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Creative Dramatics

Bringing Stories to Life

BY SUSAN KOSOFF AND
ANDREA DOANE



 SCHOLASTIC

CREAT



FIVE DRAMATICS



Bringing Stories to Life

BY SUSAN KOSOFF AND ANDREA DOANE

Open the door. The five-year-olds' classroom you see looks much like any other, except that a few tables have been pushed back to allow a bigger play space. The teacher glances down occasionally at her book, *Caps for Sale*, as she tells the story aloud. Most of the children, acting very much like the monkeys in the story, are perched on blocks, boxes, and chairs. They listen and watch as one child — the peddler — stands with hands on hips shaking her finger; then the others giggle and mirror her actions. Creative energy, rapt attention, and pure fun fill the room.

Are these children putting on a play? No, not in the usual sense. Instead, they are freely interpreting one of their favorite stories as part of one of their favorite activities — creative dramatics.

GOING BEYOND DRAMATIC PLAY

What is creative dramatics?

More structured than dramatic play and less prescribed than theater, creative dramatics asks children to use movement, mime, and dialogue to answer dramatic questions or solve dramatic problems. As the teacher, you pose the questions. You might ask about ways to move, such as "How would you move if your toes were made of rocks?" or about showing emotions: "Think about something that made you angry. How did you show you were angry?" Often, the questions will be suggested by the story that the group is dramatizing together. And of course, the answers children invent are always right!

How do you begin?

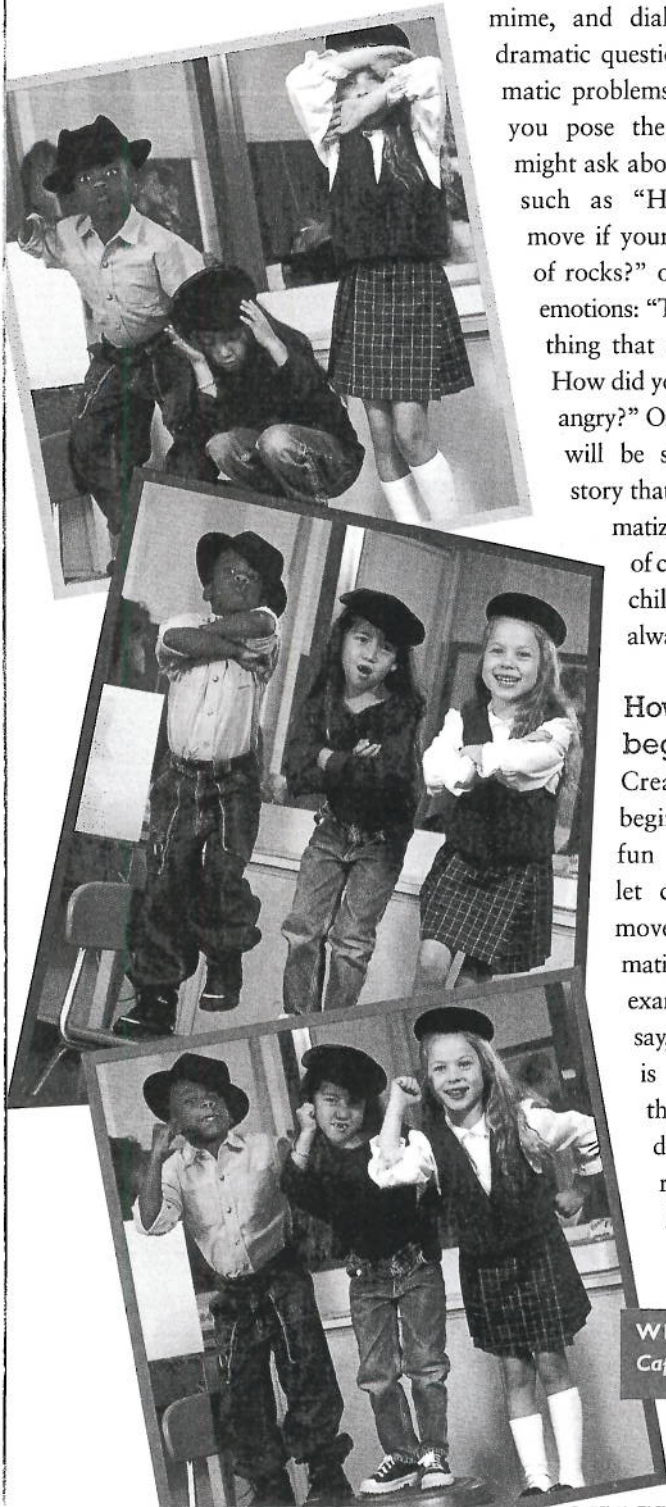
Creative dramatics begins with simple, fun exercises that let children practice movements in dramatic situations. For example, you might say, "The baby rabbit is creeping into the farmer's garden," or "The baby rabbit moves quickly away from the hunter." Children

