Teaching Strategies That Support Pretend Play

Preschoolers engage in pretend play when they imitate the actions and sounds they encounter in everyday life and imagine scenarios that take familiar experiences in new directions. Pretend play occurs alone and with peers, and is especially enriched when adults play as partners in the dramas children create. To promote children’s pretend play, use the strategies described below.

Support children as they imitate what they see and hear

Children use their bodies and voices to imitate or reproduce the actions and sounds around them — a puppy crawling on all fours, laundry flapping in the wind, the whistle of a train, or a baby crying. You can support this type of pretend play by in turn imitating what the children do. For example, if a child “meows” and pretends to lap milk from a bowl on the floor, you can “meow,” get down beside them and make lapping sounds and motions too.
Imitating children’s action may lead to an “action dialogue” — communication carried out with gestures instead of words.

At work time in the house area, Timmy stands in front of the mirror and strokes his cheeks with a small rubber spatula as he pretends to shave.

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At work time in the toy area, Brandon snaps together two blocks and flies them over his head, making an “airplane noise.”

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At work time in the house area, Roseanna plays babies with her teacher Sybil. Roseanna packs a suitcase with baby things, and they carry their baby dolls to the art area for a “meeting.” Roseanna writes on paper at the “meeting” and gives paper and pencil to Sybil so she can also “take notes.” Whenever Roseanna writes something on her paper, Sybil does too.

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At work time in the block area, Jaye announces she is leading an aerobics class. She stretches her arms high over her head. Her teacher Gary imitates her stretching action. When Jaye kicks one foot and then the other forward, Gary does the same. After she performs each part of the exercise routine — bending, twisting, and so on — Jaye pauses and looks at Gary to see if he will imitate her. Only after he reproduces each of her actions does Jaye go on to the next one.

In addition to work time, take advantage of other opportunities for imitation throughout the day. For example, at recall time, children can pantomime what they did at work time, such as pretend to read a book, paint at the easel, or stack blocks. After you read a book at the end of snacktime, children can imitate the actions of the characters in the story (for example, growl like a monster). They can imitate movements in the songs they sing at large-group time (“row” a boat) or make up new verses and accompanying actions (“This is the way we brush our hair”).

At recall time, Gretchen shows how she used the computer keyboard at work time by making typing motions with her fingers.

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At large-group time, Randy lifts one leg at a time while the other children sing and mime, “This is the way we put on our pajamas.”

Imitation, especially of unexpected movements or sounds, can also make cleanup fun. For example, when Andee walked backwards to put away the blocks, her teacher Jeannette copied her movements. Soon, the entire class declared it a “backwards cleanup day.” On another occasion, Charles “flew” each item to the shelf and made buzzing airplane sounds as he put away the toys. His teacher imitated both the gestures and noises while cleaning up alongside him.

Children also see and hear new things to imitate on field trips. A good way to recall and reflect on these experiences is to have children re-create the actions and sounds that were meaningful to them. Children will spontaneously imitate what they saw and heard. You can also initiate this activity on the ride back to the classroom, at snacktime, or in a follow-up small-group activity.

The class goes on a field trip to the zoo where they visit the Penguin House. At work time at the water table the next day, Dablia uses small dinosaur figures and says, “I’m pretending they’re penguins.” She walks them around the edge of
the water table and then makes them flop head-first into the water. She says, “They are swimming and diving.”

Watch for and support imaginative role play throughout the classroom

Provide space and materials for pretending and role play. For example, equipment and dress-up clothes in the house area might inspire children to act out a family dinner table scene, open a restaurant, or play office. Encourage them to create their own props as well, using materials from around the classroom. In these scenarios, children might respectively sculpt food with clay, add up the bill on a calculator, or write letters using a computer program.

At work time, at the sand table, Lynn makes “Jell-O and cakes” for her teacher Joan. She pretends to mix the cake batter and brings Joan a water-filled bowl of “white Jell-O.”

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At work time in the house area, Theo pretends to be a doctor by wearing a stethoscope and taking care of a doll. He says, “When I get sick, I help myself because I’m a doctor.”

