



The Creative Skills Podcast

Series 3, Episode 3:
Character Building and thinking of characters as creative provocations with artist Sam Jameson

Featuring Heather Armstrong and Sam Jameson

Transcript

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Get in touch:

Amy Hall-Gibson, Early Years Manager
Email: Amy.hallgibson@starcatchers.org.uk

00:00:01:23 - 00:00:24:02

Welcome to the Creative Skills podcast. I'm Heather Armstrong. For this episode, we want to look at character building, and in particular what happens when an early years professional pretends to be someone else. And no, I'm not just talking about wearing the padded red suit and the beard in December. If you work in an early years setting the chances are you've already done a bit of Collaborative Character Building – where you take on a role to help scaffold the imaginative play your wee ones are already engaged in.

00:00:24:15 - 00:00:45:23

You can also think of characters as creative provocations – this where a character is introduced to spark new creative learning opportunities. This approach often involves a build-up and reveal, and within child-centred practice, wee ones can still be a part of that creative process. Base your character on the needs and interests of your wee ones – use letters, objects or even just chat about the character during the build-up, and observe how wee ones respond to them creatively.

0:00:47:03 - 00:01:19:05

And if you're listening to this thinking, Heather, how on earth are we supposed to do that! Don't worry, help is at hand. I spoke to Samuel Jameson, an early years assistant who's taken both of these approaches in his setting in Edinburgh. We've created a video and a written resource based on his experiences – but first, let's hear from the man himself.

00:01:22:23 - 00:01:29:05

Heather Armstrong

Hi, Sam. Welcome to the Creative Skills podcast. Would you like to introduce yourself to our listeners?

00:01:29:13 - 00:02:07:20

Samuel Jameson

Sure. My name is Samuel Jameson, and I'm currently and have been for the last two years an early years assistant in a nursery, in a primary school nursery in Stockbridge. And before that, I was a theatre performer, mostly working in children's theatre productions. Also working as a science communicator with Edinburgh Science, but also picking up skills in puppetry, presenting and sort of generally working with young people. I also took on a lot of interim supply work when I was working in London as an actor, so I've kind of been in and out of the theatre or education for the last ten or so years.

00:02:07:20 - 00:02:11:13

Heather Armstrong

So picking up lots of skills that'll be really useful in the job you do now.

0:02:11:18 - 00:03:10:19

Samuel Jameson

Yeah. I realized that while I was when I first started working in early years, it was actually the first very first entry into an earlier setting was working with Space Dust, which was the production with Hazel Darwin-Clements, and that was maybe the third job I had out of Drama Schools in 2010 – 2011, and it was a really powerful project for me as a young

performer because it really pushed my understanding of the level of attention and energy is needed to engage with children at such a young age. And the value of putting in that effort and seeing it come back at you when you are playing, performing or engaging with young people. It's such a wonderful response and it's something that I, quite early on in my career realised I wanted to be more part of.

00:03:11:07 - 00:03:15:01

Heather Armstrong

Amazing! What was the thinking behind Space Dust? What did you actually do?

00:03:15:14 - 00:03:45:12

Samuel Jameson

So, Hazel wanted to go into an earlier setting with characters from a different place, and they were literally, in this case, aliens that visited from a different planet. And that was the premise we wanted to create or Hazel rather, wanted to create characters that were strange but approachable, but were kind of unusual in their behaviours, but also interesting and engaging and safe to be around with as well.

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Samuel Jameson

So we dressed up in silver spacesuits. We arrived in a tent that kind of hovered into the nursery, and we started to observe the children's behaviour as if we were visiting aliens from another planet. So learning everything new for the first time. So any time that a child showed us something, we would be responding as if it was the very first time we'd been shown it, allowing space and time to get things wrong.

00:04:13:19 - 00:04:54:04

Samuel Jameson

And a lot of it was just interacting with the setting and making relationships, trialing and erroring, if that's a verb, to see what the kids responded to best, because I think at that time it was the first attempt for, at least for Hazel and I to, to go in with that, open a slate of a character. And we learned over the few days we were there more and more how best we could engage with those children and what successes we had, and also how to help the staff who worked at the creche to engage with us and to narrative and supporting them to also encourage more interest and curiosity in what you're do.

00:04:55:14 - 00:05:27:15

Heather Armstrong

Nice. Do you know, we still have the, the film from Space Dust on the Starcatchers website and I still use it as an example of child centered practice because I just think it's so lovely to see the way the wee ones reacted to you and Hazel when you were in that space. And just that lovely kind of back and forward is just I actually feel a little bit like I'm meeting a star today, to be honest, because I've used I've used your practice so much example, so I'm like tell me about it!

00:05:27:15 - 00:05:57:20

Samuel Jameson

The project, I think the project really has lasted beyond beyond the five days that we spent doing it in Stirling. So during my during my interview for the earlier setting, I mentioned that I worked on Space Dust and the early years officer at the time at remembered it from Starcatchers training and and resources before. So even up to that point it really helped show my level of understanding of what that what that play could be and what I could bring to a full time setting with that experience.

00:05:58:11 - 00:06:07:01

Heather Armstrong

That's fantastic! Starcatchers have been lucky enough to work with you again more recently, haven't we? With the new film resource that we've been working on together?

00:06:07:18 - 00:06:27:15

Samuel Jameson

Yes, So when I started the job at the nursery, I started about January 2021. So that was still in terms of policy and procedure, was still sort of coming off the back of the thick of the pandemic and how that changed the nursery. So my first few months were kind of getting up to speed with that procedure and learning how the nursery operates at that level.

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Samuel Jameson

And then sort of over time, as things became more easier and there was more access, I treated that full year from August to June as, after learning how to do the job in those first few months, I thought, now's my opportunity to see what I can do to bring in more artistry or more experience from my theatre days.

00:06:48:09 - 00:07:09:02

Samuel Jameson

I wanted to gift these young learners from this year group with that experience that I'd learned from space, just because I think it was really inspiring for those kids to meet a brand-new character. And I think it really gives children the challenge to welcome someone new in, to give them your trust, and to gain their own from you, and also give them agency to bring them in.

