

Child Observation No. 4

# Pretend Play

User notes



SIREN



FILMS LTD



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## **Aims of the film and its use**

Pretend play, sometimes also referred to as fantasy, symbolic or role play, is generally seen as being especially important for the development of children's thinking. Here we present sequences of children's pretend play from 20 months to 7 years to show its general development. Most theorists and experts agree that pretense is a main element in much of the play for that age group, with extensive links to learning and development.

Pretend play involves being a symbol user, where one thing stands for another, and helps humans to think beyond the here and now. It encourages children to think in abstract ways and allows them to imagine. The ability to imagine allows them to experience and respond creatively to ideas, feelings and relationships.

Pretend play starts once the toddler is able to symbolise. The play is initially very simple and usually involves pretending with an object. At around three years, children begin to develop pretend games with their peers. This stage of pretend play is often referred to as socio-dramatic play and involves simple role play, gradually becoming more complex and sustained.

The dvd sequences showing examples of pretend play are presented in order of age, from 20 months to 7 years.

### **For each sequence we provide:**

#### **A brief description:**

A short description of the sequence and it's salient features

#### **Good for looking at:**

Examples of:

- ♦ specific aspects and developmental stages of pretend play
- ♦ associated learning and development

#### **Transcript:**

A transcript of the language is provided for the sequences where children's language is a major part of the sequence

#### **Discussion:**

Suggestions of relevant issues and starting points for discussions related to the sequence



# 1 “Isobelle cleans up”

**3 mins**

**20 months**

## **A brief description:**

Twins, Isobelle and Angus, are playing at home looked after by their mum. Isobelle has found some paper tissues. She begins carefully cleaning different objects around the room imitating domestic activity. She makes speech like sounds with conversational intonations as she talks to herself about what's happening. The decipherable words she says are “that's good”. She appears absorbed and happy.

## **Good for looking at:**

- ♦ Solitary play, with objects
- ♦ Early stages of pretend play, using simple pretend actions that involve other objects
- ♦ Language development, talks to her self and beginning to use two word combinations
- ♦ Fine motor skills, cleans objects carefully with tissue

## **Discussion:**

Think about the way Isobelle is learning to make sense of the adult world.

What is Isobelle learning?

How might you extend her learning opportunities following her interests?



## 2 "Angus feeds dolly"

2.5 mins

20 months

### A brief description:

Angus is at home being looked after by his mum. He is sitting on the floor having a snack and begins to feed the doll lying next to him. He's careful to make sure that the small bits of food go exactly where the doll's mouth is.

### Good for looking at:

- ♦ Solitary symbolic play, with doll
- ♦ Early stages of pretend play, using simple pretend actions that involve other objects
- ♦ Fine motor skills, delicate pincer grasp to pick up small objects
- ♦ Hand eye coordination, making sure food goes to doll's mouth
- ♦ Emotional development, treats doll as similar to himself, needs feeding and caring for

### Discussion:

*"Toddler time is a crucial period for the development of play. It is the time when play has the possibility to develop the features which use the rehearsal of roles, pretending, imagining and creating play props. This is all part of the symbolic explosion which occurs as the toddler turns into a talker and a player with symbols." Tina Bruce, Learning Through Play*

*What other kind of objects would encourage symbolic play at this age?*

*Do you think certain toys are for boys and others for girls?*

*How might an adult's views about what each gender should play with affect their learning?*



### 3 "Joanne's tea party"

3 mins

2.5 years

#### A brief description:

Joanne is playing at home with her mum. She is playing with a tea-set, sharing a drink with some of her toy animals. She gives a steady stream of conversation about what is happening. Her mum repeats clearly what she is saying and is careful to try and interpret correctly. She takes care, attending to the needs of her animals imagining what they are wanting. Joanne sustains this play for ten minutes.

