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Parenting

the

Preschooler

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Make Believe Play

Play contributes to developing a healthy personality. Through play, children learn about their world.

Children play out what they have seen and experienced. In the preschool years, the most prominent form of play is dramatic play (sometimes called make-believe play or pretend play).

Early dramatic play centers around home and mother. Both boys and girls walk around in heels, carrying a purse. "I'm the mother," the child announces. By playing mother, the child is better able to understand mother's role. As the child gets older, play moves out to include other family members. Around age 4-5, play will likely involve community members, doctors, nurses, grocery store clerks, and police. A child's play will reflect the experiences he has had in his environment.

Value of Make-Believe Play

Play is beneficial in helping the child deal with his feelings and emotions. Through play a child can fulfill his wishes (to be big and strong) and can overcome fears and unpleasant experiences. Play helps the child master his environment, thus the world is not so strange and threatening.

Make-believe play helps young children get ready for school and for life. Children learn through make-believe play. They learn:

- about themselves, their families, and the world around them.
- how to talk to others.
- how to get along with and work with others
- how to plan, deciding what to do and gathering the things they need.

- about feelings by acting out times that are upsetting or hard to understand.
- to be creative and solve problems.
- to develop physical skills by using large and small muscles.
- to understand the way others act, think, and feel.
- to stick with a task until its finished.

Some people use play as their teaching method, since they know that children learn through play. For example, health professionals reduce children's fears of medical procedures by showing the procedure on dolls with play equipment, and then letting the child do the same. Playing the role of the doctor, and providing the voice of the doll as well, the child gains perspective on everyone's roles. By comforting the doll, the child learns to comfort self, too. The child has mastered an understanding of the situation. As a parent, you can do this with your child too. You can reduce your child's natural anxiety about a new situation (like a dental visit or a new child care provider) by play acting the situation before hand.

Let your child's imagination soar!

You can support and encourage your preschooler's play opportunities by providing:

- a collection of toys and props for make-believe play.
- a place to play. Designate a separate area of the room for make-believe play. You might set up a housekeeping corner here with a child-size table & chairs, stove, sink & refrigerator (these can be made out of large cardboard boxes).

- time to play. It takes children a while to decide what to play and to become involved in play. Allow ample time for your child to drift into make-believe play.
- opportunities to play make-believe with other children.
- encouragement to participate in make-believe play. If your preschooler is not involved in make-believe play, you might suggest a play situation (playing house or grocery store). You may have to take a role (to be the hungry baby or the customer in the store) to get the play started. Say something such as, "Could I buy some apples from your store?" or "Doctor, would you fix my broken arm?" As soon as the children are able to play alone, withdraw and let them continue their play.
- questions that expand their play. As you watch your child play firefighters, ask about the roles. For example, ask: "What do firefighters do besides fight fires?" Or "Where do they sleep?" Or "Where do they eat?"

Props Support Make-Believe Play

Enrich your child's dramatic play with a variety of props. Attics and second hand stores are a good source for dress-ups. Recycled junk should not be forgotten. A paper towel roll can become a telescope or ray gun; an empty box turns into a train, car, or house; a corner of the room becomes a mansion today and a rocketship tomorrow. Scarves are indispensable. They magically turn into wings, superman capes, a pirate's hat or whatever the child's imagination is allowed to create. Dramatic play is creative play. Give the child time, materials, and a place for this kind of improvisation.

Here are some ideas of props and toys you can provide to encourage your preschooler to participate in make-believe play.

Clothes/Accessories

- purses and billfolds/briefcases
- hats, ties, scarves
- jewelry (not sharp or breakable)
- clothes: shirts, pants, skirts, dresses, jackets
- shoes/boots

Tools and Props

- dishes, pots, pans
- big spoons, ladles, spatulas
- food (play or real) cans, empty boxes
- baby bottle
- tools: hammer, pliers, screwdriver
- phone
- keys
- suitcase
- flashlight
- broom/dustpan, shovel
- print materials: newspapers, magazines, phone book, maps, old mail
- play money
- musical instruments
- clock
- tea or coffee pot and cups

People/Animals/Vehicles

- dolls, doll bed, blanket
- job-related kits: doctor, firefighter, dancer, clown
- play animal sets, stuffed animals
- cars, trucks, trains
- buildings and fences
- blocks to make towns, zoos, houses

Some of the most treasured times for both parent and child take place in pretend play. Your child's "party" for the stuffed animals, a "show" for a parent audience, or story/singing time make for endearing memories. Acting out well known stories like the "Three Little Pigs" helps children use imagination that adds to their self-esteem. Remember that the process of pretend play is more important than the product. It's the learning and fun that comes from doing and creating that's the most important.

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 January, 2001