

Make-Believe Play

A toddler lifts an empty plastic cup to her lips and pretends to drink. A little one pretends to read a book to a circle of her stuffed toys. A three year old lines up some empty food boxes on a table where a friend pretends to be the grocery store cashier. A six year old organizes her younger siblings and neighbours into the various roles for acting out a visit to the zoo. These scenes are all examples of make-believe play, an activity that builds children's skills for thinking, feeling, behaving and getting along with others.

Learning how to act in the world

From the simple imitative play of the one year old to the complex scenarios imagined by a six year old, make-believe play helps children take their place in the social world and supports their later learning in school. Here are some of the benefits that experts point to:

- Children can **practise how they are expected to act** in different situations, for instance, how to behave at the grocery store.
- When they need to adjust their behaviour to the imagined situation, they learn to **control their impulses**.
- They **learn and practise new words** and new sentences, appropriate to different situations.
- In make-believe, children can often **express their feelings** and find ways to deal with them.
- Children's **creativity and imagination** grow when they invent their own stories.
- When children pretend, one thing can represent something else. For instance, a rectangular block becomes a telephone. This is the beginning of **symbolic thinking**, an ability that is fundamental to literacy and numeracy since letters and numbers are symbols of real-world objects.
- Children **practise their planning and problem-solving skills** as they develop more and more complex scenarios. They must set up the situation, find or make props and negotiate any conflicts that may arise among the players.
- When children play a role, they learn to see things from another person's point of view. This is the beginning of **empathy**. It also builds **social awareness**. Children who can imagine what their classmates are thinking and feeling do better in a kindergarten classroom.

Fewer opportunities

In spite of all these advantages, it seems that children today have fewer opportunities to develop their make-believe abilities, compared to past generations. They spend

more time at an earlier age in adult-directed settings or being passively entertained in front of a screen. Instead of playing with older children who have higher-level skills in pretending, children spend most of their time in groups with others their own age.

Adult support

Since play with older siblings or neighbourhood children happens less often, parents and other caregivers can become "play mentors" to foster children's play abilities and bring them the benefits of make-believe play.

- Start with **simple demonstrations of pretending**, somewhere around the age of 14 months. Stir an imaginary sauce in an empty pot, serve it up on plates for you and your child and pretend to eat it. Say, "This is yummy!" and smack your lips with pleasure. When your child understands the game, he may want to feed the dish to a baby doll or stuffed toy.
- Suggest a game that **imitates an activity you often do**. "Let's pretend we're going on the bus to see Grandma." Line up some chairs to make the bus. At first, you can pretend to be the bus driver. Change your voice and say, "Ticket please." You can put on a cap and hold a pot lid like a steering wheel. When your child is older, she can be the bus driver and use a bus-driver voice.
- You can also **act out excursions**, ones that you have already done (like a visit to the museum) and ones that you want to prepare your child for (like a visit to the dentist).
- **Props**, like hats, shirts, toy telephones, etc., can enrich make-believe play. Very young children may need realistic props, but as children's imagination and symbolic thinking develop, they can turn anything into what they need for their story. A cardboard carton can be a space ship one day and a bear's cave the next.
- Older children can act out a **favourite book or familiar story**. Try to arrange for a number of children of different ages to play together so there are enough people to play the roles.
- With experience, children can take over the play and need adults less and less. Your role becomes simply to **supervise for safety** and to **help them if they get stuck** in conflicts. But don't be too quick to intervene; learning to figure things out on their own is a key benefit.

So turn off the TV, provide a few props and lots of free time and let your children's imagination soar, knowing that make-believe play lays a firm foundation for their social and academic success.

by Betsy Mann