

JUDITH BENDER

Have You Ever Thought of a Prop Box?

A prop box is composed of specialized items combined to foster a specific type of play. This combination of ordinary housewares can afford a child hours of enjoyment while providing an educational experience.

It's a box of real things from the real world.

There's quite a difference between a "toy" and "the real thing." Children know it. And there's quite a difference between play that goes nowhere and fizzles out because it has nowhere to go and nothing to go with, and play that can continue and stretch children's interests.

To this end, I suggest making a prop box. A prop box contains the kinds of things which prevent play from becoming stale or from stopping altogether. Watch the play. Where is it going? What will keep it going?

What does a mechanic *need* when he wants to repair cars or bikes, trains or planes? Tools. Parts. Wires. Flashlight. *Etc., etc.*

What does an astronaut *need* when he is about to visit the moon? Proper clothing. Instruments. A space panel. Food containers. Camera. *Etc., etc.*

What might a nurse *require* in order to tend an emergency case? Bandages. Medicine bottles. Hot water bottle. Uniform. *Etc., etc.*

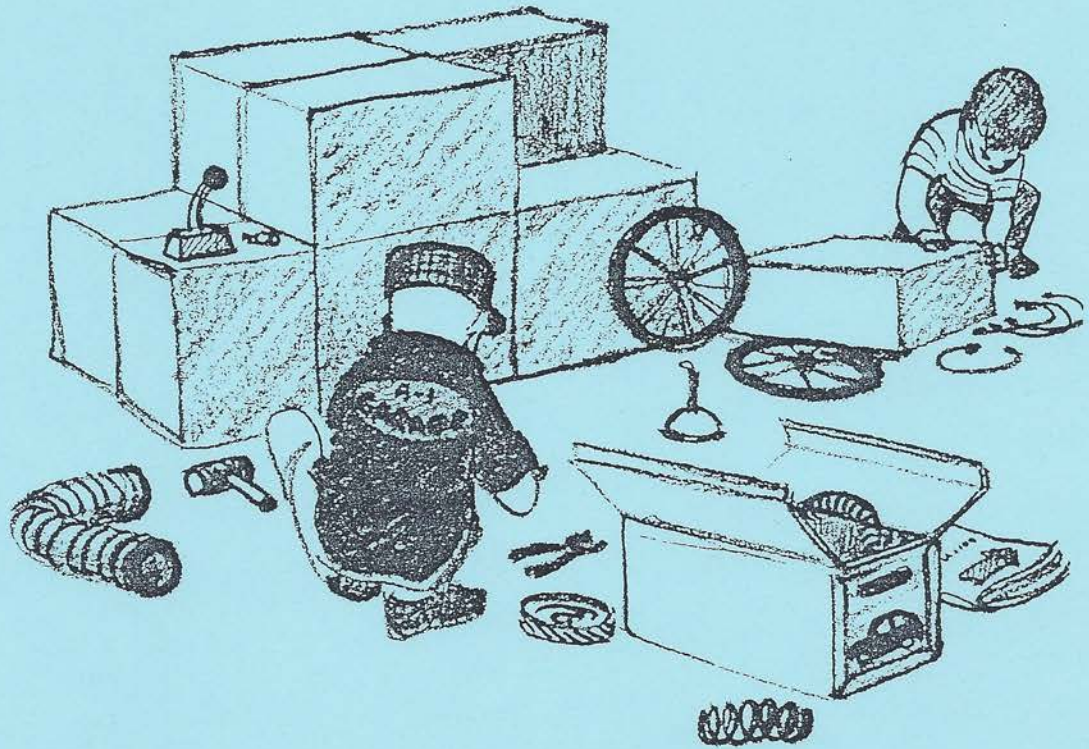
The *et ceteras* are the most important things. The *et ceteras* are what make a prop box a never-ending learning material.

Since I started playing around with this idea, I have discovered that:

- Prop boxes are often just what we need for boys. They are not sissy stuff. They do men's work.

