THE METACOMMUNICATIVE ABILITIES
OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN
IN SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY

by

MARADEE WYNN GIBSON

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Approved by:

Susan K. Warda
Major Professor

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Introduction

In recent years professional journals have devoted considerable attention to the topic of children's play. Ideally, the abundant research literature could be used by early childhood educators to formulate curricula. Unfortunately, this is usually not the case. Generally speaking, child development researchers have used this body of knowledge to further their research, while early childhood practitioners, with less access to the information, have not used the research findings in their classrooms. Elkind (1981) suggested that both researchers of the field and educators could benefit from dialogue with one another. Early childhood educators could use the child development research theories and findings to formulate their curricula. Researchers, in turn, could use the naturalistic settings of early childhood classrooms to study relevant questions.

Two areas of research literature that could be of use to early childhood educators are sociodramatic play and metacommunication. The process of sociodramatic play relies heavily on communication, as transformed components of the situation must be identified and maintained. Thus, "communication is essential to the development and progression of a sociodramatic play episode" (Butler, Gotts, & Quisenberry, 1978, p. 71). Children must talk to let others know what they are thinking and doing, to convey themes, and to manage the play. "The success of [sociodramatic] play depends upon players using

explicit language skillfully" (Pellegrini, DeStefano, & Thompson, 1983, p. 381). This communication within sociodramatic play episodes has been labeled as metacommunication (Bateson, 1955; 1956; Garvey, 1977c; Sutton-Smith, 1971). Metacommunications are the messages that convey information about how other messages, either verbal or nonverbal, should be interpreted (Fein, 1981a). Thus, the purpose of this report is to propose a system for fostering metacommunication within the context of sociodramatic play. The format of this report will include the following: (a) characteristics of sociodramatic play, (b) nature and relevance of metacommunication, (c) metacommunication research, (d) play training procedures used in early childhood education, and (e) proposed program guidelines for facilitating the metacommunicative abilities of preschool children in sociodramatic play.

Sociodramatic Play

"Sociodramatic play occurs when two or more children adopt roles and attempt to recreate a real-life situation" (Christie, 1982b, p. 25). Children integrate the people, situations, activities, events, and social experiences of their lives into their play (Garvey, 1977a). In doing so, they reproduce as exactly as possible what they observe, understand, and remember about their relationship to the world. Sociodramatic play involves a collective representation of themes, plots, roles, objects, and actions to share among the play group (Fein, 1979; Fein & Apfel, 1979). The play behaviors are contingent upon the consensus reached by the play participants in order to sustain the play episode. In her classic study, The Effects of Sociodramatic Play on Disadvantaged Preschool Children, Smilansky (1968) spelled out the following six criteria necessary for well developed and high quality sociodramatic play:

1. Imitative role play. The child undertakes a make-believe role and expresses it in imitative action and/or verbalization.

2. Make-believe in regard to objects. Movements or verbal declarations are substituted for real objects.

3. Make-believe in regard to actions and situations. Verbal descriptions are substituted for actions and situations.

4. <u>Persistence</u>. The child persists in a play episode for
    at least 10 minutes.

5. <u>Interaction</u>. There are at least two players
    interacting in the framework of the play episode.

6. <u>Verbal communication</u>. There is some verbal interaction
    related to the play episode. (p.9)

The first four criteria apply to dramatic play in general, while
the last two criteria refer to sociodramatic play only.
Sociodramatic play episodes require shared imagination on the
part of two or more children who jointly develop the
transformations necessary for their play, through active
participation.

One aspect of sociodramatic play that is of importance is
the pretend quality attributed to the play. Garvey and Berndt
(1977) define the pretend characteristic as involving "some
transformation of the Here and Now, You and I, or This and That
of the child's actual situation" (p. 1). Several specific
transformations may take place when children pretend in a
sociodramatic play episode: (a) inanimate objects may be treated
as animate, (b) everyday activities may be performed in the
absence of the necessary materials, (c) children may perform
activities usually done by someone or something else,
(d) activities may not be carried to their usual outcomes, or
(e) one object may be substituted for another (Fein, 1981a;
McCune-Nicolich, 1981). In sociodramatic play the

transformations of objects, actions, events, and persons are collectively accomplished and indicated by verbal declarations (Curry & Arnaud, 1974; Isenberg & Jacob, 1983; McLoyd, 1979). When children verbalize transformations it enables others to distinguish that a transformation has actually taken place in the realm of their pretend play.

Children begin to participate in sociodramatic play from the age of about three years, although some elements of sociodramatic play may be present much earlier. Children demonstrating early sociodramatic play may simply imitate domestic and caregiving activities while interacting with one or two peers. The play rapidly undergoes a number of changes and increases so that by the age of five it has become much more elaborate and includes all elements of sociodramatic play. Children at this age play in larger groups working around a great variety of complex themes and situations (Butler et al., 1978; Fein, 1978; 1979; 1981a; 1981b; Fein & Apfel, 1979; Garvey & Berndt, 1977; Smilansky, 1968). Fein (1978) summarized it as follows:

> by three years of age, we see the beginnings of
> sociodramatic play, and by the age of five, what began
> as a few simple gestures encompasses intricate systems
> of reciprocal roles, ingenious improvisations of
> necessary materials, increasingly coherent themes and
> plots. Then, surprisingly, as precipitously as it
> began, pretend play declines. (p. 73-74)

Smilansky (1968) also noted that by the age of six sociodramatic play "tends to become less frequent, until, at seven, games-with-rules are the common feature of play behavior and sociodramatic play tends to disappear" (p.11). Piaget (1951/1961) suggested that this is due to the fact that as children mature they adapt to the reality of the social world and no longer need to satisfy their needs through symbolic play while during the preschool years, children need sociodramatic play to help assimilate the external world. Sociodramatic play significantly contributes to preschool-age children's development of social understanding and communication (Bretherton, 1984; Forys & McCune-Nicolich, 1984).

The relative frequency of sociodramatic play during the preschool years in relationship to other forms of play ranges from 10% to 17% in preschool classrooms and increases to approximately 33% in kindergarten classrooms (Fein, 1981a). As children grow older they are capable of longer sociodramatic play episodes, partially as a result of their increasing communication skills. They are able to communicate ideas and plans regarding their play which allows them to engage in and become more involved in collective episodes of sociodramatic play (Fein, 1979). Thus as children acquire communicative skills, the frequency of their sociodramatic play increases with age.

