EYFS@RMS – Progression of Skills for the Small World Story Tuff Tray

The Small World Story Tuff Tray provides children with opportunities to explore imaginative storytelling, recreate familiar experiences, develop language and build their understanding of the world. Through small-world figures, themed settings and open-ended resources, children develop creativity, communication, narrative skills, social interaction and early problem-solving.



1. Explorers – discovering small worlds

Babies / younger toddlers, as appropriate

- Explore suitable figures, animals, vehicles and sensory materials.
- Move, hold, touch and position objects within a simple scene.
- Notice differences between objects, animals, textures and sounds.
- Begin to imitate familiar actions, such as making animals move or vehicles travel.
- Explore simple cause-and-effect relationships through moving and arranging objects.
- Respond to familiar words, sounds and adult narration.
- Communicate interests through gestures, sounds, facial expressions and emerging words.



2. Developing storytellers

Typically 2–3 years

- Use figures and objects to act out familiar experiences.
- Move characters through simple settings, such as a farm, home, park or road.
- Begin to use objects imaginatively to represent real-life places and events.
- Copy simple actions and sounds associated with characters and animals.
- Use single words and short phrases to describe what characters are doing.
- Begin to link two or more actions together during play.
- Play alongside others and begin to share ideas and resources.



3. Purposeful storytellers

Typically 3–4 years

- Create simple stories using characters, settings and props.
- Recreate familiar stories, nursery rhymes and real-life experiences.
- Begin to sequence events, such as a character arriving, meeting someone and going home.
- Use dialogue, character voices and descriptive language during play.
- Introduce simple problems, such as a lost animal or a blocked road.
- Describe settings and characters using words relating to size, colour, position and movement.
- Develop cooperative play by sharing roles and building stories with peers.
- Use imagination to adapt familiar stories and explore different outcomes.



4. Confident storytellers and world-builders

Typically 4–5 years

- Independently develop imaginative stories with a beginning, middle and end.
- Create connected storylines with characters, settings, events and problems to solve.
- Retell familiar stories using relevant vocabulary and increasing detail.
- Invent new characters, settings and alternative endings.
- Use dialogue to express characters' thoughts, feelings and intentions.
- Plan and adapt the setting using loose parts, construction materials and props.
- Negotiate roles, develop shared narratives and resolve disagreements with support where needed.
- Use early writing, drawing, labels or story maps to represent and extend ideas.
- Explain what is happening in the story, predict possible outcomes and reflect on how the story could develop.

Progression of key skills

Skill	Emerging	Developing	Secure / extending
Exploring objects	Handles and moves figures and materials	Uses objects for familiar actions	Selects and combines resources purposefully
Imaginative play	Imitates actions and familiar experiences	Uses figures to represent events	Creates original scenarios and complex imaginative worlds
Story sequencing	Explores individual actions	Links actions into simple sequences	Develops connected narratives with a beginning, middle and end
Language and vocabulary	Responds to familiar words and sounds	Describes actions, characters and settings	Uses descriptive language, dialogue and story vocabulary
Character development	Moves figures and imitates sounds	Gives characters simple actions and roles	Develops characters with intentions, feelings and relationships
Problem-solving	Explores what objects can do	Introduces simple problems into play	Develops and tests different solutions within a story
Collaboration	Plays alongside others	Shares resources and ideas	Negotiates roles and co-creates storylines
Early literacy	Enjoys familiar stories and rhymes	Recreates story events	Retells, adapts and represents stories through talk, drawing and writing

Adult role and provision

- Create inviting story worlds: Use themed tuff trays inspired by traditional tales, familiar stories, seasons, habitats, transport and children's interests.
- Provide open-ended resources: Include figures, animals, vehicles, blocks, natural materials, fabric, stones, logs, bridges and other safe loose parts.
- Model storytelling: Narrate actions, introduce characters and demonstrate how events can be linked without taking control of children's play.
- Develop vocabulary: Introduce words such as character, setting, journey, adventure, habitat, explore, rescue, obstacle, beginning, next and finally.
- Extend thinking: Ask "Where might the character be going?", "What problem could they encounter?" or "How could the characters solve this?"
- Connect with books: Use the tuff tray to revisit familiar stories, support Drawing Club and encourage children to invent their own versions.
- Encourage independence: Allow children to select characters, change the environment and develop their own narratives.
- Support collaboration: Encourage children to share ideas, negotiate roles and listen to each other's contributions.
- Support inclusion: Provide accessible figures, visual prompts, communication aids and sensory options to meet individual needs, including those of children with SEND and children learning English as an additional language.
- Observe and respond: Notice how children develop language, sequence events, use imagination and solve problems to plan appropriate next steps.

Links to EYFS areas of learning

- Communication and Language: listening, attention, vocabulary, dialogue, questioning and narrative.
- Literacy: story comprehension, retelling, story structure, early writing and making links between books and play.
- Expressive Arts and Design: imagination, role-play, creating settings and representing ideas.
- Understanding the World: people, places, animals, habitats, environments and different experiences.
- Mathematics: positional language, spatial awareness, counting, sorting, pattern and sequencing.
- Personal, Social and Emotional Development: cooperation, confidence, negotiation, empathy and managing feelings.

Assessment reminder

Age bands are indicative rather than fixed expectations. Children may demonstrate skills across several stages. Progression should be informed by individual interests, language development, imaginative play and next steps.

The Small World Story Tuff Tray should encourage child-led storytelling, rich language and imaginative exploration. Adults can introduce new vocabulary, props and gentle challenges while allowing children to shape their own stories.

Safety: Check figures and loose parts for age suitability, choking hazards, sharp edges and cleanliness. Supervise closely when using natural materials, water, sensory fillers or small accessories, and ensure resources are safe for the children accessing the tray.