



Supporting Make-Believe Play

Make-Believe Play at Home

Hey, isn't playing something children just do? Isn't it part of a child's DNA to know how to play? Well, children still play, but play itself is changing, and not for the better. Children play video games, watch TV, and engage in activities that are not what most adults over the age of 20 "played" when they were children. Gone are the long days spent playing with friends of different ages in the neighborhood, pretending to play school, having parties, being pirates or knights. Gone are the dressing up, making props, and playing out of favorite stories.

The term used for this high-level play, with different roles, props, and storylines, is "mature make-believe play." Why is mature make-believe play so important? Because in this type of play, children are more creative than when they are being entertained. They make up their own versions of stories; they create their own pretend ideas. They engage in symbolic thinking skills at a higher level than when watching television. Most important, there is growing research that shows mature make-believe play is related to the development of *self-regulation* or *executive function*. [Self-regulation](#), in turn, is associated with increased levels of achievement in literacy and math.

It used to be that children learned mature make-believe play skills from other children—"play mentors" in the neighborhood. As play has become more focused on computers and television, children do not engage as much in these kinds of interactions. In addition, many children do not have older siblings who can teach them to play. More and more, children are spending time with children who are nearly their same age, and this diminishes the opportunities to learn more mature play skills.

Parents, however, can help children learn to engage in mature make-believe play, by setting up the environment so that children can play, and by becoming their child's play partner and mentor. Here are some suggestions by age.



Supporting Make-Believe Play. Make-believe play at home

When your child is 1- to 3-years-old. Children at this age don't know how to play if no one shows them. They are just beginning to learn to play with objects in a pretend way. Here is how you can help your child learn more.

- Set yourself up for success. Make sure distractions such as the television and the computer are turned off.
- Set up a play space that is defined, consistent and accessible. Don't be too quick to put things away. Leave them out so the child can return on his or her own to replay what they remember.
- Teach your child how to pretend. Take an empty cup and pretend to drink from it. Pretend to stir with a spoon and eat.
- Make up a simple "script" by putting several actions together. The best scripts are everyday activities that the child sees you doing, like cooking, laundry, and working in the garden. These real things the child already knows then become play ideas or scenes the child can act out on his or her own. Demonstrate and encourage your child to do the same thing with you. Say, "Let's pretend to make dinner," as you stir a spoon in a pot and then pretend to taste it. Repeat the simple script and actions several times. Then, stop and watch your child. Say, "Now you make dinner," and follow the child, doing what he or she does.
- Make up a role. It is important to play being someone. Pretend that you are someone in your family (other than yourself) making dinner. "Let's pretend we're ____ (dad, grandma, auntie, uncle) making dinner." Once the child gets the hang of doing this, he or she can pretend to be you.
- Model what people say. "Grandma would say, 'Do you want cookies for dinner?' or 'Are you hungry?'" Try to use the speech that the child might have heard before. When children play maturely, they act and sound like the person they are playing.
- Choose toys that are easy for children to manipulate. Tiny figurines should be saved for when children are older. Huge dolls and stuffed animals don't work either. Baby dolls that a child can dress and undress, hold in his or her arms, and bathe are perfect.
- Avoid toys that "do the thinking" for the child. Dolls that talk and dance around encourage children to play in very specific way. Try to buy toys that children can use to create many different scenarios, such as basic plastic animals figures or a simple baby doll.
- Have props that help the child carry out the script and get into the role of the person they are playing. For example, old clothes and shoes, purses, and briefcases are good. Pretend doctors' kits and carpenter tools are also good.
- Include blocks and household objects like cups and spoons that can be turned into other things with some imagination. A block can become a phone or a boat or a car with a little imagination.
- Look for opportunities for your child to play with mixed-age groups of children. Simply going to the park or inviting children of different ages over to play can be beneficial.

When your child is 3- to 5-years-old. At this age, children have the idea of *how* to pretend but need ideas of *what* to pretend:

- Use everyday chores and situations to set up play ideas. Use errands as an opportunity for playing. Point out people and talk about what they say and do. These people will become "roles" that the child plays. Everything the child sees becomes fodder for rich play when you get home.
- Help your child turn everyday experiences into play by providing props. Don't buy a doctor's uniform—instead, use a grown-up's old shirt and put something on it that signifies the doctor. Don't have a stethoscope? Make one out of a piece of string with a circle attached to it. Remember that a prop doesn't need to be an exact replica—creating something symbolic takes more thought.
- Take on a role, too—a secondary role. You want your child to direct the entire play scene as much as possible. You want her to tell you what to do and what will come next. If the child is unclear about what the main person does, you can give suggestions, but try hard not to take over. For example, your son could be the doctor and you could be the patient or the father of a sick baby. First your baby could be sick with a fever. Then you could pretend that he has broken his arm. You could take on a secondary role that changes the scenario, such as prompting a house call. Encourage your child to tell you what to do. Ask, "What's going to happen next?" When your child directs the play, you are promoting planning skills that are a part of self-regulation.
- Help your child expand the roles and add to the script. "Now, what could happen next? Can we pretend that we had to go to the hospital in an ambulance? What else could happen?" Add onto the ideas you have already played out.
- Read a story together and let it be the basis of play. Use a story that your child likes and has heard many times; act it out.
- After playing a role and a scene several times, suggest a new twist. What if you were the doctor on a pirate ship? In outer space? Have the same role happen in a different place.

