

Home in

Good-quality props and practical domestic experiences can offer deep learning opportunities in the home corner, *Nicole Weinstein* discovers in the first of a series looking at aspects of role play

Role play that takes place in the home corner is often deeply personal, based on a child's experiences, their family and their routines. As they immerse themselves in this space, which becomes their world, they act out different experiences, perhaps taking on the role of a parent who is cooking the family meal, preparing the table or sorting the laundry.

'When it comes to role play,' explains early years consultant Penny Tassoni, 'my general feeling is that the devil is in the detail. What makes for excellent role play is the details of the props and the details that the children have experienced so they can use those props effectively.'

She argues that there is little value in placing an ironing board in a home corner if the children have never seen anyone iron, because they won't know what to do with it. However, it's the little details that are often forgotten: the tea towel to dry the dishes, the washing-up bowl, placemats, the salt and pepper.

Practitioners can also engage and encourage children to join in with some of the domestic tasks around the setting – cooking, sweeping and washing and drying up.



Domestic tasks can be fun

DOMESTIC CHORES

The amount of involvement that children have in domestic tasks varies by setting and household. Some settings involve and support children with routine tasks such as laundry, cleaning and cooking, and include the under-threes, not necessarily in their play but in doing it alongside an adult. And it is these settings that report how much the children enjoy being with an adult, which, in turn, affects the detail they put into the props in the home corner.

Ms Tassoni says, 'When a child has done something with a real prop; for example, been shown how to not just randomly sweep but do it in a more purposeful way, they will then replicate that in their play.'

'Similarly, if children have been to a garden centre and seen first-hand how to water the base of the plant to get to the roots, they will go on to use this technique in their role play. If they regularly take part in cooking activities at the setting and they wash up and dry up afterwards, the home corner should provide similar props: a wash basin, scourer and tea towel so the children can role-play the domestic chores that happen in the setting and feel satisfied in their play.'

TIPS FOR RESOURCING

- Offer detailed props and preferably real props made from natural materials that have the right weight and feel good for the children to handle.
- Look at what the children are playing with and equally what they are not playing with.
- Ask: do we have the details that allow children to play well?
- Provide real fruit and vegetables.
- Consider providing enamel cups and plates – they feel more like the real thing but don't break.
- Keep your home corner kitchen and every few weeks create a different room alongside. For example, create a bedroom with a bed, mattress, duvet cover and



Above: hanging up the laundry
Below: Wesco's Gourmet Maxi kitchen; its Textile Cooking Tea Party Kitchen Utensils; and TTS's Shopping Essentials



chest of drawers. These items, and the items inside them (coat hangers, clothes, shoes, etc) are very important for building up vocabulary, particularly for bilingual children.

THE ROLE OF THE PRACTITIONER

There is a strong link between language and role play. From the age of three, children begin to engage in deep and profound levels of role play – and the way they play is much more sustained. However, younger children or those with language delay might use the props in the home corner in a more exploratory way.

'Understanding the link between levels of language and the way children play is quite significant,' explains Ms Tassoni. 'Sometimes practitioners are disappointed if children are not using the props as expected – for example, if they are chucking everything out of the sink and pushing the items down a hole and not washing up. The child isn't doing anything wrong, but one must recognise that it isn't role play and the reasons for this is that at this point in their development, the language levels are not there.'

It is also important that the practitioner has a clear understanding of what are they going to contribute.

Ms Tassoni says, 'There are times and places for practitioners to be active participants in the role play and times when children cannot enter their magic world, particularly as they get older, in the presence of an adult. It is important to observe children's responses to you sensitively.'

RESOURCES

Make sure appliances are child-sized. Utensils can be adult-sized as they are often more durable and encourage greater motion and hand control.

Kitchen furniture

Indoor Kitchen – Toddler Size, £125, and Cottage Table, £27.95, both from www.cosydirect.com; Gourmet Maxi Multi-Function Combined Kitchen, £279.40, and Studio LAUNDRY Unit, £66, both from www.wesco-eshop.co.uk; Country Kitchen, £1,700 – which includes 4 Drawers, Sink, Cooker, Washing machine, Fridge, 2 Welsh dressers, 2 Cushions, 2 Shal-

low baskets, Deep basket, 12 Magnets – from www.communityplaythings.co.uk; Plain & Simple Wooden Kitchen Corner Unit, £85.95, from www.earlyyearsresources.co.uk; Kitchen Unit Collection, £199.80, from www.tts-group.co.uk; Country Play Kitchen, £109, and 5 Piece Solid Rubberwood Kitchen Set, £269, from www.reflectionsonlearning.co.uk; and Complete Role Play Domestic Area 2-3 yrs, £525, available from www.earlyexcellence.com.

