lays the foundation for literacy. It’s a venue for practicing the social necessities of negotiation, compromise, and agreement.

It's easy to dismiss children's dramatic play as silly, as a waste of time even, especially when we hear them intensely bickering over "truth," but what they're doing is exercising their imagination and creativity. They are learning the skills that will make tomorrow.

Two boys were digging a hole in the sand pit. It was a large hole, wide and deep. I made a comment about digging to China, a destination my own playmates and I had aspired to reach for these many years ago.

"Teacher Tom, we're not digging to China."

"Oh, where are you digging?"

"We're not digging anywhere! This is a trap!"

"No, it's not a trap. It's a hole!"

The boys bickered for several minutes, finally agreeing that it was a "very deep hole-trap."

"We're going to dig it all the way to the molten core."

"We can't dig to the molten core! It's full of lava!"

"No, it's full of magma."

"Well, it'll be too hot. We'll get dead."

They resumed digging in silence for a time, before one of them said, "We'll stop digging when the ground gets hot. Then we'll know we're close to the magma."

"I know! We can dig around it!"

"And then we can go to China."

"I don't want to go to China. Let's go to California. That's where my grandma lives. We can have movie night!"

It didn't end there, and I left them debating the relative virtues of various imaginary destinations. Their self-created dramatic play curriculum was superficially composed of equal parts earth science, engineering, and geography, but the real molten core of their project was the imagination and the bickering.

THE VALUE OF BICKERING

As adults, we too often underestimate the importance of bickering and react to it as something to control or guide. We worry it will lead to yelling or, worse, violence. But I've found that when children are accustomed to being left to their own devices, they

most often use bickering like they do their shovels—as a tool. Bickering is a tool that allows them to create agreement. This isn't always the case, of course, but more often than not they come to recognize that they must dig down and around and around and straight and up until they find their way to a compromise that keeps their game going. Compromise is a skill that's in short supply in our world, and it can't happen without the bickering.

Teachers often ask what they can do to encourage children to engage in dramatic play. They're typically looking for answers that involve costumes or props or playhouses. Maybe they're after techniques that involve reading stories and having students act them out, or even having students create original plays to perform for their classmates.

There's nothing wrong with any of those things, but the best of dramatic play is child-directed. I've found that if young children are given time, space, and other children, and if the adults simply loiter with intent, someone will invariably make a suggestion, beginning with the most perfect word of invitation in the English language, "Let's...":

- "Let's pretend we're pirates!"
- "Let's build our castle here!"
- "Let's be baby tigers!"
- "Let's dig a hole to China!"

And then, if we stand back and keep quiet, they'll do what humans have always done: bring a collaborative world of truth and bickering into existence, one that makes tomorrow.