- By four years of age, children should begin to be able to play with fewer props and not need the elaborate dressing up they needed earlier. They can also invent their own props. You can play anywhere—in the car, in the supermarket, at home.
- Have other children over who can join in the play.
- Introduce simple games with rules. Board games like *Chutes and Ladders* or *Candyland* are great—these are an extension of make-believe play.

When your child is 5-years-old and older. Five-year-old children should be able to create and act out elaborate make-believe scenarios on their own or with other children. At this point, you are really more of a resource, providing ideas as a way of helping children get things going. You should not have to demonstrate or be a part of the play as you were before. However, if you notice that your 5-year-old cannot play in a mature way with roles and themes, don't feel discouraged—just use some of the suggestions above. Practice makes perfect!

- Encourage children to play by having props available and materials that they can use to make their own props. Children will be able to make a pretend scene and choose props on their own. Blocks, pieces of fabric, blankets, paper, scissors, and glue are all things that children can turn into anything, from a costume to a construction site to a space station to Cinderella.
- Children will begin to play more with little dolls and action figures instead of dressing up and playing the roles themselves. They may engage in "director's play," in which they talk and act for the figures, playing several roles and changing their voices for each of the actors. Things can get pretty complicated with a long period of discussion of who is doing what and when, followed by the acting out of the scene that was just planned. *Legó* toy sets (with people) and dollhouses encourage this kind of play. Children will want to own a theme set, which helps in acting out certain scenarios, but you should also encourage them to add pieces from other sets to promote their creativity and flexibility.
- Use stories and literature as a basis for play. Encourage children to make their own versions of familiar stories or to make completely new stories, and then act them out.
- Play games with rules. Board games and simple card games (*Go Fish*) are all extensions of mature make-believe play.
- If you are lucky enough to have several children, take advantage of the gift! You will have to help the 5- and 6-year-olds learn to teach their younger siblings what to do and say, especially if a sibling is under 3-years-old. Help the older child invent a simple role for the 3-year-old. Model how the older sibling can define who is going to do what and then help the younger child to play along. Before you know it, you'll have a situation in which the play of both children is enhanced.

Make-believe play in playgroups: Helping children develop mature play skills

Like many parents today, you may feel that children no longer play the way you did when you were little. Many parents find that their children cannot occupy themselves for long periods of time without adult direction. In part, this is because parents no longer feel safe letting their children roam the neighborhood, playing with other children. Instead, children spend more time in adult-directed, age-segregated activities. In addition, younger and younger children are spending more time in solitary activities, such as playing computer games and watching television. Even the toys have changed! Many of today's toys require absolutely no imagination. All the child has to do is push a button and the toy tells the child what to do. When the toy's battery dies, so does the child's interest in it.

To help provide children with play and social skills, many parents host playgroups or play dates. Playgroups can be an excellent way to foster mature play skills in young children. However, not all playgroups will support mature play without some adult planning. Here are some tips on how you can help children develop mature play skills.

- Remember, the overall goal is to get children talking and pretending with each other, not with you. You want to see children taking on play roles and saying things like, "I'll be the waiter, you be the chef. Please go make the pancakes for the customers now. They're hungry." It's even better if the children make the "pancakes" for themselves out of paper or some other found object in the toy box. Being able to pretend that one object can stand for another is an important mental skill for young children to acquire.
- Turn off the TV! Television is a big distraction for children and keeps them from engaging with each other in sustained and meaningful ways.

- If you have children of similar ages in your playgroup, consider inviting older or younger children to join. Older children with good play skills can act as “play mentors” to younger children. Toddlers in the group give preschoolers a chance to try out their fledgling play skills on someone who will listen to them.
- Bring out toys that require imagination, such as wooden blocks and old dresses. Children can build and pretend with each other.
- Have a theme!

Play themes can be taken from everyday life: a birthday party for dolls, going shopping at the grocery store, opening a bakery, taking care of pets (grooming and shopping), running a bicycle or car repair shop.

Play themes can be taken from stories and books: pretending *Peter Rabbit* or *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, or books about astronauts and outer space.

