CHAPTER FOUR

DO YOU KNOW HOW TO PLAY?
A “BEGINNER’S GUIDE” TO THE VOCABULARIES OF DRAMATIC PLAY

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My childhood was characterised by the presence of play. It was a childhood to be treasured. Across weekends, holidays, and even as I wandered to and from school, unescorted by an adult, I played. This play was almost always imaginative, mostly collaborative and always free. It was also highly dramatic, for as we played, my sister, friends and I, we created roles, established fictional contexts and spontaneously developed plots. Space and place were critical too, with materials drawn from all over the house and garden being brought into the action and used to help us create and sustain the shared illusion that our co-created, dramatic worlds were real (Dunn 2002).

Projected play (Slade 1995) was important too, allowing us to develop complex play episodes involving “Barbie”, “Ken” and “Cindy” dolls who drove around in shoe boxes (or indeed the shoes themselves) to attend lavish parties or go on dates. Long before the commercialisation of play had given rise to bright pink, plastic Barbie caravans, horse trailers and indeed whole apartments, my friends and I were using our imaginations to create the props we needed to enrich and extend our dramatic worlds.

Little adult involvement or support was offered or sought, for we were independent players who had everything we needed to keep our play going. We had co-players who knew how to play, we had permission from parents who valued play, and we had that most important commodity of all — time. Together we used that time to develop, without our awareness, the vocabularies of play. It is not surprising then, that American researcher Howard Chudacoff (2007) has described the mid-twentieth century as the golden age of children’s unstructured play.

Fast-forward to the early 21st century and children’s lives have changed. Today we live in a world where, more than ever, it seems that only those forms of activity deemed to be “productive” are valued. The emphasis is squarely on outcomes that are permanent, measurable and comparable. The creative and imaginative modes of knowing, whose outcomes are less concrete, less visible, are subordinated to those modes which produce. In education contexts, and somewhat alarmingly, even in before-school settings, politicians, policy makers, educators and even parents, have conspired together to create a culture of performativity where, as Keddie (2013, 751) notes, learning is “reduced to a form and process that is auditable—to be efficiently measured, evaluated and governed”. Within this culture, academic expectations have been ramped up in the mistaken belief that structured activities and formal learning at an ever-earlier age will lead to superior educational outcomes.

In addition, many children live in homes where time has become a precious commodity, where adults are struggling to meet the fast-paced demands of modern life. In these homes, parents, including those who are spending ever-greater amounts of their precious time engaged in online worlds, are simply not able to provide the long hours of uninterrupted time children require to create and grow dramatic worlds.

Given this situation, Gray (2013, 6) has described shifts in play in the US as a “half century of decline”, while Bodrova (2008) has summarised the causes of play’s decline to include: the current emphasis on adult-directed learning that focuses on instrumental academic outcomes; an increase in adult-directed forms of children’s learning and recreation; the proliferation of toys and games that limit children’s imagination; concerns about safety that limit where and how children are allowed to play; and the decrease in the adult mediation of play. While each of these is clearly important, the final cause offered by Bodrova, relating to adult mediation in play, is the subject of this chapter. Here it will be argued that adults who value and are interested in play, can make a difference, including through direct participation as an active co-player.

Of course, caution must be exercised here, for adults have been very quick to seize upon the invitation to engage in play in order to redirect or channel it towards very specific purposes. Usually didactic and narrow in range, these purposes, whilst often created with the best of educational intentions, can nevertheless be death for play. In
these circumstances, play might be used to teach a particular concept (taller/shorter) or to develop a particular skill (measuring), or even to introduce a specific letter/sound relationship, with the result being that the specific intention takes over so that the child’s experience shifts from one that is play to one that is not. However, freedom is a crucial and defining aspect of play, for, as Csikszentmihaly (1981) has noted, the joy of play springs from the player’s knowledge that the goals and rules of their actions are freely chosen. Of course, this does not mean that play is ruleless, for as Vygotsky (1976, 252) reminds us, there can be no pretend play without rules claiming: “to imagine that a child can behave in an imaginary situation without rules, that is, as he behaves in a real situation, is simply impossible”. Indeed, Bolton (1983, 52) asserts that one of the paradoxes of play is that it is “submission to the rules that liberates the participant into the freedom of spontaneous behaviour”.