00:07:09:02 - 00:07:37:16

Samuel Jameson

So I wanted to give them a character, but I didn't know or I didn't want to choose who that character was. That was my me fighting against my artistic instinct of wanting to create something that I wanted to do that might be fun or silly, or that I was able to. So I am, from I often did this early on in my nursery time where I had less experience with nursery settings.

00:08:23:13 - 00:08:54:12

Samuel Jameson

What I would often engage in with, with what I knew, which was role play playing, attending, acting or things in between and encouraging that from the children as well. And this group were a very theatrical bunch, very musical, loved role play and would I think I got to a good place where they would often ask me to join in or it was easy for me to find a character

within the role play that wasn't getting in the way or interrupting to sort of help engage them in the role of role play as well, especially if it was 1 to 1 role play with children that didn't quite have the confidence role playing with another child yet

00:08:23:13 - 00:08:54:12

Samuel Jameson

I would be a good sounding board for them and try and help them and not pretended to be a kid in any way, but literally just pretending, not necessarily being silly, just engaging them in conversation, helping their improvisation when giving them open questions to answer so they can think of things. And that's how I got around. Eventually, through one role play outside in the garden, when children were describing to me that they were off to go and see Granny and they were building a car with which to do that, and they already had ideas of where they could go with granny, where granny lived.

00:08:54:12 - 00:09:14:07

Samuel Jameson

And they, I think I was helping a child join them. So I was asking around, this is a good tip me who's playing who. And that gives those children sometimes a chance to choose who they're playing. They might not have chosen anyone by then, or they might just say, I'm just being me.

00:09:14:19 - 00:09:31:15

Samuel Jameson

Or once in that time I asked who was playing who. I realised no one was playing granny, and I offered, I could be granny, if you like. And I put I got a scarf kind of over my head and put on it just hunkered down a little bit and just quietened my voice and thought of my gran, grannies as well.

0:09:31:20 - 00:09:51:16

Samuel Jameson

So not a lot of performance, just a just a little bit. But it did I noticed it really did change their excitement and their engagement in that story that they chose, that they could go with someone who felt a bit like an older person or someone they could bounce ideas off of, or who could someone who was also kind of looking after them or they had that kind of relationship with from the start.

00:09:52:02 - 00:10:11:07

Samuel Jameson

I think once you say I don't say I was Granny Watson, which is confusingly Mr. Watson's my teaching name. So it's very easy to give them Granny Watson as a as a way of knowing that they could still talk to me. And I did my best to kind of stay pretending that like that and it maybe lasted 20 minutes, 25 minutes, but it carried on and it was good.

00:10:11:12 - 00:10:29:16

Samuel Jameson

I may be stopped because it was starting to hurt or get achey or play moves on. And then I knew I hit a new age, struck something because the next day they asked me to do it again.

And that's when I thought, I feel like this. This could be a character. So I did it the next day. But then I stopped.

00:10:29:16 - 00:10:50:11

Samuel Jameson

I didn't want to do it anymore, and I kind of held off from doing it as casually as I would again, although they did keep asking, which is again reaffirming, but it gave me time and I wait because that was maybe January, February in the term, but I wanted to save something for round about May June to aid with that transition period for the earliest setting.

00:10:51:15 - 00:11:11:02

Samuel Jameson

So I kind of saved it up and I saw and it was all help me kind of build up a little bit of anticipation with the kids. If they did ask me to be Granny Watson, I would then tell them, I'm sorry, I can't today or I don't feel like it today, but it's because the real Granny Watson is going to visit soon.

00:11:11:02 - 00:11:29:22

Samuel Jameson

And we're just we're just working out how that's going to happen. So, yeah, a few months down the line, I'm still being asked, which is really encouraging because I want it to it's going to save it and keep it special without letting them lose interest or divert their attention. But if they did ask for Granny Watson, I would engage, at least with the kind of things I knew about her.

00:11:29:22 - 00:11:50:16

Samuel Jameson

Well, that helped me start building what, what they could know about her. And they could maybe start to build their picture in their mind of who that person was. And then with the help of Starcatchers, who I contacted to help me record this and we brought in two of my really close friends, Kerry Cleland and Ben Winger, who help me sort produce and film it.

00:11:51:12 - 00:12:13:24

Samuel Jameson

And because they also have done similar work by bringing characters into nurseries and that kind of play. And yeah, once it was all set up and I had a clear idea of what I wanted to achieve, I didn't do a lot of rehearsing in front of anyone or much performance practice. I just made a few notes of the kind of things I thought she might say.

00:12:14:23 - 00:12:39:24

Samuel Jameson

I tried a few voices saying those things. So particularly I chose expressions again to kind of thinking back to space dust where we had very before, we went into the setting, we had just a couple of rules of who we were and what we did, but kept it quite open because we thought we would learn more when we started, or kids would give us narratives to kind of for each of us to then flesh out those characters as they suggest.

00:12:41:01 - 00:13:01:22

Samuel Jameson

But for this one, I chose what I would say if I was surprised, which was just kind of "oh" keep it simple, So vocal, but non-verbal responses I think it really helps when you're building a character like how do they breathe? Or How do they huff or say yawn, or you know, sneeze or cough or say or, you know, those kind of very human qualities that you can really tell about someone.

00:13:02:02 - 00:13:36:12

Samuel Jameson

And I think that's that's a good tip for other people. The to help you not think about accents or doing a good impersonation or that your voice has to be elastic or very dramatic. I think if you're thinking about a new character, it's really useful to think about those more human qualities, the more natural side, because a lot of the day I wasn't talking nonstop, although I did find that she was a very chatty granny on arriving at the nursery, which was great because it's a very chatty group of children that we had.

00:13:37:02 - 00:14:20:03

Samuel Jameson

So I spent a lot of time making sure that I could do that for a long period of time and choosing how I could find ease those tensions because it is quite a lot of work to hunker down. I wanted to make sure it was a stretch from my normal and a base teaching, but also I wanted to get away with it. In a sense, a lot of this does feel like, well, I was doing it. It does feel a little bit like, not that I've done undercover work, but you are you are kind of pulling the wool over the eyes a little bit because you if you I think if you really invest in trying to be someone else and going for that, pretending play, they will do the same.