- Prop boxes lead to excellent beginning concepts of future occupational opportunities. They are *work* oriented. They beautifully supplement house-keeping activities. They beautifully supplement spontaneous role-playing of any sort.

- Prop boxes are flexible. Easy to carry, they can be used any-



dren need materials to extend their play (electrical switches, wire and pliers for the electrician; plastic flowers and vases for the florist). The props are real and that is their appeal. Or they are made to order by the players over at the art center or the carpentry table. And so they are meaningful because they are made the way a child thinks they should be made.

I watch children use the props. They use them in many ways; in conjunction with dramatic play, with large and unit-building blocks, in relation to wheel toys, in relation to large cardboard construction projects. Often they stand alone

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as an exploratory, experimental material unrelated to any other activity. They are very versatile and very absorbing.

As an open-ended material, prop boxes can be developed for children to use at home or at school. At home they may be joint creations of parent and child, or created as a gift for a young child. At school they are developed by children and staff together. They constantly grow. They fill up and probably start to spill over as everyone finds things or makes things to add.

Since these are really separate boxes for various kinds of role-playing, they can be made easily identifiable to children by appropriate pictures cut from magazines or drawn by children and/or adults. Clear manuscript labels might also be used. The boxes which are pictured here are heavy cardboard returnable beer bottle cartons with fold-in lids

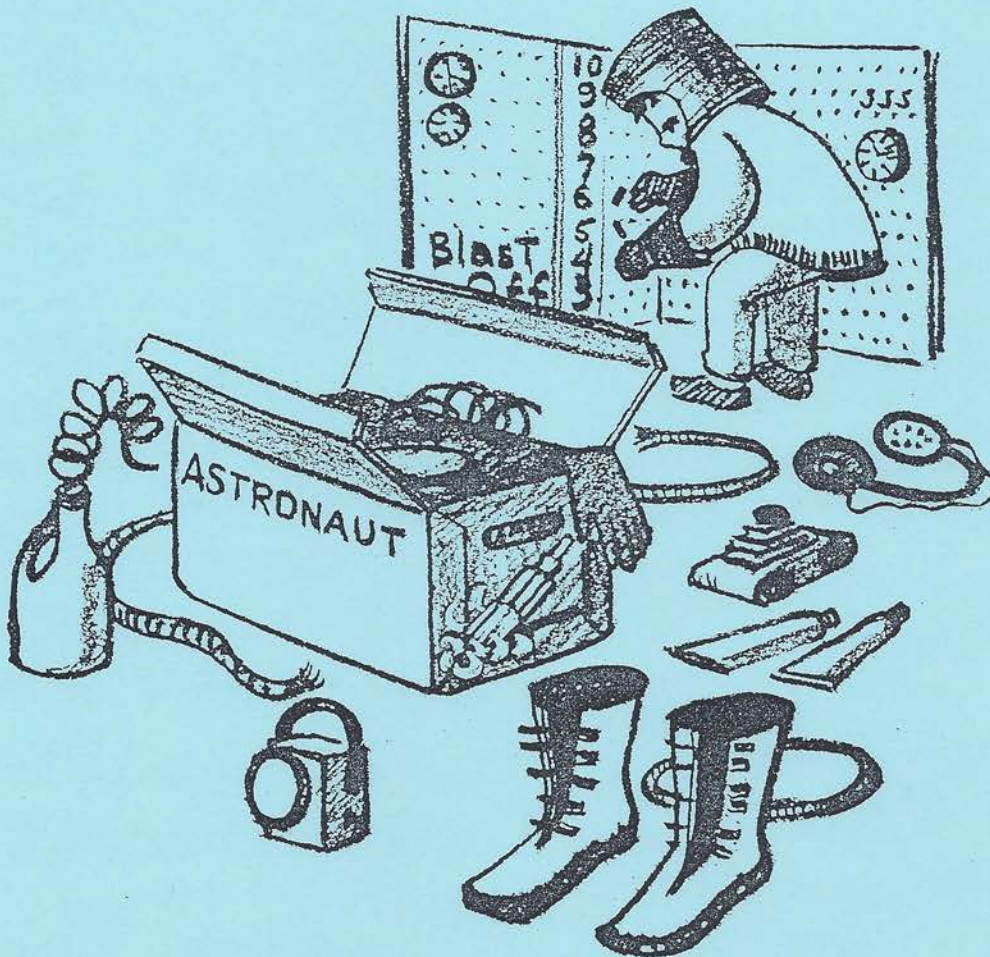
and slots for handgrips. They are light-weight for carrying and may be collected at very minimal cost from local distributors. They are quite tough, water repellant, and may be painted bright colors.

