

Hey everybody,

Have you heard about what happened to our playhouse? We've turned it into a veterinarian's office! Here's what happened: teachers noticed that children in both our morning and afternoon classes have been invested in different types of animal play (being animals in the gym or playhouse, bringing an assortment of stuffed animals from home and caring for them, creating play scenarios with small blocks and small plastic animals and so on). So, teachers packed away all the food, sent the babies off to "Grandma and Grandpa's for a vacation" (just kidding), and brought in lots of items needed to tend to sick or hurt animals. We have two examination rooms, one in the bottom of the playhouse, and one in the top. Both rooms have the same much-needed supplies: a doctor's bag of medical tools, a doctor's coat, an examination table, a light table with x-rays of different animal bodies, and the newly-added doctor's hair caps and bandages.

### **How did kids find out?**

Early last week, after arriving to school and washing hands, many kids noticed big red "STOP" signs blocking both entrances of our playhouse. Some kids began to ask teachers what these things were all about, "Hey, what are these for? What's that say? S-T-O-P? Why are they there? Hey, that's a stop sign!" Some kids still attempted to enter the playhouse, going under the sign or starting to climb up the ladder. Teachers told each child who asked that we have something new to talk about with kids at group time, and we won't go into the playhouse until kids know more about the new idea. Then, we did have a discussion at group time. We asked if kids noticed the STOP signs, explained once more why we put them up, and mentioned that teachers put away all the toys that were once in the playhouse. We talked about where animals go when they are hurt or sick, and asked kids what they know about a vet's office. Then, kids were shown all of the things that would be available: we named all of the doctor tools, showed the x-rays, and showed all of the stuffed animals that kids could choose from (if they pleased). How exciting! Then, a teacher explained how this would be a time when kids would have to wait for their turn. How disappointing! But... kids are already growing familiar with our SIGN-UP LIST procedure, so then a teacher mentioned there would be sign-up lists. That's right, not ONE, but TWO lists with different words at the top. WHAT? Yep, did you know that kids could sign up to be a VET (doctor) or a PET (animal)?! The teacher explained that kids could sign up to be the VET, the PET, or even put their name on both lists if they wanted to have a turn being both of them. Here's how the lists work. When a teacher looks at the VET list and finds out who the next vet will be, she then asks that child if they would like to take care of a pretend/stuffed animal, or if they would like another child to be the sick pet. If the VET chooses to have another child join them, the teacher then looks at the PET list and informs the PET that the next VET is waiting to take care of them! If the VET chooses to tend to a stuffed animal, the vet then chooses an

animal out of the basket, and off they go! There is one vet downstairs and one vet upstairs. When a vet's turn is over, the next vet on the list goes to whichever room is empty.

To end group time, teachers demonstrated how such a scenario could play out. One teacher signed up to be the VET, and chose to have a person be the PET. The other teacher came to the vet as a sick doggie, rubbing her ear and whimpering. Don't worry, folks. The doctor took great care of the dog, asking her questions and putting medicine in her ear. If you're smiling, you can imagine the kids' faces as they watched. After that group time discussion, teachers put the sign up lists on the table closest to the playhouse, and a teacher helped children sort through the lists and write their names down on the preferred list.

### **Besides the new materials, what else is different about the playhouse?**

The playhouse does physically look different. The kitchen and baby furniture is gone, along with the food, babies and loads of comfy pillows. The sofa is now accompanied by a basket of non-fiction animal books and is being used as the "waiting room." There are a few other differences as well:

#### **-the number of people limited in the playhouse**

Typically, the playhouse is a space that anyone can play in, even if another child/children already have a game going on (of course, for safety reasons we would help set a limit if so many kids wanted in at the same time). Sometimes children object to this, "no, this is our house!" Teachers may help kids negotiate the space and materials so that 1, 2, or 3 play scenarios can be happening at the same time. We also talk to kids about letting others know what they are playing so that their game isn't disturbed. However, there are times, such as the vet's office, when teachers purposefully decide on a number of people who can be in the playhouse at a given time. We do this for a number of reasons. First, we've put out a specific amount of materials. Generally, we have enough things (5 babies, lots of food to choose from, etc.) so that children can play out similar games at the same time without much waiting, though there still is a lot of negotiating! Now, there aren't 5 stethoscopes, only 2. Yes, we could gather together more materials, but we have chosen not to do so. With less materials, and a set number of people, there is physically more space and more time (once it's your turn) to explore one's own idea and try out all of the materials. This also allows time for 2 peers to interact without a lot of distraction or interruptions by others. For those who prefer not to enter the playhouse when there are 4 or 5 kids, it is a time to be in the space when it's not so crowded.

