

## The Power of Pretend Play

Have you come home one day to find that your child has turned into a kitten, crawling on the floor on all fours, meowing, and asking for a bowl of milk? The ability to pretend marks a big leap in the development of thinking skills. When children pretend, it means that they understand symbols—that a block can become a car, a shoebox can become a home for stuffed animals, and that a word stands for an object or an idea. Understanding symbols is important for the development of skills such as math, logic, writing, and science.

Language and literacy skills are also developing as children make up stories and tell them (or act them out) to one another. They are sequencing events—what logically comes first, second, third—a skill that children will use later for reading comprehension, math, and science. You will also see your child's logical thinking skills at work in her pretend play. When you suggest that they put their stuffed giraffe, who feels sick, to bed, they may agree and add that their giraffe might need some yucky medicine, too.

Toddlers build important social-emotional skills through pretend play as they act out stories in order to work out difficult situations or ideas they are struggling with. For example, after a new sibling is born, you may see a toddler play a game in which he repeatedly tells the baby to "go away." Or a child may play "child care" by asking his parent to be the baby while he is the daddy who says *bye-bye, I'm going to work now*. Toddlers are also practicing empathy through pretend play, as they take on the perspective of a character in their story, including that person or animal's emotions. For example, you may see your child pretend to be a puppy. You might ask: *How are you doing, puppy?* Your child responds, *I'm sad...I lost my bone!* Your toddler is now able to understand the world from a dog's perspective and imagines what would make a dog feel sad. Interactions like these show that your child has a greater ability to understand the feelings and motivations of others (including those who walk on two legs, not four).

Here are some ideas for enriching your child's pretend play:

- **Let your child be the "director."** When you follow your child's lead, you help them develop their own ideas. This approach also strengthens their thinking skills as they makes logical connections in his stories: *The dog has to go back in his house because it's raining.* You can help them develop their ideas by asking questions like, *What is going to happen next?*
- **Offer some "props" to help your child act out the stories she's creating—** hats, dress-up clothing, take-out menus, pads and markers, toy dishes, child-sized brooms, blocks, play food and household objects like big cardboard boxes, blankets, pillows, etc.
- **Build on your child's play.** If you see your toddler stirring a pot with a spoon, ask them what they're making for dinner and if you can have some. If your child is pushing a dump truck, ask them where their truck is going or show them how to build a tunnel by leaning two pillows together. Interactions like these expand your child's pretend play and thinking skills.
- **Notice themes in your child's play.** One parent was distressed when her almost-three-year-old played a game with her dollhouse where the "big sister" doll repeatedly hit the "baby" doll. (Not surprisingly, this game emerged after the birth of a new brother.) When toddlers are playing a game that we find upsetting, the temptation is to shift them to a new activity: *Let's read a book ...now!* However, pretend play can be a very healthy way to cope with difficult feelings. Pretend play

can also reduce the need to "act out" these feelings in "real life" as children use play to work through and manage these difficult emotions.

For example, say an almost-three-year-old is playing a game with her dollhouse where the "big sister" doll repeatedly hits the "baby" doll. (Not an uncommon emergence perhaps after the birth of a new brother.)

After watching your child at play, you could join in with the daughter and validated the "big sister" doll's feelings about how hard it can be to have a new baby doll in the house. Within a few days you may see the "hitting game" end. However, if your child repeatedly plays out a theme that is upsetting or worrying to you, and seems upset herself during the play, talk it through with your paediatrician, maternal health nurse or preschool teacher.