

# Observing children's development in the context of **symbolic play**

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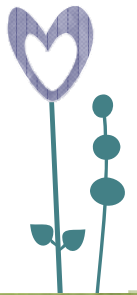
Université   
de Montréal

**Training Session, Full-Day Kindergarten  
for 4-Year-Olds**

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# Aims

- To elicit observations on children's development in order to determine which strategies should be given priority
- To recognize how symbolic play fosters children's development in various areas, particularly in language and mathematics



# Symbolic play and children's global development

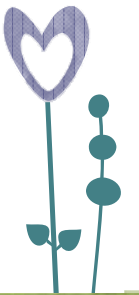
What do I observe when children engage in symbolic play in my classroom?



# What is symbolic play?

Symbolic play is different from other activities because it involves the creation of “let’s pretend” situations.

(Landry, Bouchard and Pagé, 2012: p. 16)



# Play from a historical and cultural perspective

Play, in its most complex form, has three main components:

1. An imaginary situation created by the child



2. Roles that are chosen, distributed and performed by several children



3. Rules determined according to the chosen roles

(Landry, Bouchard and Pagé, 2012,

p. 16)

# Want to play?

- What imaginary situation have you made up?
- What can you say about your character?
- In describing your character, have you asked yourself . . .



What it looks like?

what it says?

what it does?

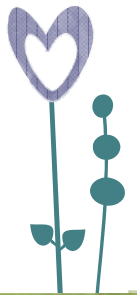
how it interacts with others?



# What is the purpose of observing children's symbolic play in kindergarten for 4-year-olds?

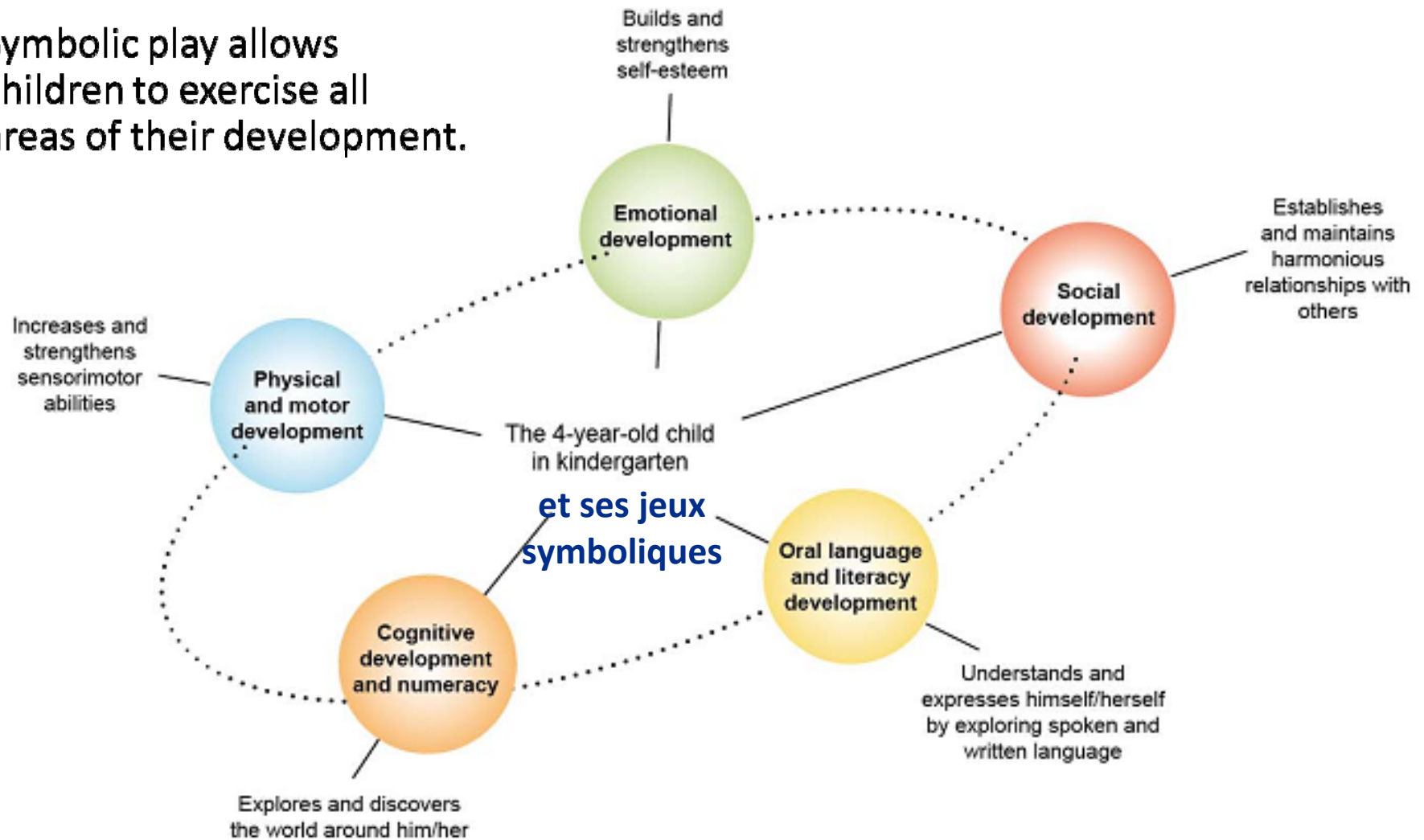
Observing a child's symbolic play provides:

