



The Importance of Pretend Play

Imagination-driven play builds your young child's developmental skills.

By [Scholastic Parents Staff](#)

Young children learn by imagining and doing. Have you ever watched your child pick up a stone and pretend it is a zooming car, or hop a Lego across the table as if it were a person or a bunny? Your child is using an object to represent something else while giving it action and motion. But this pretend play is not as simple as it may seem. The process of pretending builds skills in many essential developmental areas.

Language Skills

Have you ever listened in as your child engages in imaginary play with his toys or friends? You will probably hear some words and phrases you never thought he knew! In fact, we often hear our own words reflected in the play of children. Kids can do a perfect imitation of mom, dad, and the teacher! Pretend play helps your child understand the power of language. In addition, by pretend playing with others, he learns that words give him the means to reenact a story or organize play. This process helps your child to make the connection between spoken and written language — a skill that will later help him learn to read.

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Social and Emotional Skills

When your child engages in pretend (or dramatic) play, he is actively experimenting with the social and emotional roles of life. Through cooperative play, he learns how to take turns, share responsibility, and creatively problem-solve. When your child pretends to be different characters, he has the experience of "walking in someone else's shoes," which helps teach the important moral development skill of empathy. It is normal for young children to see the world from their own egocentric point of view, but through maturation and cooperative play, your child will begin to understand the feelings of others. He also builds self-esteem when he discovers he can be anything just by pretending!

Thinking Skills

Pretend play provides your child with a variety of problems to solve. Whether it's two children wanting to play the same role or searching for the just right material to make a roof for the playhouse, your child calls upon important cognitive thinking skills that he will use in every aspect of his life, now and forever.

Does your child enjoy a bit of roughhousing? Great! Some researchers in early brain development believe that this sort of play helps develop the part of the brain (the frontal lobe) that regulates behavior. So instead of worrying that this type of activity will encourage him to act out or become too aggressive, be assured that within a monitored situation, roughhouse play can actually help your child learn the self-regulation skills needed to know how and when this type of play is appropriate.

Nurturing the Imagination

Not enough pretend play at your house? Consider creating a prop box or corner filled with objects to spark your preschooler's fantasy world. You might include:

- Large plastic crates, cardboard blocks, or a large, empty box for creating a "home"
- Old clothes, shoes, backpacks, hats
- Old telephones, phone books, magazines
- Cooking utensils, dishes, plastic food containers, table napkins, silk flowers
- Stuffed animals and dolls of all sizes
- Fabric pieces, blankets, or old sheets for making costumes or a fort
- Theme-appropriate materials such as postcards, used plane tickets, foreign coins, and photos for a pretend vacation trip
- **Writing materials** for taking phone messages, leaving notes, and making shopping lists

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