

# DOROTHY LEARNING THROUGH PLAY (DOUGH)



A LEARNING STORY

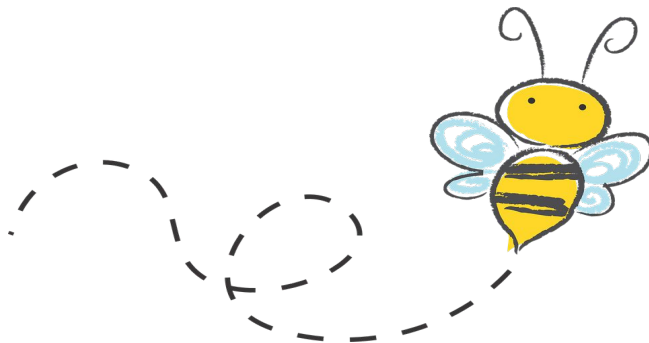
BY JILL ST. PETER



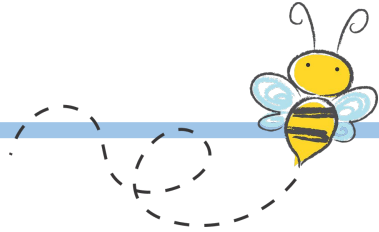
### **Meet Dorothy...**

Dorothy will be four years old on October 24th. This is her first year in preschool. Dorothy attends Windsor State Preschool where her grandmother is the Site Supervisor.

Dorothy is an independent thinker. She enjoys playing at the park, going to the beach, and driving around the neighborhood. She is creative, which is reflected in the clothing that she picks out daily. Dorothy is very verbal at home, but tends to be more of an observer at school. Dorothy lives with her parents and one year old brother.



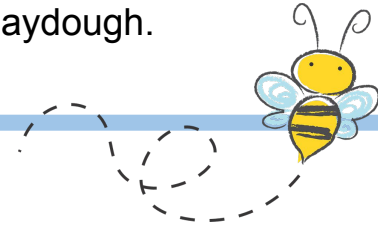
When I first arrived for the observation, Dorothy felt nervous. I had never met Dorothy, and she was not fond of strangers in her classroom. Nevertheless, Dorothy watched me as I made my way across the classroom to the playdough table where I began making playdough pizzas with a group of children. Knowing that Dorothy is usually very curious, I hoped that she would be interested in what I was doing with the other children. Slowly and cautiously Dorothy approached the table, gathered her playdough from her bag, and joined the group. Although Dorothy would not speak to me, she was sure to make eye contact when she wanted me to notice what she was doing.





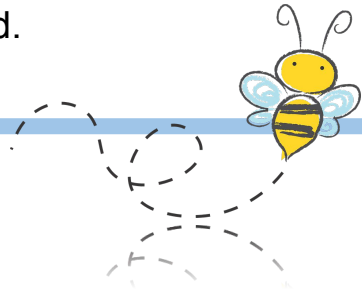


Dorothy notices the other children are making pizzas. She listens to the them talk about their favorite type of pizza. Wanting to include her in the conversation, I ask Dorothy if she likes pizza. She replies with an affirming nod. Her eyes begin scanning the table. I notice she is looking at me as if she want to ask a question, but still is not ready to engage with me. I ask Dorothy if she would like to use a rolling pin. Again, she nods. I hand her a rolling pin. Dorothy quickly looks away and begins to manipulate her playdough.



Dorothy rolls out her playdough using the rolling pin. She is very focused on making sure her hands stay on top of the rolling pin. She rolls the rolling pin back-and-forth, back-and-forth, back-and-forth. Dorothy is having difficulty seeing what she is doing because her mask keeps slipping over her eyes. Nevertheless, Dorothy stays on task and continues to roll her pizza dough. Dorothy looks at me. I ask, "Are you making a pizza, too?"

She shakes her head to indicate that she is not making a pizza. I ask, "What are you making?" Dorothy looks at me, but she does not respond.







Dorothy finds a plastic knife on the table. She begins to cut her playdough carefully. Dorothy holds her knife in her left hand as she cuts her playdough into two pieces. I notice that the other children are using the tortilla press to flatten their playdough. I asked Dorothy if she would like to try a tortilla press. She shakes her head “No” and continues to cut her playdough. Dorothy is focused on creating something. She is not ready to share her idea with me.

