



What is Pretend Play?

Pretend play has many names. Some of these names are: imaginative play, creative play, make-believe play, fantasy play.

Examples of pretend play are: being superheroes, playing 'mummies and daddies', playing shopping, dress-ups, playing flying to the moon, tea-parties, playing trucks in the sandpit and playing with dolls and teddies to name a few.

Pretend play begins anytime from 11 months to 18 months (in typically developing children) and starts to change into other types of play any time from 10 to 12 years. It becomes very noticeable when children turn 4 years old because at 4 years old children can play out a play scene over several days and adults start to notice it.

When children are playing pretend they are playing 'as if' something or someone is real. They are creating a situation where there is more going on than what is literally happening. For example, a child might be placing a cup to the doll's mouth and then lying the doll in a bed - but to the child, the doll is alive and really drinking (and it might even burp) and when the doll is put in the bed, the doll is really sleeping - and so the child will have to wait until the doll wakes up.

Pretend play is a thinking skill. To pretend in play, children have to understand the meaning of what is happening. In order to do this, there are 3 thinking abilities that are used very often in pretending. These are:

- Children use objects and pretend they are something else (for example, the box is a bed),
- Children attribute properties to objects (for example, the tea is 'hot' or the teddy is 'sleeping' or the truck is 'fast'); and
- Children refer to invisible objects (for example, there is a door in a certain space, or there is a dog near the doll (but the dog is invisible)).

Pretend play also involves

- Playing with an object as if that object is alive (this is also called decentring). For example, to the child the teddy is a living, breathing being. The teddy can talk to them, and it listens, it has a life of its own. In Australia, many boys don't play with dolls or teddies but they will have something that is special to them such as a car that might be real to them and might have feelings, or a soft toy like a dog that is special to them.
- Playing out a character in role play. For example, a child might pretend they are delivering the post, or selling food at a shop, or being a mother, or being a policeman, or being a doctor and so on. To do this children are learning what that particular person says and does.
- Playing out a story that is logical and sequential. From late 3 years and onwards, children also add problems to their stories so they are also learning about cause and effect. For example, if there is a problem (for example, I can't find the keys to the car), then they need to solve it (for example, look everywhere for the keys, or call a taxi, or walk the doll to the shops instead of driving in the car or ask another doll to drive them).