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At work time in the house area, Brianna and Senguele gather the following items in their purses: paper money, keys, and phones. Senguele tells their teacher, “We’re going shopping” and Brianna adds, “To Walmart, to buy bacon.”

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At work time in the block area, Todd and Ricky put on fire hats, boots, and coats, and load their fire truck (a wagon) with a ladder (a long block) and hoses. “Briiiing, briiiing!” Ricky intones and answers the telephone. “Fire at Becky’s!” he shouts. “Fire at Becky’s!” Todd repeats. They drive the truck to the fire in the house area where Becky (their teacher) and several other children are playing. When they get there, they go “Whoosh, whoosh” with the hoses until water puts out the fire. Then they drive the truck back to the fire station.

Be alert to the people and events children portray in their role-playing activities, and provide additional materials and props to support them. For example, when several children who had gone camping with their families during summer vacation began to act out these experiences, their teachers added flashlights and a sleeping bag to the house area. Parents, informed of the children’s interest, contributed a tent and a no-longer-functional cookstove.

Pretending and role play also occur outdoors. Wheeled toys (bicycles, wagons) often serve as buses, trains, airplanes, or boats. Climbing structures become houses, forts, tents, and igloos. Small items from nature, such as pebbles and leaves, are a feast for a banquet or birthday party. Bringing indoor materials (scarves, dolls, cooking utensils) outside, further helps children extend and elaborate their imaginative activities.

At outside time, Andrew pretends the climber is his rocketship. “Ten, three, five, one, blast off!” he says as he jumps into the air.

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At outside time in the tree house, Billy washes dishes (plastic pails, plates, and utensils from the sandbox). “I’m home, honey,” Lisa calls through the window. “Okay, baby,” Billy replies, “I need lettuce for the salad.” Lisa picks up fallen leaves from the ground and gives them to Billy. “Here
you go, honey,” she says. He puts them on a plate and serves them dinner.

Large and fluid spaces also inspire children’s pretend play. An open area can become whatever they want — a planet, jungle, or boat. Dramatic play often overlaps areas. For example, children in the house area may “build” a backyard barbecue in the block area. By locating these areas next to one another, you facilitate this type of creative play. Be sure children also know they can carry equipment and materials from one part of the classroom to another. This flexibility gives their imaginations free reign. In a room that is well organized and labeled, children know where to find and return all types of materials to support and extend their imaginative play.

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At work time in the block area, Noel builds a tent. He gets chairs from his small-group table, puts them together on the carpet, then covers them with a blanket he retrieves from the house area. He makes another tent for Colum, and says to him, “It can be anything, like a ship.”

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At work time, Rocco pretends the pipes under the house area sink are broken. He asks the other children to leave the house area because there is sewer water all over the floor, and he needs a pump to clean it up. Rocco then gets a long block and a short block from the block area and brings them to the sink. He stands the long one on end, crosses the short one at the top, and pretends to “pump” the handles. “All clear now,” he says when he’s done. Rocco returns the blocks to their shelf as the other children reenter the house area.

“Let’s pretend” can happen at large-group time as well, as children reenact a familiar story and/or make up one of their own. Again, these activities will be most successful if they expand on the pretend play themes that children generate spontaneously and the story ideas they are interested in from their own lives.

In addition to encouraging pretend play during regular times of the daily routine, plan special experiences to add depth to children’s imaginative activities. For example, field trips expand children’s horizons and give them new ideas for pretending and role play. Consider how the following memorable experience enriched a favorite pretend play scenario over time.

One day HighScope Demonstration Preschool teacher Beth Marshall (now Director of HighScope’s Early Childhood department) joined three children playing “barbershop.” They sat her in the barber’s chair, wrapped a scarf around her shoulders, and pretended to cut her hair with scissors. Given the children’s interest, Beth and her co-teacher planned a field trip to a local barbershop, where they could watch one of the children actually get a haircut. The child’s parent went with them, and the teachers talked with the barber beforehand about what they wanted to happen for the children. “I suggested letting the children get into the barber chair, make the chair go up and down, feel the vibration of the electric clippers, feel the air from the blow dryer, look in the big mirror and the hand mirror, and try out the cash register” (Marshall, 1992, p. 16). In the month after the field trip, the children continued adding details to their barbershop pretend play, and more children joined in. Immediately after the trip, six children played and added the following props and actions to the original chair, scarf, and scissors: clippers, clipping noise, floor mirror, baby doll, detailed cutting, blocks for combs, and opening and closing the shop for business. Two weeks later, 13 children were
Pretending and Role Play at Large-Group Time

In a classroom in which one group of children had been pretending with “boats” made of large blocks, another group had been using a real tent to go “camping,” and a third group had been playing “mermaids,” the teacher built on elements from all three groups by starting a large-group time inviting the children to pretend to sail to a magic land with her.