Kitchen accessories

Wooden Role Play Kitchen, £27.95, at www.tts-group.co.uk/wooden-role-play-kitchen-accessory-set/1005330.html, and Wooden Home Corner Shopping Essentials, £39.95, at www.tts-group.co.uk/wooden-home-corner-shopping-essentials-set/1002536.html. Kitchen Set – colander, kettle, six kitchen tools, stew pots, saucepans and frying pan – £49.99 from www.reflectionsonlearning.co.uk; Textile Cooking Tea Party for 6 people, £46.60, from www.wesco-eshop.co.uk; Pound



Early Years Resources' Country Play Kitchen, and Reflections On Learning's Electronic Microwave and Mini Henry Vacuum Cleaner

Shop Homecorner Mega Set, £54.99, and Real Size Natural Tea Set, £26.99, both from www.cosydirect.com; and Housework Set, £7.20, from www.wesco-eshop.co.uk.

Appliances

Mini Henry Vacuum Cleaner, www.reflectionsonlearning.co.uk/mini-henry-vacuum.html (£22.99); Dyson Vacuum Cleaner, www.reflectionsonlearning.co.uk/upright-dyson.html (£24.99); and Electronic Microwave, www.reflectionsonlearning.co.uk/catalogsearch/result/?cat=0&q=Electric+microwave (£22.99) – all are true to life and attract children who prefer to use things that 'work'.

Other rooms

@ Home Communication Corner – a set of child-sized settees, armchair and coffee table – £280, and Doll's Bed, £24.99, from www.cosydirect.com. ■

CASE STUDY: BUSY BEARS DAY NURSERY

Tidying up, dusting, washing baby clothes and hanging them up to dry, baking and sweeping are just some of the daily activities that children as young as two years old take part in at Busy Bears Day Nursery in Durham.

Deputy manager Emma Park explains, 'All of these activities are child-led, with the exception of structured tidy-up time outdoors and lunchtime monitor duty, where the pre-schoolers set up the tables for lunch. We find that children are interested to help with traditional household chores so we factor this into our planning. For example, the children often want to help staff who are cleaning surfaces with anti-bacterial spray, so we make sure we have spray bottles filled with water and cloths so that they can join in.'

'If a parent tells us that their child had fun washing grandad's car at the weekend, we get out the buckets and sponges and the garden hose and we go into the car park

with a member of staff holding the lollipop sign and we wash the cars. We may then extend this to washing the bikes and scooters. This is a favourite.'

'Children in our two-year-old room recently spontaneously undressed the dolls and took the clothes over to the water area where they washed them in soap and bubbles. In the home corner, practitioners erected a clothes line and the children used their pincer grip to hang up the clothes to dry overnight and in the morning they redressed the dolls. This was totally child-led and practitioners were on hand to support the learning and extend it where appropriate.'

Each of the six rooms at the nursery has a home corner, which changes regularly to meet the children's interests. In the pre-school room, a washing machine and ironing board have recently been added, as well as counting and matching games. Practitioners number socks and the children take them out of the washing

machine and match them up, which is an activity that some of them do at home. Other children prefer to use their imaginations to play out familiar scenarios that take place at home.

Baking is another activity that even the youngest children, aged eight months, take part in. Ms Park says, 'The focus is not on the end product, but on the process itself. For example, if we are making egg sandwiches, each child peels the shell off the egg, mashes it with a fork, adds the mayonnaise and spreads it onto the bread. Younger children help mix the ingredients in the bowl and older ones each have a go at measuring it out.'

'But cleaning up is also part of the learning. Where appropriate, children from two years and up are encouraged to take the dishes over to the sinks, which are at the children's height, and wash them up and dry them with tea towels.'



In fact, tidying up equipment is part of the continuous provision at this nursery, with long- and short-handled brooms accessible indoors and out, dust pans and brushes stationed next to sand pits and messy play areas, and J-cloths and dusters dotted around.

Ms Park concludes, 'Parents and carers have commented about how impressed they are with their children's engagement in these activities. Many have added that they are much more involved in helping with routine tasks at home since these opportunities have been made available to them at nursery.'