#### Good for looking at:

- ♦ Early pretend play with an adult
- ♦ Social and emotional development, takes care attending to the needs of her toy animals
- ♦ Three and four word sentences with indistinct pronunciation
- ♦ Mum repeats clearly what Joanne has said and is careful to interpret correctly

#### Transcript:

Joanne	Mum
Nouse (mouse)	Oh very good, a lovely cup of tea Is that nice? Some for Joanne. What about donkey? Does donkey want some?
It's nouse dup of tea	That's mouse's tea
Donkey's big tea	Is donkey having some tea?
All gone	All gone now Thank you very much
Donkey (---- indistinct) dis one	Donkey's going to have some Mouse has finished
Donkey's	



Joanne	Mum
Donkey! Oh dear All gone	
Donkey's (---- indistinct)	All gone now. Thank you
Yes Donkey's nother one Mummy's	Donkey's? Donkey's finished? Oh. He wants another one!
It's mummy's tea	And one for Mummy
Nouse (mouse)	And one for mouse
Sink (drink) tea sdonkey's	There he is
All gone	Aha, donkey's
(---- indistinct)	All gone now
	Are you going to put these away now?

**Discussion:**

*"Pretend play provides children not only with the opportunity to begin where they currently 'are' but to use their real and imaginary experiences for language and learning."*  
 Moyles 1989

*"Young children cannot always find the words to express what they are actually capable of exploring through their internal and personal development of language and thought."*  
 Moyles 1994

What is this play situation encouraging Joanne to learn?

How does Joanne's mum help her language development?



## 4 "The dancing class"

6 mins

3 years

### A brief description:

James is at nursery school in a class of similar age children. In addition to the teacher there are two other adults in the room.

James wants to wear a pink dress. A girl on work placement tries to discourage him but he puts it on any way. The teacher encourages him by becoming involved in the dressing up game. Seeing James do a few dance steps she suggests a dancing session for the whole group. James seems happy and confident throughout as he tries out a different role. (The teacher knows that his elder sister is a dancer)

### Good for looking at:

- ♦ Role play, dressing up, trying out being a dancer, seeing what it feels like to wear a dress and high heels, carrying a bag, getting ready, looking in the mirror, brushing hair.
- ♦ Adult getting involved in the play and extending it by arranging a dance
- ♦ Physical development, dancing, body coordination and expression through movement

### Discussion:

*"Children inhabit a social world that is organised, to a large degree, according to gender. The expectations and responses of significant adults exert a subtle but powerful pressure on boys and girls to behave in sex-appropriate ways. It is likely, and perhaps inevitable, that children will explore gender boundaries and identify in socio-dramatic play as they seek to come to terms with who they are as individuals. Their play will render valuable information and offer insights to educators who wish to understand children better in order to enrich their development and to meet their needs as individuals within a social context." Hislam, 2005*

What do you think about the reaction of the two adults in the sequence?

How might you have reacted to James in this situation?

Why is the home corner equally important for both boys and girls?



## 5 “Harley gets dinner”

5 mins

4 years

### A brief description:

Harley is playing on her own at home. She has just finished setting out and sorting a tea set, cutlery and pretend food. She talks to herself and pretends to eat the food, thinking hard about which piece of cutlery will be most appropriate for which food item. She practices counting and tries to work out how many ‘babies’ she needs to solve a problem that she is imagining. She handles one of the dolls lovingly, and a hat is put to various uses – it becomes a potty, a chair for watching television and finally a sunshade.

### Good for looking at:

- ♦ Solitary play, with dolls and tea set
- ♦ Mathematical development, counting, sorting, problem solving
- ♦ Language development, talking about what she is doing with a constant narrative
- ♦ Symbolic use of object, using one object to stand for another, the hat becomes a potty, a chair and a sun shade
- ♦ Social and emotional development, loving towards her doll but can also behave unacceptably towards her doll throwing her across the room

### Transcript:

#### Harley

Have a knife  
Another knife  
A spoon  
Now I’m going to eat it all up  
Yummy yummy in my tummy  
Spoon for this  
Fork for this  
Yummy yummy  
I need a spoon for this  
I can only take one baby in the world



### Harley

One baby  
1, 2, 3, 4, 5  
I need 5 babies  
1,2,3,4,5  
I need 5 babies  
I bringed some babies  
Come on, come on  
You two can walk if this baby can walk  
Your still crying  
(Indistinct)  
Now put your botty in there  
Oh that's alright  
Oh this is mummy's, found my hat  
(Indistinct)  
Now put your baby right there  
We're not in the sun now  
You watching tele  
You can see your friends now  
Her just messing the place  
Hey stop messing the place!

