



Learning to Grow

MAKING A DIFFERENCE TOGETHER

Setting Up and Encouraging Dramatic Play

Do you see your child dressing up and pretending to be someone else, or “calling” someone by holding a block to their ear? This type of play is commonly known as dramatic play, also called pretend, symbolic, or fantasy play. When children engage in dramatic play, they take on roles and act them out to explore themselves and their surroundings. Dramatic play is highly beneficial, promoting children’s growth in many areas, including:

- ♥ Language and literacy skills
- ♥ Critical thinking
- ♥ Social problem solving
- ♥ Cognitive skills

Jean Piaget, a well-known psychologist, created theories of cognitive development and proposed four stages of development. This newsletter will focus on the Sensorimotor stage (birth—2 years) and the Pre-operational stage (2 years to 7 years). Piaget describes what pretend play (dramatic play) looks like during each of these stages of development:

- ♥ **0-12 months.** An infant’s understanding of pretend play is developing.
- ♥ **13-18 months** Children in this stage perform one pretend action at a time, usually involving a situation that they are familiar with (e.g., meals or naptime).
- ♥ **18-24 months** Children begin to include other people and more elaborate objects in their play (e.g., putting the doll to sleep after feeding).
- ♥ **2.5-3 years** Children create more involved scenarios about situations they have experienced (e.g., going to the doctor)
- ♥ **4 years and up** Children begin to use their



imagination and pretend to be a superhero or a dinosaur stomping through the forest.

This newsletter will explain what you might see at each age level (infants, toddlers, and preschoolers) as children’s dramatic play develops over time. We will also present tips on how to choose materials and encourage dramatic play.

This newsletter includes:

- ♥ **Age-specific information and suggestions** about activities to do with your infant, toddler, or preschooler,
- ♥ **Featured activities** for each age group,
- ♥ **How This Helps:** a summary of your child’s development by doing these activities together,
- ♥ **Resources:** for more information, and
- ♥ **Suggested Books:** a list of books to read with your child.

Infants

While a child's understanding of dramatic play doesn't start till over age 1, between birth and 12 months, infants can imitate sounds, explore facial expressions in the mirror, and play peekaboo. During this time, it's important to encourage your infant to explore his surroundings and give words to the objects around him. You can start by describing routine activities such as diaper changing (e.g., "Let's change your diaper because it's wet. We take off the dirty diaper and put on a clean one. All done! Yay!").

Additionally, you can:

- ♥ Choose books that show pictures of different animals, and make the sounds of the animals that you see.
- ♥ Play games like peek-a-boo which helps him understand that even though he can't see you, you are still there.

Between 13-18 months, children can recall what is familiar to them and will act out a reoccurring situation such as eating or sleeping. For example, you might see him use a bowl and utensil to "feed" himself. To encourage this type of play, have some



items available that he can use to enact familiar situations:

- ♥ Meal time props such as plastic bowls and utensils, empty plastic cups, plastic or wooden fruits, and an empty, clean plastic baby food jar and spoon
- ♥ Familiar props such as toy cars and telephones
- ♥ Soft baby dolls and stuffed toys resembling familiar animals

Activity for Infants: *Box Car Fun*

What You Need:

- A sturdy cardboard box big enough for your child to sit in or a laundry basket
- A pillow

What to Do:

1. When your child can sit up on his own, place him in the box or laundry basket and show him how to hold on to the sides. Prop him up with a small pillow behind his back.
2. Gently push him around the room.
3. Talk about where you are going, you can say "We are going to the store for milk."
4. Make car sounds as you go.



Variation: When he can walk, have him put a baby doll or toys in the box car and push or pull them around. Ask him where he and his friends are going.

(See page 5 for information on how doing these kinds of activities with your child helps his development and school readiness.)

Toddlers

You might see your toddler engaging in extended dramatic play that reflects daily activities in the home, such as cooking, sweeping the floor, or washing dishes. During this dramatic play stage, your toddler understands that one object can stand in for another, which is called representation, and this is a big area of growth in his imagination. For example, you might see him put small toys into a bowl, stir it, and "eat" the "soup" he made.

Here are some materials you can introduce to enhance this type of play:

- ♥ Items that resemble daily activities – Child-sized brooms for sweeping, pots and pans, larger bowls, sponges (for washing dishes), utensils for cooking and eating, clothing (aprons, kitchen mitts), play food (plastic or wooden).
- ♥ Bigger props that help expand the play such as a play kitchen, cash register, or riding toy car.
- ♥ Books or pictures that show kitchens, a variety of foods, and different ways to cook (cookbooks with photos).

As your toddler plays with these materials, engage with him by asking questions or making suggestions such as, "What can we use to make our



soup?" or "I'm kind of hungry, maybe you can make me something to eat." Tell your toddler what you see him doing. For example, "You're using the sponge to wash the bowl after eating our delicious soup." This narrative talk lets him know you are paying attention to him and encourages him to play more.

Activity for Toddlers: *Restaurant Play*

What You Need:

Restaurant props such as aprons, plastic utensils, cups, plates, and placemats.
Paper, pens and clipboard
Play food

What to Do:

1. Place props on the table and invite your child to the table by saying "Welcome to our restaurant." Give him a "Menu" and a cup of water while he decides what he wants to eat.
2. Come back to the table and "take his order" using the paper, pen, and clipboard.
3. Go and "prepare" the food and take it to him.
4. Take turns role-playing customer, waiter, and chef.

(See page 5 for information on how doing these kinds of activities with your child helps his development and school readiness.)



Preschoolers

Your preschooler has gathered a lot of information about his surroundings and will start to incorporate that information into his play. You may see him create more involved scenarios about familiar people and/or places he's been to, or pretend to be characters from a storybook such as a superhero or a dinosaur. Children at this age do not understand the difference between fantasy and reality. He may believe that he is a superhero, so keep a close watch to ensure safety while he is playing.

