

# A Journey into Space in the Context of Three-Year-Old Play Winnetka Public School Nursery Evanston, Illinois

## Introduction

As you'll see in a moment the best way to start describing this story is "A Long, Long Time Ago in a Galaxy far, far away..." Yes, this story is a little bit about Star Wars, a lot about space exploration and even more about building friendships and a classroom community. In fact, this is a brief overview of a yearlong documentation on how children's play developed from small groups of friends and individuals to a community of children enjoying and challenging each other's imaginations.

To begin our journey into the unknown I'll take you back to the first week in October 2006, our classroom of eighteen three-year-olds has been in school for several weeks and there's been the following imaginative play scenario recurring day after day.

We are outside and Robbie and Jack are on the jungle gym. Robbie is Han Solo and Jack is Luke Skywalker and everything else they see is the Dark Side. Then, Chloe calls up "Hey, I'm going to be Princess Leah!" Han Solo, Luke Skywalker and Princess Leah then charge up their "ships" and blast off down the slide to get Darth Vader. I've learned from watching them that there isn't a child who is Darth Vader; Darth Vader is just "out there." The three of them run around blasting at nothing in particular with their, as Robbie told me, "invisible-to-teachers" light sabers in hand.

These three children also play Star Wars inside with the blocks, Legos, and other manipulatives; they even made a piano out of foam blocks to play the theme song to Star Wars.



It's important to note this because there are several other children outside this initial group of friends who want to engage with them, but are having difficulty finding a way to enter into the play both inside and outside.

For example, Fred is almost always on his bike riding around the periphery of the play – or inside watching the spaceships being built out of snap-it blocks. Andrew tries to enter the play by knocking down the block spaceships or running into Luke Skywalker on the playground. And Liam dictates, or writes a play-by-play of what he sees the children doing – all with the themes of Star Wars or Green Goblin.

It is also in early October that several parents voice their concerns surrounding the Star Wars play. They are worried it is too violent, lacks educational substance, has little direction, and it is discouraged at home. I must admit that I was feeling uncomfortable with the “I’m going to kill Darth Vader” talk and the sounds of swishing swords. But, I felt comfort watching the play unfold into budding friendships. And as Vivian Paley points out in her books on children’s stories and fantasy play it *is* play that helps children make sense of the world around them. Play is their voice, one of their *languages* that helps them make friendships and build community.

### Reflection

At this point we asked ourselves some questions: How can we continue to support these friendships and listen to the parents’ concerns without deflating the children’s play? And, how can we help the children who need an “in” acquire it naturally, without the teacher demanding that they are included?

What we came up with was to ask the children individually and in small groups questions that would encourage the development of unique imaginative detail to their play, to perhaps have it become their own – instead of Star Wars. Some examples of these questions are: Tell me about how your spaceships fly in space? What do you know about space? And tell me more about how Star Wars is in space? We didn’t demand answers or require children to be a part of a group; it was done during their play – in a way, we became part of their play and encouraged other children to come and play with us.

The responses to these questions ranged from blank stares to “I don’t know” to elaborate tales of Darth Vader and matter-of-fact descriptions of how space has stars. We kept asking questions throughout the next several weeks.

It is now the end of October and while the questions did begin to open the Star Wars play to more original storylines – like sending their ships on visits to the moon, rather than the Death Star the children who were on the periphery continued to be left out of the fast paced dramatic play.

### Observing and Listening to the Children

So, we stepped back and wondered what would happen if we sat down with a group of children and looked at books about space together. We thought that this would help the children who were at the periphery show their knowledge of the subject of space in a different way – other than dramatic play. Perhaps sitting down together would also spark an interest in working on a project together – to create something related to space.

Let me stop my story here to admit that we had visions of a collaborative end product – like a cardboard space ship or a replica of the solar system. And in fact, we did provide a large box that did act as a space ship, but the relationships needed to sustain the play with this prop were not yet sufficiently developed. Fred, Liam, and Andrew were still figuring out the nuances of group play while Jack and Robbie (and sometimes Chloe) continued to separate their play. So, we sat back and listened to what the children had to say.