#### **-the space is intended for that specific fantasy play (currently, the vet's office)**

The playhouse can be a space where games from the block rug, sand or other area are carried over into the playhouse, "We found our treasure in the sand, now we have to get back on our ship!" (upstairs playhouse, perhaps) Now, and without much explanation, children seem to get the purpose and new set of guidelines for the vet's office. Children aren't trying to play other games in the playhouse. Even for those who can't resist the urge to go inside when it's not their turn on the list, they are still incorporating themselves into the vet play, "I'm a kitty, too." (teachers help them come out and find the sign up lists!) Many days, groups of kids can be

spotted looking into the vet's office window, "Here's a rabbit for you." "My kitty is sick, I need that bandage."

### **-Sign-up lists**

Usually, kids can go into the playhouse at any time. Now they have to wait their turn. In order to get that turn, they have to sign up. The lists also mean that a child isn't choosing who plays with them. If they are hoping for a peer to join in their play, it is the person next on the PET list. The VET list has been the more popular list. If nobody else is waiting on the PET list that day, the vet or teacher will call out for a pet, in hopes a peer nearby will say yes. Some vets have already figured out who is most likely to say yes and will call out to them in particular.

This all has been very interesting to many kids. It has encouraged kids to remember and write down their own letters, find their cubby tags in order to see their letters, attempt their letters or have hand-over-hand help from a teacher. It has also been very confusing. One child signed up on PET list and declined a turn several days in a row. Finally, a teacher asked if he ever intended to be the pet. It turns out, he signed up on both lists, but really only wanted to be a VET. The teacher showed him the "VET" and "PET" lists and where his name was on both. oops! As with sign up lists for other things in our classroom, some children sign up and immediately think it's their turn. We go down the list and see who they are after. Besides the list being a concrete way to see that you are waiting after 5 other names, and that there is documentation of this in case other peers object, the scene created during the signing up procedure also helps. When children exclaim that they are waiting, teachers will often point out the other 10 children that are also waiting around the table. Yes, so many people really are waiting! Waiting can be so hard! This past week, small animals, soapy water and brushes were in the water table so they could be bathed and groomed. Another area for kids to play with animals while they waited for their turn.

### **How have children reacted to the new idea?**

Have you ever seen the tents camped outside of Best Buy on the eve of Black Friday? Well, that was our playhouse area for the first couple of days. Kids swarmed over with excitement, with markers, and with cubby tags to help remember their letters. Some kids forgot about the lists altogether and tried to go right in! Kids waited and waited and waited and then wrote down their letters. Then they waited and waited and waited and finally got their turn! (not everyone gets their turn on the same day of signing up, but teachers save the lists so that we can remember who is waiting for a turn on the next days of school. Teachers sometimes put numbers next to names in order to better keep track of who signed up first, who declined their turn now but still wants a turn later.... one of our lists made it up to 24 names waiting! Yes, that means some children have signed up 3 or 4 times already! Teachers will also use those lists to approach those who haven't signed up yet and see if they are interested in signing up now). During the play, children have been really invested in tending to their animals. Some decide to choose a stuffed animal, and silently, gently tend to their injured paws or give them shots. Others have enjoyed playing with a peer, asking them questions, "what hurts? Ok, I need to get a picture of that" (placing x-ray transparency on top of a child's/pet's injured arm and then bringing it over to the light table for viewing). Others have transformed into pets, whimpering

and feeling worried about their injuries, nodding in response to the vet's questioning. Long story short, it's been awesome!

### **What is the overall purpose for changing up the playhouse?**

We did notice childrens' interest in animals, so that gave us the idea of 'what' the playhouse could be. But, here's "why." In younger classes at Park West, we feel consistency is important. We want children to find comfort in knowing that for the most part, the things they know about school will still be there when they return. Older classes also find comfort in consistency, which is why we try to keep our schedule the same most days and so on. Now that we've been in school a while, and have established our routine, we felt children were ready for a new idea. The change is also a way for children to try out a new game or scenario that they may not have thought of, or to provide them with all of the tools if they've been itching to play such a game! For the children who tend to spend time in the playhouse, can they adapt their play to the new idea? Do they sign up to still be there? When it's not their turn, what other areas in the classroom are they discovering? Does this change who they are coming into contact with? For children who don't often choose the playhouse, does this new idea inspire them to give it a try? The sign up lists and limited number of people, again, gives children time to be with a peer they may not spend time with otherwise, and the space to do so.

### **So, what's next?**

Some kids have taken it upon themselves to be a pet's owner, approach the vet who is in the playhouse, and ask the vet to take care of the sick pet. Brilliant! This "owner" concept is something teachers presented to the afternoon class right away. We decided to hold off on that idea in the morning class as to not complicate things so much at first. Now that children have gotten to experience the procedures (sign up, wait, decide on a pet), we may add another sign up list: OWNER to extend the play even further. Depending on how long children remain interested in the vet's office, we may also add other animals. Right now we have more domesticated animals: cats, dogs, rabbits, birds. We may add reptiles and wild animals. Just wait and see!

Hopefully, you will hear tidbits about the vet's office, or get a chance to see it for yourself if you are assisting soon! The stop signs do remain up each day during our first short play time. After group time, the signs come down, the sign-up lists come out and the healing process begins!

We hope you are well!  
Ali and Sarah