00:14:20:03 - 00:14:38:22

Samuel Jameson

And that's something I learned really quickly on arrival, even though I look completely different with a different costume. I arrived at a different time of day. I arrived through after they'd all arrived, all the children had arrived for the morning. I made sure that everyone was present before and made sure that they could see me arrive in a nice kind of distance way.

00:14:38:22 - 00:15:07:02

Samuel Jameson

So luckily we've got a nice garden next to our nursery main room with windows that look out. So I arrived through the garden with my walking stick and my big cardigan and a big curly wig, which really helped, I think just a big, silly, quite mad granny wig and some glasses and a little bit of make up more than I would usually wear.

00:15:07:06 - 00:15:33:02

Samuel Jameson

And I think it was really very quickly clear who had believed it from the from that first impression, because I think it's it's that easy. And who was immediately suspicious, which is something you have to expect. With space dust, you're a new person, we were new people

into that setting, so we were always going to be a kind of stranger to them and we had to make those relationships anew.

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Samuel Jameson

What was fun about this was staying true to my narrative, which was I am Granny Watson. And that's again, looking back over the footage of what happened, I was really interested in this first moment when I was first challenged on my, my pretending and it was older children more, more, so lots of, not many maybe less than half. But a lot of the older children who were sort of four going on five, or were already five years old, knew something was up because I still had that body shape, I still had a similar face.

0:15:33:15 - 00:16:33:18

Samuel Jameson

But yes, I was putting on a different voice and I was saying, My name is Granny Watson. And every time I was asked, Are you Mr. Watson? Are you really Granny Watson? Where's Mr. Watson? Or just straight up calling me Mr. Watson. I would respond every time with I'm Granny Watson, and I think I got that from kids who, and you might know this, you will know this from working or having young children, when you call them by their name, when they say no, actually I'm Elsa or I'm Sonic.

00:16:33:19 - 00:16:55:20

Samuel Jameson

I remember saying that to my mum saying, While I'm wearing these pyjamas, you must call me Sonic. And I think that that's that just tells the other person, I am pretending to be this person. You can call me this name to help me pretend.

00:16:56:15 - 00:17:25:20

Samuel Jameson

I was just saying very openly, not too correct just to help and say you can call me Granny Watson or just I'm Granny Watson. And I noticed that the children, the older children started calling me Granny Watson. So they just got better and better at coming up to me and asking me really earnestly, Granny Watson, can you do this or can you help me with this?

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Samuel Jameson

Whereas the younger children, interestingly, even though I thought they did believe it was for some of them, a brand-new person, they would often call me Mr. Watson by mistake before correcting themselves and then say, Granny Watson, sorry, and then go on to ask me. So it's amazing. I think me being a familiar person to them really helped, even though they were also in a place to believe I was someone new because it still felt like a familiar kind of relationship. Even though it was someone different, it's still and I think it was nice that it was Granny ended up being my granny that I brought in that kind of help with the subterfuge that I looked a bit like Mr. Watson. As Granny Watson, I would talk about my relationship with Mr. Watson's grandson, and that would often inspire conversation about families and other grandparents.

00:17:56:17 - 00:18:14:09

Samuel Jameson

And so any time there was even suspicion, I found it really easy to talk, to bring the conversation back to who I was pretending to be, who Mr. Watson is, and maintaining that relationship and talking about those people as third person. I also find that really easy at nursery to talk about Mr. Watson as that person while I'm being. Mr. Watson.

00:18:14:09 - 00:18:30:05

Samuel Jameson

It just I think they're quite used to you talking third person anyway. So if you yeah. I would say Granny Watson, I would do that as well. I would say Granny Watson doesn't like that such and such. Or that's not Granny Watson's cup of tea or that is Granny Watson's cup of tea and yeah, also one of the things I had pre-planned going into the setting were I wanted Granny Watson to need help frequently

00:18:30:12 - 00:18:59:11

Samuel Jameson

They treated me as a teacher very quickly or as an adult in the setting very quickly. Where within a few minutes I was asked to read, I was asked to play, I was asked to sort of been shown around. So I spent a lot of the 2 days just reading books in a different voice as if I was reading them for the first time and enjoying their surprise and asking them questions about what they knew, the books and stuff

00:19:12:06 - 00:19:19:08

Heather Armstrong

So while you had role as Granny Watson, you were still a practitioner as part of that issue. How did that work?

00:19:19:17 - 00:19:41:07

Samuel Jameson

That was possibly the most work, was making sure that my ambition to create this character and give these kids an opportunity to meet someone new and and to pretend with me was possible. I wanted to make sure it really was a they see me as Granny Watson when I arrive and they see me when they leave. And there is there is no Mr. Watson in that time.

00:19:41:07 - 00:19:59:08

Samuel Jameson

So I really wanted to commit to being that person. But I also made sure, having spent a long time in the setting, knowing how important those safeguards are and how important it is to to fulfill your visions and values and aims and to create a safe space for those children and to get to all those duties that ultimately start with safety.

0:19:59:16 - 00:20:20:05

Samuel Jameson

And so part of my introduction to full part of my introduction to the nursery when I was talking about Granny Watson arriving, was that it was part of a program to bring in grannies

and grandpas in, to work as like as an initiative. So I sort of set up them that Granny Watson is coming to the nursery. Please welcome her.

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Samuel Jameson

Please help her and show around. But she's here really to teach. So, if you need anything, as you would ask me, please ask Granny Watson as if she was your teacher. So I gave them that permission from the start. I also hoped it would allow them to treat me as a teacher, not as a just another adult, or so as someone that she had responsibilities and that she had a duty to do.

00:20:41:01 - 00:21:05:14

Samuel Jameson

So, A lot of my play was just me pretending to do all those things and also interested in what the children knew about those. What my responsibilities were as a teacher or generally of teachers and practitioners, what their responsibilities are. So when it came to certain points of the day, I would often seek the guidance of our teachers and practitioners and also keeping them in and asking if I could help or do certain things.

