

A Magic Box

By Lenore Blank Kelner

I will never forget the evening I visited my friend and her family in her lovely home in Vienna, Virginia. Her two boys had just received via UPS an enormous gift from their grandparents. It came in a box almost as big as a refrigerator. Quite frankly, I have no recollection of the actual gift but I vividly remember watching the two boys who were five and seven years old tirelessly play with the huge box the gift came in.

The parents understood what children need and want, that is, an opportunity to imagine, play, and explore. They were not concerned that the gift, while expensive and wonderful, sat on the sidelines. Instead they saw the dramatic play possibilities of the box. They cut it open horizontally so that the boys could get in and out of it easily but could still close the lid over their heads and disappear into another place and time.

As a creative drama specialist, I was fascinated as I watched the boys, oblivious to anyone else in the room; transform the box ceaselessly into something else. They were racecar drivers speeding toward the finish line, submarine captains searching for enemy ships, animals that lived in a burrow under the ground, and “surprises” popping out of a birthday cake. They played for more than an hour seamlessly changing their roles and the settings of their adventures.

These children were having great fun but the “dramas” they created were also learning experiences. Through their random dramatic play, the boys were:

- Using creative and abstract thinking
- Problem-solving
- Negotiating and taking turns
- Cooperating
- Being leaders and followers
- Internalizing morals and values
- Synthesizing information and stories from previous experiences

In the early 1900’s a professor at Northwestern University, Winifred Ward, became fascinated with watching children’s dramatic play. From her and her fellow educators’ observations evolved the art form of creative drama.

Creative drama takes the random dramatic play children do on their own to another level. It adds form and structure to the play and as a result the learning is intentional and therefore deeper.

Creative drama is different from theatre in that there is no script and no audience. The children improvise the dialogue and alternate the roles they play. It is not meant for anyone else to see or appreciate but is a creative process that allows children to explore, learn, and discover. As Winifred Ward described it: “instead of memorizing set

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speeches and acting parts in the way the teacher directs, the children develop plays out of their own thoughts and imaginations and emotions.”

In a creative drama class, children act out original stories or ones from books. They create their own improvised dialogue. Since there is no script, each time they act out the story it is different. A trained teacher facilitates the process.

As children act out a story they:

- Recall and retell the story in the correct sequence. This is a key education goal that classroom teachers work on daily.
- Demonstrate their comprehension of the story. If they understand the story their drama will show that they got “the gist” of the story and the message of it as well. Again, key skills teachers work on with their students.
- Use the basic story elements of: characters, setting, conflict, obstacles, and solution.
- Gain oral language skills. Developing a rich vocabulary/ language acquisition is a key factor in the development of proficient literacy skills.
- Expand their concentration skills as they learn how to remain in character and be an attentive audience member.
- Analyze how they can improve their dramas thereby developing a critical eye.
- Develop empathy as they explore the emotions of characters like and unlike themselves.
- Gain a love of story and of literature. This is key in motivating students to become avid readers.

In a world of technology we often forget the simple power and importance of cultivating the imagination. Yet for many of our children creative drama can be the exciting magic box that opens the door to literacy, academic success, social and emotional balance and a deep sense of self esteem.

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