Play can, therefore, never have a single, pre-determined focus. It does nevertheless have real value for children’s learning and development for it provides opportunities for children to: apply ideas and concepts developed through other experiences; to explore and adapt these ideas and experiences; to combine ideas in new ways; and to reinforce conceptual understanding. It can also build creativity, imagination, oral language, social-emotional competence and even literacy—but it cannot be manipulated to a narrow focus lest it lose its very essence.

The threat posed to children’s play by a narrow, specific and didactic focus is one reason why there is so much opposition within the play and early childhood literature to adult involvement. However, for all the reasons outlined above, there are a growing number of children who need play support from an adult who can introduce new ideas and play contexts, provide them with the space, time, and permission needed for play, and most importantly, to act as co-player when required. The adults who engage with them in home, educational and community contexts, people like teachers, parents, grandparents and other carers, also need to understand play, and most importantly need to know how and when to support it. In addition, they need the confidence (and self-control) to participate as an equal in play—someone who understands that children are more imaginative and flexible in their thinking and also appreciates that there are no right or wrong answers in play.

In this chapter, I wish to particularly focus on the vocabularies that are useful for adults who wish to become co-players in dramatic play, for as Bolton (1998, 134) argues, this form of play requires far more than simply pretence. He suggests that it also requires the skills of composing and constructing, and cites Hourd’s view that, in dramatic play, children are also planning, directing, oral scriptmaking and spectating (his italics).

Given this complexity, several distinct vocabularies that work together are useful for adults to master. The limitations of this chapter mean not all of these can be covered here, and those included cannot be addressed in depth. Nevertheless, they are offered as a “beginner’s guide” and include the vocabularies of role and tension, metacommunicating and spontaneous playwriting.

To support this discussion, I draw upon several play transcripts, including ones recorded across my many years as a play researcher, together with another from a published external source (Tarman & Tarman 2011, 333). Amongst these will be an example of a play episode where I participated as a co-player, for it was as a co-player that I developed unique insights into the vocabularies of play—many of which I had not previously been consciously aware of.

Role and tension

By its very name, dramatic play belongs within the symbolic order of drama, yet few in the play field acknowledge this connection, and even fewer have used the language of drama as a framework for analysis or support. Nevertheless, an understanding of the elements of drama can be a strong starting point for adults who want to support children’s play.

Role and tension are two of the key elements of drama. In play contexts, the adoption of a role is one of the defining characteristics of this form whilst, in order to keep the play moving forward, at least one of the players must contribute offerings that relate to one of the various forms of dramatic tension.

Role

The adoption of role is a fairly basic concept in play, for almost everyone, at some stage of their lives has taken on a role when playing with a child. They’ve most likely been a customer in a store or a guest at a restaurant. They may even have played the role of the baddie, chasing a child squealing with delight. These roles may have been suggested by the child or may have been spontaneously created by the adult. In each case however, the roles adopted, by both the child and the adult, are more complex than they first appear, for each can be characterised
by their status, purpose and attitude (Haseman & O’Toole 2017). For example, the monster may be a high, medium or low status monster; it may have an evil purpose or a positive one; and it may have a happy attitude or a grumpy one.

Bolton (1984, 108) points out young children will often invite their father to play the role of a “big bad wolf” or other equally dangerous creature in order to “test the boundaries between reality and make-believe”. He argues the ambiguity between the two realms of real and not-real can hold a frightening fascination for young children. However, a sensitive adult who understands the vocabulary of role will know how high their status should be and how far to push the purpose (to eat the child?).