may respond by crawling, jumping, or doing whatever they choose, each moving in his or her own unique way.

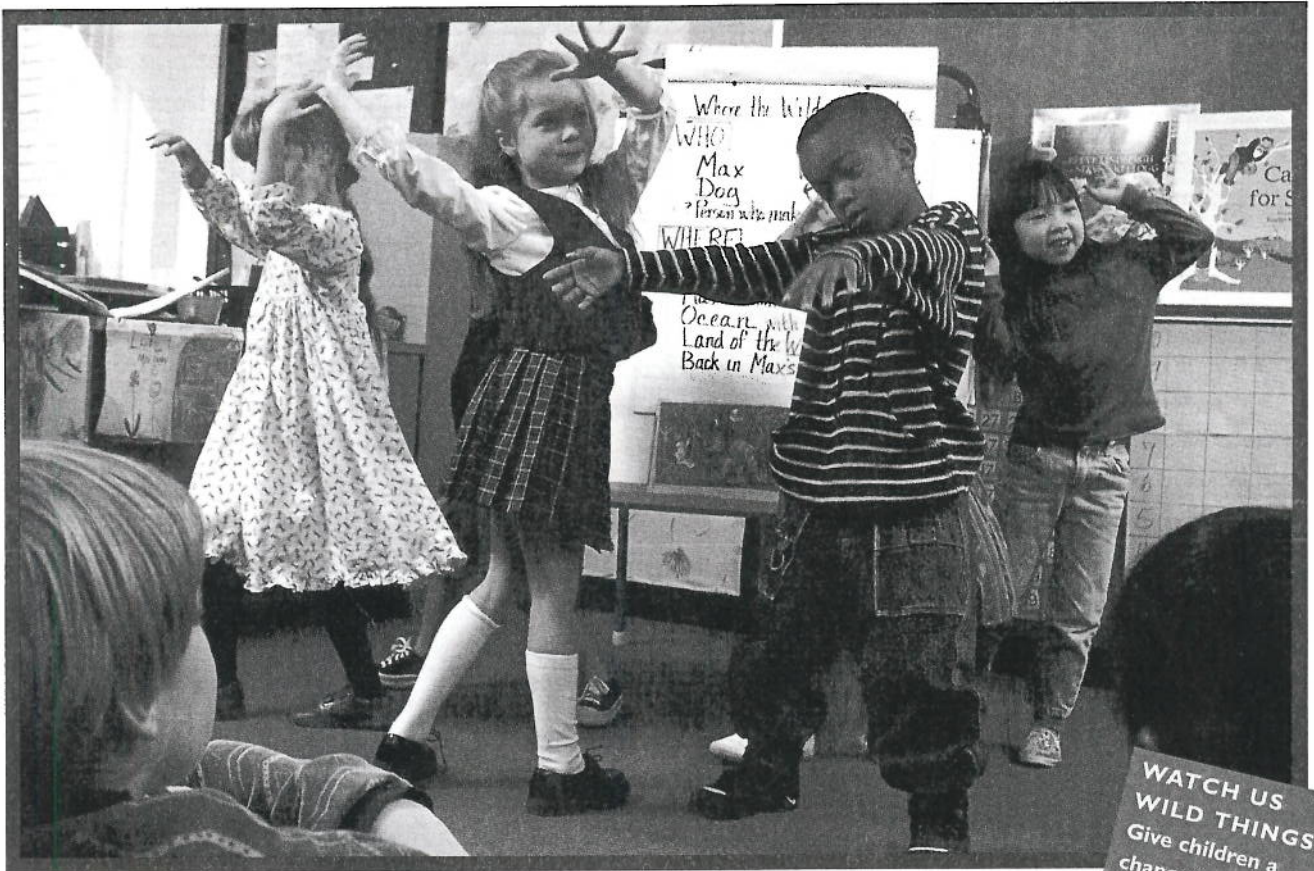
Once children have some experience with those activities, creative dramatics extends to acting out stories. Unlike in traditional theater, the dramatization isn't dictated by a script or a director's instructions. Instead, it evolves as children experiment with the components of a story — setting, character, and plot — and then put them all together to "show" as a group. Children don't rehearse in the usual sense, but they may repeat aspects of the story to try out different roles and approaches. Props, costumes, and sets are sometimes included, but they are much less important than the players. An audience, which is optional, is usually made up of other children in the group.

