

“Let’s Pretend”

by Lory Britain

“Let’s pretend...” are magical words that project children into other worlds and give listening adults a nostalgic glimpse into their own childhood.

[Social pretend play](#), “at its best” with 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds, simply refers to one or more children pretending together and sharing the imaginary world of events, roles, and objects they create. One way that children might share their imaginary world is by pretending to be someone or something other than they are. They might “be” mom, dad, or baby and act out their versions of what moms, dads, or babies do, or play on the “moon” as “weird space creatures.”

Having objects represent something other than what they actually are is another form pretend play takes. Using bananas, children might pretend to talk on the “telephone” together.

And creating totally imaginary objects or characters is still another way children pretend together. Adults sometimes partake in this type of shared pretend play when they hold imaginary food up to their mouth and “eat” together.

Social pretend play contributes to a young child’s emotional growth, social-interaction skills, language development, and the development of thinking and problem-solving abilities. Exactly how does social pretend play make all these worthy contributions to a child’s development? In the same way that daily adult life calls for adults to use a variety of skills and thinking processes simultaneously, social play provides an integrated context for children’s development. Children’s social pretend play also provides them with a world totally of their own making, free from adult intervention and regulation. Within this “safe” context, we can see children practice skills and gain understanding that helps them develop and mature.

It is perhaps easiest to understand the significance of the safeness and security of social pretend play when we look at children’s emotional development. Take, for example, a child who has recently suffered a traumatic event such as the loss of a beloved pet. Perhaps the child feels guilty because he left the gate open and his dog ran away or perhaps she is unable to deal with her grief. Such a child might reenact with other children the scene of the dog running away, perhaps pretending the dog was found or someone else left the gate open.

Because children can pretend any scene or outcome they can imagine together, pretend play allows them to live the past and/or create a present or future that satisfies their wishes and dreams or helps them deal with traumatic events.

Again, looking at this same child, we can see how the safe context of social pretend play contributes to children’s emotional and social development in another way. In pretend play, children have the power to change roles and move freely from being themselves to their selected imaginary world. When the child, saddened by the loss of a dog, is able to pretend to be the dog and act out how the dog might have felt and perhaps how happy the dog is in its new found home, the child practices taking the perspective of others. Or when children need to step out of their pretend roles and negotiate what particular identity can be assigned to an object, they are

practicing communication and considering others' perspectives. And, of course, the ability to understand how others feel is necessary for getting along with others and is important to develop and practice throughout our lives.

Language skills are also important for building and developing social relationships. Social pretend play provides a fun, secure environment for children to develop, practice, and refine their language skills. Many skills valued in adult conversation can be seen in a simplified version in shared pretend play. Children practice taking turns talking, listening, and responding to each other's proposals, and "pretend." Also, in the very same way that they use one thing to represent another, preschool children begin to use language to describe things or events that do not actually exist in the present. Social pretend play provides a challenging context for using this representational language.

In addition, sharing pretend play with other children gives children the opportunity to practice and refine new thinking abilities. Children understanding that they can be both themselves and imaginary characters at the same time is the beginning of understanding that they can think about a problem and search for a solution their minds without actually physically working on the problem or that they can think about something they did in the past or to do in the future. This is called abstract thought. And, of course, the skills of thinking abstractly like most other abilities develop through practice. Pretend play is the perfect way to practice these thinking abilities.

Children's thinking processes are stimulated and challenged by social pretend play in still another way. Consider all that the pretending child has to keep track of when engaged in imaginary scenarios. This child must keep in mind his real self and imaginary role, the developing plot, and how to contribute to it.

This enjoyable and popular form of play for preschoolers provides a safe and easy environment where children can be [creative](#). They can concentrate on what they are doing without worrying about the outcome because the outcome can be, of course, whatever they want. Children can be creative and try new ideas such as the imaginative use of an object or new behaviors such as "rescuing the puppy." Creativity is a valuable asset to children regardless of their ages.

So next time you hear those magical words, "let's pretend," sit back, observe, and enjoy a glimpse into the rich, meaningful world of pretend—a world where children are working very hard at play!

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