Similarly, the customer entering a pretend play shop may have a high status, knowing a great deal about the particular workings of the shop, or a low status, being a customer who knows very little, is lost or needs help. They may have entered the shop with a specific purpose (to buy a gift) or no purpose at all. In addition, their attitude might be critical or supportive, meaning that they may want to complain or praise. Each of these decisions, conscious or unconscious, will influence the play. Adults who opt to join play episodes need to understand this influence and its impact.

In the play transcript below, published within an article by Tarman and Tarman (2011, 333), the adult (pseudonym Mrs Christy) is a preschool teacher working in a daycare centre located in the USA. She takes a role as someone who presumably is the servant of the King’s servant. This role, which might appear to be a low status one, is in fact the reverse, for this servant’s servant has knowledge and comes bringing important news. The adult’s purpose is also clear (both within the dramatic world and outside it)—she wants to get things happening and has an air of urgency about her attitude. These role choices have an immediate impact on the four- and five-year-old children’s play:

Mrs. Christy: I’ve got news from the King’s servant. Tomorrow is the princess’s birthday. She is too sad, because she thinks everybody forgot her birthday.
Nathaniel (King): Oh! No! We need to make her happy.
Madeline (Queen): Let’s have a party!
Mrs. Christy: Okay. What do we need to do? We do not have enough time to get ready for the party.
Ashley: There are lots of things to do before the party.
Mrs. Christy: I think, we need to clean up and decorate the castle, cook birthday cake, invite people to the party. Let’s start! Who is going to help the clean up?
Josie: I can clean up our castle.
Ashley: I know how to make cake, I want to make a big birthday cake for princess. She is now 5 years old, I put 5 candles on it.
Umang: I want to write note for everybody so they can come to party.

Here we see that, while the idea of a party was Madeline’s, the third offering made by Mrs Christie had a strong influence over the play’s ongoing direction, prompting Josie to clean up the castle, Ashley to volunteer to make the cake and Umang to create the invitations. These responses were freely and spontaneously offered by the children themselves, and as such there is no suggestion that the freedom of play was hindered by this adult’s involvement. Nevertheless, this transcript offers a useful opportunity to hypothesise about how the play episode might have changed had the adult adopted a role with a different status, purpose and attitude. For example, a lower status messenger might have said, “I just saw the princess outside and she was crying. Does anyone know what is wrong with her?” Such an offer, made by a low status character, with an attitude of wonder rather than knowing, and little or no specific purpose, could potentially have opened up the play to far more exciting opportunities. Who knows what the children might have decided was the cause of the princess’ tears and where the play may have gone if this had been the adult’s offer?

This then is the key to effective adult role taking in play (and in drama)—the ability to make an offer that layers in new information whilst also introducing new directions. Most often, these new directions are driven by, and generate, tension.

**Tension**

To be a successful co-player, an understanding of the various forms of dramatic tension can also be really useful. Haseman and O’Toole (2017) claim that tension is the driving force of all dramatic activity and have identified five key tensions within dramatic action: task, relationships, surprise, mystery and the fifth tension: metaxis, a tension that exists within the relationship between the actual world and the dramatic world. O’Toole (1992) makes use of
Ryle’s metaphor of dispositional flow and emotional “eddies” to describe the nature of tension as “a boulder in a stream”—an intervention within the flow of a dramatic text that causes that flow to be disrupted. This boulder creates emotional eddies and prevents the text from reaching resolution too rapidly. O’Toole notes that, within the dramatic narratives of young children, resolutions are swiftly achieved, often through the use of magic. However, he goes on to suggest that, as children’s play matures, their desire to resolve tension slows so that they are able to delay the gratification that comes with resolution.

In the example above, the first offering made by Mrs Christie involved the tension of surprise, whilst her second offering made use of the tension of the task (“We do not have time to get ready for a party!”). These are two common tensions also introduced by children as they play, with children described by Creaser (1989) as master-dramatists being the most fluent in their use of these.