First she asked the children to help her build a boat, which they did enthusiastically using blocks, cartons, scarves, and ropes. Then the teacher used a few planned prompts to get things started: “What should we take onboard?” and “What do we see?” After that, she followed the children’s leads as the fantasy unfolded. The children discovered “jewels in a treasure chest” (buttons in a box) and swam away from sea monsters they saw with their “spyglasses” (paper towel tubes). She let them decide, again by looking through their spyglasses, when they had arrived on land.

Once there, the children continued to determine the direction of the play. They discovered a tent where “gigantic lions” were hiding out and cooked a “berry stew” (made of beads) when they got hungry. Two minutes before the end of large-group time, the teacher announced it was time for them to sail home. She again turned it over to the children to bring the voyage to closure. They braved a storm and vanquished more monsters en route, but made it back in time for snacks.

Over the next few weeks, the children incorporated and elaborated on these imaginative elements as they played “boats,” “camping,” “mermaids,” and now, in addition, “sailing to a magic land.”

Participate as a partner in children’s pretend play

Child development and theater expert Vivian Paley (1990) concludes that adults who participate as partners in children’s play are better observers, understand children more, and communicate with children more effectively. However, partnering must be done with sensitivity so that children retain control of the play. Therefore observe first to understand their intentions before you join in. Wait until you are invited, or be alert to cues that the children welcome your involvement.

At work time in the house area, Dawn (a teacher) sits beside Tucker and Rona as they play “restaurant.” Tucker serves Dawn chicken soup. He types letters on the computer, prints the page, and shows it to Dawn. He says it’s the recipe. Dawn asks him to tell her what is in the soup.
After Rona asks Tucker for more soup, Dawn asks if she can have more soup too.

To make sure you respect the content and direction of the children’s play, rather than “taking over,” follow a simple set of guidelines. One is to continue with the play theme set by the children, for example, being another dog or baby rather than adding a new type of character. A second principle is to stay within the play situation when offering suggestions; for example, if the children are pretending to visit the doctor, do not suggest an emergency ambulance trip from the office to the hospital. A third guideline is to match the complexity of the children’s play, that is, to scaffold learning at their developmental level rather than trying to “push” them to a much higher level. Finally, acknowledge and accept children’s responses to your gentle ideas. If they do not pick up on them, let it go and return to the play that was happening previously. (For an example of how the teacher acted as a partner in the barbershop play, see “Four Customers, One Barber” on p. 78).

For examples of children’s pretend play at different levels of development and how adults can scaffold their learning in this area of creative art, see “Ideas for Scaffolding KDI. 43 Pretend Play” on page 79. Use these ideas to carry out the foregoing strategies as you support and gently extend children’s pretend play during your interactions with them across the program day.
Four Customers, One Barber

Here is how preschool teacher Beth Marshall (now Director of HighScope’s Early Childhood Department) participated as a partner in children’s pretend barbershop play.

One day, Douglas, Martin, and Callie were setting up the “barbershop.” Callie got the clippers and scissors. Douglas and Martin wanted a haircut, and so did Corrin, who had joined them. When the three potential haircut customers began struggling over the “barber chair,” Beth decided to join them: “Is this barbershop open? I think I need a trim,” she said.

“Well,” responded Corrin, “I think it’s a problem. There’s only one hair-cutting place and everybody needs to get their hair cut.”

“I see,” said Beth. “There’s only one hair-cutting place. What do you think we should do?” (The children didn’t say anything but resumed their struggle for the “barber chair.”)

“Douglas could have the first turn, and then Corrin, and then you, Martin, OK?” Callie suggested.