Why should you do creative dramatics with young children?

For so many reasons! Like music, visual arts, and dance, creative dramatics is an art form of its own, one that touches the whole child. It begins with moving and making believe, two things children naturally love to do. Then it allows you to help children build on these abilities by offering fun challenges in dramatic ways. Because many of the challenges come from acting out stories, creative dramatics helps children understand concepts of literature such as character and story structure in imaginative and physical ways. And, in the process of creative dramatics, children learn a wealth of new ways to express themselves and communicate their thoughts and feelings. In addition, because creative dramatics is a group art, children learn to work together and to



WE'RE THE MONKEYS! Repetitive actions in classic tales such as *Caps For Sale* provide great material for children's creative dramatics.



WATCH US WILD THINGS!
Give children a chance to interpret a story such as *Where the Wild Things Are* in their own way — while others watch.

solve problems collaboratively. In all these ways, creative dramatics provides experiences that foster children's creative, cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development.

Who should do creative dramatics?

Children begin to develop the roots of creative dramatics as soon as they start learning to move and play pretend. But it isn't until they are about five years old that they can fully use these skills to act out stories. For two- and three-year-olds, spontaneous, child-initiated, open-ended dramatic play is the most appropriate form of dramatic activity. Dramatic play remains important for all young children, but at four, many are also ready to experiment with creative-dramatics movement activities. And by five and six, creative dramatics can really take off. (See the Development Chart, p. 29, for ideas about appropriate dramatic activities for different ages.)

Creative dramatics is also a great activity for many four-, five-, and six-year-old chil-

dren with special needs. Because individual expression is key, children of all physical and cognitive abilities can enjoy and learn from creative dramatics together. Many children with conditions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) are attracted to creative dramatics because it is fast-paced and active, and they are usually successful at it because there is enough structure to help them keep focused.

What is your role?

In children's spontaneous dramatic play, your role is primarily supportive. In creative dramatics, you play a much more active part. In movement activities and story dramatizations, you pose the questions that children answer using their bodies, voices, and imaginations. You narrate stories as children act them out, orchestrating their actions into a unified whole. But though you guide the *activity*, you aren't directing the children's *actions*! Instead, you set the stage for each child to interpret a situation or story in his or her own way and then express it as part of a group.

Choosing Stories That Work

Make sure the stories you choose:

- have a clear story line with a beginning, middle, and end.
- are age-appropriate and developmentally appropriate.
- include a dramatic conflict.
- can be broken down into problem-solving tasks that allow for character development, movement, and mime and/or dialogue.
- have a limited number of scenes.
- allow for as many or as few parts as you need for your group.

- are favorites of yours and your children's.

Here are some stories that work:

- Who's in Rabbit's House?** by Verna Aardema (Dial Press)
- The Greentail Mouse** by Leo Lionni (Pantheon Books)
- Swimmy** by Leo Lionni (Scholastic)
- There's a Nightmare in My Closet** by Mercer Mayer (Dial Press)
- Anansi the Spider** by Gerald McDermott (Holt, Rinehart & Winston)

- The Stonecutter** by Gerald McDermott (Viking Press)
- The Funny Little Woman** by Arlene Mosel and Blair Lent (based on the tale by Lafcadio Hearn) (E.P. Dutton)
- Where the Wild Things Are** by Maurice Sendak (HarperCollins)
- Caps for Sale** by Esphyr Slobodkina (W.R. Scott)
- Two Bad Ants** by Chris VanAllsburg (Houghton Mifflin)

LET'S GET MOVING

Getting started

For children new to creative dramatics, the most important things are to move and to think and talk about moving. Your first creative-dramatics activity can be as simple as asking children to move around in a space such as your rug area or a circle taped on the floor. Then you ask questions to help them think about their movements. Were they moving high or low? In what directions did they move? How many parts of their bodies were on the floor supporting them? Encourage children to try moving at different levels, in different directions, and with different bases of support. They can also experiment with different styles, such as moving heavily or lightly, loudly or quietly. The purpose is to have fun and help children build a repertoire of movements they can draw upon.