The following transcript, recorded as I witnessed children playing in a Year one classroom, offers a useful example of these tensions in action. Here the children were playing without the involvement of an adult and were exploring a plot idea involving Santa Claus delivering presents to children on Christmas Eve.

*The new section of the play begins with Child 3 pretending to be Santa giving out gifts to the three other players who on the floor asleep. One of the children opens their eyes to peep. As she goes, the child in role as Santa continually warns the “sleepers” not to open their eyes and peep until the sack is empty. Once this is achieved, she announces, “Ok it’s morning!” The children wake up and play with the toys with great excitement. Suddenly one of the children looks up and notices that Santa is still in the space designated as the house and cries, “Look, Santa is here in our house and he’s drunk!”*

The notion of a drunken Santa who has not gone back to the North Pole come morning, is clearly a surprising one, while this situation has also created a flow-on effect that has generated tension of the task and mystery—what do you do if you suddenly find a drunken Santa in your home on Christmas morning? What has happened and how did this all occur? In this case, while the play had previously been stagnating somewhat, this child’s offering, so rich in tension, gave the play episode a new lease of life, with the children’s play moving rapidly from this offering onwards.

By understanding the various forms of tension, adults might be able to make similar useful contributions. However, skill and understanding are required to know what kind of tension to offer and from what kind of role position. For example, in the first transcript above, relating to the princess, while the high-status messenger offered a tension that surprised the children and set up tasks for them to complete, as I have noted, a lower status messenger might have achieved richer play outcomes by introducing tension of mystery (“I wonder what’s wrong with the princess?”)

### Metacommunication

Within dramatic play, the communication that takes place about the play itself is called metacommunication. It involves signals that are used to “collectively regulate the emergence of the play drama” (Sawyer 1997, xxiii), enabling the integration of individual ideas within a shared text. An understanding of metacommunication and how it works in dramatic play is therefore critical for adults who wish to participate as a co-player in children’s play episodes, or indeed, who need to understand the signals children make inviting them into play they may not have originally intended to join.

Giffin (1984) suggests that metacommunication strategies fall along a continuum, from those that are offered within the fictional frame and thus maintain the flow of the play (implicit), to those that are out-of-frame (explicit). Those at the out-of-frame end of the continuum are referred to as overt proposals to pretend, and according to Giffin’s and my own research (Dunn 2008) occur less frequently as children’s play develops. Giffin found that these out-of-frame strategies are usually most common within the first few moments of commencing play, and that once the play has begun players tend to use strategies which are more in-frame. Giffin saw this desire to remain in-frame as one of the unwritten rules of play and called it the “illusion conservation rule”.

As children prepare for play they tend to make proposals about the play context, its roles or the plot itself. These offers will be very familiar to most adults and include statements like, “Let’s pretend that...” or “Let’s make it that...”. They are overt calls to play and signal to other players that the fiction is still being negotiated or may also be used to send play in new directions or to help reach compromises where required.

Low-voice prompting is another signalling strategy within dramatic play, falling about mid-way along Giffin’s continuum between those forms of metacommunication that are deeply within-frame and those completely out-
of-frame. This form of signalling provides the player with the opportunity to direct the action overtly, but without interrupting it for out-of-frame negotiations. Usually occurring between just two players, the player wishing to direct the action drops the tone and volume of their voice in order to prompt the actions of another player. In these usually brief out-of-frame moments, directions are given that are not heard by other players, but which can have a strong impact on the ongoing action. Its very effectiveness lies in its surreptitious nature.

My first conscious experience of low-voice prompting occurred within a play session involving six 11-year-old girls. I was initially observing this play but was drawn into the text by the children and soon found myself involved in a complex play episode about children lost in an underground cave. Almost immediately I was confronted by one of my co-players who pulled me aside and said to me in a low voice, “You think I'm Angela.” This prompt, which was clearly signalled as being out-of-role and designed for my ears alone, took me by complete surprise as it was an offer that had the potential to change the action of the play text considerably.

