

A Newsletter for First Steps Families ♦ Fall 2009



Act Natural: Dramatic Play for Young Children



Dramatic play lets toddlers stretch their imaginations, retell favorite stories and practice using new words. Research shows that rich make-believe experiences help young children develop a wide range of skills such as language, speech and attention span.

What is the practice?

Dramatic play occurs any time toddlers use their imagination to act out a scene or pretend they are someone else. As a parent, take part in these scenes by following your child's lead. Show your interest and provide props to enrich the experience. This can motivate your child to continue the fun of pretend play.

What does the practice look like?

A toddler dresses up in mom's old high heels and hosts a tea party for her dolls. A child acts out her own version of a favorite scene from "The Lion King." These children are enjoying dramatic play. Playing different roles with a parent or other children is full of benefits for toddlers. They come to understand more about the roles they're playing, and they get to practice using language they wouldn't normally use on their own. For example, a child pretending to be a firefighter practices thinking from another person's point of view and uses uncommon words such as *helmet*, *hose* and *alarm*. These are important skills for developing language and speech.

How do you do the practice?

Many toddlers enjoy using their imaginations and engaging in dramatic play on their own. If your toddler hasn't shown much interest yet, there are many ways to provide opportunities for pretend play based on his or her special favorites.

- Encourage your toddler to act out a story you read together. Try saying things like, "Show me what the little boy did," or "Do you want to be the cat or the dog?" to

start the process. Take on the role of one character yourself, and invite your toddler to play another part with you.

- When your child is playing with a favorite toy such as a stuffed animal, toy car or doll, use a similar toy to start a pretend chat between the toys. For example, one truck might ask the other where it's going or what its name is. Prompting talk between toys is a good first step in dramatic play.
- Provide your toddler with toys that support dramatic play like old clothes for dress-up, doctor kits, tool boxes and pretend food.
- Invite your child to use drawing, scribbling or painting as a starting point for dramatic play. Ask her to tell you about the picture she is making. You can help her expand on her answers ("What's the lion doing? What is this lion saying to his friend?") and pair actions with her verbal responses ("Can you show me how this lion walks? Could we walk this way and be lions too?")
- Don't worry if the dramatic play doesn't make a lot of sense. Young children might have a firefighter stop for pancakes on the way to a fire or blast off into space after the job is done. The important thing is that they are using their imagination and practicing different roles and words.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Is your toddler using his or her imagination in play more often and for longer periods of time?
- Does your toddler pretend to talk for different toys or give voices to them?
- Does he or she expand on stories heard or movies seen by imitating or adding to scenes, dialogue or characters?

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A Missouri Family's Story

By Tina of Maysville, Mo.

I am the mother of a child with special needs. My child has trouble grasping and holding toys and other items in her hands. Because of this, it has been difficult to find toys she can play with. It has also been difficult teaching her to eat with traditional utensils. So, I decided to adapt a universal cuff that would be tailor-made to her needs. We began with a catalog-purchased pediatric universal cuff. The cuff kept slipping off of her hand so I sewed a thin strip of the lightweight, rubbery kitchen shelf liner on the inside of the cuff. The cuff now grips her hand. The spoon she used did not fit in the pocket of the cuff so I sewed an elastic band on the cuff in place of the spoon slot. Now, any spoon she uses in the cuff stays in place because the elastic expands or contracts to fit the size of the spoon.

The kitchen shelf liner also proved helpful with our child's plastic chair. The liner keeps her from slipping out of the chair. We also cut out a piece the size of her wheelchair tray, and it keeps her bowls and toys from slipping off of the tray. The liner washes easily with soap and warm water.

My child also needed a weighted vest, but the ones in the catalog were very expensive. Instead, I bought a pattern for a vest and adapted it by elongating the front pockets and adding two elongated pockets on the back. I also used Velcro in place of the buttons. I contacted our occupational therapist to determine how much weight to put in the pockets. I filled a resealable plastic bag with copper BBs, put a second bag over it for safety and placed them in the elongated pockets, evenly distributing the weight. I sewed the pockets shut. Voilà – we had a weighted vest that cost one-third what it would've been to purchase a ready-made vest.

Just for Fun

Five Little Squirrels Rhyme

Five little squirrels sitting in a tree. *(Hold up five fingers.)*

The first one said, "It's getting cold for me." *(Hold up one finger.)*

The second one said, "The leaves are falling to the ground." *(Hold up two fingers.)*

The third one said, "Let's get busy; there are nuts to be found." *(Hold up three fingers.)*

The fourth one said, "We better not wait." *(Hold up four fingers.)*

The fifth one said, "Fall is really great!" *(Hold up five fingers.)*

Reread the rhyme two lines at a time. At the end of each two rhyming lines, ask children which words rhyme. Then ask them to tell you other words that rhyme with those words.



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