Metacommunication

The term metacommunication is commonly understood as "communication about communication" (Carroll, 1981; Danziger, 1976; Giffin, 1984; Kleeck & Hopper, 1980; Kotsonis & Patterson, 1981; Wilden, 1972).

> "Meta" means about, but it is also listed in Random
> House and Webster's dictionaries as denoting beyond,
> along with, beside, modifying, and changed in form....
> Meta- is a good process term.... use[d] to explain
> that nearly every message is more than it seems to be.
> (Kleeck & Hopper, 1980, p. 2)

According to Bateson (1955), who coined the term metacommunication, the most distinctive feature of play is that it is metacommunicative. He stated that "play, could only occur if the participant organisms were capable of some degree of meta-communication, i.e., of exchanging signals which could carry the message 'this is play'" (p. 41).

Bateson also noted that messages about sociodramatic play have a paradoxical referent because they imply a sense of pretending. The paradox assumes that pretend actions stand for real actions when, in fact, they are not. Bateson (1956) was "concerned mainly with the nature of the message 'This is play,' i.e., with the problem of identifying that level of communication which labels a temporary [play episode]" (p. 151). He was especially interested in the actual messages that portrayed the

message "This is play". In Bateson's view, then, in order for sociodramatic play to begin and continue, partners must be informed about the nature of the play activity.

Metacommunicative messages function as frames or contexts that provide information about how another message should be interpreted. In order to understand an action as play it must be framed by the message "This is play". Metacommunications serve to frame and label the complex messages and actions of sociodramatic play (Bateson, Jackson, Haley, & Weakland, 1972). As a result, Schwartzman (1978) asserted that "because play actions are never quite what they seem to be, metacommunicative messages must be contained in every action that is play" (p. 221). The frames of sociodramatic play episodes are therefore delineated by metacommunication among the players.

Metacommunication skills are necessary for sociodramatic play in that they actively sustain the play scene. Metacommunication is the central tool in such play and without it children lack the most important tool for sociodramatic play (Bretherton, 1984). By three years of age, metacommunicative messages are produced that communicate the intention to pretend (Fein, 1979; Fein, Moorin, & Enslein, 1982) and these skills improve as children get older as evidenced by the fact that five-year-olds are more adept at metacommunication than three-year-olds (Bretherton, 1984; Sonnenschein, 1984). The message "This is play" is transmitted in various ways: it may be verbal or

nonverbal, it may include words, gestures and other communicative actions, or it may merely be taken for granted (Fein, 1979; Garvey, 1977b; Kleeck & Hopper, 1980). Lloyd, Baker, and Dunn (1984) described metacommunicative skills as "the child's growing understanding of the nature of the communication process and of how this understanding affects the business of exchanging information and ideas" (p. 281). Children may develop the skills of metacommunication to organize their words and actions in a way to inform others that they are playing. In the process of sociodramatic play children discover that it requires interaction with others and that they must control the information sent through their metacommunications.

In summary, metacommunications serve to establish, maintain, and elaborate the pretend of sociodramatic play. To play successfully requires that the players communicate to each other that they are playing and what is being played. Metacommunications are the exchanges about the sociodramatic play episode that children use to assign roles, to decide on themes, to plan story lines, to execute object transformations, to interpret situations, and to negotiate the development of the pretend reality (Christie, 1982a; Forys & McCune-Nicolich, 1984). In order to pretend with companions, children must metacommunicate about who they are, where they are, what they are using, and what they are doing (Garvey, 1979; Garvey & Berndt, 1977). "It is likely that by verbalizing their transformations

they also assist and support themselves in pretending" (Garvey &
Berndt, 1977, p. 7). Without such verbal transformations (see
Figure 1), ambiguity would result because players would not know
what transformations were supposed to represent in the play
episode (Pellegrini, 1983). Therefore, the ability of children
to join in and sustain sociodramatic play episodes is partly the
result of their increasing metacommunicative skills.

Figure 1

Transformation of Roles in Sociodramatic Play
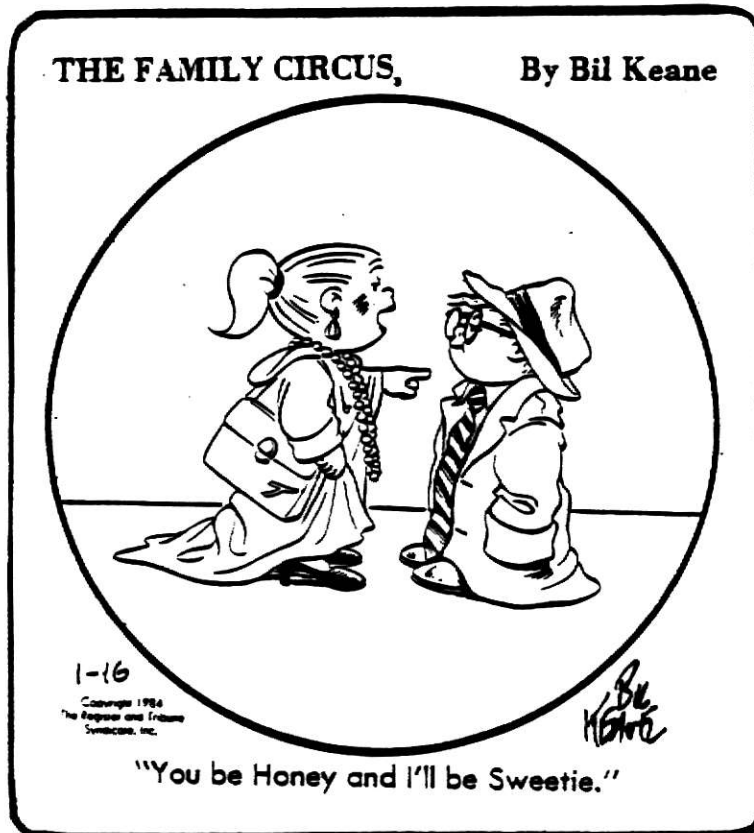
Note. From "The Family Circus" by B. Keane, January 16, 1984. Copyright 1984 by Cowles Syndicate Incorporated. Reprinted by permission.

Metacommunication Research

Research concerning metacommunication among children has dealt primarily with sociodramatic play as a communication system. According to Sutton-Smith (1980), "undoubtedly the newest and most provocative theory of play arising primarily out of the work of Bateson is the view that play is first and foremost a kind of communication" (p. 11). Four major studies have been conducted to describe the forms of metacommunication occuring during children's play episodes. These studies attempted to identify the mechanisms by which communication about play was used to establish and maintain the play.