Fortunately, I understood the metacommunication strategy and its intention, and responded appropriately, immediately turning to the other players and asking, “What is Angela doing here? How did she get here?” Presented with all the seriousness required for good play, my questions had the immediate impact my co-player hoped for when she used low-voice prompting to suggest it, with the play immediately moving rapidly into new and exciting territory.

At the opposite end of Giffin’s continuum are the implicit metacommunication signals. These are selected by players in order to help them remain in-frame for as long as possible but require intense concentration and rapid decision making.

Diverse in nature, these implicit strategies range from enactment, which is the most in-frame of these, to storytelling, which is closest to the out-of-frame end of the continuum. Giffin (1984, 81) sees enactment as being the most sophisticated. Here the players are “enacting a shared script and thus each action automatically and implicitly metacommunicates the appropriate response. No transformations are being proposed”. The action is left to flow along as it would in non-play contexts, and no major playwright decisions are made.

At other times, signals are required however, and here strategies like underscoring, miming and ulterior conversation are used. Ulterior conversations allow players to make transformations in roles and objects from an in-frame position, whilst underscoring is similar, but exposes the play frame more, for here the player describes what they are doing as they are doing it. The play transcript below, relating to a detective agency, provides some examples of these metacommunication strategies in action. For example, underscoring is used here as the player announces knock, knock, whilst an example of ulterior conversation occurs when Angela says, “Now look what you have done, you’ve stepped on the evidence.”

Natalie and Winter have decided to switch roles and have signalled to the others by making a phone call to the office, that they would now be the bosses of the detective agency and would be coming to check on the progress of the case. They adopt a demeanour that clearly reflects their superior attitude, and don fur coats to signal power. Meanwhile, at the detective agency, there is a flurry of activity as the agents prepare for the arrival of their bosses.
Angela: Come in, you're quite welcome.
Natalie: [Addressing Jessica and Kate who have taken on the role of photographers] What are you paparazzi people doing? Shouldn't you be out looking for things to take pictures of? Do I have to take five percent off your pay rise and what are you doing? [She addresses Gillian]
Gillian: I'm going through the files on the crime.
Natalie: Shouldn't that be over and done with by now?
Gillian: Yes, someone who works and does not be cheeky to their bosses. [Gillian gets up and walks off]
Winter: Where are you going Miss?
Natalie: Yes, where are you going?
Winter: You've not finished your work.
Natalie: Yes, sit down and finish that work.

[By walking after Gillian however, Natalie steps on two cut-outs of footprints that are on the floor]
Angela: Now look what you have done, you've stepped on the evidence.
Natalie: Well, it shouldn't have been left lying around.
Angela: The reason for this visit was to help I thought, if not, go away.
Winter: How dare you talk to your….
Angela: [Cuts Winter off and goes right up to her face and shouts something inaudible. Winter looks shocked].

This transcript excerpt demonstrates how smoothly the action runs, and the confidence the players have in their ability to generate text. It also shows the importance of props and costumes to the continuation of the action and the signalling of role.

The final category from Giffin's continuum is that of storytelling, with this implicit form of signalling being similar in form to that of a narrator. An example comes from a play episode about a fisherman who is returning to a village after a fishing trip. The player, in role as the fisherman, needs to signal to the others that she has returned to the village and so calls in a loud voice, "We're coming back!". She follows this narration with a horn sound, "toot, toot" and then calls again, "Town, town, we're back and we have the fish." These calls are a real mixture of in-frame and out-of-frame. The first of these statements, "We're coming back", is akin to narration or Giffin's storytelling, and falls mid-way along the continuum. The "toot, toot" sound effect is absolutely out-of-frame, being an inappropriate vocalisation for a fisherman but a useful signal to the other players, whilst the final statement is solidly in-frame and could be seen as an example of ulterior conversation, or even enactment.

