



# Introducing It: The Benefits of Theater Exercises for Social-Emotional Learning

Center for Early Education  
and Development

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

*This tip sheet was developed together with the Children's Theatre Company. It shares information on supporting young children's social-emotional development with theater-based games and activities.*

Most of our social interactions are improvised: we don't know how they will turn out. But during pretend play, we can practice our social skills in low-stakes scenarios. Theater activities give children the chance to play with purpose. They get to practice the important play skill of pretending to be someone else.

## SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING COMPETENCIES

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) describes five Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies in its Social and Emotional Learning Implementation Guidance.<sup>1</sup>

Theater activities offer lots of chances to work on different aspects of the SEL competencies.

The five SEL competencies are:

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Social awareness
- Relationship skills
- Responsible decision-making

### SELF-AWARENESS

MDE's definition of self-awareness includes "[t]he ability to accurately recognize one's emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior."<sup>1</sup> Recognizing and naming our feelings is a learned skill.<sup>2</sup> It can sometimes be frustrating for children when they don't have the vocabulary to name their feelings.

Theater exercises to help with this might include portraying a character who names their emotions or guessing how a character is feeling based on how the actor behaves. Caregivers may wish to start out by talking about vocabulary first. Or they can begin by talking about how emotions show up in our bodies.

A **vocabulary-first approach** might sound like this:

- "The word *nervous* means..."
- "When we are *nervous* it might look/sound/feel like..."

A **body-first approach** might sound like this:

- "I notice this character's shoulders are raised. They are looking around quickly like they want to hide. They might be *nervous*."

### **Supporting self-awareness through language:**

During morning circle time, Ethan is less energetic than usual. He looks downcast and doesn't want to participate in singing the Hello Song. "He's angry," remarks one student. "He's not angry, he's sick," offers another classmate. "No, I'm not!" Ethan replies. But he doesn't have the words to explain how he is feeling. Later, during story time, a teacher asks for volunteers to help act out the characters in the book. One of the characters in the story feels sad. Students practice slumping their shoulders, looking down, and pouting their lips. After observing each other and acting out these physical cues, the children make a connection with Ethan's behavior. "Are you sad, Ethan?" asks Ethan's classmate. He nods.



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## SELF-MANAGEMENT

MDE defines self-management as “[t]he ability to regulate one’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations.

This includes:

- managing stress
- controlling impulses
- motivating oneself
- and setting and working toward achieving personal and academic goals.”<sup>1</sup>

Self-management includes **executive function** skills like:

- paying attention
- waiting your turn
- controlling your body

Acting out a familiar story can be a great way to practice skills like these.

### ***Practicing self-management in character:***

Destinie loves preschool, but like many children her age, she has trouble taking turns. She cries when she isn’t the first student to be called on. When her class acts out “The Three Little Pigs,” she volunteers to play the wolf. She knows the story, and she knows her character doesn’t appear for a while. Her teacher helps her wait and watch while the pig characters are introduced and build imaginary houses. “I know you’re excited to play the wolf,” her teacher says. “But the little pigs need to finish their houses before you come and blow them down.” Destinie is able to wait because she knows that eventually she will join in the fun.

## SOCIAL AWARENESS

MDE defines social awareness in part as “tak[ing] the perspective of and empathiz[ing] with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures.”<sup>1</sup> Actors have a lot of practice with taking other people’s perspectives. They “try on” different perspectives when they play different characters.

Preschool-aged children are just starting to develop **theory of mind**—the understanding that people can have thoughts and beliefs that differ from our own.<sup>3</sup> Taking the perspective of a character can help children advance their theory of mind skills. If a character makes a decision that the actor does not agree with, the actor must work to understand why the character made that choice.

### ***Supporting social awareness through acting:***

During story acting time, nobody volunteers to play the Giant in “Jack and the Beanstalk.” The children insist, “The Giant is mean. I’m not mean.” Rather than trying to convince anyone to play that character, the teacher invites the class to think about why the Giant chases Jack away. The class has mixed feelings about both characters’ actions, and that’s okay. “The point,” explains the teacher, “is to have fun pretending to be somebody else, and to tell the story to our audience so they know how each character is feeling.” As they discuss each character’s perspective, a few children change their minds and ask to play the Giant. Acting out the story may change children’s opinions of each character and their choices or it may not. In the end, they all get to take a bow, including the Giant.