Garvey and Berndt (1977), in a study of the spontaneous make-believe play of three- to five-and-a-half-year-old children, focused on how children communicate pretending to each other. They emphasized that "the point to be made about the communication of pretending is that a good deal of talk is directed to creating, clarifying, maintaining, or negotiating the social pretend experience....To some extent, then, the saying _is_ the playing at this age" (p. 7). Therefore, they felt that carrying out make-believe situations was largely a matter of communication.

On the basis of their analysis, Garvey and Berndt developed a system for categorizing the metacommunicative techniques used by children to inform each other, and observers, about roles, plans, and objects as well as to make preparatory or procedural

statements. They proposed that there are at least five types of communication involved in pretending:

1. <u>Negation of Pretend</u>. Transformation of an ongoing pretend state back to reality ("I'm not the dragon anymore" "I'm not playing anymore").

2. <u>Enactment</u>. The actions, gestures, attitudes, tones of voice, etc., exhibited by the player to signify the pretend identity (whining, waving, ironing).

3. <u>Signals</u>. Markers of the adoption of play orientation (giggling, grinning, winking).

4. <u>Procedural or Preparatory Behaviors</u>. General references to interaction including apportioning objects ("This is my telephone"), clarifying rights ("I didn't get a turn") and inviting to play ("Do you want to play with me?").

5. <u>Explicit Mention of Pretend Transformations</u>. Specification of a transformation of one or more of the components in the make-believe through verbalization. Seven categories of verbal communication were outlined:

   a. Mention partner's role ("Are you going to be a bride?").

   b. Mention own role ("I'm a work lady at work").

   c. Mention joint roles ("We can both be wives").

   d. Mention partner's plan ("Pretend you hated baby fish").

e. Mention own plan ("I gotta drive to the shopping center").

f. Mention joint plan ("We have to eat, dinner's ready").

g. Transform object/Invent object ("This is the train" - the sofa / "Now this is ice cream" - empty plate). (pp. 3-7)

Garvey and Berndt found that a large amount of metacommunication can occur between playmates, and their research described the main elements subject to transformation, that is, roles, objects, and plans. Although the five types of communication involved in pretending were outlined, no data were given to indicate the relative frequency of each type. However, they did indicate that children explicitly mention plans more frequently than roles. In communicating about such plans, children mention their own plans most frequently at all ages, while older children are also more likely to mention joint plans. Perhaps plans were mentioned more often because once the roles were established there was no need to mention them again, whereas plans needed to be discussed to inform the partners about the constantly changing action plan. In summary, Garvey and Berndt's research identifies communication as the critical factor in the successful production of make-believe. It was the first major study to set forth the importance of metacommunicational techniques in sociodramatic play.

In the second major study, Schwartzman (1978; 1979) studied the communicative behaviors of lower socioeconomic status children in a day care center over a period of 18 months. The emphasis regarding metacommunication was on how different children use metacommunicative statements to construct, control, enter, and exit make-believe play events. She identified nine different types of metacommunicative statements used to relate and coordinate sociodramatic play to other players:

1. Formation Statements. In order for a play event to occur, children must first communicate their intention to play to other children ("Let's play house").

2. Connection Statements. Once a group has formed, a child who wishes to play with this particular group must generally ask permission to do so ("Can I play with you?" "Can I be the gold fish?" "You can be the sister").

3. Rejection Statements. Children who attempt to enter the group may be quickly rejected by the group ("You can't play here!").

4. Disconnection Statements. Children may voluntarily part from a group at anytime ("I'm not playing anymore" "I'm not the sister anymore").

5. Maintenance Statements. Sustaining the play situation, even when a potential disturbance occurs, by avoiding

or transforming it into the theme (A child falls –
"Daddy hurt himself, quick, bring the bandages!").

6.   <u>Definition Statements</u>. Children may enter the group
simply by defining themselves as part of it, by
adopting a play role ("I'll be the princess"), or
defining a new activity for the group to respond to
("I'm cooking dinner").

7.   <u>Acceptance Statements</u>. Accepting a definition ("O.K.,
now I'm eating it").

8.   <u>Counterdefinition Statements</u>. Challenging a definition
("No, this is meat, not rice" "I'm the father, not the
baby").

9.   <u>Reformulation or Disintegration Statements</u>. A new
theme may be proposed ("Let's play cowboys now") or,
alternately, the play event comes to an end by a
child's or a teacher's initiation (Let's not play this
anymore"). (Schwartzman, 1978, pp. 237-239)

The results from Schwartzman's studies were primarily
descriptive in nature, as she was most interested in becoming
familiar with the social contexts of the play situations
observed. She did not identify which types of metacommunicative
statements were used most frequently by the children. Her
research simply outlined metacommunicative statements and
described how they pertained to the establishment of the
sociodramatic play group.

Göncü and Kessel (in press), utilizing the frameworks described by Garvey and Berndt (1977) and Schwartzman (1978), evaluated the metacommunicative approach of three- and four-and-a-half-year-old children during the creation of sociodramatic play scenes. With a purpose similar to that of Schwartzman's (1978), they were interested in determining how "children become engaged with one another in imaginative play, and once engaged how they understand and relate to each other's imaginative constructions" (p. 3). Göncü and Kessel described seven categories of metacommunicational statements:

1. Invitations. Statements that are explicit requests for play ("Let's play with the blocks" "Do you wanna play with me?").

2. Plans. Statements which express the orientation of self, of partners, or of both-self-and-partner toward current and ensuing activities ("You're gonna cook" "We're gonna dance and marry").

3. Object Statements. Statements that indicate possession of play materials ("This is our truck" "Those are my flowers").

4. Transformations. Statements which exhibit a quality of nonliterality. They are expressions of the way in which pretend identities, objects and situations are represented ("This pipe is my gun" "We're now at the restaurant" "I am the mother now").

5. <u>Acceptance</u> <u>Statements</u>. Statements that are explicit
    approval or acceptance of announced transformations
    ("Isn't it sad that a sea-monster came and broke it?" -
    "<u>Yeah</u>").

6. <u>Negations</u>. Statements that are explicit refusals or
    rejections of announced transformations ("I am
    Superman" - <u>"No, you aren't, you are small</u>").

