



early education

DR CATHRINE NEILSEN-HEWETT, A LECTURER IN EARLY CHILDHOOD STUDIES AT MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY, EXPLAINS THE IMPORTANCE OF UNSTRUCTURED, IMAGINATIVE PLAY TO A CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT

The other evening as I sat eating dinner my two-and-a-half-year-old proudly presented me with three pieces of paper, each a different size and shape. One was a saw, another a sander and the third a lolly. As I pretended to eat the lolly he looked at me wide eyed and said, 'Mummy – don't eat it, it's just pretend!'

Every young child loves to engage in imaginative play. As adults we fondly recall times when we dressed up in mum's clothes or paraded around in Dad's work boots. Imaginative play stimulates the senses, creates opportunities for exploration and creative thinking, and helps your child to develop key skills vital for intellectual and emotional growth as well as social success.

The first signs of imaginative play emerge as early as 12 to 18 months. Your 18-month-old may pour you a cup of tea, pat dolly off to sleep or pick up a block and bring it to their ear as a phone.

Early forms of imaginative play are largely solitary in nature and while many toddlers enjoy playing with friends, a closer look at their play will tell you that each is under the spell of a separate fantasy.

Two-year-olds typically play "in parallel". My daughter Jessica and her friend Ben, who are both two-and-a-half, were playing together recently with a Thomas The Tank Engine train set. At first glance, they looked like they were engaged in quite sophisticated complementary play but closer inspection showed both children were completely absorbed in their own scripts: as Ben 'toot-tooted' his engines around the track, past the Fat Controller and picking up passengers, Jessica was asking Thomas whether he would like a cup of tea before she put him to bed!

It is not until after their third or even fourth years that kids' imaginative play becomes truly interactive. Pretend play scenarios often centre around playing house, hospital, shops, monsters, princesses or superheroes, although your child will continue to enjoy solitary play activities with miniature toys (dolls' houses, small trucks, petrol stations, castles and so on) and props. The years from three to six are generally thought of as the "golden years" of imaginative play; at no other time in your child's life will they be so immersed in a world of fantasy.

You can encourage and foster imaginative play experiences by providing your child with a range of props and toys. Younger children need realistic props such as miniature figurines, kitchenware, medical kits, a cash register and toy animals to get them started and to sustain their play, but as they get older, unrealistic props are equally important (think different sized containers, cartons, tubes, boxes and sticks).

It's also good to include open-ended objects such as blocks as these extend children's imagination with unlimited possibilities. Parents can further encourage imaginative play by just providing uninterrupted time – to create and time to enjoy!

Preschoolers also enjoy engaging in role-play and love to dress up. One day my daughter greeted me as The Great Becean (her word) – a world famous magician. The next day she was a princess who had been captured by an evil queen. At times I am lucky enough to be invited into this world of make-believe characterised by limitless possibilities and boundless adventures. These are

the days I love the most – not bogged down by deadlines, expectations or external pressures.

Many role-plays involve simple imitation of adults. This helps your child to better understand what adulthood is all about. If you are invited to participate, take direction from your child as this is their world and they will relish the opportunity to be in charge.

While some children may need little inspiration to engage in imaginative experiences, others may require a little more adult involvement. Ask questions to extend their play or add more props where necessary. Avoid taking over because when adults are overly intrusive in children's play, many of the intrinsic benefits are lost.

IMAGINATIVE PLAY HAS THE GREATEST IMPACT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF KEY SKILLS

Developmentally, imaginative play helps a child's self-confidence, self-awareness and self-control. It stimulates creative thinking and improves their memory, language and perspective-taking skills.

Imaginative play is the form of play that is most social and has the greatest impact on the development of key skills important for a child's success with peers. When playing creatively with their friends your child learns to cooperate and compromise, to participate in social activities, how to respond appropriately to others and to understand social relationships – imagination really is the key to success! ●