### Discussion:

Young children of both sexes act out roles, often as narratives, with great intensity and seriousness of purpose. As they do so, they develop language skills, try out behaviours and ways of being girls and boys and become more confident communicators and story makers." Hislam 2005

Discuss what you think Harley is experiencing and learning during her play.

Why do you think Harley talks to her self while she is playing ?

Think of some ideas of how you might join in Harley's game to extend her play and learning?



## 6 "Mums and dads" (Playing house)

3.5 mins

3.5 & 4 years

### A brief description:

Harley 4, and cousin Lauren 3.5 years are playing together in Harley's bedroom. The two girls are playing 'house'.

Harley, on the right of the screen initially, changes role a number of times. Firstly she is daddy – being quite assertive with her body language and giving instructions. Lauren, as mummy, starts the ironing.

Then Harley takes on the role of a little girl and changes her voice level. She tells Lauren to scold her for licking Grandma and Grandad's ice-cream. Lauren does this but Harley takes no notice of being told off and continues to 'eat' the ice-cream until it's gone. Harley now becomes the baby. Again she sets up a situation whereby she can be told off – this time for making a noise.

### Good for looking at:

- ◆ Socio-dramatic play, develop make believe game taking on agreed roles
- ◆ Beginning to step in and out of roles
- ◆ Language and communication development, creative verbal and nonverbal communication to act out their roles
- ◆ Knowledge of the world, theme for game taken from family life, drawing from previous experiences
- ◆ Social and emotional development, making sense of the adult world, trying out situations

### Transcript:

Harley	Lauren
I'm the mummy	
	No. I'm the mam
I'm the dadda	
	I need something to iron
I think you iron this	
	No I won't iron that
It's a dress. This is dirty	



Harley	Lauren
Tend (pretend) it's dirty Will you take Barney's clothes off (to camera person)	Right
You gotta say 'top licking da iye cream' it's for grandma and mother	No iron this Stop licking that ice cream
Grandad and grandma  I finished it mummy and you've got a say 'good girl'	It's for grandma and mother  Grandad and grandma Stop eating it
It's powder This is baby food Me and Jay, eat baby food Ga ga I be the little baby Ga ga You've gotta say 'stop shaking that' Ga ga	Good girl Let's see that
Baby powder	Stop shaking that Will you open that, baby
Yes. I open it	No it's mam's powder

**Discussion:**

*"A child plays with her doll not solely for the role of a protective figure, but also (like her own mother) as a power figure; little girls disciplining their doll families can be a disconcerting experience, especially for the mother who recognises her own bossy voice. For the child to adopt a role of power is most valuable to the process of identifying with parents and internalizing their standards of behaviour" Newson 1979*

How does Harley communicate the different roles she takes on?

How is the game being used to express the children's feelings?



## 7 “Cats and dogs”

3 mins

3.5 & 4 years

### A brief description:

A little later we see Harley and Lauren make use of a book (*'Mog the Forgetful Cat'* by Judith Kerr) as a springboard for an imaginative game. Harley has chosen the book and directs the action. She cooperates when Lauren says she doesn't want to be the 'pussy cat'. Harley pretends to be the cat and Lauren is the little girl who feeds the cat by pretending the talcum powder is milk. Lauren extends the make-believe in her own way by attending to some toy dogs. Harley scratches a doll on the face and then licks the doll clean.