Of interest as well, are the ways children encourage adults to enter the fiction and become co-players. Sometimes done as an explicit request, at other times children make use of implicit metacommunicative strategies. The transcript below provides a useful example:

Angela: Why don't we go outside now?
Faye: Yes, but the teacher is going to have to make sure that we're in bed, so it's our bedtime now so let's get into bed and meet back here at one o'clock.
Natalie: No, midnight.
Angela: No, one o'clock.
Natalie: Ok, how about 11.30 so we can get the stuff already and leave at midnight?
All: Ok.
Faye: [Points at adult] Quick, the teacher is coming, get into bed.

Spontaneous playwriting

As can be seen from the various transcripts above, dramatic play is a highly improvised form, with players spontaneously working as playwrights to create narratives in action. O'Neill (1995) uses the term “playwright function” to describe this process and argues that, within all forms of improvised drama, someone must be in control of this function. Elsewhere (Dunn 2008) I have written about this process in detail, identifying four distinct playwright functions. Not readily separated or distinguished, these functions operate simultaneously as well as alternatively. They should not, however, be thought of as being in any way fixed or pre-determined, for control of the playwright function shifts from one utterance to the next. Each time a player offers an action or moment of
dialogue, they are using a playwright function, for their contribution is helping to build the dramatic play episode. Even when a player chooses to remain completely still and silent in response to the evolving action, they may still be operating as a playwright. On some occasions, players will compete to gain control of the direction of the play whilst, at other times, the players collaborate to co-construct a play episode.

There is insufficient space here to outline these functions in detail, but of most significance for this “beginner’s guide” is the idea that some offers change the course of the dramatic action (intervening playwright function), some simply allow for the narrative to continue in its current direction (narrative playwright function), whilst another is used to reinforce a key intervention made within the action (reinforcing playwright function). The fourth, and final, function serves to review action that has already occurred and as such serves to help players catch up with what has happened during particularly fast-paced play. Here a player might simply ask: “What was that?” or “What just happened then?”

For the adult who is hoping to support children’s play through co-participation, an understanding of these functions is very important. Of most significance is an awareness of the dangers of always being the player who has control of the intervening playwright function, with the first transcript once again being useful. Here we see that Mrs Christie has adopted the intervening playwright function, using her involvement to shift the direction of the play. Whilst this might have been necessary to kick-start play that was flagging, she might have benefitted from an understanding of other options once her original intervention was reinforced by Madeline (the Queen). For example, she may have chosen to remain silent, or indeed just reinforced Madeline’s idea of the party. Instead she offered a further intervention (and tension), by suggesting that there was insufficient time.

In addition, within the example of low-voice prompting above, where the player invited me to recognise her as Angela, my awareness of the various playwright functions provided me with several options within the play. In this case, I chose to reinforce her offer, by asking questions about Angela. Alternatively, I could have rejected the offer and inserted a new idea of my own, or I might have simply ignored the comment and remained silent in order to allow the episode to progress in the direction it was currently headed.

The vocabularies come together

In order to understand the interwoven nature of these vocabularies, I offer a further transcript, again involving the 11-year-old girls. In this episode, the children have become excited by an idea I offered during pre-play discussions. Originating from a process drama created by Peter O’Connor, one of the co-editors of this volume, the idea involved a mysterious wise woman who has used her powers to threaten the livelihood and well-being of a small fishing community by making all the fish disappear. In the story, she promises to bring the fish back, but adds demands to accompany this promise. The players, intrigued by the magic inherent within this story, soon made it their own, building on the basic idea to spontaneously create a play episode rich in new directions.

The excerpt below relates to a moment of high tension within their play, where angry exchanges are being offered between the wise woman (a role Gillian immediately grabbed) and one of the community members (Natalie).