- Use simple props that everyone has: old clothes and shoes for dress-up, baby dolls, stuffed animals, pots and pans from the kitchen. Help children use their imaginations to make an old shirt a spacesuit.
- Consider giving up adult-directed “crafts” and other activities during playgroup. Children need time to talk with each other and learn to negotiate the rules and roles of play without being under the constant direction of adults.
- If you have a very active group, consider playing games that require *physical* self-regulation, such as Greg and Steve’s *Listen and Move*, or *Freeze Game*, using their music CDs. Play games such as *Simon Says*. Let children jump to the beat of a drum. Having children stop and start motor actions on cue provides important practice in building self-regulation.
- Give children enough time to play. Often we over-schedule our children’s time. Sometimes it takes them a while to get the hang of the play scenario. Too often we think children are bored and interrupt them with an adult-directed activity when all they need is more time or perhaps a nudge in the right direction.
- If a child seems unable to take on a role in the play of the group, encourage him or her to put on a costume (such as a stethoscope for the doctor or a purse for the mommy) and help him or her remember what a person in this role might say. Often immature players benefit from taking on a more passive role in make-believe play, such as the “patient” rather than the “nurse” or “doctor.” This way they can be part of the play without having to keep it going themselves.

We hope you find these tips helpful and wish you many happy and productive playgroups to come!

Does my child’s early childhood program promote mature make-believe play?

Almost all programs for young children have some kind of play going on. The problem is that not all play helps children develop self-regulation (also known as executive function). In some centers, children play with things and not each other. There may be fights and arguments during play time. Instead of becoming engrossed and playing for a significant amount of time, some children wander from center to center.

In order for play to help children develop self-regulation, teachers need to plan for play, and have strategies for helping children develop play in the same way they work on letters and numbers. Only play in which children pretend to be someone and become so engrossed that they act and talk like that person promotes self-regulation.

The kind of play that promotes self-regulation involves pretending with another child who also takes on a role. Children talk about who they are going to be and what they are going to do before they act it out. To get a picture of what this means, think about how you used to play as a child with the children in your neighborhood or your brothers and sisters. You probably acted out a pretend adventure or scene and you were probably so involved that your parents had to remind you to come home for dinner!

To determine whether your child’s preschool program includes the type of play that promotes the development of self-regulation, watch for the features in the list below. And while you are evaluating the program, remember that real play is something that teachers cannot “stage” to impress the parents. Further, it can be better on some days than others—visit the classroom more than once to get a true picture of how good the play is. And most important, play should be fun! Children should be enjoying themselves—smiling, talking, laughing, pretending.

- In a good preschool play program the environment is set up so that children have props and costumes to use for play. Children should be dressing up and playing someone, like the mommy or daddy, the doctor, or the waiter at a restaurant.
- When it comes to toys and props, the rule of thumb is the older the children the less realistic are the props. Plastic food is okay for 2-year-olds, to give them an idea for pretending, but in a 4-year-old classroom you would want to see more props that children have re-purposed or made by themselves.
- Play themes involve things that children have had experience with, such as the family or grocery store. During play, the center should look like a home or a grocery store so that children can feel like they are in that place.
- Children play for at least 30 minutes a day (longer in full-day programs), uninterrupted by lessons or teaching activities. Two 15-minute play times are not the same as an uninterrupted 30 minutes.
- When children are playing, they are pretending to be someone. Children talk like that person and act like that person. For example, when the "mommy" is mad because the "baby" is naughty, the mommy will sound mad. When the "doctor" talks to the "patient," she will say things like, "I need to take your temperature," or "I'll write you a prescription."
- Children play with other children, instead of engaging in solitary activities like playing on the computer. The roles that they play interact in a complementary way. For example, the "mommy" cooks for the "baby" and the baby eats the food and asks for more. The "doctor" gives the "patient" medicine and the patient tells the doctor what is wrong with her. The "teacher" teaches his "students" and reads them books, while the students act like students.
- Children talk with the other children about what they are going to play together.
"Let's pretend that you're the baby and you're sick. I'll be the dad and I have to take you to the hospital."
"OK, I have a broken arm and a fever and I'll cry and you put me in the car."
- Part of the play is talking to the other players.
"Baby, you don't look very good. Are you sick?"
"Waaaah, I broke my arm and I have a fever."
"Let me check"(puts hand to forehead). "Yep, you're sick."
- Teachers help children learn how to pretend by modeling different roles and by helping children think of what might come next. Teachers don't direct all of the play but step out once children seem to get their pretend ideas going.
- Teachers help children resolve social problems that arise when they want to play the same thing or argue over a toy. Teachers help children resume their play after it is interrupted.
- Teachers take an active role when a child wanders off to another center, either to get the child involved in play at the new center or help the child re-engage with the group he/she has left.
- Teachers can explain and articulate what their philosophy of play is. Why do they have play? What do they do when a child wanders and cannot seem to get engaged? What do they do when children argue? How do they introduce a new play theme?

Look for the articles written by Drs. Deborah Leong and Elena Bodrova in *Scholastic Early Childhood Today* and *Parent and Child* magazines for more ideas on how to [promote mature play](#) and how to use play to build your child's [language and literacy](#) skills.

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