A parent's guide to...

small-world play

Although this type of activity is child-led, parents can help their children immerse themselves in worlds of their own making by following these tips. By *Penny Tassoni*

If you have never heard of 'small-world' play, don't worry. In early years, this term is used to describe the play associated with toys such as farm animals, cars and play people. Most early years settings have collections of these types of toys to support this play, and indeed, your own child may be an avid dinosaur or play people collector.

So why is this type of play of such interest to children and what are its potential benefits?

FIVE THINGS PARENTS NEED TO KNOW

1. A special type of imaginative play

You may have already spotted that your child's early years setting has a home corner, dressing-up rail and/or a pretend shop. These, as well as small-world play, are all forms of imaginative or pretend play. What makes small-world play unique is that children do not take on a role or pretend to be something as they play with the trains, dinosaurs or play people. Instead, they act more like a film or theatre director.

2. Creating a mini world

Small-world play is interesting for children because it allows them to create and control a mini-world. It means they can develop their own rules as to where objects and characters should go and how they should behave. This sense of control and organisation is deeply satisfying for children in a world where most of the time they have to follow adults' rules and directives.

3. Using language for thinking

If you have time, it is worth standing back and listening to your child when they are engaged in small-world play. You may find that they talk about what the objects or characters are doing, where they are going and why they are behaving as they are. The use of language is one of the reasons why small-world is beneficial, as children are learning to use language to develop their thoughts and to organise things.

4. Sharing the world

While some children prefer to play alone with small-world toys, others enjoy being with one or two other children who can play alongside them. Most children will be at least three or so years old before they are comfortably able to create worlds with other children and divide up roles.

It is not uncommon also for one child to lead the direction of what is going to happen to the play people or which train is due to depart first. This can sometimes lead to disputes when ideas of what should happen clash. Happily, though, this is all part of children's learning about being with others.

5. Being imaginative

One of the key benefits for children of small-world play is that it offers them the chance to be imaginative and creative. Children will often improvise with other objects to shape the mini-world as they wish it to be. A shoe box might act as a cinema for the farm animals that have been good.

PHOTOS ADOBE STOCK

SMALL-WORLD PLAY AT HOME

While small-world play is likely to be provided by your child's early years setting, it is easy to provide it at home too. Here are a few ways you can encourage it:

Join in, but don't take over

Children often welcome their parents joining them in small-world play. If you feel that you can do so, one of the key things to remember is that your child needs to remain in charge. Your job is to be the second in command and to take orders.

Often children's early small-world play seems far from logical for us as adults, but that doesn't matter. You may find that at times, children jump from theme to theme or change their minds. This is all part of their learning.

Provide interesting props

You may have already noticed that many children are like magpies, and they love a little variety. Your child's small-world play can be enriched by providing a range of small resources that they can help themselves to. The best resources for this are everyday objects such as strips of cardboard, scarves, a plastic bottle or a plastic box.

It can be worth putting these resources out to one side of the play so that your child can draw on them if needed. As children do like variety, it can also be worth putting out more than one type of small-world toy at the same time, or even adding in some building bricks. This allows your child to literally build a world for their characters.

Take your pick of resources

There is a huge range of toys and resources available to support small-world play. Most toyshops and even supermarkets will stock items, but it is also possible to buy items in charity shops. The key to buying resources for this type of play at home is to focus on the actual characters and objects – for example, the play people rather than the house, the cars rather than the garage. This not only keeps cost down, but also encourages your child to become more inventive. As young children are primarily led by what things feel like in their hands, choose items according to their texture, rather than what they do.

SMALL-WORLD PLAY IS FOR EVERYONE

Finally, there are no laws that state that only boys can play with dinosaurs and cars, or girls will like farm animals and small dolls. While children do have preferences, one of the roles that we as parents can play is to widen their horizons at home and to give children a chance to try out new and different things.

It is worth applying this to small-world play and to look out for a few different small-world toys, not just those that your child uses in their early years setting. ■