- information about his or her motor, psychomotor, emotional, social, language and cognitive development
- opportunities to guide his or her symbolic play to increase its maturity level, thereby supporting his or her learning and development in an adapted manner



# Symbolic play and areas of child development

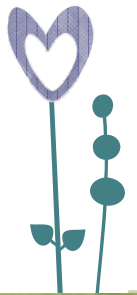
Symbolic play allows children to exercise all areas of their development.





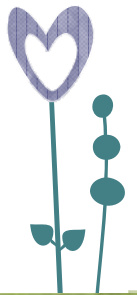
# Symbolic play as a development tool

- When children enter into dialogue to create an imaginary situation, their thinking becomes increasingly complex.
  - ✓ Working memory
  - ✓ Self-control
  - ✓ Mental flexibility
  - ✓ Exercising areas of global development in a meaningful context



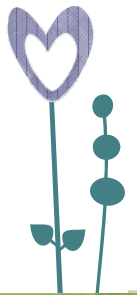
# Symbolic play and child development

From ages 5 to 6, children should be at the peak of their symbolic play abilities.

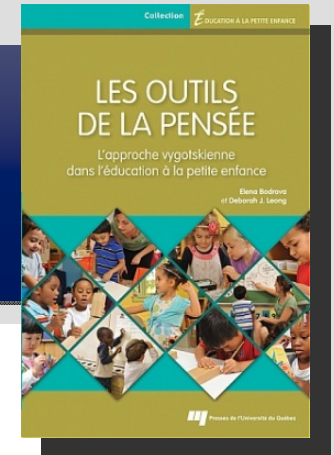


# Symbolic play and child development

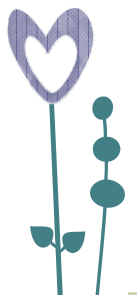
- Research cited by Karpov (2005), Leong (2009) and Johnson, Christie and Wardle (2005) compared children's abilities in play situations in 1950 and in 2000. It appears that children's play observed in 2000 is not only different from that of children observed in 1950, but that it has declined both in quantity and quality. (Landry, Bouchard and Pagé, 2012, p. 17)
- The decline in play means that children have lost the resulting benefits. (Elkind, 2008)



# Support for symbolic play based on the writings of Vygotsky



- Apply observation skills as well as specialized knowledge about play and children's global development
- Identify successes that children can achieve if they receive support from an adult or an expert peer
- Guide children's learning by providing adapted support in the form of the highest level of symbolic play (i.e. mature play) (Bodrova, 2008; Bodrova and Leong, 2007, 2011 cited in Landry, 2013)



**Some reference points for observing the development of symbolic play in kindergarten for 4-year-olds in order to provide better support**

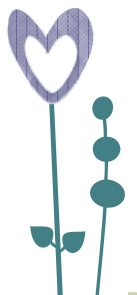


# Emergence of the first roles

## *Level 1*

### **The child . . .**

- imitates isolated actions from daily life
- does not consider the usual order of actions
- uses realistic objects
- chooses actions based on the available objects
- does not name the roles or establish rules