Showing shapes

The following exercises are beginning creative-dramatic activities that let children use movement in dramatic situations. You can try them in small groups or with your whole class at once. Before you start, be sure to define for

children the space they can move in. Then, to do the activity, ask children to think about the qualities of a specific object and show its shape using their bodies. (This is more effective than asking children to "be" objects that they can't really be.) Slowly relate a dramatic situation, using lots of descriptive words, and encourage children to show how the object changes as you talk. For example, children might show the qualities of not only doing but actually being the laundry, as you relate the following situation: *A woman took her wet, crumpled clothes out of the washing machine. She dropped them into her basket and carried them outside to the line. She began hanging up the clothes, one piece at a time. She picked up a pair of jeans. It was very heavy. She threw the legs over the clothesline. Next, she picked up a shirt by the sleeves and hung it up. The warm sun slowly dried the clothes. They started to feel lighter....*

Here are other situations you can ask children to dramatize:

- Show the shape of a tall candle as it burns down and eventually becomes a pool of wax.
- Show the shape of ice cream in a cone as it begins to melt slowly, until it becomes a puddle of goo.
- Show the shape of a rubber band that is stretched and stretched, then released to fly across the room.
- Show the shape of a pretzel that is put in the oven to bake, and begins to puff up.

Moving with feeling

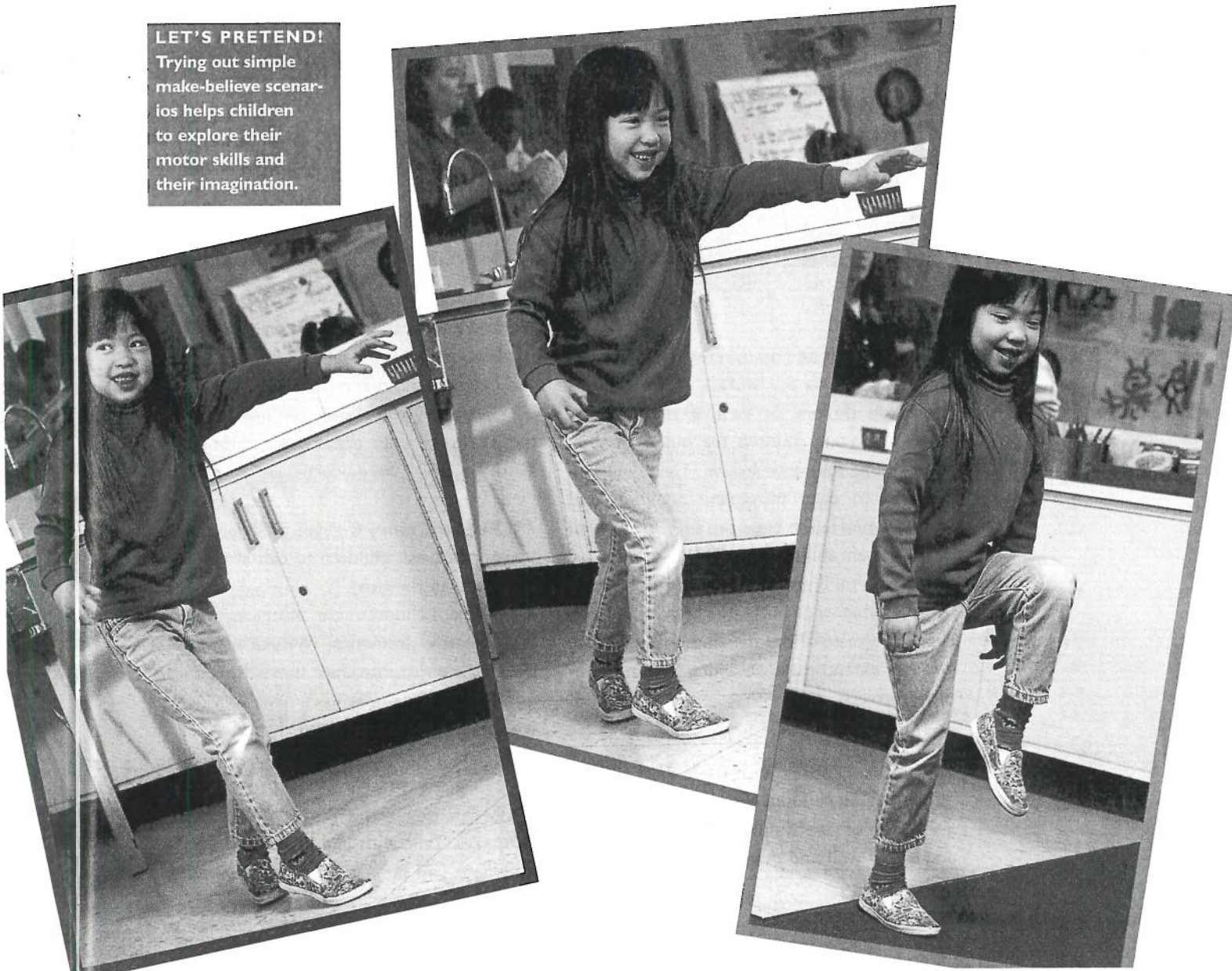
Once they have some experience with these kinds of activities, most four-, five-, and six-year-olds are ready to use their bodies and

