



## Play & Creativity / Why Play is Important Dramatic Play & Imagination



Dear Debi,

I have a three-year-old daughter. She loves playing dress-up at home and even “acting” at school events. Do you think it’s a good idea to encourage this activity? How is this going to affect her development?

– **Ana Chavez**

### Debi's Tips



**Debi Gutierrez**

Host

- Play is important
- Select familiar themes
- Provide theme related props
- Include literacy materials
- Take kids on neighborhood outings

### Expert Advice



**Ann Barbour, Ph.D.**

Early Childhood  
Education Professor

When children use their imaginations or pretend, we call that dramatic play and that’s the main type of play for 3-to7-year-olds. What they’re doing in dramatic play is representing in their own way their understanding of their experiences, rather than simply imitating what they see others do. They use objects and actions and storylines to symbolize the things that concern them. And in the process, they’re building thinking skills and developing social, emotional and language skills. Dramatic play is a very important context for learning.

Most preschool children love dressing up for a reason. It’s their way of learning. It’s a way for them to walk in another person’s shoes, so they understand what someone else is going through. So when your child is at home playing house, she’s not only imitating the actions of the people around her, she’s actually coming to understand at a deeper level what it’s like to be a parent. Also, when kids are engaging in dramatic play, there’s vocabulary development going on. Encouraging dramatic play encourages social and emotional development as well as helps with skills for academic learning.

Dramatic play promotes abstract thinking. When children use a prop (like a block) to stand for something else (a phone for instance), they are learning to think using symbols. The block symbolizes the phone. And that kind of thinking is the basis for just about everything children learn in school. After all, letters and words and numbers are really symbols for real objects or quantities. Dramatic play also encourages problem solving,

and if children are playing with others, it builds social and emotional skills: learning about other peoples' feelings and perspectives, negotiating, cooperating, etc. They also learn how to respond appropriately to others. In dramatic play kids can be anything they want just by pretending and that's emotionally satisfying and builds self-esteem.

Pretend play also builds language skills. Kids often use words and phrases in play that you never knew they knew. They use language to plan their play with others and language usually supports the roles they adopt. At the same time, they can experiment with language and learn to use it appropriately. After all, doctors say different things than storekeepers do. Dramatic play also helps kids concentrate, be attentive and control their own behavior – all skills that will help them do well in school and in life.

Adults can encourage dramatic play by just providing uninterrupted time, space and materials or props that support the theme children choose. When children are playing together, it takes time for them to set the stage for their play. They need to decide together what they're going to play, who's going to be what, etc. so they should have enough time to do this – at least 30 minutes and longer is better. Make a space or let children use spaces in your home where they can play. Let them put a bedspread over the dining room table to make a cave or fort. And as much as possible, provide real materials, rather than store-bought toys. A broken or discarded cell phone is better than a toy telephone and real but safe kitchen items are better than plastic play sets.

Good materials that can support a variety of themes and that kids can adapt in their own way include: hats of different kinds, stuffed animals, purses/wallets, a cash box and play money, a telephone, a mirror (safe, of course), a tote bag, small blankets, clothing that children can manage independently, containers of various sizes, a clipboard with paper, crayons or markers. You can add other props that are specific to the theme. For a shoe store, for example, you could add old shoes and something that children can use to measure their feet. Remember to include simple materials that support literacy – ones that children can use to pretend to read and write (making a list, reading to a stuffed animal, paying for something in the store, etc).

Of course, because kids' play is based on what they've experienced, adults should make sure that children have had various experiences in the community (like going to a bakery, getting a haircut). Having been read to will also encourage children to engage in dramatic play. You can also encourage them to think about their experiences by asking, "What would you do if you were a . . . ?" Adults can take their cues from children. Some kids won't need any inspiration outside of the time, space and materials that adults can provide. But some kids may need a little more adult involvement. So adults can be children's play partners but still let children control the play. They can model more complex ways of using materials, ask kids questions to extend their play, and add additional materials. They can help kids plan their play and talk with them afterwards about it.

### **Child Care Provider Comments**

Imaginative play is a wonderful way to develop a child's imagination to take on the role of another. Young children love to pretend to be cats and dogs. This sort of play also may



**Jane Fung**

Mother of 5-year-old

encourage art and drama. It is something that they can visualize. During this play, children are using words, so it also helps them to develop language skills. Kids need an outlet for all they are trying to make sense of in the world.



**Suyapa Espinoza**

Cares for her niece and nephew

Through dramatic play, children will explore different roles or characters. My niece cares for her dolls and plays with them. She gives them different voices. She learns to communicate, and she gets to listen to herself when she speaks. She will say something with one doll and answer with another. She learns language and it gets her mind working to be creative. This helps my niece's personality by exposing her to different things. She learns to interact with herself and whoever plays with her.



**Bridgette Smith**

Mother of two, expecting her third child

I think that it is wonderful and healthy that a child is wanting to pretend in play. It broadens creativity. It can only help the child in the long run, especially with writing. Pretend play will also help her with self-esteem. For instance, when my boys are pretending to be superheroes, they seem more sure of themselves instead of insecure with their environment. Their self-esteem is raised. When you can instill those behaviors and values in a child, it will help them in the long term.

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