

## 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).

***"Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood."***<sup>1</sup> Wise words from a pediatrician. Play is serious learning. It's more than just fun. It's a very important part of growing up. And it happens from day one of a child's life. Even small babies play.

Here are some specifics on what you can expect as your child grows and develops.

### **Birth to 12 Months**

#### **What they Can Do**

Your baby uses their body to explore. They make discoveries and learn largely through their senses. Babies use their eyes, ears, nose, hands, and mouth (especially her mouth!) as tools to explore their surroundings.

#### **What they are Learning**

As your baby grows, they will also begin to reach and grasp. This builds their eye-hand coordination. They are starting to understand cause and effect. They are learning that shaking the rattle will produce a fun sound. Your baby is also learning to communicate. By the time your baby is about 8 months old, they will have lots of ways to communicate. They may "talk" using gazes, gestures, facial expressions, and sounds. This is their way of telling you what they're thinking and feeling, and what interests them.

#### **How You Can Help**

You don't need toys to play with babies this young! They love simple exchanges. Try peek-a-boo or holding their hand while dancing. You can also coo and "talk" to your baby. Imitate their sounds and wait for a response. Encourage them to copy you, too. Remember that it's perfectly normal for them to put toys in their mouth. Offer only baby-safe objects to explore and watch babies closely as they play.

## 12–24 Months

### What they Can Do

Your toddler likes to investigate spaces, toys, and everyday objects. They will learn to stand, walk, jump, and climb. They are also able to use their fingers and hands to play in more complex ways. They are learning to push buttons, open boxes, and turn pages. Your toddler also loves repetition as they figure out how things work. For example, they might fill and empty a bucket over and over.

### What's they are Learning

Your toddler's play helps them learn new concepts. They will discover up and down, full and empty, in and out. They are also using imitation to begin learning about the world of pretend. They will pretend to talk on the phone or copy how you use a spoon to stir a pot. Your toddler is developing new language skills. These skills help them understand and communicate more than ever before. These new skills boost his self-confidence, which means they will want to do more "all by myself."

### How You Can Help

Follow your child's lead. Let your child decide what's fun (within safe limits) and join in. Every child is different, and yours will have their own preferences. Their play doesn't always have to be full of action. They might prefer quieter activities. Perhaps they like to look at books, build with blocks, or listen to music. It's important to offer a variety of types of play. This approach gives your child the chance to learn and practice skills like building, jumping and climbing, pretending, and matching. Different activities grow different parts of the brain. Be understanding if your child moves quickly from one activity to another. Toddlers this age have a short (but growing) attention span and a drive to explore!

## 24–36 Months

### What they Can Do

Your child will use their imagination more. They may act out stories like driving a truck, going to "work," or baking a cake. Your child might make up stories and rules for their games. In fact, when you play together, they may really enjoy telling you what to do! Your child may also bring conflicts and emotions to their pretend play. For example, after a trip to the doctor, they may act out the appointment with their teddy bear. Toddlers are also developing more mature problem-solving skills. They may now enjoy different types of blocks, puzzles, and construction toys as fun challenges.

### What's they are Learning

Older toddlers are beginning to show interest in playmates. Months earlier, they may have just watched others playing or played side-by-side with peers. Now, they are beginning to play with friends. Sometimes even without arguments! Playing together provides great opportunities to learn, communicate, share, and resolve conflicts.

### How You Can Help

Your older toddler still loves to play with you. As you play, help them expand and build on their ideas. Ask how the stuffed dog feels or wonder together why the block tower fell down. Model new vocabulary. ("These blocks are equal—they are both same length.") Offer new challenges to explore. Create an obstacle course, build a blanket tent, or try a new puzzle together. Try musical games like "Freeze" and "Hokey-Pokey." These games offer opportunities to listen, follow directions, and practice self-control. They also allow children to move their bodies. Don't be surprised when your child has strong feelings or a temper tantrum when it's time to stop playing. This is typical behavior for 2-year-olds. Sometimes it helps to give her reminders that playtime will end. Offer a countdown that it will be over in "5 minutes, 2 minutes, 1 minute."

Here are some general tips to finish with:

- **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.

### **Your Child and Play**

Play is practice for real life. It gives children an opportunity to learn and practice new skills. It offers an outlet for expressing themselves and working through powerful feelings. Most important, play brings joy.

### **References:**

1. Moore, H. Why Play is the Work of Childhood.

### **Produced with reference to:**

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources>

<https://www.learntoplayevents.com/>