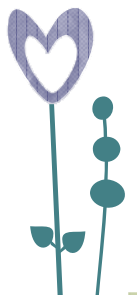
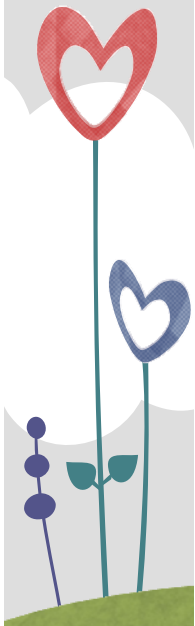


# The first sharing of roles, actions and rules

## *Level 2*

### The child . . .

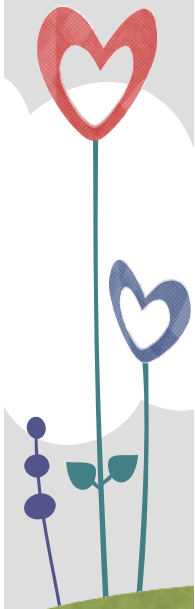
- combines a few actions in a simple and repetitive scenario
- stages actions from his or her daily life
- names his or her role and tells the other children about his or her actions
- does not use rules
- spends a short period of time engaging with a small number of peers (two or three)



# A shared play scenario using symbolic accessories *Level 3*

## The child . . .

- chooses and describes his or her role before beginning to play
- interacts with other characters
- Stages longer and more varied play scenarios
- is inspired by life experiences
- follows the rules associated with the play scenario
- is capable of metacommunication





# What is metacommunication?

(Andresen, 2005)

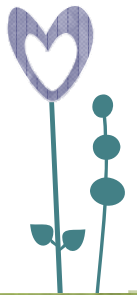
- Process that accompanies all communication, whereby one communicates information about the act of communicating at the same time as one communicates

## Explicit metacommunication

- The child leaves the context of the pretend play to give instructions about a character or make suggestions or comments about how a partner is acting.

## Implicit metacommunication

- The child stays in character while explaining his or her actions. This requires a high level of representation.



## Video clips: *Évolution du jeu symbolique dans le coin maison* (development of symbolic play in the home play area)

Three video clips illustrate how the symbolic play of preschoolers develops:

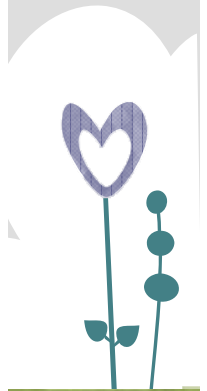
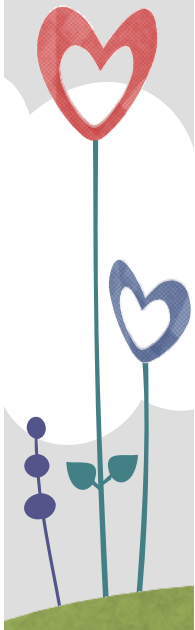
- 1) 18 to 24 months of age (video clip 039)
- 2) 3 years of age (video clip 225)
- 3) 4 years of age (video clip 226)

# Reflective and planned play that takes reality into account

## *Level 4*

### **The child . . .**

- chooses and describes his or her role before starting to play
- interacts with the other characters
- stages a variety of scenarios, including numerous actions that reflect reality
- uses his or her imagination to create increasingly complex scenarios
- plays easily with a greater number of peers over a considerable period of time
- uses implicit metacommunication



# Observation and support for mature play

## Key points

(Adapted from Cantin, 2012, p. 32 and from Leong and Bodrova, 2012, p. 30)

### Planning

Capacity of the child to think about play before experiencing it, to plan what will happen

### Roles

The actions, language, emotional expression of a given role, a specific character that the child plays

### Accessories

Real, symbolic or invented objects that the child uses in his or her play

### Extended temporal framework

Long sequence of continuous play (e.g. one hour), or a game continued over several play periods . . .