7. <u>Termination</u> <u>Statements</u>. Statements which signal or
    announce the end of an activity or episode or the end
    of play itself ("I am not gonna play with those blocks
    anymore"). (pp. 8-9)

Analysis of the distribution of the seven kinds of
metacommunicative statements revealed that they were not equally
likely to occur. Transformations were the most frequent
metacommunication statements, occurring 65% of the time. Plans
and object statements were the second most frequent forms of
metacommunication constituting 12% and 13%, respectively. The
remaining metacommunicative forms were infrequent: Invitations
2%, Acceptance Statements 3%, Negations 4%, and Termination
Statements 1%. The findings suggested that "most
metacommunicative statements in social imaginative play are
expressions of symbolic representations rather than comments and
negotiations about such representation" (p. 10). In general,
then, Göncü and Kessel reported that most metacommunication in

sociodramatic play deals with the transformations that take place.

Giffin (1984), in her research on metacommunication in sociodramatic play, was interested in determining how children: (a) communicate transformed meaning, (b) coordinate to develop and sustain make-believe, and (c) metacommunicatively define the play world. She analyzed 31 play episodes produced by 38 previously acquainted preschool children in groups of two to five players. Giffin identified a range of seven metacommunicative options that play a significant role in achieving the coordination of meaning, and "a system of rules that influence the choice of metacommunicative options" (p. 79). It is important to note that the options are not mutually exclusive; they can overlap or be combined. The metacommunicative options are as follows:

1. Enactment. Performance of identifiable actions related to the adopted role or plan. Players enact a shared script; thus, each action automatically and implicitly metacommunicates the appropriate response according to previously established transformations (gestures, postures, traditional action formats).

2. Ulterior conversation. Proposed transformations of objects or events to develop and maintain the action plan. The simultaneous creation and orchestration of

events and definitions with other players ("This is the telephone. Call the grandma").

3. Underscoring. Verbal description or sound effect of an action or state of being, unnecessary in real life, while it is being nonverbally enacted. A monologue that may enhance the play situation by clarifying definitions and actions ("I'm crying" "I'll pour the milk).

4. Storytelling. Narration of events, rather than enactment, that permits the development of more elaborate plots. Distinguished by a peculiar singsong cadence where phrases are usually in the past tense, preceded by the word and, strung together, and accented as in a question ("...and I closed the door... and you start to cry...and I make you some wedding cake...").

5. Prompting. Brief comments, made out of character in a lowered voice, to clarify meaning, give directions, or instruct a partner ("You weren't supposed to say that, you're the baby" "No, her name is Annie" "Make the crying sound").

6. Implicit Pretend Structuring. Negotiations which establish the major elements of the action plan, without verbally acknowledging the pretense. Designations of roles, settings, objects, and circumstances are clearly communicated among players

("You have to come and dance" - "No, I Dad" - "He

doesn't dance").

7.   <u>Overt Proposals to Pretend</u>. Players control the make-

believe world by making reference to the pretendedness

of the activity ("Let's say" "Pretend that" "Let's

play like" "Let's pretend" "Say that" "Just

pretend"). (pp. 81-88)

Giffin was interested in the degree to which the

metacommunicative options ranged along a continuum from <u>within-</u>

<u>frame</u> (W/F) communication to <u>out-of-frame</u> (O/F) communication.

In other words, some metacommunication overtly reveals the

pretend situation (O/F) while other metacommunication (W/F) tends

to conceal it. Other researchers (Fein et al., 1982) have

explained this concept as:

Statements <u>about</u> pretense [out-of-frame communications]

differ from those produced when children are <u>in</u> the

pretend mode [within-frame communications]....These

statements...presuppose knowledge about how roles are

defined in real life, how they are expressed in play,

and assume that a partner will understand the

distinction between statements "in" play and those
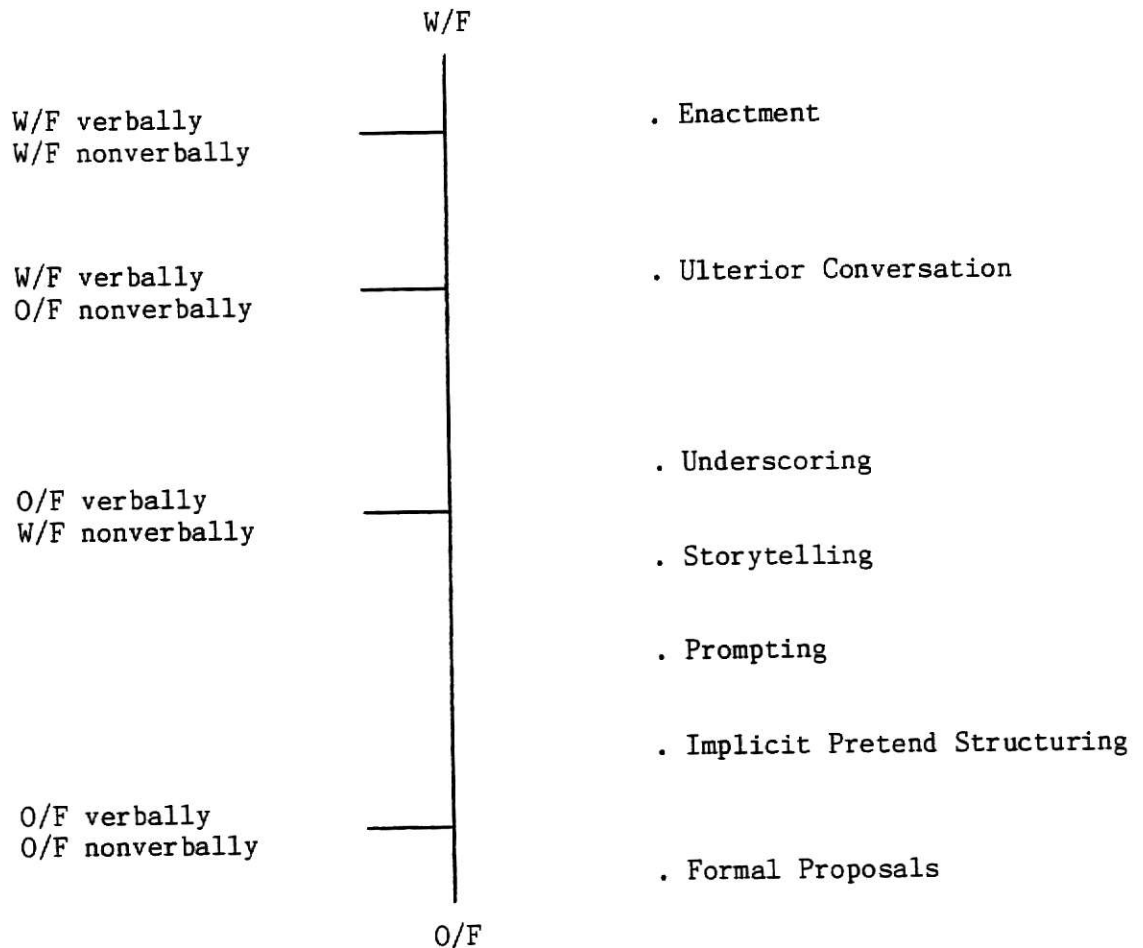
"about" play. (p. 393)

