

Chapter 13 - Playacting



Playacting is a magic carpet that takes Cubs from a world of reality into a world of adventure and imagination.

“I need scarcely to count up the various points of development which underlie acting, such as self-expression, concentration, voice development, imagination, pathos, humour, poise, discipline, historical and moral instruction and so on,” B.-P. said. “Charades and impromptu plays are just as good as more highly designed and rehearsed shows.”

Playacting with the pack stimulates imagination, encourages observation, improves memory, and develops self-expression. It is closely allied to other program elements: storytelling provides a source of plays; crafts provide the props; music gives background and atmosphere; the outdoors can provide the stage.

How To Get Started

Start informally with a simple game of charades or putting actions to a song. First involve the whole pack in doing the actions. The next time, choose a particular six to go into the centre of the circle and lead the rest of the pack in the actions. Finally, choose another song and give a six a bit of time to prepare a short skit to illustrate the song.

When all sixes have had a chance to act out a song, the next step involves asking each to prepare a short skit for the campfire. This way, you let them work from something familiar and comfortable, and add their own creative interpretations.

Above all, keep playacting activities light, humorous and fun. Set the tone for this atmosphere by joining a six's playacting activity, or contributing your own leaders' skit to the proceedings.

Have fun! Encourage free expression and movement. At the end, have the pack give the six a cheer for their efforts.

Types of Playacting

The following represent only a few of the most common types of playacting. As your pack develops, you will see many other opportunities to incorporate playacting into the program.

Charades or Mime

To mime is to act without words; it's an activity that often appeals to leaders looking for something quiet. You can try it with sixes or individuals. If it is a six mime, ensure that even the shyest of Cubs in the six is involved to some degree.

Good mime topics include song titles, stories familiar to the pack, play situations from *The Jungle Book*, and TV commercials.

Mimes are also useful as fillers when unexpected gaps occur in the program. They require no props or real pre-planning — just a bit of imagination and some eager participants.

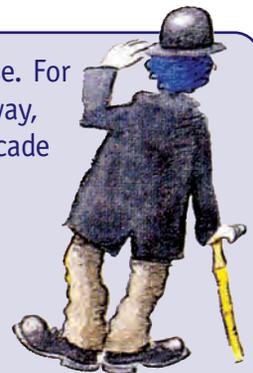
Role Playing

The charades activity develops quite naturally into role playing, where Cubs spontaneously act out a situation putting themselves into another's shoes in order to understand that person better.

Role playing develops an appreciation of another person's point of view and stimulates social and emotional development. Although Cubs are not ready to do a lot of abstract thinking, leaders can use role playing dramas to help them see how other people might feel in a given situation. Simple props can often trigger Cubs' imaginations and help make their role seem more real.

You can use role playing to:

- Develop a better understanding of the meaning of the Cub Law and Promise. For example, mother sends a Cub to the store to buy a few groceries. On the way, the child encounters some friends who want the Cub to go to the video arcade with them. How might the youth deal with the situation?
- Give Cubs an opportunity to take over an adult occupation so they better understand why certain rules and requirements are necessary. On a trip to the fire station, for example, arrange for your Cubs to take on the fire chief's role for a short period and deal with various problems that might rise in a real situation.



Newscasts

Pack news reports can often put a humorous conclusion to a meeting. Use a few simple props: a table, a "C.U.B. News" sign, a microphone (put a tennis ball on the end of a cardboard tube and cover it all with foil), hats, glasses, false noses, advertising props.

To give your Cubs some ideas, have a leader make the pack's first newscast. Then, at the beginning of the next meeting, tell a six that they will be responsible for tonight's newscast. Provide them with a "Roving Reporter Book" so they can jot down happenings throughout the meeting. Keep newscasts short, snappy and funny.



Items might include the following:

1. News. This might include a brief synopsis of what went on at the meeting, funny happenings, special guests, badges earned, sick Cubs, etc.
2. Sports. Your sports report can describe games played and winners, total points collected, etc.
3. Commercial break. Encourage originality!
4. Weather broadcast. The broadcast might include temperature, sky signs (clouds, etc.) indicating tomorrow's weather (star activities).
5. Stock market report. This might include the amount of dues collected tonight, total pack dues to date, and how money is being spent.
6. Announcements. Reminders, coming activities.



It's fun to have the pack choose a catchy tune as the theme for the newscast. The six in charge either sings or plays it on tape to announce it's time for the news.

Skits

Skits usually require a bit more preparation time and planning, even though Cubs generally "ad lib."

A good way to stimulate skit-making skills is to provide the actors with some starting points. When young people have not had much experience at creating original skits, it helps if they can start with a setting, situation and character.

Fill three paper bags with cards: one with different settings, the second with a variety of situations, and the third with a selection of characters. Skit teams draw one card from each of the first two bags, and enough cards from the third to give each player a character.