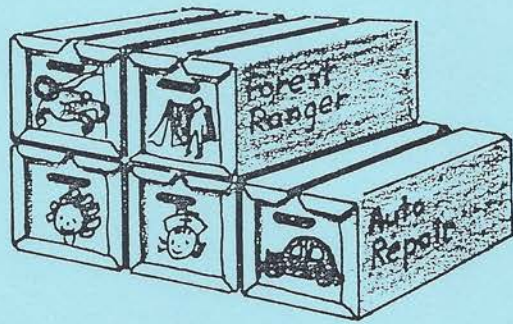
There are many sources for props:

- Once you are aware of their potential for use, you will discover community sources for these *real things* at little, often no expense (hardware and surplus stores, repair services, dumps). I have found that if you have a vivid imagination, one of the best sources is a state surplus property facility. Find out how your state implements its Federal Surplus Property Program and if

your school is eligible for its use. Depending on the day of your visit, you may find anything from long underwear and boot liners (great for space suits), to broken computers (great for space panels), to tools and electrical parts, typewriters, fancy papers, nails and things which you won't know what they are, but children will love them for something. This challenging situation also exists in many junk yards, behind car repair shops—and in our own attics, basements and garages.

- Children and parents will contribute odds and ends and add them





to increasing collections (a timer, an old mirror, a license plate, a tape measure).

• Children may make props as

For the Automobile Repairman

Used (and washed) motor parts: spark plugs, filters, carburetors, cable sets, gears, etc.

Tools: hammers, pliers, screw driver

Oil funnel

Empty oil cans

Flashlight

Wiring

Air pump

Windshield wipers

Key carrier and keys

Rags, old shirts, gloves

Automobile supply catalogues

Etc.

For the Forest Ranger (or Camper)

Canteen

Flashlight

Rope

Mosquito netting

Canvas for tent

Knapsack

Food supplies

Nature books

Small logs

Grill

Binoculars

Etc.

they need them (a potato chip carton space hat, some money to go shopping, cardboard curlers for the beauty shop).

The specific ideas will be yours and your children's. Prop boxes will be continually developing over days, weeks and throughout the year. The following ideas might start you moving. When similar things are included in several boxes, it is good to collect different types or styles, e.g., different kinds of hammers, of measuring devices, of flashlights, wires or wearing apparel.

For the Beautician

Mirror

Curlers

Hairpins

Hairnets

Dryer

Aprons or large bibs

Combs

Towels

Magazines

Empty shampoo bottles (plastic)

Plastic basin

Emery boards

Pencil, paper

Money

Etc.

For the Plumber

Piping: all lengths, widths, and shapes for fitting together

Spigots

Plungers

Tools

Hose and nozzles

Spade

Old shirt, cap

Hardware supply catalogues

Measuring devices

Etc.

Again

Doctor
Nurse
Veterin
Seamstr
Post off
Scientis
Secretan
Ship ca
Bus dri

Again, watch the children. What props can you find for such play as:

Doctor
Nurse
Veterinarian
Seamstress
Post office worker
Scientist
Secretary
Ship captain
Bus driver

Electrician
Frogman
Office worker
Reporter
Teacher
Shoe salesperson
Policeman
Painter
Peace Corps worker

Grocer
Fireman
Spaceman
Martian
Fisherman
Pilot
Telephone repairman
Magician
Railway engineer