Giffin described the continuum (see Figure 2) as follows:

Where on the continuum a particular category of

behavior is placed depends on both the verbal and the

nonverbal components of the message. All communication

behaviors can be described in terms of verbal and

nonverbal components. A transformation proposal tends

to be out-of-frame verbally if the verbal content of

the message is inappropriate to the play script....A

transformation proposal also tends to be out-of-frame if

nonverbal behavior is incongruent with the imagined

role or event, that is, if it would not be acceptable

or necessary in real life. (pp. 79-80)

Giffin concluded from her observations that once a play

episode has begun, players tend to resort to more indirect forms

of managing the pretend reality. Although no data were

presented, Giffin suggested that players may be guided by an

unspoken rule which prescribes that children choose within-frame

options more often than out-of-frame options so as not to expose

the pretendedness unnecessarily. In order for children to engage

in sociodramatic play, they must metacommunicate along a full

range of options.

Figure 2

Griffin's Continuum of Metacommunicative Options

W/F

W/F verbally
W/F nonverbally   . Enactment

W/F verbally
O/F nonverbally   . Ulterior Conversation

. Underscoring

O/F verbally
W/F nonverbally   . Storytelling

. Prompting

. Implicit Pretend Structuring

O/F verbally
O/F nonverbally   . Formal Proposals

O/F

W/F — "within-frame" metacommunications tends to conceal pretense.

O/F — "out-of-frame" metacommunication overtly reveals pretense.

Note. From "The Coordination of Meaning in the Creation of a Shared Make-believe Reality" (p. 80) by H. Giffin, 1982. In I. Bretherton (Ed.), Symbolic Play: The Development of Social Understanding (pp. 73-100). Orlando, FL: Academic.

The four studies discussed have described children's means of metacommunicating within the context of sociodramatic play. The four lists of metacommunicative forms presented are fairly complete in and of themselves, although there are redundancies as well as unique features among the separate lists. Future research should strive to incorporate the distinct lists and interpret the relative frequency of each metacommunicative type that is specified. In terms of application, the descriptions of metacommunication presented here could be incorporated into the curricula of early childhood programs to facilitate young children's sociodramatic play.

Play Training

Play training, a recent trend in early childhood education, could be a valuable part of any program that incorporates a systematic procedure to help children develop components of metacommunication, and simultaneously sociodramatic play. Depending on the emphasis, play training may serve merely to enhance spontaneous play or it may serve to advance the skills needed to play sociodramatically. Successful training has been conducted by researchers in early childhood classrooms. The best description of an observational system for play and play training procedures is provided by Smilansky (1968). Recently, Christie (1982a; 1982b) has elaborated on Smilansky's system and has proposed slight modifications to her procedures. The play training procedures of both Smilansky and Christie are significant and will be discussed below.

Smilansky (1968) posited that adult intervention might be introduced in order to help children develop the ability for sociodramatic play. The intervention, in Smilansky's opinion, does not interrupt or disturb the sociodramatic play, but rather it helps to unfold the play and helps children to express their pretend states. Smilansky described particular forms of encouragement by teachers in the preschool setting to intensify sociodramatic play.

In an initial phase of Smilansky's work, advantaged and disadvantaged Israeli kindergarten children were observed in

similarly equipped classrooms in different schools during free play activity periods. The most startling finding was a difference in the sociodramatic play behavior of the advantaged and disadvantaged children. Sociodramatic play occurred in 78% of the observation periods in the advantaged classrooms and in 10% of the observation periods in the disadvantaged classrooms.

In a subsequent phase of Smilansky's research, she designed an experimental procedure to identify and evaluate the existing and missing factors of each child's sociodramatic play. The systematic observation of the children's play behavior was based upon her criteria for sociodramatic play: (a) imitative role-play, (b) make-believe in regard to objects, (c) make-believe in regard to actions and situations, (d) persistence, (e) interaction, and (f) verbal communication. At this point the intervention was planned according to the diagnosis of each child's level of sociodramatic play.

Smilansky noted that play training procedures were not appropriate for use with children who had already been observed engaging in all six elements of high quality sociodramatic play. Likewise, after children had been observed participating in sociodramatic play that contained all of the six essential elements, the adult intervention was phased out. Smilansky outlined the important elements of adult intervention connected to the development of children's sociodramatic play:

1. The planned intervention of the adult [is] based on knowledge of the missing factors in the child's sociodramatic play, which takes into consideration, on the one hand, the child's personality and the play situation at that specific moment and, on the other hand, the necessity of trying to help the child develop these play abilities that the adult knows to be underdeveloped.

2. The adult does _not_ intervene or try to further develop factors that have been observed existing in the child's sociodramatic play behavior.

3. The adult's intervention in a child's play is to be planned to encourage the use of only _one_ specific factor at a time missing from the child's sociodramatic play, and is to last for a specified length of time as various opportunities present themselves. When the adult is satisfied that _one_ factor has been integrated into the child's sociodramatic play behavior he will then be able to encourage the development of _an_ _additional_ factor....

4. Planned adult intervention concentrates mainly on teaching the child _how_ to play and is to interfere as little as possible in the content of the child's play. The point is to help the child know how to play with

all and every kind of play content with which he might
wish to contend. (pp. 113-114)

Smilansky used the above techniques in each of her three
training treatments. In the first treatment group, teachers
actually taught specific play themes to the children in an
intensive enrichment program that involved field trips, resource
persons, and group discussions. In the second type of training,
they taught play techniques by intervening in actual play
sequences. A third treatment group received a combination of
both theme and technique training. The most dramatic improvement
occurred in the third treatment group, which was significantly
greater than the improvement of the second treatment group;
there was no noticable improvement in the level of play of
treatment group one. Smilansky speculated that teaching how to
play may have been the most important factor, while teaching
about themes may have facilitated the significant difference
found in treatment three. It was easier for teachers to
encourage, suggest, and demonstrate the possibilities of
sociodramatic play based upon the shared experiences provided by
treatment one. The children also had a common language for
interaction based upon their concepts and their knowledge of the
themes.