Once your pack is more experienced at creating skits, try some of these ideas:

- Fill a bag with punch lines (e.g. They told me there would be days like this... I knew I should have minded my own business... But it seemed like a nice little pussycat...). Challenge teams to create a skit that leads up to the punch line that they've drawn.
- Fill a bag with fairy tale or nursery rhyme titles. Challenge teams to create skits that give the story a surprise ending.
- Challenge teams to act out a situation using only nonsense words (gobbledegook) or only numbers. How about a skit using only sounds such as hand claps, foot stomps, finger snaps, and the like?
- Fill a bag with real-life scenarios (e.g. shopping at a supermarket, rearranging the furniture in a room, giving the dog a bath). Challenge teams to act out the scenario with no props (i.e. using people as doors, typewriters, lamps).
- Give each team one item (e.g. scarf, pair of shoes). Challenge members to create a skit using their item.



More Formal Skits or Plays

At a holiday show or special campfire, you may occasionally want to present a formal skit that requires more careful preparation.

Because the number of speaking characters is usually minimal, you need to make a conscious effort to involve as many Cubs as possible in other roles: props, sound effects, music, and background characters.

Selection of Skits

Most experienced Scouters have compiled a collection of favourite skits over the years. If you have not already done so, start keeping a file now. Check with the Cubs: they will have some good suggestions as well. *The Leader Magazine* often publishes successful skits. Scouts Canada's *The Campfire Book* contains a wide collection of popular skits, as does *The Best of the Leader Cut-Out Pages* book. Both are available at your local Scout shop.

Sound Effects

Involve some of the Cubs in producing special sounds for their skits. They'll have fun experimenting with different media to try to achieve the desired sound. Sound effects people need to work behind a hidden microphone; their efforts can add a whole lot of realistic fun to the skit. Try these ideas:

- Rain. Slowly drop sand on tightly drawn cellophane.
- Wind. Cut a narrow slit in a sheet of paper. Hold the paper about 12 mm from the lips, and blow.
- Fire. Crumple cellophane into a ball and release it to make a crackling sound.
- Thunder. Shake a 30 cm x 90 cm piece of tin suspended from a bar or frame.

Encourage your Cubs to develop other innovative effects.

Props

Try to keep props to a minimum. If they are essential, they need to be big enough so the audience — including the people at the far side of the campfire or in the back row of the hall — can see them all. Homemade caricature props are effective. Involve parent volunteers when making the props.

Moving and positioning props is an important job that a very shy Cub can do. Many a budding actor started out as a tree!

Music

Appropriate music (spooky, patriotic, etc.) will set the mood for a skit. You can pre-record it to play during the skit, or you could have a chorus of Cubs or leaders provide live music vocally or on instruments. (Of course, this will depend on the particular talents in your pack.) You may also have parents or older brothers or sisters with musical abilities who can help.





Guidelines to Successful Skits

1. Provide only an outline, not a script. Children are natural actors who will happily improvise. This takes away the pressure to be “correct,” and reduces anxiety.
2. It’s a good idea to do some basic speech training. Often, neither Cubs nor Scouters realize the affect a roomful of people or a crackling campfire will have on acoustics. One way to practise projecting the voice is to have your actors rehearse standing 5-10 metres apart so they have to call out to each other. Or, rehearse outside with someone standing 15-20 metres away to check sound levels. Your actors need to learn to project their voices without shouting.
3. Practise delivering the punch line LOUD AND CLEAR! Encourage your actors to move forward and face the audience when delivering the punch line.
4. Put a dramatic punctuation mark at the end of the skit to signal it is over. Just having the group take a bow works well.
5. Cubs often forget they have an audience, and so they start talking to each other during the skit. You need to remind them frequently with questions such as, “How will you stand so the audience can see what you’re holding?” or “Will anyone know what you’re doing if you stand behind Paul?” Generally, questions like these are better than directions because they make the performers think about their actions and the reasons for them.
6. Be prepared for the unexpected. Skits have been known to develop new and different endings over the course of a production!

Three Simple Skits

1. Quick Skit

Announcer: “Ladies and Gentlemen, Professor X will now give his address.”

Professor: “Ladies and Gentlemen, my address is 498 Maple Street.”
(Professor bows; announcer and professor exit.)

2. Measurement Problem

(Two Scouts come on stage carrying a long pole. They prop it up, then stand back and look at it.)

First: “Now, there are several ways we can figure out the height of this pole. How do you want to start?”

(The Scouts unsuccessfully try various methods of estimation to calculate the height of the pole. The conversation goes something like...)

First: “According to my calculations, that pole is about 2 m high.”

Second: “There’s no way. It’s got to be shorter than that. Just look at it.”
(This kind of exchange repeats several times as the Scouts obviously become more and more exasperated. A Cub strolls onto the stage.)



Third: "Hi!" (*The Cub watches a bit.*) "What are you guys trying to do?"

Second: "We're trying to measure the exact height of this pole."

First: "We haven't had too much luck yet, but we'll get it."

Third: "Why don't you just lay the pole on the ground and measure its length?"

First: (*Scornfully*) "Boy, are you silly!"