To help encourage dramatic play:

- ♥ Talk about real-life experiences as they occur. On a trip to the grocery store or doctor's office, describe and explain what the workers are doing and the tools they are using. For example, the doctor is using a stethoscope to listen to your heart and lungs. This helps your preschooler understand and recall those experiences in a dramatic play.
- ♥ Provide items that relate to situations, such as band-aids, a clear plastic jar of cotton balls, a play stethoscope, and clothing (scrubs, or a white coat).



- ♥ Ask your preschooler what he wants to pretend to be and supplement that theme with props such as costumes (use safety precautions if wearing masks), scarves, and scraps of material (for capes and costumes). For example, use boxes for castles or caves; blue sheets, scarves, and streamers for underwater props.

Activity for Preschoolers: Let's Pretend

What You Need:
None

What to Do:

1. Tell your child that you are going on an adventure together.
2. Have him sit on a chair or stool or the floor and pretend that he is sitting in a canoe.
3. Show him how to hold and use a pretend "paddle" (you can use a prop such as a recycled paper towel roll) with his "canoe." Explain how the action of the paddle against the water makes the canoe move in different directions.
4. *"Paddle" your pretend canoe together and encourage him to talk about where you are going and what he "sees" or "hears."*
5. *Comment about what you "see." Ask questions to encourage him to use his imagination. For example, "I see a big black bird flying above us. Do you see it? It's an Iwa bird (frigate bird). Where do you think it is going?"*

(See page 5 for information on how doing these kinds of activities with your child helps his development and school readiness.)



How This Helps

The activities suggested in this newsletter help promote many different aspects of development:

Physical Development

- ♥ Learn to use his body with intention
- ♥ Develop eye-hand coordination

Social and Emotional Development

- ♥ Learn to interact with others
- ♥ Develop a close bond with you

Language and Literacy Development

- ♥ Build verbal skills, vocabulary, and use of descriptive language
- ♥ Learn to ask and answer questions



Cognitive Development

- ♥ Increase his observation, listening, and understanding skills
- ♥ Develop his thinking and problem-solving skills

Kids in the Kitchen

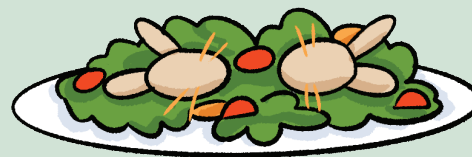
Cooking teaches valuable lessons such as math (quantities, measurement), science (how matter changes), fine motor (stirring, pouring), and literacy (print awareness). As you make this recipe with your child, talk about kitchen safety. Show him how to handle items safely and allow him to do as much as he is capable of. Praise his efforts, and ask questions throughout the process to encourage his thinking skills. Most of all, have fun!

Bunny in a Garden Salad

Adapted from Perdue.com, <https://www.perdue.com/recipes/bunny-in-a-garden-salad/> (Makes 4)

Ingredients:

- 4 Refrigerated Breaded Chicken Breast Cutlets (12 oz.)
- 1 carrot, peeled and cut into thirds
- 7 oz. mixed salad greens
- 2 grape tomatoes, halved
- 1 stick celery, sliced crosswise into 1/4-inch pieces
- Ranch dressing (optional)



Directions:

1. Cook chicken according to package directions.
2. Cut a circle from the bottom half of each chicken cutlet at the widest part to form bunny faces. Cut each top half into two pieces to form ears.
3. Cut one-third of the carrot into wide strips and cut out 4 bow tie shapes. Cut the remaining carrot pieces into skinny strips to use for whiskers.
4. Allow him to divide salad leaves among 4 plates. Place chicken cutlet pieces on top to form faces. Add carrot whiskers and bow tie to each then place grape tomato half over whiskers (nose) and use celery to form eyes and the bunny's two front teeth.
5. Serve with Ranch dressing, if desired.

Resources

Pretend Play: Ways Children Can Exercise Their Imagination

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/power-of-play/Pages/pretend-play-ways-children-can-exercise-their-imagination.aspx>

In this article by healthychildren.org and the American Academy of Pediatrics, you will gain tips that will inspire imaginative fun that includes all of the benefits of dramatic play.

Act it Out: Dramatic Play for Kids

<https://www.pbs.org/parents/act-it-out>

This webpage by PBS Kids has many ideas and information about dramatic play. The focus is on Social-Emotional benefits for children of all ages.



You can access crafts, other articles, and games, all relating to dramatic play.

Suggested Books

Discover these books and more at the **Hawai'i State Public Library**
www.librarieshawaii.org.

Infants and Toddlers

***I'm a Frog* by Mo Williams**

Piggy announces that he is a frog. His friend Gerald does not understand how he can be a frog if he is a pig. This book introduces children to pretend play.

***Hey! Look at You!* By Sandra Boynton**

This book will invite the child to look into an animal-shaped mirror and moo like a cow or baa like a sheep.

Preschoolers

***Not a Box* by Antoinette Portis**

Introduce the magic of the imagination with Rabbit and a box (or is it). A mountain, a robot, a boat, or a car – What else can this be?

***Not a Stick* By Antoinette Portis**

When pretend feels so real it becomes real. The options are endless in this book about "a stick". Dragon slayer, masterpiece painter, or orchestra conductor. What can happen when a stick is not a stick?



Learning to Grow is a project of the University of Hawai'i, Windward Community College, with funding from the Hawai'i Department of Human Services. Visit our website at www.learningtogrowhawaii.org or visit us on Facebook at www.facebook.com/learningtogrowhawaii and Instagram @uhlearningtogrow