voices to express feelings as well as situations. In the following activities, ask children to think about, and then show, how they would feel as well as how they would move.

- Pretend your feet are stuck to the ground. You are working to unstick yourself. Then, finally, you are free.
- Pretend you are walking through crunchy leaves on a dark night, then walking through snow on a sunny day.
- Pretend you are walking through your front door at home, and realize you lost something important such as your new mittens.
- Pretend you are rocking backwards on your chair until it tips over.

LET'S PRETEND!

Trying out simple make-believe scenarios helps children to explore their motor skills and their imagination.





STORY ACTION
 Children can begin to explore movements as you read their favorite stories.

A C T I N G O U T T H E S T O R Y

Curtain up!

The most exciting part of creative dramatics is actually acting out stories, so don't wait! After you do one or two of the exercises above, let your children try out a favorite story, using the steps below. Then you can continue to offer movement activities and story dramatization exercises to help children develop their abilities.

At first you'll probably want to go through the following steps fairly quickly to give your children a taste of dramatizing a story. Later, you can extend these activities into more in-depth projects.

1 Choose a story with the children. Start by having children choose one story from a selection of very simple stories that they like and know well and that you are prepared to

work with. Read it over a few times, and think about how it might work as the basis for a creative-dramatics activity.

TIP: The story you choose can make or break the success of your activity. See "Stories that Work," page 22, for guidelines and suggestions.

2 Read the story together. While you read or after, ask children to call attention to the events in the story.

TIP: When children are more experienced with creative dramatics, you can use this as the first step to introduce new stories to act out. Remember to discuss a new story as you would any story to help them understand it and relate it to their own lives.

3 Break down the story into dramatic parts. Talk with children about the sections that can be acted out. In *Swimmy*, for

(38) example, these sections would be Swimmy
(39) swimming alone and feeling lonely, exploring
(40) the seas, feeling happy as he joins up with the
(41) other fish, and bravely leading them as they
(42) scare off the big fish.

(43) TIP: Point out features in the plot and the
(44) illustrations that will help children think
(45) about ways to act out the story. Consider flag-
(46) ging your book to help everyone remember.
(47)
(48)

(49-51) **4 Decide on roles.** Ask children who they
want to be. Most stories for young chil-
dren involve one or two lead characters and
any number of supporters, such as the Wild
Things in *Where the Wild Things Are*, the
monkeys in *Caps for Sale*, or the other fish in
Swimmy. Decide ahead of time if you want to
demonstrate the main character at first to
give children the idea, or if children can vol-
unteer. Later, interested children can take
turns as the main character(s).