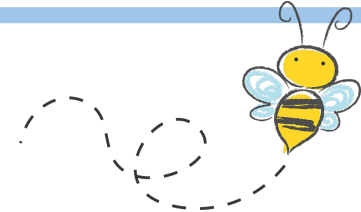


As Dorothy is cutting her playdough, a child at the table notices that Dorothy is using her knife. The teacher asks Dorothy to give the knife back, but before she has time to finish her sentence, Dorothy puts the knife on the table for the other child. The teacher inquires, "Dorothy, would you like a knife?" Dorothy nods her head and continues playing with her playdough. Dorothy can understand and follow instructions from her teacher as well as requests from her friends. I can tell that Dorothy likes to follow the classroom rules. Dorothy rolls her playdough into a ball and attempts to flatten it with both fists, at first, then with her right fist. Bang, Bang, Bang! Soon Dorothy picks up the rolling pin again and continues to flatten her playdough.



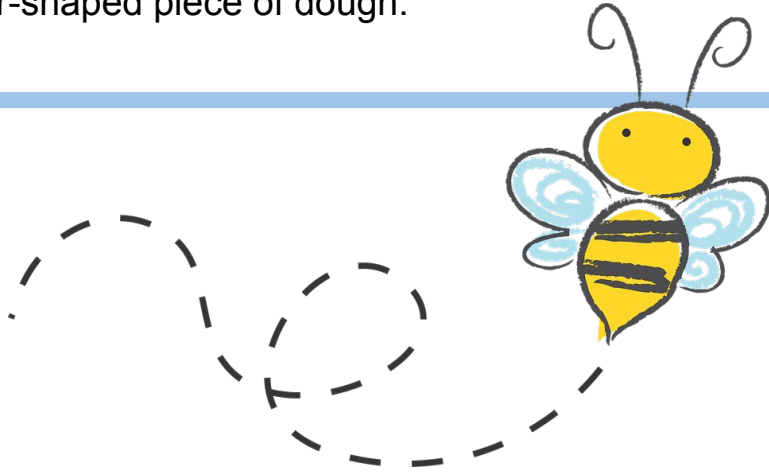


Dorothy notices the gold pipe cleaner next to her. She picks up the pipe cleaner and looks up at me. I take a guess at what she is trying to communicate with her stare. I do not want to influence her creativity, so I say, “I wonder what you are going to do with that pretty, gold, pipe cleaner?” Dorothy looks at her playdough and begins to wrap the pipe cleaner around the flat piece of playdough. Dorothy begins to tie her playdough with the pipe cleaner as if she is wrapping it like a present. Her fingers are able to expertly maneuver the pipe cleaner, but as she pulls the ends, the playdough tears. Dorothy looks at me, then back down at the table, and begins to roll her playdough flat again with the rolling pin.



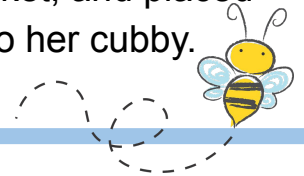


Dorothy continues to roll her playdough until it is flat. Then, she picks up the purple car-shaped cookie cutter and strategically places it in the center of her playdough. Dorothy adjusts the car until she is happy with its placement and proceeds to push the car into the playdough to create a car-shaped piece of dough.





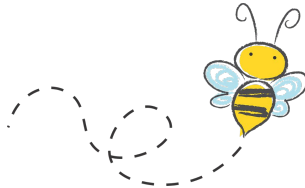
Dorothy pulls the excess playdough away from the car that she cut out. Proud of her work, she picks up the car and shows it to me. I wish I could see if she was smiling under her mask! Remembering that she no longer had a knife, she looks at me and quietly says, “Can I have a knife”? Now I am smiling under my mask! I am so happy that Dorothy felt comfortable talking to me. I hand Dorothy a knife, and she replies, “Thank you.” Dorothy takes the knife in her right hand this time. Dorothy steadies her car with her left-hand looks closely at the car. She puts her knife near the middle of the car, picks it up, and places it directly in the middle this time. Dorothy confidently and skillfully pulls the knife back and forth across the car until she successfully cuts it in half. Dorothy showed me her two pieces of the car. Next, she cleaned her spot, put the toys in the basket, and placed her playdough into her bag and back into her cubby.



