

Building Language with Small World Play

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may 9, 2013 by [stephanie](#) • 22 comments



Hi friends! In honor of Better Speech and Hearing Month, I have teamed up with Katie from [Let's Grow Speech](#) to bring you a fun and information-packed series called Playing With Language designed to highlight easy ways to stimulate language that you can do at home with your little one! In case you missed Tuesday's introductory post, I shared some fun ways to [Build Language with Sensory Play](#). Today I am going to talk about one of my favorite activities, building language with small world play.



As a speech-language pathologist, I was (and still am) frequently consulted by concerned parents of “late-talking” two-ish year-olds. After asking the necessary questions regarding frequent ear infections, second languages, etc., the first thing I did was sit back and observe the child at play.

More often than not, I was able to reassure the parents that language was on the horizon based on the presence of **symbolic play**, which is simply when children begin to use one object to represent another during play. This is why, as a parent of preemie twins who were at risk for developmental delays, I was overjoyed the first time my son zoomed his carrot around on his high chair tray, pretending it was a car. Table manners? Meh. He was doing SYMBOLIC PLAY!!!

Symbolic Play and Language

Why does the presence of symbolic play signify language readiness? It’s simple, really- in it’s purest form, language is just a system of abstract symbols (words) that represent objects and concepts in our world. If a child is able to use a wooden block (or a chunk of carrot) to represent a car, this means that he/she has the cognitive ability to understand symbols, and this is a necessary skill for language learning. And that’s not all- researchers have documented that the development of symbolic play parallels the development of language, so as your child’s pretend play sessions become more sophisticated (i.e. involve multiple characters, steps, and scenarios), his/her language will follow suit.

What is Small World Play?

Which brings me to today’s topic- using small world play to build language. Small world play is when children use miniature items such as toys, found objects, or replicas to act out scenes or ideas from

real life, stories, or books. Small worlds often include sensory elements (examples to come) which adds an even more depth to the experience and creates more opportunities for language stimulation (see my post on [building language with sensory play](#)). Creating small worlds for children is a fabulous creative outlet for adults, too!



Pig pen from our [Farm Small World](#)

Choosing Your Subject

I can't say enough about how much I love small world play for language building. Small worlds are versatile- they can be simple or elaborate, small or giant scale, and incorporate toys or natural items, which is a personal favorite of mine. But what they all have in common is the potential for allowing children to practice using language in a *meaningful context*, another concept that I cannot stress too much. Choose small worlds that replicate environments or scenarios that your child has experience with- this is especially important with early language learners. Good first small worlds often involve animals, since this is a subject that most children have some knowledge of, whether it be through pets, a trip to the zoo, or a visit to a farm.

Creating Your Small World

Once you have chosen your subject, you can create your small world, but do keep a few things in mind. If you are creating it for a very young child (children are generally ready for small worlds around age two, when the average child has begun to demonstrate early symbolic play), try to keep it simple. For example, if you are creating a farm scene, limit it to a barn, 2-3 animals, and one sensory material. Too many elaborate details and characters will become overstimulating and distracting to your child. As your child's play becomes more sophisticated, you can begin to add more elements and characters to your play scenes. Take your child's motor skills into consideration as well- large, chunky pieces may be easier for little hands to manipulate than more delicate replicas. If you are using a commercially created toy as part of your small world, be sure that any sounds or flashing lights are disabled. Get rid of those batteries!

Playing With Small Worlds

And now for the fun part...play! When you first begin small world play with your child, you will probably need to do a fair amount of modeling. Even if your child has had experience with the

scenario, you may have to show him/her how to reenact that experience within the miniature world.

For example, if you are playing with a farm world, make the animals walk around the fields, eat their food, and go to sleep in the barn. Have the tractor plow the field. Talk about what you are doing as you go using simple language. Make animal sounds. Have fun with it! Pretty soon, your child will join in, and as he does, back off a bit and follow his lead. Just as you would [scaffold on his early speech](#), you can scaffold on his play actions. If he makes his animal eat, make yours eat, and then take a drink of water. If his animal gets a drink, make yours get a drink and then jump in the water for a bath! If he loses interest, that's ok, too. You can return to the small world later or on another day, and chances are he will show interest once again.



As your child grows and develops, so will his interest and involvement in small world play.

Additionally, you will be able to create more abstract scenes for play, including scenarios that your child may not have had first-hand experiences with. Many small worlds are based on scenes from books- wouldn't these [Truffula Trees](#) made from pipe cleaners and pompoms by I Can Teach My Child be fantastic in a small world based on Dr. Seuss' *The Lorax*? More advanced children will use small worlds to act out or create stories. At this point, the play will be mostly child-led, so do more listening than talking and interact with your child through characters in the play scene. Small world/dramatic play is an ideal time for children to practice social interaction, so a play date is an excellent opportunity to set one up! Although it is often fun as a parent to create small worlds for your child, don't forget that there is real value to having the child help. Even younger children can help select materials and set up the play scene- I was surprised by how involved my two-year-old son was with the creation of this dinosaur garden inspired by [Play Create Explore!](#) While we worked we got some excellent practice on prepositions ("You put the rock **BESIDE** the stick") and problem solving ("This book shows dinosaurs eating leaves off of tall trees. Which plant looks like a tall tree for our dinosaur?"). Older children will love brainstorming what items could be used to represent elements in their small world environments!

Examples of Small Worlds

Here are a few small world set-ups from around the web:

Shaunna from [Fantastic Fun and Learning](#) describes how her children's small world play evolved after reading books about pandas.



Panda Small World at Fantastic Fun and Learning

This small world from [Fun at Home with Kids](#) includes a super-fun science element...fizzing sea shells with hidden animals inside!



Fizzing Hidden Ocean World at Fun at Home with Kids

My twins would LOVE this construction site with special play dough dirt from [My Nearest and Dearest!](#)



Construction Site With Play Dough Dirt from My Nearest and Dearest

I love the natural elements included in this frog pond small world from One Perfect Day.



Frog Pond Small World at One Perfect Day

Another animal scene incorporating natural elements from Creative Playhouse.



Creative Playhouse Reptile Small World

I hope you have enjoyed our second installment of the Playing With Language series. Be sure so come back next Thursday to learn about Building Language with Music, and in the meantime, please hop on over to [Let's Grow Speech](#) to see her latest fantastic post- [Playing with Language Outdoors!](#) Psst...there's another free printable!



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