Second: "I'll say." (*To the Cub*) "Didn't you hear right? We want to know how tall the pole is, not how long it is!"

3. The Empty Boxes

(You need a manager, guard, three workmen, and a few large cardboard boxes. Setting: a factory gate.)

Manager: (*Speaking to the new guard*) "I'm giving you the very responsible position of gate guard at this factory. Because of the lack of vigilance by your predecessors, the workers have stolen so many finished articles that the firm is heading for bankruptcy. Your duty is to ensure this is brought to an end. Do you understand?"

Guard: "Yes sir. I am to stop the stealing."

Manager: "That's right. You can search people, if necessary. Now it's up to you. Let's see some results."

Guard: "Very good, sir." (*Manager leaves, guard takes post, first workman enters carrying a cloth-draped box.*)

Guard: "Just a moment. What do you have in that box?"

Workman 1: "What do you mean?"

Guard: "What do you have in that box? It's my duty to see that no one takes stuff out of the factory."

Workman 1: "Why didn't you say so? There's nothing in the box. Look!" (*He shows everyone that the box is empty.*)

Guard: "Oh, well, that's all right then." (*The first workman leaves and the second workman enters, box draped as before. Guard and workman go through routine of looking in box. Repeat with the third workman. After the third man has left, the manager races in enraged.*)

Manager: "You idiot. I hired you to stop this pilfering. You have only been here half an hour and already we're losing things!"

Guard: "But the only people who went out were three men with boxes. I stopped them all and they had nothing in them."

Manager: "You nut! We make boxes!"



Puppetry

If your Cubs make puppets as a craft, double their enjoyment by letting them stage a puppet play. Let them decide the kind of play they want; this will help them know what puppet characters to make. Try a jungle story, with all Cubs taking part. Pack activities also make suitable subjects.

Since your Cubs will probably want hand puppets, to make a stage all you need is a large cardboard box from a neighbourhood appliance store. Cut away the top and back so Cub puppeteers can stand inside the box.

If you want scenery, mount it on sticks so Cubs can hold them above the stage.

It's best for puppet operators to speak the puppets' lines. Why? Because, generally Cubs ad lib much of their performance. Some packs prefer to tape the dialogue before the performance. Whatever performance method your Cubs choose, the puppet speaking should be the only one moving on the stage. (Movement signifies speaking.) The other puppets stay still to listen.

You can use a wide variety of puppets: paper bag puppets, finger puppets, matchbox puppets, stick puppets. You'll find lots of ideas in library books.

Jungle Dances

Dancing is one of the oldest forms of expression. Practically every culture throughout the history of civilization has used dance as a form of worship, a means of retelling history and a kind of communication. It is in this context of tribal dances that B.-P. suggested using jungle dances in the pack. If your Cubs understand them in this context, there will be no need to disguise them under other names. Although jungle dances are definitely a form of playacting, we look at them more specifically in the chapter on Themes.



Enjoying Playacting as an Audience

Another value of playacting is the opportunities it gives Cubs to participate as an appreciative audience. An audience gains satisfaction by identifying with the performers. An enthusiastic audience may stimulate players so much that their performance reaches high standards.



Try to take the Cubs to a live musical or theatrical production. Contact a local, amateur theatre group and offer the pack's services as ticket takers, ushers, program people, and the like. After attending a live performance, ask for a tour backstage to view the props, lighting and costumes.

As a pack, you may also enjoy going to the movies to see "Mowgli's Brothers" or other heartwarming stories suitable for Cub-aged viewing. Many Cubs will also be interested in visiting the projection room at a movie theatre.

If you can, arrange to take your pack to the filming of a children's television production.

Invite an actor with an amateur theatre group, or a high school drama club, to come to a meeting and talk to your Cubs about acting. If you ask, the person may even bring along an old make-up kit and help make up the Cubs as different characters.

Involving the Shy Cub



Some Cubs are natural actors — people who like to “ham it up”— but some aren't. You'll easily recognize more hesitant Cubs; it's important not to push them into uncomfortable or embarrassing situations. Involve them in activities related to the props, lighting and music. Gradually, include them in the background or give them a small verbal part in a skit. Instead of putting them in the position of having to do a role play or charades alone, team them up with Cubs who will encourage and give them confidence. Praise them for their efforts, whether they are acting or helping with the props. Your aim is not to produce a pack of Oscar winners, but simply to encourage each Cub to participate, to build self-esteem, and develop to the best of the youth's ability.

Pack Resources

Prop Box

Keep a box full of hats, glasses, masks, walking canes, rubber swords, capes, old clothes, and wigs. Encourage your Cubs to contribute costumes and props to the box. Buy a kit of washable make-up.

Music

Keep on hand four or five tapes of different types of music that you can use to create atmosphere. Try to include a variety of types: lilting light music, spooky eerie music, dramatic music, and marches. Encourage your Cubs to choose the music most suited to their particular production.

Skit File

Keep a file of skits, charades and role playing ideas for future reference.