00:21:05:14 - 00:21:32:24

Samuel Jameson

And any time they would say, Oh no, it's okay, Granny, you have a sit down. I would insist on saying no and I would use the opportunity to bring in as much help as I could to do those responsibilities from the children. So when it's tidy up time or snack time or it's the general kind of running of the nursery, I would always either seek them, seek the practitioners approval openly to make sure that they knew I was learning and also give them the opportunity to teach me where things went.

00:21:32:24 - 00:22:00:03

Samuel Jameson

And I have to say it was the best tidy up, one of the best tidy ups those two days I've ever seen over from surprise participants as well that no, we engage in that quite crucial part of the day. I'm quite often quite tense part of the day so that was great having, making, having made new relationships to the point where they would help me tidy up more than they would ever help Mr. Watson tidy up.

00:22:01:11 - 00:22:06:01

Heather Armstrong

Are you tempted to keep that wig in your pocket just for a tidy up time every day?

00:29:01:15 - 00:29:23:07

Samuel Jameson

Oh, that's a great idea for the practitioners. Just become old and very slow and unable to. Yeah, it was fun in a sense, trying to be bad at the job or trying to learn the job anew.

00:22:06:11 - 00:22:50:07

Samuel Jameson

I think that was that was entertaining and entertaining for them I think as well. Yeah. And all those, it's all those little times that they engage with me in a helpful way. Whether they were pretending, whether they knew I was pretending or not. They were all sincere types of play or sincere responses to the game, which is, yeah, that was the most inspiring thing I think was seeing those kind of attitudes from someone I knew. Yeah, was sometimes new or surprising.

00:22:50:07 - 00:22:55:18

Heather Armstrong

This kind of goes on to my next question. What do you think the children gained from you being Granny Watson?

00:22:55:18 - 00:23:45:15

Samuel Jameson

I think along with many of our other kind of event themed institutions that we bring to the setting, you're creating for them a brand-new narrative to build around all of their play and experiences. So me coming in as someone new is an event for young people, especially these children having come off spending a lot of time at home and not meeting as many new people and not having that opportunity meant that they could have a little bit of practice with someone that they trust and someone that knows them really well, spend time helping them develop.

00:23:45:15 - 00:24:07:17

Samuel Jameson

It's an opportunity, I think, for them in a safe way, in a safe space to try out meeting people. And it's certainly one of the things that I still have like anxiety over of like meeting new people or meeting lots of strangers at once. Or even when I came to the nursery, I felt quite nervous about just meeting lots of new people, however old they were, or whether they were working or playing.

00:24:08:21 - 00:24:29:04

Samuel Jameson

So I think that kind of practice in that setting at that level just feels like a really good opportunity for them to kind of stretch those interactions a little bit, they might be a bit more confident meeting that person in that setting and they can stretch their capabilities of what they they know they're capable of. They might be children that don't get the opportunity to help very often.

00:24:29:14 - 00:24:56:09

Samuel Jameson

They might be the youngest or they might feel like they have less agency than their peers, or they might not quite have the skills to to jump into something. But maybe seeing someone doing that, whether they're observing me do it or working with me to do it, I think it just gives them a good scaffolding from a from an honest place, from someone that knows them from an educational point and from a very personal point.

00:24:56:09 - 00:25:17:22

Samuel Jameson

Because you do spend so much time with these kids and they are always looking for something to attach their knowledge to and their understanding too. So often what we were talking about with Granny was just an opportunity for them to say, Well, I can do this. And my grandparents are like this and I can I be a granny too, and can I join in with that?

00:25:17:22 - 00:25:48:12

Samuel Jameson

And you just given them something to attach to you, giving them a character that's really engaging and interested in them and learning new for the first time. Curiosity is a very universal emotion and feeling. I think bringing in the character that's curious about those people and that place helps those learners feel a bit more responsible for that setting, responsible for their play in their actions.

00:25:48:12 - 00:26:13:11

Samuel Jameson

Because, I mean, the character the character Granny was interested in, you know, the things that were in the nursery, but also really interested in the people in what they did and was surprised by what they said or was entertained by what they said. And she I felt I laughed a lot over that two days because whether it was stuff I knew about the kids anyway or it was just the way they told it or it was stories we were reading together.

00:26:13:11 - 00:26:45:00

Samuel Jameson

I found really funny for the first. Like I tried that as a as an attitude to the place that it was all a bit strange and a little bit entertaining and all a bit odd. And I think it really helped the kids see their setting in a new light as well and feel a bit of, I guess, distance from it because they know the place so well for someone to come in and explore it all over again makes them feel really maybe proud of that space and what they do there. And yeah, I wanted them to feel proud of what they had.

00:26:45:23 - 00:26:57:22

Heather Armstrong

It sounds like it gave them a chance to look at their setting almost with fresh eyes, and for you to come in and ask all these questions, they got the chance to be, Oh, I'm the expert. I've been here for ages. You're brand new.

00:26:57:22 - 00:27:24:07

Samuel Jameson

Absolutely. I think the more you give children that responsibly and also in general role play, giving them responsibilities, enabling them to affect what you do and to give them choices that then you act out and that you pretend to do just makes them feel like they've got power and they've got influence over their their setting, and their people, especially their teachers, which can often be quite like an impassable.

0:27:25:09 - 00:27:46:13

Samuel Jameson

Sometimes I try I try and create distance from children when I'm I'm in artist because I need to get that information across or I need to, you know, put a serious face on or serious tone or because I have an expectation of how the setting should be run and how I want how want it to be run.

00:27:47:24 - 00:28:03:23

Samuel Jameson

So it kind of took the pressure off that for me for a little bit as well. I wasn't thinking about what I wanted from the setting I was thinking about was, what do they want, what are they experiencing and what's their engagement and what did they understand? And if they got it wrong and they told me something that was wrong, I would do it anyway.

00:28:04:13 - 00:28:25:14

Samuel Jameson

So like if they if it didn't, if that's not where the toy lives and I put it there, I'd either choose to think about it a little bit and maybe come to a common sense decision of where it could go or to continue that conversation as to finding out the real answer with the right answer, yeah. A couple of times that they asked me to do things that I thought the teacher side of me thought, that's not safe.