[Natalie collects four fish together and heads to the Wise Woman's house. She knocks loudly on the desk and immediately begins to shout.]
Natalie: *You have lied to us. We have only caught four fish today. You have lied to us. You said you would make all the fish come back, and yet we only have caught so few.*

Gillian: *I brought back the fish, but you have not gone far enough out to sea. [She shouts angrily]*

Natalie: *We did, we went far. If we went further we would fall off the earth!*

Gillian: *Then fall off the earth!*

Natalie: *No, we would rather you fell off the earth. We are sick of you and all your demands.*

Gillian: [She raises her hands above her head and claps them together in a ritualistic style] *You may go now!*

[The girls appear to be stunned by this response and move off slowly, all except for one player who appears to be in a trance. The others try to rouse her, but she has become some kind of zombie slave. Another player witnesses all of this and grabs a torch (which had previously been made as the girls prepared to play). Jessica takes it from Natalie and hits Gillian on the head with it.]

Gillian: *Go away all of you and bleed until you die!*

Natalie: *Why have you done this to us—you Evil Kineveal!*

[The girls all briefly giggle at this title, but quickly return to the fiction as Gillian speaks.]

Gillian: *I will speak no more!*
Natalie: You must speak or… [she grabs the torch] … or I will burn your house down. [(She begins to chant loudly] Burn house burn, burn house burn, burn house burn!

[From the side of the room and, from quite outside of the action, Katie announces in a narrator style voice: “It has started raining”. Natalie responds immediately by placing her hands over her head to prevent the rain from wetting her.]

This brief transcript offers much in terms of the play vocabularies outlined in this chapter. Here the players have: taken role with a clear but implicit understanding of status, purpose and attitude; spontaneously employed the playwright functions to introduce and reinforce ideas including various forms of tension; and have metacommunicated their ideas. For example, Gillian asserts her high-status authority over the others through her deliberate and elaborate clap, and her use of language patterns such as “I will speak no more!”; whilst Natalie’s chant of “burn house burn”, is a clear signal of her purpose and attitude, generating a powerful tension of relationships and creating real surprise amongst her fellow players. Then suddenly, Katie, from the side-lines of the action, uses the metacommunicative strategy of storytelling to announce that it is raining. In doing this, she shatters the immediate tension, but by preventing the fire and potentially saving the Wise Woman, Katie has saved the play, giving it and the spontaneously generated narrative, the opportunity to continue.

Conclusion

The play vocabularies outlined in this chapter have been offered as a framework to support adult participation in children’s dramatic play. The purpose of this participation is not to narrowly direct play toward pre-determined adult goals or to support specific outcomes, but rather, to extend and develop play so that a whole range of highly important but non-specific outcomes is made possible. Based on the premise that dramatic play is a key and indeed foundational member of the symbolic order of drama, this framework is derived, at least in part, from the drama literature.

Including vocabularies of role and tension, spontaneous playwriting and metacommunication, this framework could be accused of making something as simple as play appear overly complex and challenging. However, based on my experiences of working with adults over many years, including with early childhood teachers who are directly responsible for supporting children’s play and learning, it is clear that many have very little understanding of the grammar of play and for this reason are either reluctant to join in or do so in a manner that limits or diminishes the play efforts of the children. Others simply lack the ability to be playful. This is a problematic situation, for as Vandenberg (1986, 25) reminds us, “to be incapable of fantasy is to be barred from human culture … play and fantasy are central features of what it means to be human”. As such, any framework that provides adults with a set of tools for sharpening this blunted aspect of their lives has the potential to be useful.

Unfortunately, no set of vocabularies, no matter how well researched or articulated, can be understood unless they are applied in action. As such, adults interested in developing their play skills can only revive their playfulness and move beyond the beginner level by engaging in play itself. Of course, children don’t always want adults to play with them, and indeed master dramatist children are more than capable of providing the modeling their co-players require without any adult input. However, in a world where play is under threat and where children are increasingly living insular lives “protected” from the risks of play or deprived of the time, permission or companionship that play needs, adults who care about and value play will need to step into the void. In doing so, they will need to be aware of its possibilities and join this exciting form armed with the vocabularies that come with knowing how to play.

References


