

Role Plays or Practices in Incredible Years Parent and Teacher Groups

by Carolyn Webster-Stratton

Setting up numerous role plays or practices in Incredible Years program delivery is critical to participants' learning processes. As a group leader you may think from your group discussions that parents or teachers understand the management principle or topic but when you see them practice "in action" you will have a better idea of their ability to put their ideas into real-life behaviors. There can be a discrepancy between how participants understand a strategy and how they actually behave. It can be very difficult to think of the right words to use with children, manage angry thoughts and stressful or depressed feelings when children argue or are disrespectful, or to follow through with consistent proactive or patient responses. Role play practices help parents and teachers to rehearse their behavior strategies, practice staying calm and using positive self-talk, and to get feedback from group leaders and other participant group members about their skills. Here are some tips for setting up successful role plays.

Set up a Large Group Role Play Practice

Practice should first be done in the large group so that you can scaffold and support a successful practice. This allows participants to observe exactly what you expect them to practice in the small group that will happen next. Without this example being set first often small groups often will deteriorate into personal stories or they may be confused about what they are supposed to be practicing.

- Remember you are the "director" of the role play and get to choose the actors, set the stage, and determine the script and roles for the things you want practiced. You also can pause, clarify, give feedback and replay the scenarios.
- Always make sure that you have covered the content to be practiced prior to doing the role play practice. For example, after watching video vignettes about persistent coaching and making a list of key principles on your flip chart you can say, *'we are going to practice persistence coaching with a 5 year old child who is well behaved.'* Begin with a simple role play that will illustrate the concept and achieve your learning objective for the participant learning that strategy. Later you will add complexity to the practice by having the child be inattentive or impulsive or be angry or anxious.
- Rather than ask for volunteers, select a parent or teacher participant you think understands the behavioral concept or strategy and can successfully play the role of the teacher or parent. Invite the participant to help you, e.g., *"John, would you come up and help me by being the parent/teacher in this next role play."* Then choose a participant to be child. *"Sally, will you be the child who is fearful and afraid to take risks?"*

- Group participants, rather than group leaders, should be the role play participants. Participants will learn more from being in the practices themselves. If you are in the role play yourself you will not be able to effectively scaffold the scripts and interactions or debrief the process.

Set the scene and build a script:

- Set up the role play practice by letting participants know the age of the child, developmental level, temperament of child, and what the child and parent/teacher will do.
- Start with your simple practice, *“we are going to practice social coaching with a well behaved 4 year old child”*.
- After this practice of this skill, expand the complexity. Ask the group for ideas for how the parent/teacher would respond using this skill with a child whose has a particular difficulty. . For example the leader will say, *“So in this practice, our parent/teacher is going to be practicing social coaching and Seth is going to be the child who is anxious, often plays alone, and is reluctant to play or initiate interactions with others. Our parent/teacher is going to use social coaching to try to build some of this boy’s confidence around his friendship skills. What words can s/he use for what behaviors? How can you bring in puppets here to enhance this child’s learning?”*
- Using the participants’ suggestions, walk through his/her part in the role play before the role play starts. Putting some sample scripts on the flip chart can be helpful. Give instructions to the child, letting him/her know whether to be cooperative or noncompliant and what his/her level of play and communication is. .
- If the child will be noncompliant, let him know of the limits (e.g., you should fuss and whine, but please don’t throw things or hit). This is very important because you don’t want the role play to require management techniques that haven’t been taught yet.

Scaffolding the practice:

- Both the leader and co-leader can serve as coaches for the role play. Often one leader supports the role of the parent/teacher and the other supports the role of the child.
- As the role play proceeds, freeze the scene at any time to give the parent/teacher feedback for her effective skills, or to redirect, or to clarify something you didn’t explain well. Provide the parent/teacher role with plenty of scaffolding so s/he can be successful. Group members can also be asked to suggest ideas if the actor participant is stuck. Sometimes you can replay a scene using different ideas to discover which approach seems to work best. Or, you can replay a scene using a child at a different developmental level or temperament. For example, *“now let’s try social coaching with a child who has very little language and think about how we can prompt sharing, or taking turns or using language.”*

Debriefing the practice in large group: Always debrief each role play.

- Start by asking for positive feedback from the group about the parent or teacher's effective skills: *"What did you see Thomas doing well? Or "what principles of ignoring did Maria use?"*
- Debrief with the person playing child to get his or her perspective. Parents and teachers have often told us that playing the child and experiencing another adult's responses was very instructive and helped them understand the viewpoint of their child.
- Debrief with the parent/teacher afterwards to find out how they felt during the practice.
- When applicable, rerun the role play with a different response using the ideas of another parent or teacher. Sometimes you may want the person playing child to try the scene being in role as parent or teacher so they can experience practice in a different role.
- Reward all the actors with some special acknowledgement such as sticker, candy or prize. It is hard to put yourself in center stage and be viewed by others. Participants who do this help everyone learn and this effort needs to be highlighted.

After Large Group Practice Set up Small Group Practices

- Break up parents or teachers into small groups of 3 or 4 to practice what they saw modeled in the large group practice.
- Clearly describe how the role play will go, and repeat key instructions (what the parent/teacher role will be and how the child will respond).
- You may assign one person in the small group to support the role play by giving the parent/teacher ideas and giving positive feedback after the practice is over.
- For small group practices when you break out into triads for parent/teacher-child interactions you can ask the 3rd person to be the support person. Her assignment is to view the checklist, offer ideas as needed during the interaction and at the end to give the person in role as parent or teacher some positive feedback about what they liked best. The group leader then can ask for small group to share one key point they learned in this practice experience and record it on their flip chart.
- While these small group practices are going on group leaders will go around to watch them and to offer suggestions as needed as well as positive feedback.
- After the small group practices, the group leaders will debrief the experience with the whole group, offering members of each small group a chance to feedback a key point or experience from their practice. These may be recorded on a flip chart as a summary of the experience.

Note: Be sure to be flexible with role plays and make these role play practices fun. The more fun they are, the more people will want to participate in them and will recognize how the help them to learn. See

leader's book *Incredible Teachers or Collaborating with Parents to Reduce Children's Behavior Problems* by Carolyn Webster-Stratton at <https://www.incredibleyears.com/>