00:28:25:18 - 00:28:46:23

Samuel Jameson

Definitely not. But instead, from Granny's perspective, I would just choose a sustained amount of uncertainty that she was worried and concerned that she was really thinking about it. So she didn't know the right answer. But she spent time working it out on this and then deciding, I don't think this is a good idea.

0:28:47:20 - 00:29:03:00

Heather Armstrong

Yeah, that's really important to remember. That wasn't it because you're good and as a character, but you're not going in as a puppet, you know, Granny Watson can still have a modicum of common sense.

00:29:03:06 - 00:29:27:23

Samuel Jameson

Yes. Yes. She says she's yeah, she's a grown person. I try to sprinkle in little bits here and there of like what she did before, like in a in her career or in her life or where she grew up or what she did. And they didn't care because it just wasn't as interesting to them as Granny is here right now, and let's do something together because it meant I could just spend more time playing and being silly and also, yeah,

00:29:28:02 - 00:30:05:00

Samuel Jameson

getting through the steps of of yeah discovering the place. I made sure I wanted to have an interaction with every child in some level and I think only a couple of kids. We'd only gotten to like a little bit of conversation or a little bit of like side along play rather than direct

interaction. And that was right up to kids following me around all day and making lots of opportunities to learn things about you. I did notice what was kind of assuring, I guess, was that some of the children who were very, they'll stay quite close by relationship when I'm when I myself teaching, a couple of them weren't as trusting of Granny Watson.

00:30:05:00 - 00:30:28:05

Samuel Jameson

So I made sure with those children I would give them opportunities to engage or to make sure that they were welcome in all spaces. And I don't think we necessarily found that trust as I would when it was me and them. But yeah, it made sure that every kid got some kind of positive experience out of it with also making sure that they could play and do their own thing.

00:30:28:05 - 00:30:45:01

Samuel Jameson

And, and it was nice because children would come in and out of what I was doing. I would have groups at the time and then they would carry on and play again. So it's nice to know that I wasn't interrupting them and it was nice to know that I could get some space and spend some time, some of that quality time with little groups of kids rather than being mobbed, which was a concern.

00:30:45:24 - 00:30:50:24

Heather Armstrong

And what sounds really lovely as well is that you still kind of brought the same

00:30:50:24 - 00:30:58:34

Samuel Jameson

Ethos.

00:40:44:09 - 00:31:09:24

Heather Armstrong

Ethos, yes. So I think what was lovely is that you brought the same kind of child centered ethos to being Granny Watson as you would to being a practitioner. So it wasn't about, I imagine coming in and then making a big show of yourself, into the whole Granny Watson show.

00:31:09:24 - 00:31:16:24

Heather Armstrong

It was still about being able to respond to the needs and interests of the ones that you were working with.

00:31:17:11 - 00:31:52:14

Samuel Jameson

Yeah, I think from the start. Again, going against my instincts, I think if I was a freelancer coming out this, I'd I would want to make a bit more of a show and a dance and as a brand-new person to make it to really lead on that entertaining side. But knowing I was going to be there in character for 12 hours over two days, there was a personal looking after sort of

sense of making sure that I was taking it easy and taking my time, but also making sure that I gave space for children to to choose how they interacted with me.

00:31:52:20 - 00:32:13:08

Samuel Jameson

I very much asked what the flow of the nursery was. I tried to get up to speed as a teacher, learning the ropes and trying to get things in line and always making sure that children heard me out loud saying what I was going to do next and, you know, keeping on top of my duties. And I need to go over here now where we can go over here, do you want to come kind of thing.

00:32:13:08 - 00:32:40:03

Samuel Jameson

I was always supported by my peers, but I was also trying to make sure that they were included in the play, but not swallowed up by it or without the feeling of them to do too much. It was nice actually, because the lot the teachers are all the teachers in some way, even just by calling me Granny Watson just referred to me. That is, is enough of a commitment and all that's really needed.

00:32:40:08 - 00:33:05:10

Samuel Jameson

But it was nice also that some of the practitioners kind of went along with the story and egged on the narrative that Mr. Watson was somewhere else and confirmed that it definitely was Granny Watson and also offered ways they became a good resource of I think Granny Watson needs some help to do this. Or would you mind giving Granny Watson a hand or, you know, supporting that that relationship as well with me because they could gain trust from them?

00:33:05:10 - 00:33:21:18

Samuel Jameson

I think it's important that they were trusting of me doing it as well and they were so supportive. I think they were kind of bemused by it generally. I think some of the parents were a bit bemused by it generally I came out and said at the end of the day because they were all also because they were because the children were led along to know that Granny Watson was coming.

00:33:21:18 - 00:33:41:22

Samuel Jameson

Obviously it made the news made at home as well. We made sure that the parents were aware of it and that it was going to be happening. And I chatting to the early years officer today about the project. And she said actually the main thing that came up was that we had a film camera operator in and that became possibly the biggest hurdle.

00:33:42:09 - 00:34:10:03

Samuel Jameson

But actually just just being me, they see the value of, well, it's brought the kids they still talk they still talk about Granny Watson.

00:33:42:09 - 00:34:10:03

Samuel Jameson

It's really nice. I've done it. It was maybe it's now maybe eight months ago, nine months ago, maybe longer. And some kids were talking, one kid's got a walking stick, he was holding a stick and then just turned upside down and had a little doddle and said, their granny Watson, I thought, gosh, it's still it's amazing. And I left little trinkets as well.

00:34:10:03 - 00:34:30:11

Samuel Jameson

There's another thing I would recommend if you wanted to do this. I left a couple of things that I donated to the nursery. Just little toys that look quite old that got from charity shops, like 50 cards or postcards or whatever. So those items are still kicking about. They're saving to the kids. I didn't know Granny Watson. They'll still get to play with those things.

00:34:30:11 - 00:34:47:02

Heather Armstrong

You mentioned earlier that some of the children were suspicious, particularly the older ones. Did you have a discussion or did you with your colleagues or did you think about it beforehand? What would we do if someone was really insistent? No, that's a.

