

How do I look?

Hats, scarves – even a walking stick or a false moustache – will send young children’s imaginative play off in exciting new directions, says **Wendy Bowkett...**

We called it our treasure chest. It was a hinged wooden box with a lovely grain running through it, given to us by a lady who had worked in the theatre, and inside there were treasures indeed! It was full of bits and pieces the lady no longer required but thought we might make use of. There were scarves of all shapes and sizes, a bowler hat and straw hat covered in flowers and feathers, a tiny walking stick and pieces of fabric in silk and chiffon in all the colours of the rainbow, amongst many other pieces of clothing – all in small sizes, just right for under-fives.

The children put the fabrics in our collage box in the craft room cupboard and then were left to explore the rest of the box’s contents. Their accents and voices changed on wearing the hats and they moved around the room wafting and waving the scarves as though to music. Soon we were all swaying and ‘waltzing’ around the room to ‘The Blue Danube’. ‘The Champagne Polka’ livened things up a tad but the scarves and bodies moved constantly. This wasn’t dressing up in the usual sense, but without the garments, the activity could not have taken place.

The walking stick remained in the box but seemed lonely on its own. So, even though it was only about 30” high, I began hobbling around the room with it as though I were a very old person with a stooped back, dodderly and frail. After a short time, Ellie started to sing, “There was a crooked woman...” as I wandered around. She fetched me a chair and, in what I hoped was a frail, weak voice, I said, “Thank you for your kindness. I can’t walk far and a chair is very welcome.” Then the children took turns to ‘be old’.

During quiet time, later that morning, the children thought it would be a good idea to make a crooked road in the playground with chalk lines, and use the balance

bars to make a crooked stile. The sixpence was made from foil and was as large as a dinner plate. The cat came from the soft toy box and a very crooked mouse was made from felt pieces, roughly glued together. The playhouse outdoors wasn’t crooked, but we used our imaginations to believe it was!

That treasure box was used every week with different dressing up items in it, so that the children could experience a different type of ‘play acting’ to our play corners. A moustache and beard combo was used by the troll when the goats trip-trapped over the bridge (to make her look more authentic). Assorted giggle noses from Comic Relief made us laugh every time they were thrown and caught; others made us talk in peculiar ways because they pinched our noses. Scarves with soothing music were used to calm busy little bodies down – lying on the floor with a chiffon scarf to waft or place on your face is extremely relaxing.

A child-height mirror is a great addition to a dressing-up box. Children love to pose in front of it, especially if their whole body is in view. Ours came from a wardrobe door and was attached to a wall in the imaginative play room. We collected other types



about the author

Wendy Bowkett has worked in early years settings for over 30 years, and ran her own private day nursery for 15 years. As well as contributing to *Teach Nursery*, she has written a number of books for those working with 0-5-year-olds.

of headwear (a policeman’s helmet, a flat cap) for children as young as three to become ‘different’ little people. Spectacles (with lenses removed) added character too, as did wigs and moustaches. Our parents began donating items for our treasure box because they saw how the children loved being someone else for a few minutes.

We used dressing up in our story telling: a red scarf is all you need to become Little Red Riding Hood, and big teeth (left over from Halloween) the wolf. A bit of face paint and a wig can make for a couple of ugly sisters or the wicked witch. We loved using simple props to enact nursery and number rhymes. With a few play-dough buns, pennies and a baker, ‘Five Currant Buns’ becomes a production; a stethoscope and phone, and ‘Miss Polly’ springs to life!

One final thought: always ensure that ‘props’ placed in mouths or ears are cleaned after each use. Most

children, if the need for hygiene rules are explained to them, will clean items effectively once shown how. It is important that adult supervision goes hand-in-hand with any dressing up activity. I have seen a child being led by a long scarf tied around his neck when he wanted to be a dog going for a walk – potentially very dangerous when unsupervised!

