

Especially for parents of toddlers!

Act Natural

Literacy Learning Experiences

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 skills such as language, speech, and attention span.

What is the practice?

Dramatic play occurs any time a toddler acts out a scene or pretends she is 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 activity. 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. Another child acts out his own version of a scene from a favorite movie. These children are enjoying dramatic play. Playing different roles with a parent or another children is full of benefits for toddlers. They learn more about the roles they're playing and they practice using language they wouldn't normally use. For example, a child pretending to be a firefighter practices 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 taking part in dramatic play on their own. If your toddler hasn't shown much interest yet, there are ways to encourage pretend play based on her interests.

- Encourage your toddler to act out a story you read together. Try saying something like, "Show me what the little boy did." Or you could ask, "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 plays with a favorite toy, like a toy car, use another car to start a "chat." For example, one car might ask the other car 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 for dramatic play, like doctor kits, tool boxes, and old clothes for dress-up.
- 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?" 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 your toddler's dramatic play doesn't make a lot of sense. A young child might have a firefighter stop for pancakes on the way to a fire. She might blast off into space after the fire is out. The important thing is that she is using her imagination and practicing different roles and words.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Is your toddler using her imagination in her play more often and for longer periods of time?
- Does your toddler pretend to "talk" for different toys or give voices to them?
- Does she expand on stories or movies in her play by imitating or adding conversations or people?

Take a look at more toddlers' dramatic play

Favorite Character Fun

Twenty-month-old Petra loves watching her Cinderella DVD over and over again. She knows every song and can name all the characters. Sometimes her mom suggests they "play Cinderella." Petra gets to pick which role she wants to play. They use dolls and stuffed animals to act out Petra's favorite parts of the story. Lately, Petra has begun including other props into her play. She uses her big brother's toy truck as Cinderella's carriage, for example, and makes the story different each time. Once, Petra and her big brother pretended to be Cinderella and the prince having a tea party. Mom knows Petra enjoys this kind of play because she wants to "play Cinderella" over and over.



Playground Pretend

Bella, who is almost three, is an active, energetic toddler who loves running and playing outside. She has less patience for looking at books and indoor play. When her dad takes her to the park, they use their imaginations on the climbing equipment. "What do you want to be today, Bella?" her dad asks. "Astronauts or explorers?" "Let's go on the rocket ship!" Bella yells, leading her dad to the spring-mounted riding toys. "We're in the rocket ship, about to blast off," her dad says. "What do we see?" "Stars," Bella says, "and some space monsters." "Uh-oh! What should we do about the space monsters?" "Blast off!" Bella yells, and bounces wildly toward her next adventure.

Hopping Imagination

Elly is a 30-month-old toddler who has developmental delays that affect her attention span and language skills. Her dad knows it's important that Elly practice speaking and staying with an activity. He also knows how much she loves playing with her two pet rabbits. When it's time to feed the rabbits, Elly's dad gets her attention. He asks, "Are you ready to be the mama rabbit, Elly?" Elly knows that as the "mama rabbit" it is her job to feed the rabbits in their cage. Elly also knows she must play with them gently and talk to them quietly so they don't get frightened. "What do your rabbit babies want to eat today?" her dad asks. "Carrots or lettuce?" "Carrots," Elly says. She gets a piece of carrot for herself, too, and takes the rest to the cage. "Hi, babies," Elly says. "They're happy to see you, aren't they?" her dad asks. "How can you tell your rabbit babies are happy?" "Noses," Elly says, pointing to their twitching noses. As she feeds them, Elly and her dad make up a story about the rabbits.