### Language

What the child says to develop his or her scenario, coordinate the actions of different players; use of the language associated with a role, a character

### Scenario

What the child stages, the interactions among characters, how the different scenes play out

# Development of mature play: A long process for children

(Bodrova and Leong, 2012, p. 217)

Immature play	Mature play
Repetition of the same actions	Creation and observance of a scenario
Realistic use of objects	Invention of missing objects
No roles or one basic role that consists solely of actions	Invention of roles based on specific rules and observance of these rules throughout the pretend play
No interaction and difficulty describing the pretend play in advance	Presence of extended dialogues before, during and after the pretend play
Difficulty distributing objects and roles	Resolution of conflict concerning objects and roles without adult intervention
Difficulty playing for longer than 10 minutes	Capacity and desire to develop a scenario over several days

# Suggestions for supporting symbolic play



**Video clip:**  
*Dans le coin maison*  
**(in the home play area)**



*Camera and editing: Martin Gendron and Sarah Landry (2014)*

# Schedule enough time

(Bodrova, 2008; Bodrova and Leong, 2012; Landry, Bouchard and Pagé, 2012)

- A child needs at least 40 to 60 minutes to engage in a pretend play scenario.
  - ✓ Children with little experience playing, however, will have trouble playing for that amount of time.
  - ✓ It is important to observe children's capacity for play and provide an environment adapted to their level.

*Play becomes mature if an educational context recognizes its value and reserves a sufficient amount of time for it.*

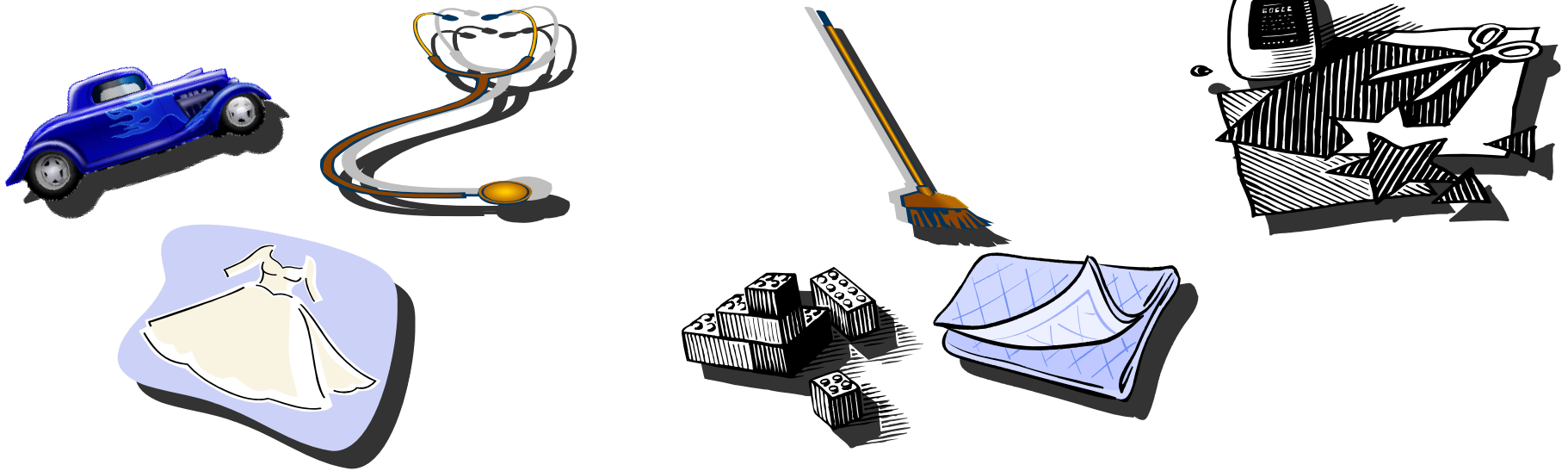


# Supporting symbolic play

## Choose appropriate objects and give children access to them

(Bodrova, 2008; Bodrova and Leong, 2012; Landry, Bouchard and Pagé, 2012)

- Offer a variety of objects, based on classroom themes and children's interests.
- Explain the functional or imaginary uses of objects, and ask children to come up with their own ideas.