00:34:47:08 - 00:35:13:07

Samuel Jameson

No, I had a I had a plan. If an older child or someone that was more suspicious of what I was doing and more insistent that they wanted it stop, or they even if they particularly missed Mr. Watson, it was upsetting them. Or, you know, or they were more offended by the pretending. Yeah, I suppose I was. I'd be ready to sit down with them and talk to them, come out of character, engage with them as Mr. Watson, and bring them in on the idea.

00:35:13:15 - 00:35:40:17

Samuel Jameson

Let them know earnestly what I wanted to achieve, that I thought this would be a nice idea for the kids that were to get to meet someone new. This was a character that we came up with in the playground. I thought, this be a bit of fun. It would be really cool. You could help me help the other kids think that I'm Granny Watson and bring them, maybe give them tasks or maybe give them responsibilities to help that along. And yeah, give them ownership of that.

00:35:40:17 - 00:36:10:16

Samuel Jameson

And if they didn't want to do that and if it wasn't okay then talk about it and just make sure that we could find a place where we could help each other or let them know they could take space from me. And I suppose if it if it came to it and it did feel like it was too much, or if I came in with a character that felt really distrustful, whatever reason, or they didn't feel right about it, I would, of course, absolutely stop at them and maybe talk about it afterwards, or maybe try a lighter version of the pretending that felt a bit more like they could talk to me and I could stop.

00:36:11:00 - 00:36:32:18

Samuel Jameson

That's always the option as well. You can. I was ready to stop at the drop of a hat if obviously the job required it and the timing was right. But we were quite lucky. I came out of character a couple of times by mistake. I realized looking back on it or I had little jokes with it was quite nice to have little jokes with other teachers and that kind of helped me settle a little bit.

00:36:32:20 - 00:36:52:18

Samuel Jameson

I knew if I felt like I was going a bit mad and I was stuck, I could look to a teacher and they could see what was going on. I guess we could share. So that you had a teacher a bit of normalcy because it was weird and I think. But it was it was so nice also to go and meet teachers and for them to see me in the lunch room and for them to sort of ask about it

00:36:52:18 - 00:37:09:07

Samuel Jameson

and because it yeah, it was it became a little event and I think that's the one of the nice things you can bring to a nursery is that kind of event feeling that you give them a really safe space of a place that they know with environment, the resources that they can use and that they have ownership of.

00:37:09:12- 00:37:36:15

Samuel Jameson

And then you give other things to that environment to change, like you say, to change the way they look at it, to change the way they think about what they're doing and keeping that feedback going. Yeah, whether it's a party or a festival or character or maybe someone from the from the community, a new person. We like getting parents in who have like specialties to kind of bring new ideas. And that just gives the kids another another look at a different kind of life in a different kind of way, in a safe space.

00:37:36:24 - 00:38:04:05

Heather Armstrong

It it strikes me that with space dust, and then with Granny Watson. There was two kind of slightly different approaches. So with space dust, obviously you didn't have that previous relationship with the children. So in my mind, that's more like using a character as a provocation. So bringing this character in and keeping really open and saying, okay, well actually here's the provocation, here's the inspiration, let's see where the creativity comes from.

00:38:04:11 - 00:38:48:23

Heather Armstrong

Or what creativity develops. And that gives wee ones a chance to respond creatively to what you're offering. I think the lovely thing about Ganny Watson is that it sounds like there was a bit of co-creation and that you were having those conversations beforehand and it was really based on what they were already interested in and thinking about, and yeah, I don't know, I

just, I just, I find it really interesting that there can be those two kind of slightly different approaches, but they can both bring it can have really rich interactions.

00:38:49:22 - 00:39:12:07

Samuel Jameson

I think also it was it was quite a surprise that that initial role play of Granny Watson when it was just in the playground and we were just I was just inviting myself into their play, but it just kind of came from nowhere, that was, it's, I've never really played a character that specifically. I'm usually just when I'm role playing, I'm usually just myself and often kids are as well.

00:39:12:07 - 00:39:30:06

Samuel Jameson

When they're serving you tea or lunch or you're at the doctor's, they're just kind of being them. They might be Doctor So-and-so or Officer So-and-so or whatever, but it was it was it was cool that they gave me a character that I kind of had to make a bit of a jump to do, and I think that was the fun thing for them.

00:39:30:06 - 00:39:51:11

Samuel Jameson

Most of all, the thing that attached them, first off, was that, Oh, it's completely different, Mr. Watson. He's behaving completely differently. This is great. And he's but he's behaving in a way that we expect. We know what a granny's going to do. We know how they're going to be. You know what, Yeah, all that again, they're kind of choosing their own granny memories and thinking, great, it's the person I know because it's granny.

00:39:52:11 - 00:40:12:18

Samuel Jameson

And it's a great prefix to have to a character, I think a just a granny somebody, because it means they can imprint their own granny kind of ideas onto. Yeah. So whatever I came up with, I suppose they might have already started imagining who that person was. And that's a great way to introduce the character that they have in their imagination or that they can.

00:40:12:18 - 00:40:34:09

Samuel Jameson

Because, yeah, I can tell you that I've got a great, great, great uncle and you'll love start kind of thinking who that person might be or what they might look like or how old they are. Even just that little suggestion is enough for a kid. And yet, the person that turned up was completely different to what they expected because they were quite tall and quite broad shouldered and it sounded quite a lot like Mr. Watson.

00:40:34:09 - 00:41:03:09

Samuel Jameson

It looked a bit like Mr. Watson, I think. But yeah, I think that that's what it gave was that they could see a transformation from something they thought they knew. Maybe that's I think that's an enticing thing. Whereas bringing in a new character is just a completely new curiosity starting point. I think both are great and I was interested maybe if the play had

been different or if it involved in it on, you know, in another group of young learners think, it might be a different character that might have had to go in without any words or be.

