Prop Box

This article is excerpted from Literacy-Building Play in Preschool: Lit Kits, Prop Boxes, and Other Easy-to-Make Tools to Boost Emergent Reading and Writing Skills Through Dramatic Play by V. Susan Bennett-Armistead

Prop boxes have been shown to enhance children’s literacy skills, and deciding what to include in them is usually pretty straightforward.

For example, if you were to create a restaurant, you’d undoubtedly need a table, chairs, and menus.

But don’t be afraid to tap your creativity by also including aprons, order pads, fancy dress-up clothes, and a picture cookbook.

Think about your theme. What do you want children to learn about? What do you want children to be able to do?

Once you’ve come up with a theme, think about the following criteria as you choose materials for the box.

Appropriateness

- Are the materials safe for the children with whom you work? (Avoid using items that might be construed as dangerous, such as glass mirrors, plastic bags, and lead pencils.)
- Do the materials support your theme?
- Can children identify the theme just by looking at the materials?

Authenticity

- Would a child find the materials in the real world?
- Can you locate a source of “real” materials, such as menus from an actual restaurant or message pads from an office?

Creativity

- Can the materials be used in a variety of ways?
- Are there ways that the children can contribute materials to the box? Could they create some themselves?
- Do you have a variety of prop boxes to attract different children? For example, some children will never go into “housekeeping” but may be very attracted to a bakery (similar but different themes).
- Do you have a variety of materials in each prop box to attract different children? For example, in a firehouse prop box, you might include not only firefighter hats and hoses, but also dolls and a typewriter to appeal to a wide range of children.
**Connectedness to Text**

- Are the materials connected to a book or song that you have used? Can you provide a copy of that text in the box? (Keep in mind that not all texts are books. Some are lists, menus, songs, and so forth.)
- Have you read related texts to the children or will you provide them with texts they might use in the center on their own (such as a guide book for a campout)? If you include a reference book, do you plan to spend time helping children use it?
- If the text is environmental (such as ice cream parlor signs), how will you help children read and make sense of it?

**Usefulness**

- Will the children actually use the materials? Do they need a demonstration?

Prop boxes expose children to literacy materials that they might not otherwise use. They also create a foundation of knowledge that children can draw upon in their writing and reading now and in years to come. For you, the teacher, they provide a quick and easy way to implement rich, thematic play experiences, day to day, week to week.