

Let's Pretend: Thoughts about Play

Your toddler ordered pizza in the classroom pizza parlor last week (This week it's sushi!). Your preschooler worked the counter in the red room bakery yesterday or tended to patients' injuries in the hospital under the green room loft last month. Even your infant may have fed and diapered other babies and rocked them to sleep recently. Really??? No, it was "just pretend!"

Through pretend play, a child becomes a competent representer of experience—a crucial skill for future success. To pretend, children must be able to recall past experiences and then re-create them. They must be able to visualize situations in their minds. In their pretending (also known as dramatic or fantasy play), children try on different roles, act out experiences, recall past events, and work out anxieties. Your afternoon preschooler cannot really be a firefighter (yet), but by donning our child-size firefighter gear, s/he can feel the sense of power and efficacy that accompanies that role. Your three-year-old is probably not in charge of the household's grocery shopping, but, during pretend play, can "write" a shopping list, gather items in a basket or bag, and "pay" for them. Making these choices during play enhances your child's cognitive abilities and encourages creative thinking and problem solving. Negotiating through complex play "scripts" with friends or siblings strengthens social skills. Research indicates that children who

have many opportunities to participate in dramatic play use more sophisticated language and become better readers and writers.

One way to encourage more elaborate pretend play at home this summer could be to begin assembling your own "prop boxes," as we do at school. These can be as simple as a box full of items you might take on a camping trip or picnic. Label each box with a picture and/or word and keep them accessible with your child's other play materials, or pull them out of a closet when boredom descends. Keep adding to your prop box collections, as we do, when you visit yard sales or thrift shops. Be sure to join in the play with your children on occasion to introduce new language or concepts, stimulate and extend ideas, and simply enjoy playing with each other.

Have fun!

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