### Good for looking at:

- ◆ Socio-dramatic play, develop make believe game taking on agreed roles
- ◆ Literacy, drawing inspiration for game from a story book
- ◆ Literacy, using language from story book style 'A long long time ago...'
- ◆ Social and emotional development, beginning to be able to negotiate when working out their roles, Harley is showing sensitivity towards Lauren
- ◆ Language and communication, directing and discussing the flow of their pretend theme

### Transcript:

Harley	Lauren
Let me have a see I'm the girl That's Jay and you the pussy cat	
Alright I be the pussy cat There's Jay and there's me and I know where you've gone There you. Yes that's me. There me Long long time ago Lauren says get a food here pussy cat	No I'm not pussy cat



Harley	Lauren
There where I'm sleeping	No I have to put it on your face
I'm the cat, miaow	This is your powder
Cat food	I will put some milk in
I'm licking the little girl	These were my dogs
Lick the little girl, nice and clean	Powder there, powder there
It's called milk	No that was my bag
It's called milk	No that was mine
I want to be the dad	
I'm powdering this	
Nice and clean now for me	

**Discussion:**

*"...play is not just about fantasy. It doesn't have a life of its own which is divorced from reality. Children continuously weave in and out of their play their knowledge skills and understanding learned in the other areas of their lives." Wood & Attfield 1996*

How has Harley adapted the story to fit in with her own situation ?

What does this sequence tell you about the value of reading stories to children?

How does Lauren adapt the game that Harley has made up, to fit her own interests?



## 8 "Gladiators"

**3 mins**

**4 and 5.5 years**

### **A brief description:**

Harley is playing in her front garden with two 5.5 year old boys – Jay, her brother and their neighbour Stephen. Jay, in yellow, suggests a game of Gladiators (a television programme where contestants have to compete with super sports heroes with fantasy names).

The children each take on a specific role which in this case involves being either Werewolf, Cobra or Foxer. Jay, who is the leader in this game, allows the other two to choose their 'personas' first. He quickly establishes the rules which the other two seem happy to comply with. During the game the children extend themselves and practice their physical skills to the limit. The older boys are skilful in climbing and swinging and doing 'stunts'. Harley, this time the youngest child, is much less dominant and vocal than in the previous sequences.

### **Good for looking at:**

- ♦ Fantasy play, based on non-real characters from television show
- ♦ Social and emotional development, Jay shows signs of diplomacy and well developed social skills as he allows the other two to choose their 'personas' first, he quickly establishes the rules
- ♦ Enjoying team games with rules
- ♦ Physical development, climbing, swinging and performing 'stunts'

### **Discussion:**

"There are sound reasons to be concerned if physical play is down graded along with outdoor and energetic play for children. Apart from the great importance of physical skills in their own right for children, many of the more valued intellectual activities are highly dependent on confidence and practice in physical skills." Lindon 2001

Discuss the value of the outside environment for children's development.

How could this outside play area be enriched?

How do the children relate to each other?

What do you think about their game being based on a television programme?



## 9 "The factory office"

5 mins

3.5 & 4 years

### A brief description:

Christopher, Megan and Vicky aged 4 are playing together at nursery. They are joined later by Zoe and Kayleigh aged 3.5 years as their game progresses. There are two adults in the setting.

Christopher, Megan and Vicky are in the 'writing corner'. They are cutting out paper in their factory office. They decide to be dad and two mums. The girls are making phone calls and Christopher is cutting out various sized trousers to go in the factory window. He tests out who the trousers will fit by measuring them against themselves. Two younger girls arrive and are told they can be the children. They pretend to be naughty children and 'dad' tells them off. The children continue giggling 'naughtily'. Christopher establishes his authority by telling 'mum' that "This is really my office isn't it? But for the first time I let mum in didn't I?" and pats Megan on the shoulder. Mum agrees "I needed to go to work."

Meanwhile the 'children' are getting 'naughtier' and decide to steal some scissors. Christopher politely asks for their return, supported by his 'wife' who says "Those are my dad's scissors." The 'children' however are intent on being 'naughty'. One of the adults intervenes to tell Zoe she must not run with the scissors because it is dangerous. All the children communicate their roles non-verbally, through body language, as well as speech.