“Well, my appointment is not for a while. I wonder what I could do while I’m waiting,” Beth thought aloud.

Douglas had an idea. “We could make a waiting area!”

“Yeah, like a big bench,” Corrin added. Corrin, Douglas, and Callie gathered big hollow blocks from the block area and arranged them in one long line in the “barber shop.”

“Sit here on the waiting bench, Beth,” Douglas instructed. Martin brought some books over, handed one to Beth, and sat down next to her. Douglas gathered some magazines from the art area, piled them on the bench, and selected one to “read.” Corrin sat down in the “barber chair,” Callie tied a scarf around her neck, and proceeded with the first haircut of the day. When she finished and Corrin “paid,” Callie called her next customer.

“Douglas, you want to be next?” He put down his magazine and took his place in the “barber chair.”

# Ideas for Scaffolding KDI 43. Pretend Play

Always support children at their current level and occasionally offer a gentle extension.

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**Children may**

- Pretend to be a real person, animal, or object that is familiar to them from their own lives (e.g., crawl like a cat; whirr like a motor).
- Use an object to stand for another, similar object (e.g., pretend a small block is a cell phone).
- Engage in pretend play on their own (e.g., imitate truck noises while racing cars up and down a ramp; hold their arms out to the sides and “fly” like an airplane).

**To support children’s current level, adults can**

- Pretend with children; imitate what they say and do (e.g., meow like a cat).
- Use a prop as a stand-in for the real object in the same way as the children (e.g., turn a plate like a steering wheel).
- Play in parallel with children.

**To offer a gentle extension, adults can**

- Ask children what other features of real people, animals, and objects they can imitate (e.g., “What other sounds does your truck make?”).
- Model using other materials to stand for or make familiar objects (e.g., “We could use this block for the table”).
- Call children’s attention to others who are pretending the same thing (e.g., “Jaron is racing his truck and going ‘vroom’ too”).

**Children may**

- Pretend to be a character in a story, song, nursery rhyme (e.g., the spider in Little Miss Muffet) or a generic role in a situation (e.g., a mom or dad feeding a baby).
- Talk in the “voice” of a character when playing with people or animal figures (e.g., use a high squeaky voice for a mouse); animate figures or objects (e.g., make an airplane fly).
- Engage in a simple pretend play scenario with another child (e.g., pretend to be horses together; pretend to be firefighters).

**To support children’s current level, adults can**

- Interact with children in character.
- Use figures similarly to children (e.g., create an animal family with figures; talk in a different voice with your puppet).
- Acknowledge when two children play together (e.g., at recall say, “Emilio, I saw you and Daryl being firefighters”).

**To offer a gentle extension, adults can**

- Encourage children to add details to their roles (e.g., “What else do dads do?”).
- Gently try out other voices or actions for the figures but back off if children do not pick up on them (e.g., “My plane needs to land. I need to find an airport”).
- Encourage children to describe their pretend play actions to others (e.g., “Daryl, can you show Pat how you and Emilio put out your fire?”).

**Children may**

- Pretend to be a character or play a role they imagine (e.g., “I’m the daisy fairy who gives out flowers to sick babies”).
- Create a prop during pretend play (e.g., scuba gear with tubing, milk jugs for oxygen tanks, safety glasses as swim masks, paper taped to shoes as flippers).
- Engage in complex play scenarios with others; step outside the role to clarify or give directions and then return to the play (e.g., say “Let’s have the baby be sick. Marasol, you’re the doctor. Okay, baby, mommy will take you to the doctor now,” then rock and hand the doll to Marasol).

**To support children’s current level, adults can**

- Allow extended time for children’s detailed pretend play to fully develop.
- Provide materials to create props.
- Ask children to assign them pretend play roles (e.g., “Okay, I’ll be the ambulance driver. Tell me what to do”).

**To offer a gentle extension, adults can**

- Encourage children to imagine other scenarios (e.g., “What if there were no more sick babies for the daisy fairy?”).
- Allow time for children to explore a variety of play options with the props they make (e.g., provide storage and work-in-progress signs; remind children of previous play at planning time).
- Provide consistent opportunities and materials for children to elaborate their play ideas over time.