(52)
(53) TIP: Be flexible about parts to accommodate
(54) your group. There might be several peddlers
in *Caps for Sale*, for example, or Max might
(55) rule with his sister, the queen of all Wild
Things. If you are flexible with roles, you'll
56-57) encourage children's flexibility as well.
58-60)

5 Create an audience. A creative-
dramatics audience is usually composed
of children in the group whose role is to
watch actively and give feedback to the play-
ers. At times you may have no audience, or you
may divide your group and ask children to
alternate being players and audience members.
TIP: Audience member can be a good role for
children who are interested in creative drama-
tics but prefer to observe before joining in.

6 Set the stage. Decide together how
your classroom will serve as the setting
for the story. For example, to dramatize
There's a Nightmare in My Closet, you
might designate the library area as the spot
for the bed, and your rug area as the closet
where the nightmares gather. Involve chil-
dren in deciding whether you need simple
props and costumes, like a blanket and hat,
or larger set pieces, such as a chair to repre-
sent the closet door.

TIP: Gyms and other large, empty spaces can
overwhelm young children and make it diffi-
cult for them to focus. So your classroom,
with the tables pushed back, is usually the
best stage for creative dramatics.

Dramatizing the Story Elements

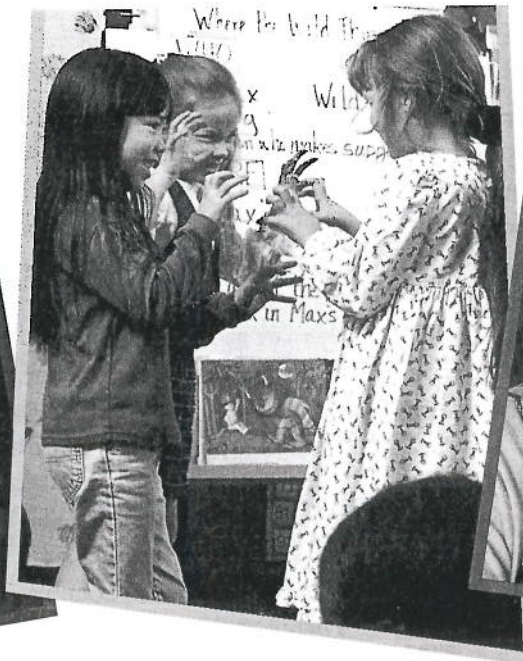
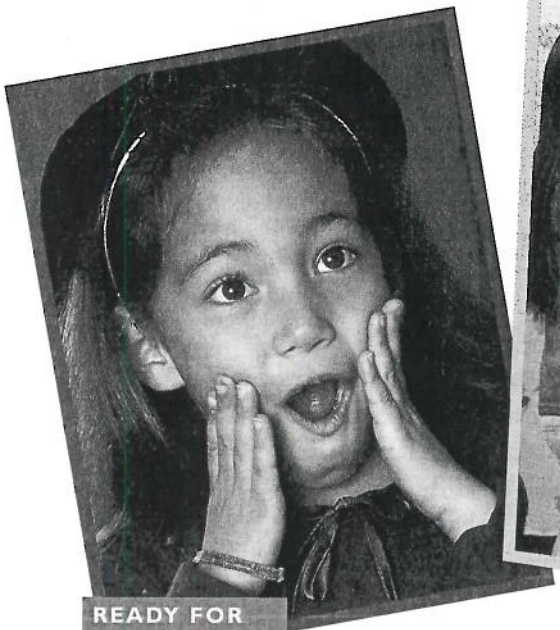
Here is one way you might help
children explore the elements of
Where the Wild Things Are by
Maurice Sendak.

• Examine the features of the set-
tings. For example, Max's bedroom
has very straight, angular furniture
and walls. The forest has many
features at medium and high lev-
els, and the ocean is made of fluid,
twisting curves. How can children
show the shapes of the objects in
these settings? How can they

change their shapes to show how
the scenes transform from bed-
room to forest to ocean?

• Experiment with character's
movements. Notice the Wild
Things' body parts. Ask children to
create their own kind of monster
by exaggerating a part of their
bodies to show, for example, huge
paws, long ears, or a bulging stom-
ach, as well as claws and huge eyes.
How would the exaggerated body
part affect movements?

• Explore the characters' reac-
tions. What makes the Wild
Things happy or sad or shy or
angry? How can the children
use their voices, as well as their
bodies, to show the Wild Things'
feelings? Suggest a few activities
for the Wild Things to do with
Max, such as marching or playing
hide-and-seek or leapfrog. Ask
children to dramatize these games
showing and emphasizing their
exaggerated body parts and par-
ticular feelings.