Christopher and Vicky continue the game for a further ten minutes.

### Good for looking at:

- ♦ Complex socio-dramatic play, develop make believe game taking on agreed roles, directing and discussing the flow of their pretend theme
- ♦ Language and communication development, imitating words and tone of voice
- ♦ Physical development, using scissors to make changes to the paper
- ♦ Physical development, manipulating materials to achieve a planned effect, making trousers out of paper
- ♦ Mathematical development, measuring and comparing sizes



**Transcript :**

Christopher	Vicky	4 year old girl
This is dad's and mum's office		
There could be two mums	No I'm the mum	I'm the mum and you're the daddy
We have to make trousers don't forget	Mum has to cut something out and she has to get cutting out things out	
Were a factory aren't we	(No you said mum's)	
And factories have to make everything we need - clothes	Yes we've a factory	
There ---- Where shall we put them Oh yes we'll just put them in the window		(phone call)
There are some baby trousers No I mean these are shorts	(Phone call) Hello - daddy at work	Do you want to come to tea Emmy and me and mummy and Vin and James?
These are for babies	These shorts won't fit me	Do you want to come to tea?
Ah the glass ones mine	Which is my ruler dad? Do you think the glass one's my ruler	Yes. Bye bye I've done now I'll be a doctor



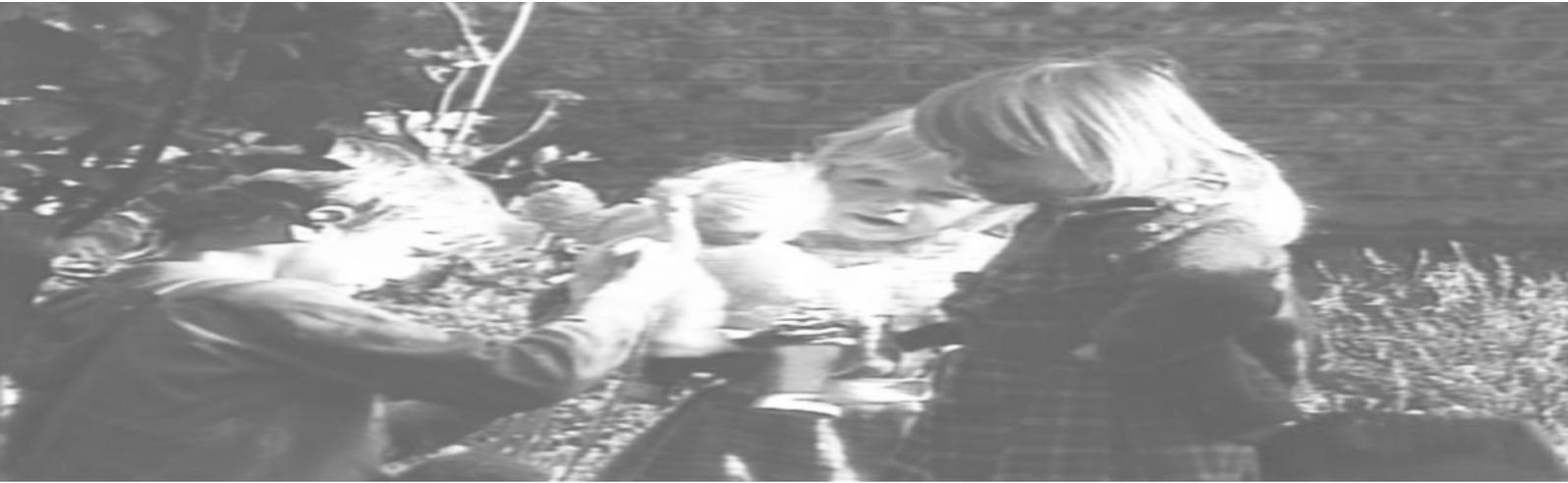
Christopher	Vicky	4 year old girl
<p>This one's yours            No this ones mine            Here we go!            A nice funny thing            I don't know what it is            though too many holes in it            - I going to put that in the            bin. Our bin used to be            here            I'm afraid there's no room            (to younger children)</p>		
	<p>Yes I'm afraid it's no room.            There's no room!            You can be our children</p>	<p><b>3 1/2 year old girl</b></p>
		<p>Look out the window            Look            Giggle</p>
<p>We're trying to work chil-            dren!</p>	<p>Stop it children</p>	
<p>This is really my office isn't            it? But for the first time I let            mum in didn't I?</p>		
	<p>Yes 'cos I needed to go to            work didn't I?</p>	
<p>So you need to learn in this            office don't you</p>		
	<p>9-8            How do you do 9-8?            This is our office            Dad will you look after my            chair?</p>	