# What is Play?

Play is described by Stewart Brown (2010) as being intrinsically motivated, voluntary, and pleasurable while also being process-oriented, freely chosen (p. 17)

Furthermore, Piaget's theory of play states, "children's play does not merely reflect their existing developmental level. Children also use play to integrate new information and grow into a higher level of cognitive understanding. He believed that children actively contribute to their own cognitive development by constructing their own understanding of the world around them (Heidemann, 2010).



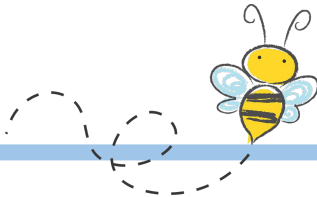


## Connections to Theory

Playdough is a malleable manipulative that builds muscle strength, perfect for preparing children for controlling things such as pencils and scissors. Dorothy shows her developing fine motor skills as she carefully cuts her playdough with a knife and a cookie-cutter. Fine motor development was also observed when she practiced tying the pipe cleaner.

Playing with playdough is a tactile, sensory activity that promotes fine motor skills by giving the children the opportunity to squeeze, roll, squash, rake, and poke. Dorothy further practiced fine motor development as she rolled her dough with the rolling pin, formed balls, and attempted to flatten the dough by repeatedly hitting it with her fist.

James Johnson explains (2015) that from “four to six years of age, children achieve considerable fine and gross motor mastery. The advancement of their fine muscle development contributes to their ability to string beads, cut with scissors, paste, trace, draw, and color” (p. 22). Dorothy is working toward mastering fine motor skills.



## Connections to Theory

Playing with playdough can also be a wonderful social experience for children allowing them to build, communicate and share ideas with their friends. Although Dorothy did not interact with her peers verbally, she was comfortable and confident while joining the group experience. Dorothy also has a sense of community and understanding of classroom rules which was observed when she willingly returned the plastic knife that another child had been using. Dorothy's school uses the Teaching Pyramid social-emotional framework. Therefore, returning the knife to her friend represents the shared school expectation "We are Respectful."

Playing with playdough can enhance the child's concentration, confidence, creativity, imagination and encourage persistence and patience. Dorothy showed both concentration and persistence as she persisted in trying to tie the pipe cleaner and concentration when she was cutting out and cutting the car shape.

This learning experience can be linked to Piaget's theories. He believes that children need to be able to see, touch, taste, smell, move and hear the things they are learning about.



## What's Next?

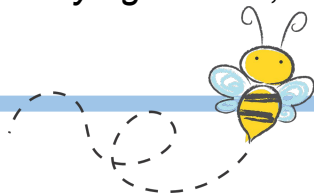
Working with playdough is an open-ended art activity. Open-ended art is powerful for children because it promotes independence, problem-solving, and self-confidence.

New activities can be introduced into the learning environment to expand upon Dorothy's developing social and fine motor skills. For example, Dorothy is interested in learning to tie.

Shoe tying calls for a precise sequence of fine motor movements. Each hand is responsible for its own set of highly dexterous movements. The brain coordinates each hand's sequence while mastering the timing to ensure that each hand's sequence coordinates with the other hand's sequence.

Providing Dorothy with opportunities to practice tying would support her fine motor development.

**Suggested activities to be added to the learning environment:** *Lacing Cards, Lacing Beads, Clothes Pins, Dolls with zippers, buttons, and shoes, Shoe Tying Boards, Yarn, Hole Puncher, Shoes in the Dramatic Play Center.*





## What's Next?

I would like to initiate Paley's Play Stories with Dorothy and other classmates for continued social-emotional support. Storytelling invokes creativity and imagination and helps children work through social, emotional, and cognitive challenges. Coupled with story acting and writing, it supports multiple early childhood domains and skills. My goal would be that Dorothy begins to feel more comfortable and confident in her social skills at preschool.

Having a teacher play with Dorothy and other children in the dramatic play area would further support social interaction with teachers and peers. In addition, dramatic play encourages socialization and communication as children share ideas, engage in conflict resolution, and use their imaginations.

