

Preschool Research & Insights

Developing responsible citizens together

“Intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character, that is the goal of true education.”

– Martin Luther King Jr.

“When I grow up I will be a policeman. They help good people and take away bad people. They look after us. And [they] are brave.”

– Alfie, 4 years

There are a number of important features when considering responsible citizenship: compassion, honesty, courage, amongst others. Children like Alfie learn about character as they do with other areas of learning, by observing others who set high standards and a good example of how to behave. Talking to Alfie and his classmates, it was clear they recognized archetypal responsible citizens. Others mentioned firefighters, nurses, teachers, and their parents.

Alfie's teacher, Suzie, encouraged roleplay and dressing up, prompting discussions about what responsibilities we all have. As Early Years Foundation Stage leader, she also *organized* visits from local emergency services to bring the real world to the classroom.

In their research paper, ‘What kind of citizen?’, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) provide an interesting framework of what being a responsible citizen might mean and how that might be achieved. They establish three types of citizen:

- The Personally Responsible Citizen – who acts responsibly within their community, obeying rules, recycling, aiding others. Children are engaged in volunteer activities to nurture compassion and empathy for others.
- The Participatory Citizen – who are part of civic affairs at various levels, whether it be local, state or national. Children are prepared for this through active involvement in community-based programs, while being taught how governmental and community organizations work.
- The Justice Oriented Citizen – who seek to bring about social change and understand how social and economic forces relate, passionately advocating for fairness. Children are enabled to identify social injustices, critique them, and bring about social change.

We see these interplays in daily school life, where children defend their friends, vehemently highlight right and wrong actions, and work together to take responsibility for their classroom and classmates, for example.

How does play help develop responsible citizens?

The above issues can dominate a child's school life. Some of the facets of being a responsible citizen can be abstract, almost alien concepts, where others simply sit firmly in the 'realm of adults'. Of course we encourage children to consider these issues, firstly by taking responsibility for their own actions, and a little later to be mindful of the words and actions of their friends.

As with most concepts introduced at a young age, bringing a sense of play to the teaching of these abstract ideas has distinct benefits. Roleplay can offer new perspectives different to our own. Alfie and his classmates, dressed up in their police hats and high-visibility jackets, were encouraged to think and behave like those adults, to interact with others as they learned about the roles and responsibilities of people in their community. The playfulness kept them engaged and having fun, which in turn kept them learning.

Daniel Elkonin (1978) said: "A child starts with feeding herself with a spoon; then she uses the spoon to feed everyone; then she uses the spoon to feed her doll; and finally feeds the doll pretending to be the 'mommy' who feeds her 'daughter'."

Toys act as props to enhance the characters but ultimately, roleplay will change from being 'toy oriented' to 'people oriented'. That is when the focus on other people's issues and concerns awakens a sense of community-based responsibility. This is just one way play can spark an understanding of what it is to be a responsible citizen.

What teachers say

"Without play there is little sense of citizenship and responsibility at this [early] age. The earliest window into the world of other people is through shared play experiences. When we see children play policemen, or doctors and nurses, they understand, for a moment, what it is to be an adult – to be responsible for more than just themselves. Using LEGO Minifigures and buildings encourages discussion around a broader spectrum of people and places than they ordinarily have access to in real life. Play is also safe, familiar, allowing me as the teacher to delve deeper into areas that may otherwise be overwhelming to talk about – in fact, unfathomable for a four-year-old!"

- Suzie Espie, Early Years Lead teacher, UK

References

Elkonin, D.B. (1978) *The Psychology of Play*. Moscow: Peagogika

Westheimer, J. and Kahne, J. (2004) What kind of Citizen? *American educational research journal* 41.2: 237-269