00:41:04:08 - 00:41:45:24

Samuel Jameson

I was thinking about this when I was writing up the kind of toolkit for this because I really like this project to continue and I'd like to hopefully be able to support other practitioners do this. I mean, we're in the process of doing that now. Yeah. So I want to give lots of advice on how to do these things and what kind of characters might be interesting, and I'm really interested in that side of it. We weren't silent characters in Space Dust, but we started in a very blank slate and we had to listen really, really carefully too. And that's what we learned. We learned the language of that creche. We only learned the words that they taught us that they knew. Whereas yeah Granny came in with a bit more knowledge, I suppose, and a bit more.

00:41:45:24 - 00:42:03:06

Samuel Jameson

But they could have chosen a monster. They could have chosen or that could have been the one they ask more, in which case they would have. That would have been more of an emotional, non-verbal kind of introduction. And I would have, I think Granny helped with that group quite well because they were quite a high energy, quite an older crowd, and I think having us choosing a softer, slower character helped.

00:42:03:06 - 00:42:32:09

Samuel Jameson

I wonder if a different setting would naturally choose a character that needs to fill up that space that they don't have in the nursery. I would maybe, my advice would be maybe not to do animals. If you were doing this kind of thing, because then you're worrying about looking like a dog or being like a dog or having four legs.

00:42:32:09 - 00:42:39:24

Samuel Jameson

So I think it's good to have two legs to balance or to be to be a human, say, well, our aliens were kind of human shape and they could they could walk and pick up things. And I'd be worried that if you restricted yourself too much, you wouldn't be able to fulfill the duties of a practitioner

00:42:40:08 - 00:42:52:16

Heather Armstrong

Yeah. So I guess it's really interesting to think about other practitioners and how they might be able to do this. I mean, the first thing I would suggest is that they maybe don't need to do 6 hours of it. I feel that you made quite extreme.

00:42:52:16 - 00:43:16:03

Samuel Jameson

Yeah. I wonder even if, like, there could be a visit after lunch for an hour or two, if you feel like you've got a character that they that it's come from, come from a child led play

interaction that's developed by them or suggested by them for you to do. Yeah. Start with start small. Let's start that. Like I did with Granny Watson, I was naturally pretending in play there and then.

00:43:16:03 - 00:43:34:23

Samuel Jameson

So they did have like an early introduction to what I presented, but stripped back and very off the cuff. And that's when I tried some things out even and sort of got the idea. So if you can do it in the blink of an eye, some kind of version of that character, that's kind of the ideal starting point that it feels like an easy thing that you could do.

00:43:35:00 - 00:44:04:02

Samuel Jameson

It feels interesting to you. It's giving you ideas when you're when you're being that character, it's changing the way you behave and you're noticing a feedback response from the kids because they're seeing you be different and that's laughing at you or looking after you. Yeah, I think that's when you know you've got something and then yeah, just dress it up, dress up, put a wig on it and keep it simple, keep it cheap, keep it that fun and try it out.

00:44:04:02 - 00:44:20:13

Samuel Jameson

Try arriving as someone you either in the morning and then coming back as your as your normal teaching self and hearing all about it or starting the day as your teacher self and then bringing in you character because you've got a, you've got an emergency to get to whatever. Like, Yeah, play around, you can leave and if you want to keep it short, yeah, I'd say 6 hours is a lot.

00:44:20:13 - 00:44:44:07

Samuel Jameson

They don't have doesn't have to be a one visit and then they go it might be something you build up to or something that they can build up to you with. You could actually if you. Yeah. If you felt like the children would be more interested in developing a character during creating something and you give them that ownership instead and make sure that while you're gearing up to arrive as the character they've they've been part of that.

00:44:44:16 - 00:45:02:23

Samuel Jameson

Just keep listening to what your kids are interested in and get used to changing your behaviour moment to moment when you're playing. I suppose it's good advice as well, like when you're just mucking about or if you were asked if you want something of this is quite regular thing at my nursey where I'll ask what I want for lunch or I'll be given a bowl of something to try or a cup to smell and it will be will that table.

01:00:54:20 - 01:01:13:16

Samuel Jameson

But I'll have to do some kind of and I, I know one thing that can happen. I would do those things. I think, how many times can I do this differently and how many times can I respond

differently to this? How many emotions can they get out of? How long did it take me to even say what I think about the cup while I'm reacting to it?

00:45:02:23 - 00:45:25:08

Samuel Jameson

I think that can, oh about acting. I think that's the big that can be quite a barrier to people who are who to pretend professionally. And one thing I've heard from other teachers is that they're often most embarrassed by performing in front of other adults.

00:45:25:08 - 00:46:12:12

Samuel Jameson

With other kids, it's kind of fine because they are playing and you are playing too. But sometimes that can be. I don't want to be seen being kind of out the normal way. I want to protect that, that teacher relationship. So I think sometimes if you're being silly, you can maybe lose your kids or they might lose respect for you. But silliness is such a great thing to have a tool at your disposal to cheer someone up or to engage them in a new thing, or to help them teach you how to do something right.

00:46:12:20 - 00:46:35:17

Samuel Jameson

And the sillier you are, not the stranger, the odder you can be about the things that they they know and their expectations. If you can challenge their expectations, then you can stretch their imagination of what what's possible, what's right or what's wrong, and get them thinking about what they believe and what they know of themselves.

00:46:36:03 - 00:46:50:00

Heather Armstrong

Yes, I just I really love that idea of, you know, when a wee one gives you a cup and the automatic thing is, is to be like, "mm, thanks." Isn't it, though? We all do "mm thanks!"

00:46:50:04 - 00:46:53:19

Samuel Jameson

Yeah. Especially if you got lots of them.

00:46:54:02 - 00:47:40:02

Heather Armstrong

Yeah, I really like that idea is like a little kind of many creative challenge to be. Well, actually, how many different ways can I drink this cup of tea or, you know, and how many different reactions can I try to see in each will tell each person in the pretend play what's in that cup. And it just. It feels like a really nice way to start tapping into that.

