Let’s pretend!

Has your toddler started pretending and developing her imagination?

Information

Toddlers in the second year of life often show the beginning of imagination.

Children pretend in many different ways: by dressing up, pretending they’re you or grandmother, making a fort, having a tea party or playing with a farm set. Role playing helps children learn about social roles and rules. They can practice doing things in a safe environment that might be scary or difficult in the “real” world. Pretend play also develops language skills and an ability to plan ahead, problem solve, and think creatively.

The very first pretend play actions are often fleeting. Perhaps a toddler uses a toy spoon to pretend to feed himself or a brush and pretend to brush his hair, scarcely touching his head.

Pretend play is at first directed by toddlers at themselves, but soon they pretend with someone or something else. They pretend to offer you a drink or to feed a favorite stuffed animal.

They start to pretend an object is something else. For example, a block is a car or a plastic bowl is a hat. Perhaps the whole action is pretend; there is not only no drink, the drinking action is made without a cup. Toddlers look at you as if to say, “You know that I know that you know that this is all just pretend.”

Action Steps

1. Have plenty of telephones (toys and real ones) on hand. Look for push-button and portable phones like the ones toddlers see at home. Help toddlers talk on the phone to a friend or family member.

2. Join toddlers in their make-believe play to introduce new words and to encourage them to talk. “That smells delicious. What are you cooking?” “Are you going to work? Say ‘hello’ to your Dad for me.”

3. Dress-up clothes encourage pretend play and creativity. At the same time that they provide practice with real-life dressing skills. “Look at me!” experiences in front of a mirror are lots of fun, and they enhance self-awareness as toddlers try on different roles, expressions, and poses along with the clothes.