The Power of Pretend Play

Pretend play has long been considered essential for early learning and development. Sometimes called make believe, fantasy play, housekeeping play, dramatic play, or symbolic play, this is the type of play—familiar to those who work with young children—in which children take on imaginary roles of persons, animals, or objects or play themselves in make believe settings. Pretend has been found to contribute to nearly every area of development that is important in early childhood. In fact, the ability to pretend is one of the best predictors we have of how well children will perform later in school. Most important, pretend play is a fundamental way that children of diverse cultures and characteristics connect with one another, as illustrated in the following example.

A Party for Cat Woman

Tamara, Analilia, and Lawanda are planning a party for Cat Woman in the dramatic play center of their Head Start classroom. Analilia's family just moved to the U.S. from Mexico and she speaks very little English. Tamara, who is Euro-American, only speaks English. Lawanda, also an English speaker, has Down Syndrome. Their teacher, Ms. Sanchez, watches in amazement as this diverse trio plays in remarkable harmony.

"Cat Woman's coming soon, like 4:00 o'clock, because it's her birthday," Tamara says, "so we need to bake pies. Lots and lots of pies with those . . . what are they? . . . sprinkle things."

"Pies?" Analilia says, showing brief confusion. "Tortas," she says and takes an empty pie tin out of a toy oven. "Es muy caliente," she says, waving a hand over the pretend pie as if trying to cool it. "Caliente," she says again.

"Honey," Tamara responds in a very adult tone, her hands on her hips. "Sometimes I just don't understand you. Now let's make those pies as quick as a wink." Tamara and Analilia begin pouring and mixing pretend ingredients in pie tins and bowls.

Lawanda, who has been watching, picks up several other plates and pans and begins a pouring and stirring motion, copying her peers. After a moment, she begins putting these dishes into the oven, quickly removing them, then putting them back in, laughing.

"Good, Lawanda, that's the ticket," Tamara says, still as an adult. "We need to bake them at four degrees for four minutes. Serves four." She says this as if quoting a recipe. "And it's one, two, three, and four," she counts pointing to her peers, herself, and a doll. "Four people eat the pies."

Lawanda pauses to watch Tamara then continues moving dishes in and out of the oven. "And let's put them on the table when they're done, see?" Tamara says, placing a dish on the table where the party will be held. Analilia follows her lead, putting out more pans and plates, then turns to Lawanda. "Aqui, Lawanda," she says, pointing to the table. Lawanda smiles and copies her peers, placing dishes on the table. The three then sit down with a doll, who is obviously the guest of honor, and pretend to eat pies right out of the pans.

As shown in this example, children learn new words and adult phrases as they pretend—in this case, in both English and Spanish. More than that, they experiment with long, adult-sounding utterances. When pretending to be adults, children use some of the longest, most sophisticated utterances they ever speak! The children in this example also exchange ideas and learn new concepts from one another. They consider the meaning of sprinkles, the time of day when a party begins, and the temperature setting of an oven. They experiment with number, which explains why there is such a strong connection between this kind of

play and math learning. In pretend, children learn how to use symbols—objects, actions, or words to stand for things that are not present. An empty dish becomes a pie, a gesture a shaker with sprinkles. This is the same kind of symbolic thinking children use when reading, writing, or expressing themselves artistically.

Children persist at activities for longer periods when they are pretending. One reason is that this type of play is so engaging and enjoyable. A new theory is that when children pretend to be adults, they try to be more mature and grown up and less impulsive and silly. They attempt to be as self-controlled as the adults they are pretending to be. This leads to an important area of development: self-regulation.

Children learn social skills in pretend play. The children in the previous example initiate play, articulate play suggestions, and cooperate with and persuade one another.

Building a Farm

Pretend play is an ideal setting for children to learn conflict resolution, as the following example illustrates:

JOSEPH: *(Placing plastic farm animals in a block structure)* I'm building a farm here. Let's say this is a farm.

CEDRIC: *(Building with blocks)* No, this is a museum where paintings are. See, Joseph?

JOSEPH: *(Angrily)* No! It's a farm!

CEDRIC: No, 'cause there's not enough room for a whole farm, Joseph. Let's say it's a museum where farm animals can go. They can go to the museum, okay? See? *(Begins placing farm animals in his structure)*

JOSEPH: Okay. *(Helps Cedric put in the animals)* But those animals might make a mess at the museum.

In this example, Cedric has learned the art of negotiation and compromise, acknowledging Joseph's play suggestion, but offering an alternative.

The Role of Adults

Adults can take the following steps to enrich pretend play in homes and classrooms:

1. Create a separate, partially partitioned play space devoted to pretend play.
2. Equip this space with realistic family-related props or theme-related toys (e.g., menus and toy foods for a make believe restaurant)
3. As children get older, integrate more and more nonrealistic materials, such as cardboard boxes or blocks, into the pretend play center.
4. Interact with children in play, but only purposefully, briefly and when they truly need support.
5. When interacting in play, take a role within children's play theme to model make believe or ask questions or offer new props from outside of actual role playing, depending on the kind of help children need.
6. Engage children in planning and making props to include in play centers.
7. Always return, every few weeks, to home-related play centers, so that children have an opportunity to play our family-centered themes and concerns.

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