**I found this object.  
Do you know what  
it is? What do you  
think we use it for?**





# Magical object



# Supporting symbolic play

## Enrich play scenarios

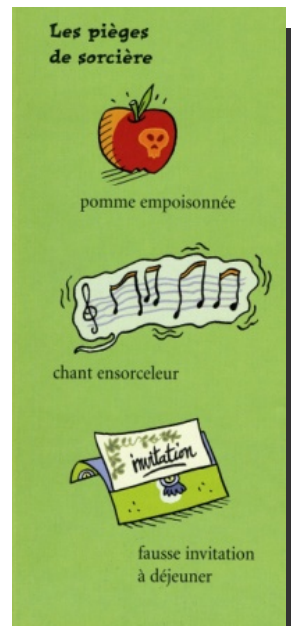
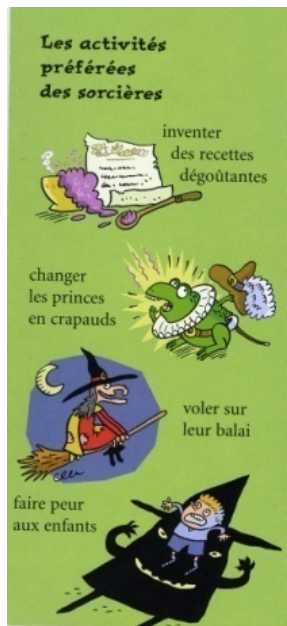
(Bodrova, 2008; Bodrova and Leong, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2012; Landry, Bouchard and Pagé, 2012; Karpov, 2005)

### Storybooks

- Use them to find themes and determine the roles and the relationships among them.

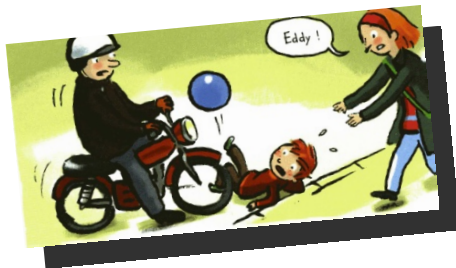
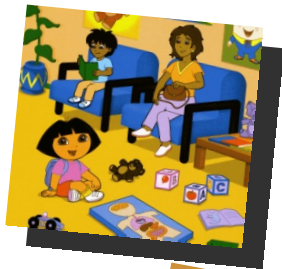


# Supporting symbolic play



- To develop the scenarios, you need to be able to name and explain the objects associated with the roles.

# Give children access to books to enrich the scenarios of symbolic play . . .



# Supporting planning

(Bodrova and Leong, 2011; Leong and Bodrova, 2009)

- Suggest themes based on observations about children's interests
- Encourage discussion about possible roles
- Discuss the interactions among the chosen roles  
*Draw their role, a required object, a possible action, etc.*



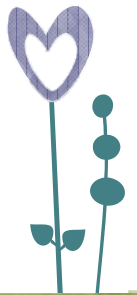
# Video clip: *La classe de Madame Marie-Claude* (Marie-Claude's class)



# Situation observed

In Marie-Claude's class, the children will explore various stages of symbolic play:

- Discuss the actions associated with various roles
- Use "transformed" materials
- Perform a play scenario chosen by the children



# Supporting the development of a play situation

(Bodrova and Leong, 2011; Leong and Bodrova, 2009)

The child doesn't choose a role.

The child takes objects and manipulates them, but doesn't do anything else. You can describe what the child is doing and link the description with a role.

Example: *Are you a mommy who is cooking a meal?*

The child isn't able to continue playing his or her role.

You can help the children better understand their actions.

Example: *Who are you? I am the doctor. What are you going to do? What can you say?*

Ask questions until the child comes up with a simple play scenario.

# Supporting the development of a play situation

(Bodrova and Leong, 2011; Leong and Bodrova, 2009)

The child doesn't speak to the other children.

You can help the child develop a play scenario.

Example: What are you playing? Who are you? (Ask each child.)  
What will happen next?

The child plays well, but sometimes seems to forget the scenario.

You can intervene and take on a role. Intervening temporarily can assist the children in interacting with each other.

*\*The more children play, the less involved you will need to be.*

# Symbolic play:

**An essential educational context for fostering learning and development among preschoolers**

- Symbolic play prepares children naturally for school and everyday life while also respecting their uniqueness.
- The play context gives children opportunities to interact with other children and, thus, reflect on the interactions, experiment with social behaviours, become competent, and become better adapted to their class.
- Play scenarios derived from children's preferences foster their desire to learn . . . and get them interested in school.

