

Imaginative Play in Early Childhood: An Overview

WHAT DOES THE YOUNG CHILD LEARN FROM PRETEND PLAY?

Whether she is play-acting familiar family scenes, such as driving the car like daddy, or imitating her mother's actions, the young child is using her imagination, actions and language to think things through and to remember what happened in familiar situations. Because this activity is fun, she will become so engrossed that she is able to think and act it through from beginning to end. She will enjoy pretend play on her own, making animal noises when she plays with her farmyard animals, and also participating in "let's pretend" games with other children, thus developing her social skills. Pretend play will help her to learn eye-hand coordination, spatial skills, counting, pre-math and pre-reading skills, while allowing her to safely express her emotions and feelings.

RE-CREATING EXPERIENCES

A child's first 'make believe' games will re-create familiar activities such as going to a restaurant, driving to the supermarket or feeding and bathing her dolls. Play can help her understand her gender identity and, as she acts out family activities, she will begin to see her role in the family. Older children enjoy playing pretend games together, sharing similar experiences. Their play will also involve the retelling of fictional stories they have heard or seen.

BEING SOMEONE ELSE



The young child is not able to organize complex thoughts, so when he dresses up and acts as a doctor he is organizing his thoughts and coming to understand the doctor's role. Through such play roles he is slowly beginning to think about what it would be like to be someone else, so that by the time he's about four-and-a-half he has some understanding and awareness that other people have their own thoughts and feelings. This is the beginning of empathy.

LITTLE WORLDS

The young child will use toy people, animals, cars and trains to create "little worlds," replaying family events, acting out familiar stories, or making up new situations. This is a way of claiming a safe arena where he can safely exercise control and make (and break) the rules.



MORE THAN PLAY ACTING

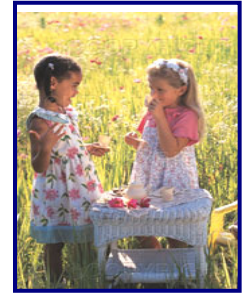
Pretending is one of the ways that the child can try to come to terms with something he's afraid of. He may be afraid of monsters or ghosts and ask for the light to be left on at bedtime, but then play monsters the next day, or run around with a sheet over his head pretending to be a ghost! For young children, role-play is their way of coming to terms with their fears.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY IN THE YOUNG CHILD'S LIFE

Play, including imaginative play, is the child's work. Play prepares the child for adulthood, play teaches him his place in the world, and play teaches him how to interact with the world. It is play that, in the child's early years, lays a strong foundation for the physical, academic, social and emotional wellbeing that will last a lifetime. A child NEEDS to play to grow.

Imagination and the Pre-School Child

Unlike the simple quality of the younger child's pretend play, the pre-school child's imaginative play is complex and takes many forms. From about the age of about three-and-a-half/ four to about six-and-a half, the pre-school child's imagination is in full play. The ability to imagine and pretend is a crucial part of a child's development and to be denied ample opportunity and time to develop these skills is to also deny the opportunity to develop the creativity and empathy that form the best foundation for intellectual and emotional growth.



PLAYING WITH THE WORLD IN WAYS THAT IT IS NOT!

By the time a child has reached her fourth birthday she has acquired a vast store of knowledge – enough that she can take what she knows about her world, stretch her imagination and transform the ordinary into the extraordinary. During the summer of her fourth birthday my sister – who had watched our father clear out a nest of rats from a compost pile, and had also heard her soccer-playing uncle rhapsodizing about his winning goals – insisted that our garden was inhabited by a team of rats who wore yellow soccer shirts and played soccer with her when no-one else was around! Fortunately our wise parents allowed and enjoyed her fantasy with her, and eventually the soccer-playing rats disappeared from our lives and garden. This ability to create a world of her own where she can make rules, and control what happens there, is an important part of social and emotional development.

IMAGINARY FRIENDS

Closely related to the imaginary world is the imaginary friend, an important stage of social development for many preschoolers. At this age, when the child is testing the world *and* testing the adults in his life, an imaginary friend can offer a safe opportunity to feel in charge, perhaps break the rules, and feel a measure of control over his own life. For my grandson, *his* friend first appeared a few months before his fourth birthday. After a trying day that left both him and his mother exhausted we took an evening walk together. He suddenly announced that he had a babysitter named Ella, and Ella was a cricket! He also told us that Ella had been taking care of him since he was a baby, she allowed him to ride his big wheels in the street without an adult and with no helmet, let him eat ice-cream whenever he wanted it, and never sent him to his room when he threw his dinner on the floor!

MAGICAL THINKING



Magical thinking is that thinking that allows the child to believe she can direct the elements around her – capture the moon and toss it like a balloon, hold back the night (and bedtime), or control the tides so the waves won't wash away the sand castle on the beach. Magical thinking allows the child to be king or queen of an imaginary world, where the laws of nature are suspended and where wonderful things can happen.