00:47:40:08 - 00:48:33:18

Samuel Jameson

So another thing I like to do when I'm when I'm role or having those kind of very simple interactions is don't be don't be afraid to say no a couple of times as long as you show the there's a bit of tension and maybe you might or always play with I like to play with kind of opposites. You can play with when you're offered something. It's like you say, it's really easy

to go, "yes, great. drink. Lovely. Thank you." And that that is a way of affirming their play. But I don't think it's interrupting their play to take that offer and play with it and play along sort of sliding scale of do I want to do this because you're giving them that scaffolding of like what they can say if they're offered a strange cup of something, you're given them sort of skills of like what it is to respond to the new things and that you can show fear and trepidation.

00:48:34:15 - 00:48:59:13

Samuel Jameson

And I'll always drink it. I'll always eventually get to that place. This is another way of scaffolding, trying new things, and I might not like it. And that's okay too. I've tried that a couple of times recently of drinking something and actually going, Oh goodness, no, that's awful. Well, what's in there? And it just makes them laugh because you've tried something weird. Challenge expectations when they're role-playing with you directly.

00:48:59:18 - 00:49:00:24

Heather Armstrong

Yeah.

00:48:59:18 - 00:49:00:24

Samuel Jameson

And I'd be silly. Really, really silly.

00:49:02:21 - 00:49:23:10

Heather Armstrong

I think silliness is actually really important to remember. And I think particularly with the what everybody's been through, the past few years with the pandemic, you know, when you're stressed and when you're worried about, you know, all the things that are going on in your life, your playfulness and your silliness can be the first thing to go.

00:49:23:18 - 00:49:48:17

Heather Armstrong

So just kind of having that moment to just be late in actually is important to be silly sometimes. One of things I picked up from your experience with Granny Watson as well is that although I think it does seem like Granny was a very convincing character, it's for other practitioners want to try this it's maybe not that important. Is it that important that that a super believable character?

00:49:48:17 - 00:50:06:16

Samuel Jameson

I, I maybe a couple of times during those two days I felt like, you know, I was in a really Zen place and I, you know, and I was really Granny Watson. But like most of the time I was I had one half of my brain thinking, you know, do my usual duties. I look completely different. That's the main thing and that's obviously quite a big statement. I'm going to be there all day. If I keep an eye on what I'm saying, just make sure that it sounds a little bit granny or pick myself pick. But you know, notice when I'm not putting the energy into the voice and correct it. I think it's not an acting job. I think that's a maybe a useful way of describing it.

00:50:24:10 - 00:50:52:07

Samuel Jameson

It's a pretending job. And pretending is something that we all have done and we all naturally do as young people. And maybe it's my belief that it's other things that on top of that and kind of cross your usual opportunities to pretend. I still think we pretend daily naturally by affecting our voice or, you know, trying to get someone to help us or being kind of convincing or being authoritative or being entertaining.

00:50:52:07 - 00:51:33:17

Samuel Jameson

We're all kind of doing little bits of stretching our expressions and stretching our personalities every day, and we still little bits of ourselves, or we might be someone else's voice or tell a story from another person's perspective or so there's a little bit of pretending always happening all the time. And I suppose one thing I'd really like to encourage with practitioners and help with is changing the mindset about pretending as something that is either childish or silly or not welcome in a in a nursery setting for whatever reason, pretending happens so much and so naturally in early years settings that it's not unusual for it to come from a practitioner.

00:51:33:17 - 00:51:57:07

Samuel Jameson

I read. If that's what you provide for, for the young learners, they'll learn that that's one of your skills. That's something you can give them. And I'm careful you not too often. I think when I first started the job, I found myself in a position where I'm doing way too much, pretending a role play, and I'm not getting any agency of myself. Like I'm not able to get all all the children are relying on me too much to entertain them.

00:51:57:18 - 00:52:15:24

Samuel Jameson

And that's not a good place. That's not them learning. So yeah, with all those things in mind and knowing that children really feed off of your energy and your and so if, if you're not comfortable doing it, it doesn't feel like a relaxing thing to do. It doesn't feel like something that would be enjoyable.

00:52:15:24 - 00:52:37:18

Samuel Jameson

Then just do, Yeah, keep it small and keep it simple. But if you feel like you're having fun getting more involved with play or you're finding that silly's going down really well, going over really well, or you're doing something regularly in one of their games that really entertains them or really gets them animated and excited, or also feeling a bit like they can pretend to.

00:52:38:19 - 00:53:07:05

Samuel Jameson

Then you'll then they'll learn that as an accepted opportunity within the nursery, that you can be just as playful as them because you've had all that experience. And even then you can

be playful and still shape their language and model for them good behavior or emotional resilience. You can really also engage on their level and have opportunities for awe and wonder, seeing things for the first time.

00:53:07:23 - 00:53:35:18

Samuel Jameson

Like often when if a child shows me a snail in the garden, I'll say, Oh yes, that's the mollusk. And they, you know, they, you know, they've got this bit of their body and I can tell them lots about it. But what if they show a snail to a character that's never seen a snail before? Yeah. And then if it's still quite fresh for them as an idea, you can both experience it together and really encourage that curiosity with your own and kind of model it as best pretending.

00:53:35:18 - 00:54:17:22

Samuel Jameson

You're pretending to be curious about something. You're pretending to enjoy what they're doing, what they've offered you to eat or drink or. And the more you pretend, the more they know it's okay to pretend. The more it stretches their pretending and gives them opportunities to practice being people and talking to each other and living with each other and sharing goals or creating new ones and yeah, I think if it's just shame that's getting in the way of all that, I think I would really love to help create, to get rid of that. You work in a safe space which encourages pretending.

00:54:18:11 - 00:54:48:02

Heather Armstrong

Yeah. And it just sounds like there's so many benefits for the wee ones for you to be a little bit brave and great your comfort zone a little bit and try this new thing because the that the idea of bringing a real sense of wonder to a setting is just absolutely magical. And that's what helps children fall in love with learning to be thinking about the setting they go into and thinking, wow, I wonder what's going to happen today.

00:54:48:15 - 00:54:52:09

Heather Armstrong

Yeah. Some. Thank you so much. This has been absolute joy speaking to you.

00:54:52:10 - 00:54:55:20

Samuel Jameson

Oh, it's been great fun. Thank you, Heather.

00:54:55:20 - 00:55:35:10

Amy Hall-Gibson

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Speaker 1

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