

DESIGNING LARP FOR CHILDREN

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There are larps aimed at exclusively at children and larps that should not include children at all. This chapter is about family larps, which are designed for all age groups. With some modifications, most larps can include children as well, and there is a growing need for such larps. The player community is at a point where a second generation of larpers has been introduced to the hobby by parents, aunts and uncles.

CHILD DEVELOPMENT & ROLE-PLAY

To children, larp is play with friends. In a young mind, reality and fantasy can mix, and this is one of the reasons why children can delve into a character more easily than many adults. Play, and specifically role-play, represents an important part of child development: children engaged in (role-) play develop social skills through reflecting on what happened. Larp as a medium is to do just this and a further reason why children love it – it is a way to get adults to play along.

YOUNG CHILDREN, 0-2 YEARS

This is the “living prop” stage. A child of this age cannot tell the difference between larp and reality. Mom means mom, dad means dad. A child does not pay attention to strange clothes and will not understand that a costume change might mean change of character. A child can react to other players’ strong reactions by getting scared, but it’s more like a reflex; they cannot follow the reactions. The child plays mostly with objects and likes to participate in simple tasks.

PLAYING AGE, 3-5 YEARS

At this stage the child will get attached to stories and worlds. They experience these stories as facts, will start feeling empathy, and can easily get upset if someone is crying, yelling or visibly displaying emotional states of mind. The child can not be expected to understand the cultural difference between right and wrong, and will struggle to understand the difference between ingame and offgame. At this stage, the parent of the child should be their guardian. Parents

should talk to their child in a similar way to that they do at home, as this will reassure the child. Some children react strongly to behavioural changes in their parents, so the parents should be aware how much they can push their own immersion. Naturally, this depends a lot on the child's age and personality.

CHILDREN AGE 6 AND UP

The child is now **old enough to tell the difference between reality and make-believe**. They want their parents or guardians to be in-character, so remember to act accordingly. The child understands people are behind the characters. **They know they are part of a game** and can make character performance fierce and exciting. In the larp, the child will strive to win and to solve every problem. They might need a reminder once a while to include others. Rules and guidelines are important, and the child has to learn a few cultural rules. At this stage, the child believes good always triumphs over evil. This is not always the case in larps, which can be scary.

Three stages in a child's social development in larps

Age	What a child understands of larp	What adults can do to support the child
0-2	<i>Observing stage. A child mostly observes their parent and their reactions to the larp.</i>	<i>Be calm and show the child that everything is fine in a strange environment.</i>
3-5	<i>Living the story stage. A child will believe the stories and act as though they are real. They reflect the world from their parents.</i>	<i>Avoid scenes with yelling or crying since the child will think something is wrong and it can ruin their game.</i>
6+	<i>Larp stage. A child understands the concept of larp and that it is not real. They want to participate fully in a larp.</i>	<i>Tell them about the people behind the characters. Give lots of tasks and activities.</i>

CHARACTERS

THE CHILD

Characters for the child should be light and fit their age. **Children love tasks and light plots**. You can include some specific tasks for each child to make them feel extra special. They should have character relations to the other children and also a couple of others, but **not too many**. Their characters should be written along with the guardian's, so that the guardian knows all the child's plots and can support them.

THE GUARDIAN

Characters for guardians should be made as supporting characters. Their role is to support the child's game and should only have lighter plots with additional plots to seek out should the child be doing great. Because the role as guardian will limit the player's movement, the character should be someone other players come to for information or aid. If there are more children, the guardian's relations should include some of the other guardians, creating agency for the children to interact.

BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER THE LARP

BEFORE THE LARP

Talk to the guardians and the child, preferably a long time ahead. The best way is to meet with them in person; this way the parents will know you and it will help the child feel safe. If that is not practical, set up a video call instead.

When you meet the child for the first time, sit down or concentrate on a simple task you can do together. Do not use baby talk or demeaning speech, just treat them as any other player. They want to make the larp work and have fun just as much as any of the adult players. You can ask them to introduce themselves and talk about what they expect and what they are going to do at the larp. You can tell them what you are planning to do and if there are things you can do together.

If there is something in the larp the child might find scary, such as orcs, trolls or loud fights during the game, make sure to talk to the child on location before you put on a mask. You can show them some of your props and tell them you are not really a troll. You and the child now share the secret that you are not scary or going to really hurt anyone.

Briefing

Guardian and children might have to skip some of the briefings and workshops before the larp. An hour of listening to an organiser talking is a long time to sit still for a child. If possible, give the guardian access to the briefing material beforehand. They can then go through them with the child ahead of time, and be free to attend only the most necessary briefings. You can organise other activities like games for the children while the guardian is away. These are good to plan ahead of the larp, so the child will know the adults will attend something while it plays. You can use this opportunity to teach the children a game they might also be playing in character in the larp.

DURING THE LARP

Ingame

Younger children are motivated to do tasks and quests more than talk to each other. The larp should support this and give them specific quests designed just for children, with adults in supporting roles. These can be very simple in structure:

- Treasure hunt: Find map pieces and find the treasure.
- Something has broken, find out how to repair it.
- Deliver a message to someone, get something in return.
- Follow this specific person and report back where they went.

By lowering your voice as you tell them about it, you show the child how important this specific mission is and how important it is that just that child be part of it. This creates a feeling of a real adventure.

Breaks

Children need breaks and a place to relax; there should be an offgame space available, like an out of character room. It should have light snacks like raisins, carrots, apples, cookies and bread available. You can also encourage parents to bring the child's favorite snacks. This space should also offer familiar activities such as favorite toys, colouring books, or the possibility of watching cartoons. A child's stress levels (incl. positive) drops instantly when they have something familiar to do.

A younger child needs more breaks, whereas an older child can handle more time ingame. You know it is time for a break when the child starts going out of character, for instance by making comments that reference the real world. It is important not to punish the child for this; they are just getting tired and are in need of a break.

AFTER THE LARP

While adults debrief, children will have time to blow off steam. They have gotten new friends, and it is good to put on everyday clothes and let them play freely. It is good to have at least one guardian to watch them, but do encourage the guardians to take turns, so everyone gets to debrief.

If there have been scary characters like trolls, those players should talk with the children and perhaps play with them for a bit while still in costume. It is also important for the children to see their ingame relations remove their props and masks and turn back into normal people.

Finally, don't forget to debrief with the children. Ask them what their favorite part was and tell them you had fun playing with them. You may have given them an experience they will remember for the rest of their lives.

Jonna Kangas (Ed.D. Finland), early childhood researcher, consulted on theoretical background on children and role-play for this chapter.

FURTHER READING:

nordiclarp.org/wiki/100.000_swords_can't_be_silenced

nordiclarp.org/wiki/Keskikesän_tarinoita

Ben Schwartz: "Live Action Role Playing To Support Healthy Teen Development", ithrivegames.org. (12.12. 2018)



LARP DESIGN

CREATING ROLE-PLAY
EXPERIENCES

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