READY FOR ROLES
Acting out feelings and gestures helps bring story characters to life.

7 Ask dramatic questions. Go through the story part by part. Point out features in the illustrations and pose open-ended questions that help children problem-solve ways to dramatize the story. Encourage them to experiment with different solutions.

TIP: Have fun and be creative in finding ways to help children dramatize story elements. See “Dramatizing the Story Elements,” page 27, for examples.

8 Narrate and observe. Now help children bring the pieces back together so they can “show” the story. Tell it aloud, using the book as a reference. Pause when appropriate to allow children’s actions or dialogue to develop. Observe children’s movements and reactions and weave them into your narration. Your goal is to maintain the integrity of the story line, but at the same time to be flexible and validate children’s creativity and self-expression.

TIP: Agree on cues that will signal the beginning and end of your dramatization. For example, “Lights up” and “Lights down,” “Curtain up” and “Curtain down,” or “Actors ready” and “Actors rest.”

9 Reflect on the drama you created. Ask children, “What do you think?” Look to the audience, if you have one, for comments. What parts of the dramatization worked for them? How did they know how a character felt, for example? Encourage a positive discussion among the audience members and players.

TIP: As you discuss your efforts, don’t forget to applaud yourselves for a creative job well done!

10 Do it again! Ask children what, if anything, they would like to do differently. If they are interested, repeat the dramatization. Encourage them to take on a new role or try out a different approach to the same one.

TIP: Consider postponing this step for another day. Waiting offers children an opportunity to think about new approaches now that they are comfortable acting out the story line. And it gives you a chance to look for new props or scenery and to create a new movement activity that will help spark fresh ideas.

In fact, one story can be developed over a number of days or even weeks. Give children time to fully explore their creative process.

Creative dramatics invites children to tap into a rich source of self-expression, creativity, and creative thinking. And it can do the same for you! Just as you don’t need to be a painter or singer to help children express themselves through art or music, you don’t need to be an actor to provide rich dramatic experiences that you and your children can enjoy. Try creative dramatics in your classroom. Trust in your own creative powers. Don’t be afraid to start — and have fun!

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DRAMA AND DEVELOPMENT

Ones & Twos

- Are mastering basic movements such as running and jumping.
- Use realistic objects symbolically to imitate adult behavior.
- Concentrate more on props than on interacting with other children.
- Play out simple themes involving mother-baby relationships.
- Communicate more with gestures, motions, and sounds than with words.

You can help by:

- Offering large, soft spaces to safely practice moving.
- Providing familiar, realistic props such as dolls, toy telephones, and household items.
- Encouraging and building on children's spontaneous use of objects.
- Modeling ways to use objects symbolically.

Fives & Sixes

- Use movements to represent pretend objects or situations, such as knocking on a make-believe door.
- Enjoy creating dramas with fantasy themes and acting out stories from books.
- Discuss their dramas with one another, planning the *who, what, where, when, and how*.
- May extend their play over a period of days.
- Like to make their own props and costumes to enhance their dramas.

You can help by:

- Offering lots of space and time for children to move their bodies.
- Continuing to encourage children's own dramatic play.
- Allowing children to discuss their play on their own, stepping in to help only when needed.
- Reading stories often and encouraging children to reenact them using dramatic play, felt boards, and organized dramatic activities.
- Providing many open-ended props and materials that children can use in their own way.

Moving and making believe are the roots of creative dramatics. Here are ways to help children develop these skills:

Threes & Fours

- Have improved coordination and control over their movements.
- Adopt roles of other family members and familiar people (threes) and active characters such as police officers (fours).
- Use language, different voices, and costumes to portray roles.
- Interact in pairs or small groups and continue their play for extended periods.
- Use abstract objects as props, such as a large block for a car.

You can help by:

- Providing equipment that challenges motor development, such as balls, tricycles, and climbing structures.
- Organizing movement activities such as obstacle courses and non-competitive circle games.
- Creating a dramatic-play area rich in materials and costumes to encourage children's spontaneous play.
- Allowing enough time (at least 45 minutes) for satisfying drama to develop.
- Observing children and asking questions or offering props to help extend their play.