Smilansky identified two forms of adult intervention
that were important for the creation and implementation of a
sociodramatic play program: (a) intervention from the outside,

and (b) participation in the play. The purpose of both play training techniques was to promote a response by the children rather than to control the play.

In the first technique, intervention from the outside, the teacher as an observer of children's play helped them clarify their make-believe roles by posing questions or suggestions related to the roles. The teacher remained outside of the play episode and made comments to the children who were engaged in the play in order to encourage them to use specific sociodramatic play behaviors. Intervention from the outside worked in several ways taking the form of: (a) questions ("How is your baby today?" "What are you cooking for lunch?"), (b) suggestions ("See which shoe fits." "Maybe you should take your baby to the clinic."), (c) straightforward directions ("Put some food in the pan and then put the pan on the stove." "Show the nurse where the telephone is."), (d) clarifications of behaviors ("If you have the pan on the stove too long the food will burn." "He wants to park the truck."), and (e) establishment of contact between players ("Someone's knocking at the door." "Can you please help her, nurse?")

Smilansky's second play training technique was participation in the play. The teacher, as an actual player, helped children meet the demands of their roles. The teacher actively participated in the sociodramatic play of children by choosing a role and enacting it during some period of time. While enacting

this role the teacher demonstrated sociodramatic play behaviors that had been missing in the children's play. Smilansky found that both types of play training were very effective in improving the quality of children's sociodramatic play.

Christie (1982a; 1982b) elaborated on the two forms of adult intervention in sociodramatic play training originally developed by Smilansky. He designated Smilansky's intervention from the outside as being outside intervention, and what Smilansky referred to as participation in the play, Christie called inside intervention. He suggested that during both inside and outside intervention the teacher should address the roles that children have adopted rather than using the children's actual names. This makes the intervention a part of the play world and minimizes the disruption of the play episode.

Both methods of play training have advantages. Outside intervention, being less obtrusive, allows children to retain more control over their play. Inside intervention, on the other hand, is a more direct method of training specific play behaviors. Christie recommended that teachers use outside intervention first since it is the least obtrusive of the two procedures. If outside intervention fails to stimulate sociodramatic play, then teachers should try inside intervention. Once again, after children are observed participating in sociodramatic play that contains all six elements, the intervention should be phased out. Continued intervention is

not needed with such children and may actually disrupt their play. "The child now has all of the tools necessary for engaging in high quality sociodramatic play and should be given as much freedom as possible in choosing her or his own play experiences" (Christie, 1982b, p. 31). At this point it would be much more appropriate to indirectly enrich the quality of the play by introducing new props, vocabulary, and roles to extend the themes the children have selected.

In Smilansky's and Christie's work the adult intervenors may have in fact been encouraging metacommunicative skills as well as sociodramatic play. However, they did not specifically address metacommunicative stratagies. Future intervention approaches might combine the work of Smilansky and Christie with metacommunication research to provide even more effective play training procedures to enhance children's sociodramatic play.

Proposed Program Guidelines

"It is a widely held view that play is a useful, if not essential, activity for many forms of learning" (Smith & Syddal, 1978, p. 315). In fact, "a basic understanding within the field of early childhood development is that young children learn through play and that play has value for development" (Johnson, Ershler & Bell, 1980, p. 271). Accordingly, play has become an integral part of the early childhood curriculum. Children play in an effort to understand and master their environment. When play becomes an aspect of the curriculum, the early childhood educator plans experiences through which children learn from their play. During play, children are exposed to many curriculum areas to promote: cognitive development, social development, emotional development, physical development, language, and creativity.

One form of play that is highly valued by the early childhood educator is sociodramatic play (Almy, 1968). Evidence suggests that all children do not necessarily engage in sociodramatic play and it appears that skills in highly elaborate sociodramatic play are learned (Butler et al., 1978; Smilansky, 1968). The responsibility of early childhood educators is to help children develop the skills necessary for sociodramatic play. One aspect that could be of use in developing sociodramatic play curricula is metacommunication. The implication is that as opportunities are provided to foster

children's metacommunicative abilities, the children will

negotiate the imaginative content of their sociodramatic play.

By promoting and encouraging the development of

metacommunication, teachers would likewise be enriching

sociodramatic play experiences which result in additional

learning opportunities for the children in their classrooms.

Metacommunication Categories Employed

To facilitate the metacommunicative abilities of preschool

children in sociodramatic play, teachers should employ

metacommunication strategies. Researchers have identified

various metacommunicative mechanisms used by children to

establish and maintain sociodramatic play. Each

metacommunication research study, previously described, presented

a list of metacommunicative categories. The distinct lists have

been incorporated to introduce a composite of metacommunicative

abilities. It is suggested that teachers employ the following

approach to encourage metacommunicative abilities and

sociodramatic play. The categories are arranged and described

according to metacommunicative abilities which occur prior to,

during, and following a highly elaborate sociodramatic play

episode.

    1. Proposals to Pretend. Statements that are explicit

       requests for play and that communicate the intention to

       play. Often a reference is made to the pretendedness

of the sociodramatic play situation (Giffin, 1984;

Göncü & Kessel, in press; Schwartzman, 1978).

2. <u>Connection</u> Statements. Asking permission to join an

organized play group (Schwartzman, 1978).

3. <u>Enactment</u>. Identifiable actions, postures, gestures,

tones of voice, etc. are exhibited by the player that

relate to their pretend identity (Garvey & Berndt,

1977; Giffin, 1984).

4. <u>Storytelling</u>. Narration of events which permits more

elaborate themes and action plans to be developed

rather than enacted (Giffin, 1984).

5. <u>Object</u> Statements. The apportionment of props and

objects to indicate possession of the play materials

(Garvey & Berndt, 1977; Göncü & Kessel, in press).

6. <u>Transformations</u>. Verbally proposed transformations of

objects and roles into their particular pretend

identities (Garvey & Berndt, 1977; Giffin, 1984; Göncü

& Kessel, in press).

7. <u>Plans</u>. Negotiations concerning the past, present, and

future activities of self, of partners, and of joint

plans in the sociodramatic play (Garvey & Berndt,

1977; Giffin, 1984; Göncü & Kessel, in press).

8. <u>Underscoring</u>. A monologue which clarifies an action

being performed by the player (Giffin, 1984).

9. <u>Acceptance</u> Statements. Acceptance or approval of

transformations and definitions (Göncü & Kessel, in press; Schwartzman, 1978).

