

Development of Pretend or Symbolic Play Skills

Developmental Stage of Symbolic Play and Age it Emerges	What it looks like:	What props are used in play:
Pre-Symbolic Play		
14-18 months:	Pretend play based on every day, familiar activities. Child performs one pretend action away from self (usually on an adult or a doll)	Realistic props (e.g., a spoon with no food on it)
19-22 months:	Pretend play based on every day, familiar activities. Child sequences two actions (e.g., the doll receives two actions, such as: feeding with a bottle and a spoon) or two people receive one action (e.g., child feeds the doll with a spoon and then her mommy)	Realistic props
Symbolic Play		
2-3 years	Pretend play based on every day, familiar activities. Begins to interact with the toy (e.g., talks to it). Start to see emotions being included, verbal planning, and sequencing of several actions within a theme (bath in a tub, wash, dry).	Realistic props
3-3 ½ years	Pretend play events based on events child has seen or heard about but not personally experienced. See the child giving the toys a voice. Using more language to plan play, and talk about play, and during play. Play includes short sequences of activities that are now time-related.	Low representation toys (e.g., a stick becomes a wand, a block becomes a phone)
Advanced Symbolic Play/Socio-Dramatic Play		
4 years	Pretend play events based on events child has seen or heard about but not personally experienced. Child is now taking on a role. Play includes planned events with cause-effect sequences. Child is using language is used to “set the scene.”	Low representation toys
5-6 years	Child is now taking on multiple roles (mother, wife, doctor). Play includes highly imaginative themes with multiple plans and sequences. Language is being used to set scene and includes understanding and use of inferencing, predicting, nonverbal communication (e.g., gestures, facial expression).	Low representation toys

Reference: Westby, C. (2013, May). *“The Roots of Literacy: Play and Language.”* Handout provided at the annual Speech, Language, and Hearing Association of Peterborough conference in Peterborough, Ontario.

Reference: Hender-Lederer, S. (2011, October). *“Pretend I’m the Princess: Assessing and Treating the Language of Pretend Play.”* Handout provided by on-line conference at www.speechpathology.com.

What is the link between play and expressive language development?

As children develop the ability to engage in pretend play, they become able to think about things as separate from the objects they represent. Symbolic play shows the development of abstract thought. Abstract thought or using symbols to represent other things is the foundation of language. Why? Words are abstract symbols for things in our environment; just like objects are abstract symbols in play (e.g., a stick being used to represent a “wand”). Play skills are reflective a child’s cognitive development, particular up to the age of 3.

Reference: Retrieved from http://sociallyspeakingllc.com/my-mission-for-socially/free-pdfs/whats_play_got_to_do_with.pdf on Jan 24, 2014. Cited within this pdf: Play and Autism: Facilitating Symbolic Understanding Preissler, M.A. (2006) In D.G. Singer, R.M. Golinkoff, & K. Hirsch-Pasek(Eds.), Play = Learning: How play motivates and enhances children’s cognitive and social Emotional growth. New York: Oxford.