

<https://www.maggiedent.com/blog/the-real-value-in-pretend-play/>

The real value in pretend play

Posted on January 28, 2021

“Babies create hypotheses, test them and then relentlessly appraise their findings with the vigour of a seasoned scientist. This means that infants are extraordinarily delightful, surprisingly aggressive learners. They pick up everything.”

— John Medina, Brain Rules for Baby (2014) [www.brainrules.net](http://www.brainrules.net)

In today’s consumer-driven world there is enormous pressure on parents to buy stuff for their kids, whether it be toys, games, craft or construction material — especially if it has ‘educational’ or ‘stimulating’ written on the box. Parents have told me they feel pressured to buy toys to help their kids to play.

For some parents, the amount of stuff purchased or gifted to their children can become overwhelming. I have spoken about my concerns for having too many toys many times. Carefully chosen toys that allow for creative and autonomous play are fabulous and my favourites are still blocks, Duplo and Lego, cardboard boxes and anything that encourages pretend play.

One of my concerns with young children being given digital play opportunities too soon and too often, is that it can displace pretend play. This form of play can seem like not much is happening at all however, it is almost the opposite.

Dr Margot Sunderland, in her book *The Science of Parenting*, explores the notion that babies, toddlers and little ones are wired to play and be curious. They have a “seeking mechanism’ in their developing brains that need to play in as many different ways as possible.

Toys that only work one way can be a negative influence in this brain development. Play can be stimulated by having the opportunities to use their imaginations with loose parts that are materials that can be moved, carried, combined, redesigned, lined up, and taken apart and put back together in multiple ways. They are materials with no specific set of directions that can be used alone or combined with other materials. Loose parts can be natural or synthetic.

In the days when I worked as a counsellor, pretend play was how young children were able to express what was troubling them in their view of the world. One very sad little four-year-old girl I worked with drew a dark picture when I asked her to draw how she was feeling. To explore her sadness, I gave her a princess wand and asked her to make a wish with the wand, so that she could be happier. She paused for a moment and then waved the wand and said, “Abracadabra. I just wish my daddy would play with me sometimes”. She was feeling a profound disconnection from her daddy and once the family had this information, they were able to address it.

The fascination and fun of joining in

One of the blessings of having grandchildren under the age of six is that I get to witness them playing. Even better, I get invited into some of their pretend play.

During 2020 my 4.5-year-old granddaughter was playing doctors. Our front door leads into a small room, so it makes a perfect office. She has some toy medical equipment like a stethoscope, thermometer and the thing that looks in your ear. When it is your turn to see her, she walks out of her office and calls loudly, “Maggie Dent – next please!” When you take a seat, she asks you how you are and what seems to be the problem. I had a sore knee and she examined it and put an Elsa bandaid

on it. She then asked me had I had any coughing or a runny nose. When I answered no she told me I was lucky because I didn't have the virus. She insisted on seeing my green card (Medicare card) before I could pay my bill! At a second appointment when I mentioned my knee was still sore, she suggested I go see another doctor! It was so hard not to laugh.

Pretending to be a doctor or a shop assistant has been a part of traditional play for a very long time. This is how our little ones make sense of the grown-up world and right now how they strive to make sense of the pandemic to some degree as well.

The research is in: it's more than child's play

Pretend play or dramatic play, known technically as socio-dramatic play, is one of the best ways to consolidate oral language. Researchers have found that children who engage in pretend play often use higher forms of language than they would use in normal situations, often because they are pretending to be adults.

It also helps children practice for situations and experiences they might not be ready for yet, and builds persistence.

Pretend play is also known as "symbolic play" because it involves the use of symbols and children do this beautifully. This might involve using a tea towel as a cape, shells and small stones as crystals and jewels, or sticks representing swords. Many little boys will explore gun play with making guns out of Lego, cutlery and even toast! For our children this is not just pretend. These props feel real and we need to be very mindful before we dispose of them, thinking they are unimportant. If your child has a stick under the bed, know that it is incredibly important so please treat it with the respect it deserves.

Another thing I have noticed with pretend play is that children try to make sense of their world through the recreation of certain events. I have witnessed little ones playing with dolls as though they are in a classroom. They will repeat what an educator may have said, including a raised voice. The doll who was spoken to sternly can often be soothed by the child who's playing, unlike what may have happened in the real classroom.

Children need opportunities to be in control and to have autonomy and pretend play allows for that beautifully.

This last weekend I had three grandies aged almost 6, almost 5 and 4.5 playing in my foyer. They were wanting to play without being interrupted by grownups.

When it was time to go home, we discovered a sign on the door to tell us that No Poppy's were allowed into their play space!

Also, they had taped up the front door and put up another sign had banned babies, sausage dogs and cats!

Together they had worked out boundaries and made signs – writing with a real purpose – all while playing together. They had been chatting and negotiating for ages to work this out. So much wonderful learning happening without any input from us grownups.

So, we can see how incredibly important pretend play is.

It helps our children to not only navigate the world they live in but to make sense of it as well.

Creativity and problem-solving are incredibly important in childhood. Research has shown that pretend play has dropped significantly in our early childhood settings over the years

I know it can get tiring playing families, or hospitals or being construction workers in the sandpit! Just know it is hugely valuable developmentally, emotionally, socially and cognitively. Thankfully the ABC kids' show Bluey has given so many parents great insight into the importance of pretend play.

We must celebrate pretend play in our homes, ECEC centres and primary schools because it is a valuable way that kids learn and grow healthy.

*This entry was posted in [Building Family Relationships](#), [Building Resilience](#), [Newsletter Articles](#), [Play & Nature Play](#), [Posts for Parents](#) and tagged [creativity](#), [imagination](#), [nature play](#), [play](#), [pretend play](#), [role play](#), [toys](#).*