10. <u>Prompting</u>. Cues, spoken in a lowered voice, to interpret subject matter, to coach a partner, or to give directions (Giffin, 1984).

11. <u>Maintenance Statements</u>. Preserving the sociodramatic play episode by avoiding a potential disruption or by transforming the disturbance into the plot of the action play (Schwartzman, 1978).

12. <u>Negation of Pretend</u>. Announcing a transformation of a sociodramatic play episode back to reality. (Garvey & Berndt, 1977; Göncü & Kessel, in press; Schwartzman, 1978).

Assessment

The teacher must first assess the children's existing metacommunication based upon the proposed categories. Observations may be recorded using an observational checklist of metacommunicative abilities (see Appendix A). The checklist can be used in several ways. The teacher could focus on one target child in order to gain information about the frequency of that child's metacommunicative abilities. In such a case, the checklist is used over several days to sample the child's metacommunicative behavior in different sociodramatic play themes. A time period of ten minutes is suggested for observation and the time period of observation should remain

constant each day. Daily the teacher records, in the checklist column, the child's name, the date, and the theme of the sociodramatic episode. Each time an example of one of the twelve metacommunicative categories is observed, the teacher makes a mark in the respective row on the checklist. Comparisons of the child's metacommunicative abilities are made in regard to the themes chosen, as well as in regard to the frequency of each metacommunication category.

Another option would be to use the checklist to assess the classroom as a whole, observing the variety of metacommunication categories rather than their frequency. Such an assessment could be done in a matter of a few days, or possibly in one day. The class is split into small groups containing six or fewer children. The names of the children in each group are written in the columns of the observational checklist; each group on a separate checklist. The teacher is responsible for setting up an area conducive to sociodramatic play, following the guidelines presented later in this report. Each small group is simultaneously told that it is their turn to play in the sociodramatic play setting. The setting and props must remain constant for each group in order to gain a representative sample. The teacher observes each group in turn over a time period that contains two minutes per child. To observe each child, the teacher focuses on a particular child for 15 seconds, records that child's metacommunicative behaviors for 15 seconds by making

marks in each category observed; then the teacher switches to observe the next child. The observation proceeds in this manner for twelve minutes, with six children, allowing each child an equal number of observations. The length of observation time may be adjusted to allow for fewer children, if the number of observations per child remains constant. The teacher must realize that some metacommunicative categories are more likely to occur during the beginning, middle, or end of a sociodramatic play episode. One limitation of the described observation procedure is that it does not control for this fact. If this is a concern, the teacher could observe each small group several times, rotating the children's names, in an attempt to give each child an opportunity to be observed during the different stages in the sociodramatic play episode.

When the observations are completed, the teacher determines which metacommunicative categories are exhibited by each child. After such an assessment of the existing metacommunicative abilities has been made, intervention can be planned.

Teacher's Role

The role of the teacher in facilitating metacommunication and sociodramatic play is to provide training in both areas. The teacher needs to teach children about sociodramatic play themes as well as teach children how to metacommunicate. A systematic procedure for helping children develop components of

metacommunication and sociodramatic play will advance the metacommunicative skills needed to play sociodramatically.

To facilitate the presentation of metacommunication strategies, it is suggested that the teacher combine theme and technique training as achieved by Smilansky (1968) in her third treatment group. This will give children and teachers the advantage of establishing sociodramatic play upon their shared experiences. The teacher should take each sociodramatic play situation into account to determine when and how to intervene, the purpose being to interfere as little as possible. By incorporating outside and inside intervention (Christie, 1982a; 1982b; Smilansky, 1968), the teacher may help children metacommunicate without controlling their sociodramatic play.

The teacher should begin with outside intervention to promote metacommunication, being sure to address children by their adopted roles. This procedure will allow the teacher to take on an active, yet facilitative, role. The teacher helps to get the play organized by remaining outside of the play and by making comments to children, encouraging them to use specific forms of metacommunication. Researchers have reported that most metacommunication in sociodramatic play deals with transformations (Göncü & Kessel, in press) and that plans are subject to transformations more frequently than roles or objects (Garvey & Berndt, 1977). Children may also be using indirect forms of metacommunication in an attempt to conceal rather than

reveal the pretend aspect of sociodramatic play (Giffin, 1984).
Consequently, it is proposed that during outside intervention the
teacher might focus on the very aspects of metacommunication that
children have been verified to use through research. According
to the metacommunication system to be employed, the teacher
should emphasize the following categories when helping children
to establish a sociodramatic play situation:

> Proposals to Pretend. "Pretend that you are going to the
> grocery store."
>
> Object Statements. "Here is your cash register."
>
> Transformations. "This large block could be your car."
> "Who would like to wear the Safeway jacket and be the
> cashier?"
>
> Plans. "A truck load of groceries just arrived. Someone
> needs to stock the shelves."

After the teacher has intervened from the outside, the children's
metacommunication needs to be assessed. If the children are not
successful at maintaining and establishing their sociodramatic
play, then the teacher should use inside intervention.

Inside intervention is the teacher's opportunity to model
specific metacommunication strategies while actively
participating in the sociodramatic play. The teacher models the
metacommunication categories and behaviors that the children are
to learn. Care must be taken so that the amount of modeled play
by the teacher does not exceed the children's spontaneous

sociodramatic play. During inside intervention, the teacher may use any or all of the twelve metacommunication categories employed. Once again, the transformations of plans, roles, and objects should be accentuated. The teacher should also take care to conceal the pretense during a sociodramatic play episode. Examples of ways that a teacher might metacommunicate during sociodramatic play based on the theme of birthday party are described:

Proposals to Pretend. "Say that today is your birthday."

Connection Statements. "May I come to your party?"

Enactment. Blowing out birthday candles. Pinning the tail on the donkey. Eating pretend cake.

Storytelling. "..and you open all of your presents...and then we play with them...and then we go outside..."

Object Statements. "These are our party hats."

Transformations. "These pieces of straws can be the candles." "Now you be the birthday girl."

Plans. "It's time to open the birthday presents."

Underscoring. "I'm cutting the birthday cake."

Acceptance Statements. "Oh yeah, I like chocolate cake."

Prompting. "Sing the birthday song."

Maintenance Statements. Another child disturbs the play – "Let's invite him to the party."

Negation of Pretend. "I'm not going to play anymore, but you may continue to have the party without me."

The categories of metacommunication are not to be used in any established order. The teacher may use each category as the need arises or as the situation presents itself.

