



PARENT *handout*

Pretend Play With Your Child

Pretend play, or make-believe, helps young children in all areas of their development: language, cognitive, social, and motor.

You may notice your child starting to pretend when she is around 1 year old. At first, she will copy what she sees you or other caregivers doing, like feeding a doll with a bottle. Her play will be realistic.

Starting when your child is about 18 months old, her pretend play will start to be more imaginative. She will still act out situations she sees in her life – cooking, grocery shopping, going to the zoo.

Your child will also develop the ability to pretend an object (like a block) is something else (like a cell phone). This **symbolic thinking** ability is something to encourage.

At this age, your participation in pretend play becomes very important. Your role is to join in your child's fantasy. Ask her about what she is playing. She will probably tell you exactly what you should do! But if she doesn't, suggest a role for yourself.

Once you are in the game, try not to take over. Keep your questions open-ended – for example, “What does this do?” As events unfold, offer explanations for emotions the characters might be feeling. “Uh-oh. The server dropped a tray of food. I think the chef is angry.”

Tips for supporting pretend play

- > Let your child bounce ideas off of you. You'll give the message that you believe her play is important and worth your time.
- > Comment on what your child is doing. “You took good care of your sick baby.”
- > Do what your child does. When she pretends to eat, you pretend to eat also. This helps her develop confidence and leadership skills.
- > Introduce questions or new ideas to extend the play. “What should we do after we eat?”

Real skills from make-believe play

Social-emotional – Curiosity, confidence, cooperation, negotiation, impulse control, self-awareness, and creativity.

Cognitive – Problem-solving, orientation in place and time, and symbolic thinking.

Language – Communication, vocabulary, and early literacy skills.

Motor – Large muscle control, small muscle control, and processing of sensory input.

- > Back off if your child isn't interested in your idea. Remember this is her drama, not yours.
- > Help her collect many different play materials. Most props for children's pretend play can be found around the home.

Children who are good at pretend play when they start school often become good at reading and writing. Research shows that pretend play helps children understand symbolism. When your child understands that a block can represent a phone, she will also understand that the letter M can represent the sound “mmmm.”