**Discussion:**

"The child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour. In play it is as if he were a head taller than himself." Vigotsky 1978

Do you think this idea applies to the children playing this game?

How is the game developing the children's development in the following areas: mathematical, physical, emotional & social, communication, language & literacy, knowledge & understanding?



## 10 "Orphans"

**4 mins**

**4.5, 5.5 years & 7 years**

### **A brief description:**

Three children of different ages play together in one of their gardens. Katrina, 7, knits, Colette, 5.5, holds her doll and Beth, 4.5, has a moses basket. They are discussing the scenario for their game. They decide that they are all teenagers and their mum had died and their dad had gone away for a hundred years. They love him and really miss him. Colette is going to have a baby. The baby's grandad is deaf and they practice sign language, making up signs they can't remember.

### **Good for looking at:**

- ♦ Complex socio-dramatic play, develop make believe game taking on agreed roles, directing and discussing the flow of their pretend theme
- ♦ Rehearsing the way young adults behave
- ♦ Emotional well being, exploring their experiences of family life, love and separation, fears and anxieties
- ♦ Emotional and social development, beginning to manage, explore and deal with their feelings
- ♦ Language and communication development, using language to organise feelings and events
- ♦ Knowledge and understanding, knowing that deaf people communicate with sign language

### **Transcript:**

<b>Katrina (7)</b>	<b>Colette (5.5)</b>	<b>Beth (4)</b>
Yeah, our mam had died		Our mam had died
Yeah – no our dad went away for a hundred years	And wa dad('wa' dialect for our)	
I'm sixteen	Yeah and we never saw him again did wa?	



Katrina (7)	Colette (5.5)	Beth (4)
<p>Alright then I'll be nineteen You be sixteen</p>	<p>Laughs</p>	<p>I'm as big as her in the game</p>
<p>Beth's much bigger than you</p>	<p>Eeh we really are nearly the same</p>	
<p>Right. Back to back</p>	<p>She's not</p>	
<p>You're up to there on her</p>	<p>We always do back to back</p>	
<p>About two inches more</p>	<p>Yeah well that's quite... She isn't much more bigger than me then</p>	
<p>That's not her dad it's her grandad</p>	<p>I know Chloe (doll) your dad's gone away and you want him</p>	
<p>Yeah, but you look after it</p>	<p>Yeah. Can I have this baby born out of my tum?</p>	
<p>Yeah</p>	<p>Pretend she was trying to walk and she fell there – right?</p>	
<p>And she had a great- grandad as well</p>	<p>Poor thing, and she was sad because her grandad had gone away and she really loved him</p>	
<p>Go on then</p>	<p>I know how to do 'good- night' in deaf signing</p>	
<p>You weren't deaf. Our</p>	<p>Ah pretend who could be deaf, cause I'm not deaf</p>	



Katrina (7)	Colette (5.5)	Beth (4)
grandad was deaf  Just do 'grandad' She'll be going to bed soon  So he had to say the words	And this was 'good night grand' Oh I can't remem- ber Grandad  No, he was blind  So he had to hear the words, didn't he	

**Discussion:**

Vivian Paley (1988) was interested in children's fantasy play.