It is Monday and as the children arrive we ask them if they would like to join me on a trip to the school library to find books about space. There were eight takers, Fred, Liam, Andrew, Heidi, Robbie, Jack, Iris, and Isabel - off we went to the library. We brought the books back to the classroom and kept them in our classroom library for several weeks. During this time, there was much interest in these books. Yet, it was difficult to sustain a conversation with more than two children at a time, due to the noise and activity level in the classroom. So, we decided to bring the books into the studio to look at them as a group.

#### New Environment as Provocation

Our studio is a shared room where classes can sign up to use it for extensions of class projects or activities. Amazing things happen in this room – maybe because it is a “special” place for children, outside of their classroom – full of new possibilities.

For us, it was just that – a place of new possibilities. For the children who were so quiet in the classroom, when they arrived in the studio with their books in hand they came alive with conversation and confidence. And I was able to capture it on a digital voice recorder and camera.

Here is a transcription of some of their conversations along with the pictures:



- Liam:** I know this. This is Mars, Jupiter, Saturn....
- Iris:** Yeah, I know the planets too. Saturn has rings.
- Chloe:** Oh! There's the sun! Fire's falling on it.



**Will:** And look. Here's the earth.  
The blue is water.  
**Andrew:** The moon hides the earth,  
here.



**Robbie:** This is a real rocket ship.  
This is not pretend. Star Wars  
has pretend ships. Astronauts  
travel in these ships.  
**Heidi:** There's light and fire at the  
bottom of it.



**Fred:** Mars is red and there's a  
rover that landed on Mars  
to explore its geology.

## Interest Broadens and Languages Emerge

What we learned from this studio experience is how much many of the children already knew about our solar system and how much they could share with each other. The days and weeks following this studio conversation showed us how powerful a short, but focused time away from the “daily routine” can scaffold children’s play.

From this point forward “space” became a topic of discussion and play among everyone; not insiders, not outsiders, everyone. It seemed like there was a new respect and interest in how other children represented their knowledge of space. I say this because the children who were looking for a way “in” to the fantasy play began to show that they too could play, in different ways than dramatic play, by using their talents and having them validated by their peers.

So, you remember the outsiders – Fred, Liam, and Andrew? Here’s what happened:

Fred became interested in using the clay as a language for his space explorers. The children saw how Fred used the clay to make rovers and began to make their own space ships. Here is one of my conversations with Fred about his space rovers:



### **Fred’s Clay Rover Dialogue and Pictures**

Ms. Dodd: How did you learn about rovers?

Fred: I learned about Rovers from Calvin and Hobbes. And my mom told me about salt craters that are being filled up by rocks.

Ms. Dodd: What is this rover doing?

Fred: Where rovers go there are no people in the spaceship. Sometimes. So, the rovers take the samples on Mars. On the moon people take the samples. These marks help remind the rover that there are no craters ahead.

Ms. Dodd: Tell me about this part of the rover.

Fred: It pushes the front of the camera into the ground to take rock samples. They might find rock samples that show salt. That means there was oceans and volcanoes on Mars and Martians.

Ms. Dodd: What are Martians?

Fred: Martians are a kind of animal that lives on other planets.

Liam quickly caught on to Fred's interest in space ships traveling to planets to find Martians, so he began to tell the teachers stories about Martians. In order to help his stories reach the children's ears we asked him to share his stories (Martian Man Story).

Here is his story:

### **Martian Man Hunter**

Martian Man Hunter's strap is gone. Bizzaro takes it. He tries the strap out. And, he takes his boot and his orange eye and he takes Martian Man Hunter's hole and he takes his head.



To go along with Liam's stories Andrew, who knocked down Robbie and Jack's block structures in the beginning of the year, began to direct the construction of block ships to go along with Liam's stories of Martians traveling into space.

### Conclusion

All of these scenarios served to help the children reference each other – to extend their knowledge of each other – and to create situations where play and conversation could occur. By the end of the year the children were collaborating on building and playing in huge block structures. They were also deep inside imaginary play, with little teacher support, using the props of the classroom and those of their own creation to make their ideas come alive. And, in fact, the “outsiders” became the “glue” of the fantasy play.

Documenting the social emotional growth of the children was definitely a journey into the unknown but what we came to know was how resilience, persistence, curiosity, risk-taking, and collaboration are at the heart of friendships and a classroom community with a culture of play.