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## RELATIONSHIP SKILLS

MDE's relationship skills competency "includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed." <sup>1</sup> Theater is an inherently collaborative art form. It requires children to work together to communicate a story. They negotiate roles, take turns, listen and pay attention to each other, and offer feedback. Children also learn to navigate the social expectations of "performer" and "audience."

### ***Practicing self-management in character:***

Before story time, students are playing a guessing game to practice acting out different emotions. It's Jemila's turn. She puts her hands on her hips and looks around the room.

"She's angry!" guesses Jose.

The teacher suggests to Jemila to show the emotion on her face, also. She opens her eyes wide, hands still on her hips.

"She's scared!" shouts Siham.

The teacher prompts Jemila to add an action or movement to her expression. Jemila starts jumping up and down, hands on her hips, eyes wide.

"Is she surprised?" asks Jesse. Jemila nods her head, satisfied with her performance. The children in the audience observed her performance and gave feedback. The teacher helped Jemila adjust her performance based on that feedback. Next time it's Jemila's turn, she will know to try changing different parts of her performance to help her audience guess what she is trying to communicate.

## RESPONSIBLE DECISION-MAKING

MDE defines responsible decision-making as "[t]he ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others." <sup>1</sup> Fictional stories give us a wide range of memorable examples of actions and their consequences—without us having to experience them firsthand.

Acting as a fictional character can provide a helpful buffer when talking about choices and feelings, too. "When this character made this choice, then that happened?" is a framework for processing events that doesn't make children feel their own choices are being scrutinized. It can even be easier for children to engage the rational, decision-making parts of their brains when they are thinking about other people's choices, rather than being flooded with the emotions that come with making our own choices. They can talk about characters' choices and act them out in a playful, low-stakes environment.

### ***Room for responsible decision-making:***

Ruby and Michael are acting out versions of "Little Red Riding Hood" that they remember from story time. "I'll be Little Red," says Ruby, "And you be the wolf." Michael starts growling and howling like a wolf. "I'm hungry. I'm going to eat you!" he exclaims. Ruby and Michael remember how the original story ends, but they want it to end a different way. Even though Michael is acting like an out-of-control wolf, he and Ruby pause the story to think about what the characters could do next. They recognize that they have agency to decide on different choices for their characters and change the ending to the story.



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## DEFINING IT

### Vocabulary-first approach

When introducing a new word, we may choose to use it in a sentence before describing what it means or looks like in action. This is a **vocabulary-first approach**. Example: "This character is feeling *excited* to go to the party. They have a smile, big eyes, and a loud voice."

### Body-first approach

When introducing a new emotion word, we may describe how experiencing it could look in one's body before using the term in a sentence. This is a **body-first approach**. Example: "This character is looking down, their shoulders are slumped, and they look like they are going to cry. They might be feeling *sad*."

### Executive function

A set of brain-based skills that allow people to control their own behavior and direct it towards longer-term goals rather than what is automatic or easiest to do.<sup>3</sup>

### Theory of mind

The American Psychological Association defines this as, "The understanding that others have intentions, desires, beliefs, perceptions, and emotions different from one's own and that such intentions, desires, and so forth affect people's actions and behaviors."<sup>4</sup>

## DIVING INTO IT

### For additional information on this topic,

Check out the Children's Theatre Company's Creative Play storytelling program at [childrenstheatre.org](http://childrenstheatre.org) or email [education@childrenstheatre.org](mailto:education@childrenstheatre.org).

To learn more about executive function, check out our tip sheets: [z.umn.edu/executive-function](http://z.umn.edu/executive-function).

For more on the power of pretend play, check out our blog post, "Do Grown-ups Play Pretend?": [ceed.umn.edu/do-grown-ups-play-pretend](http://ceed.umn.edu/do-grown-ups-play-pretend).

Visit us at [ceed.umn.edu](http://ceed.umn.edu).

## REFERENCES

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