The use of outside and inside intervention is left to the teacher's discretion. Suggestions have been made on how to incorporate metacommunication training within sociodramatic play. Teachers may also use both methods of intervention simultaneously, depending on the sociodramatic play situation. Clearly, the teacher must adjust the intervention procedures to the needs of individual children and their previous experiences with metacommunication and sociodramatic play, as well as the ecological context of the situation.

Teachers should also consider the following supporting components which are critical to the effectiveness of their efforts to facilitate children's metacommunicative abilities in sociodramatic play. Themes, props, timing, and room arrangement are important aspects of any early childhood environment which strives to encourage metacommunication in sociodramatic play.

Supporting Components

Themes.

To facilitate metacommunication in sociodramatic play, the teacher must provide the children with possible themes for their play. Themes provide direction and structure around which children can metacommunicate about their sociodramatic play. The themes must be appealing to the children and they must allow for

the roles of both sexes. In addition, themes should be connected to events that are of current interest to the children. The children must have some basis in their experience for relating to the roles and behaviors required in the sociodramatic play situation. Often the sociodramatic play of children is imitation of what they have observed adults doing in the real world. Children can not be expected to play sociodramatically and to metacommunicate if they have not experienced what they are to play about.

In the preschool classroom, the themes can be related to previous experiences of the group. Complex themes for sociodramatic play situations can be based upon field trips, resource persons, books, pictures, or films. New themes can first be explored during a large group time to ascertain the children's as well as the staff's level of interest. Sociodramatic play can then be designed by the children around the new theme. The list of possibilities for sociodramatic play themes is endless, although here are some suggestions: service station, circus, airport, radio/television station, bakery, veterinary clinic, camera store, car wash, fire department, grocery store, shoe store, medical center, hair care shop, post office, library, fast food restaurant, ice cream store, and birthday party. To promote metacommunication within the sociodramatic themes, the teacher must also provide the children with an array of play materials.

Props.

To encourage metacommunication of transformations in children's sociodramatic play, various props should be made available. One way to provide props for sociodramatic play is through prop boxes. A prop box can be assembled to contain props which relate to individual themes (See Appendix B for an example). Teachers and children can talk about how each prop box could be used in pretending. Pictures, photographs, and written words that symbolize the theme should be placed on the outside of each prop box so that one prop box can be distinguished from another. When sociodramatic play is devoted to a particular theme, that theme's prop box could be utilized. To sustain interest in sociodramatic play and to facilitate metacommunication, the props should be modified and expanded periodically.

The props chosen for sociodramatic play need to be carefully considered by the teacher. Younger and less experienced players need an environment which contains an ample supply of realistic objects, while the sociodramatic play of older children may be limited rather than enhanced by such an environment (Fein, 1981b). The teacher can help children in the metacommunicative and sociodramatic play process by varying the play props. Pellegrini et al. (1983) suggest that:

> children who have trouble keeping fantasy play going
>
> might need realistic props to guide them at first....
>
> After the children sustain play with the realistic

prop, [the teacher] could then replace it with a more abstract prop. Finally, the teacher should remove the prop altogether so that players do not rely on any object but have to make a verbal representation for the [object]. (p. 382)

A great deal of metacommunication is devoted to object transformations in sociodramatic play; while in the pretend state, children's behavior is directed to the transformed rather than to the actual object. Sociodramatic play may thus be intensified by a sensitive teacher who offers a rich array of supporting materials and equipment.

Timing/Room Arrangement.

Most early childhood education programs devote a fair amount of time and equipment to sociodramatic play. Free play activity periods allow children to plan and carry out play episodes. Children need uninterrupted amounts of time to really get involved in their play and to establish a system of metacommunication. Persistence in sociodramatic play is supported by children's ability to metacommunicate and sustain the play. It takes more than 15 or 25 minutes to get organized, arrange the space, plan roles, and carry out themes. Teachers need to provide ample time for metacommunication to take place in child-directed sociodramatic play. When scheduling, teachers should devote one to one-and-a-half hours per activity period if they expect metacommunication and highly elaborate sociodramatic

play to occur. There may also be a need to reduce the number of activities available during free play in order to lessen distractions and give more opportunity for involvement in sociodramatic play (Griffing, 1983).

Teachers must also provide children with space for play in their classroom environment. During free choice activity time metacommunication and sociodramatic play are most likely to occur in the housekeeping and block centers of a preschool classroom (Griffing, 1983; Schwartzman, 1978; Pellegrini, 1983). Griffing (1983) found that a higher level of sociodramatic play occurred in a separate play room, which contained housekeeping and block props, than in the classroom itself. This was attributed to the concentration of props as well as to the decline in distraction from other activities. Teachers may use this information when planning their classroom arrangement. The housekeeping and block centers could be located in the same contained area of the classroom to encourage metacommunication within the context of sociodramatic play.

Conclusion

Proposed program guidelines for facilitating preschool children's use of metacommunication in sociodramatic play have been suggested. Systematic procedures were based upon research studies which described children's metacommunicative abilities. Metacommunication categories necessary for highly elaborate sociodramatic play episodes were incorporated into inside and

outside intervention by the teacher, according to the assessment of children's individual needs. Using the procedures outlined, teachers may effectively enhance the metacommunicative abilities of preschool children in sociodramatic play.

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Appendix A

Observational Checklist of Metacommunicative Abilities

Date/Time _____   Location _____

Proposals to Pretend						
Connection Statements						
Enactment						
Storytelling						
Object Statements						
Transformations						
Plans						
Underscoring						
Acceptance Statements						
Prompting						
Maintenance Statements						
Negation of Pretend						

Description of Theme:_____

_____

_____

Appendix B

Example of a Sociodramatic Play Prop Box

Theme: <u>Birthday</u> <u>Party</u>

Materials: invitations

party hats

party favors

cups

napkins

plates

streamers

table cloth

balloons

pin the tail on the donkey game

wooden birthday cake and candles

THE METACOMMUNICATIVE ABILITIES
OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN
IN SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY

by

MARADEE WYNN GIBSON

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KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

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Abstract

The purpose of this report was to propose program guidelines for
facilitating preschool children's use of metacommunication in
sociodramatic play. In developing this system the
characteristics of sociodramatic play, the nature and relevance
of metacommunication, and play training procedures were reviewed.
Among the variables considered were: (a) metacommunication
categories employed, (b) assessment, (c) teacher's role, and
(d) supporting components of themes, props, timing, and room
arrangement. Implications for early childhood curricula were
discussed.