

The Drama Studio has been teaching creative children's Drama for 12 years now but recent work with pre-schoolers has produced some truly fascinating results, highlighting this period as one of the most creatively receptive stages in child development.



As Drama teacher, Louise Arbuckle prepares to go into role as the head Elf and take her wide-eyed 4 year old group through the enchanted forest, a number of thoughts are going through her head. For the children this will be a wonderful adventure. They will meet and become many different animals and characters, totally absorbed in a story which will largely be created by themselves. While Louise will provide the initial stimulus, her skill is the spontaneous development of the children's ideas and moving them forward to challenge their reasoning and enhance their

language. Louise would like to incorporate turn-taking today and at some point in the improvisation she will take the opportunity to do so. The children will be oblivious that they are learning to take turns but they will need to do so for that part of the story to work.

As the "elves" return to their house they discover that someone has paid them a visit.
"It was the goblins!" shrieks one of the children.
"How do you know?" the teacher-in-role asks.
"Because of the giggle marks on the wall!" she declares triumphantly.

This is the wonder of a creative drama approach to learning. The improvisation itself will belong to the children. They will see their own ideas develop before their eyes and from within the drama itself the teacher will provide its shape and structure. The children become successful learners proactively contributing every step of the way.

The children also quickly come to know the difference between this imaginative world and the real one and it provides for them a safe environment in which to experiment and express their emotions.

As Irene Clayton of James Gillespie's Nursery school put it,
"Drama lessons in the nursery have helped our children to develop confidence, self esteem and a sense of security. The children have participated in simple games, used verbal and non verbal language in role play and expressed their own thoughts, feelings and ideas. The children have thoroughly enjoyed the sessions, which are stimulating and fun. I would thoroughly recommend these lessons to other pre-school providers."

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During these early years when spoken language is relatively undeveloped the children often produce very detailed and almost perfect mimes in their self-expression. It is quite delightful to watch a young child's natural mime. Sadly, as we learn to communicate more effectively through spoken language much of this precise mime becomes lost for many although some children and indeed some adults do retain the capacity for it. My interest in mime has led to a keen observation of a person's body language and I have noticed some excellent detailed mime in elderly people especially when reminiscing.

In the junior and senior ages we try to reawaken these early instinctive mimes within our improvisations.

When a group of children meet for the first time, movement and mime will help with ice-breaking. There are also times during the creative process when children will focus more deeply if spoken language is actually removed or temporarily suspended particularly during the first stages of a new theme or project.

As my college teacher of Mime, Pat Keysell (Vision On) writes in her book *Motives For Mime*

"The constant struggle to come to terms with vocabulary and grammar can cause the imagination and creative forces to dry up. In mime, however, we perceive and take action because of what we see happening, and this spontaneity can bring about a great release."

As teachers we come to understand the power of frequently reverting to these first, more primitive forms of communication. After all a slight body movement or action can often convey a message far better than words ever could!

Our younger children find security in routine and workshops generally reflect this. We will usually begin with a game, then the main story (including movement or dance/songs) and ending with a final game. Children of this age have a short attention span so the workshops must be well-balanced in terms of listening, moving and doing.

If you would like more information on our Drama classes for young people aged 3-16 please visit our website www.thedramastudio.co.uk or call 0131-453-3284

Julie McDonald is the Director of The Drama Studio

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