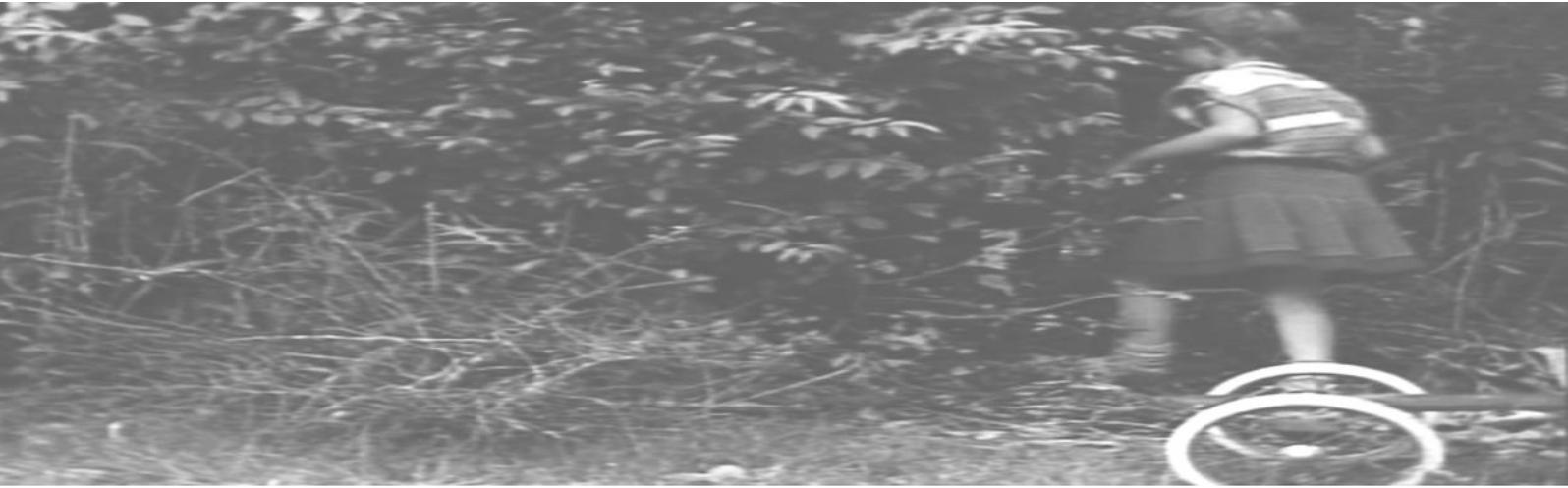
"...because it is the main repository for secret messages, the intuitive language with which children express their imagery and logic, their pleasure and curiosity, their ominous feelings and fears."

Why do you think it is important for children to be able to work through big ideas in their play?

What issues do you think the children are exploring during their game?

Why do the children step in and out of their roles during their game?

Why do you think outside space is important for children, even when they are not running around or being highly active?



## 11 "The journey"

1.5 min

5.5 & 7 years

### A brief description:

Katrina joins Collette in their den in the hedge where Colette is cutting up apples. They are imagining going on a journey and behaving in a way they know is unacceptable in real life, going camping without asking their parents, sneaking food and money from their mums. In their den they can pretend whatever they like and imagine what it would feel like.

### Good for looking at:

- ♦ Emotional and social development, experimenting with what it might feel like to break rules and behave unacceptably
- ♦ Communication and language development, using language to organise thoughts, feelings and events

### Transcript:

Katrina	Colette
I'm not doing the plums again	I would like to go out camping without asking me mum and dad, with you - right and erm
Sneak some food	Yes and sneak all wa (dialect for 'our') mam's money
Laughs	and then set off for the journey
No you've got to mush it like this. Go and get yourself a knife	

### Discussion:

Do you think dens are important spaces for children to work through their feelings in private or a place where children can be naughty away from adults?



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Siren produces a range of other child development films and all follow children in everyday situations. Some are conventional films while others are specifically designed for learning observation skills and consist of valuable source material.



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