

Shown to support development of language and social skills. ⁽¹⁾

Learn to Play

Parent Brochure

A program to help children
self-initiate pretend play and
develop their pretend play skills. ⁽²⁾

^(3,4)



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Pretend Play

Pretend play is also known as make-believe or imaginative play. It has been connected with creativity, divergent thinking, flexibility, problem solving, (6) emotional regulation, self control, (7, 8) social competence and language skills (reading, writing and comprehension) (9, 10).

Similar to other areas of child development, the ability to pretend has a developmental progression. ⁽¹¹⁾ It begins with simple actions such as copying an adult and progresses through to the highest form; role play. Pretend play skills relate to language (expressive and receptive), narrative (spoken or written story telling), and social skills. ⁽¹⁾ Children with difficulties in these areas have been found to have difficulties with play skills. ⁽⁹⁾ Research has shown that actively assisting to improve a child's pretend play skills can result in improvements in language, narrative and social skills. ⁽¹⁾ Learn to Play assists with pretend play skill development and the self-initiation of pretend play. ⁽²⁾

Learn to Play

Learn to Play is a program for children that was developed by Occupational Therapist Dr Karen Stagnitti. (2) It begins with an assessment to determine the child's current play level. (14) Play sessions are then individually planned to work on the skills that need support. (2) Play experiences begin at the child's play level with the Therapist being directive in approach. (2) As the child progresses, the Therapist becomes less directive and follows the child's lead. (2)

The Intake Interview

This gives an overall understanding of the child and helps to guide play material selection. Medical, developmental, allied health, social, schooling difficulties, and family information are collected. The child's likes and dislikes, interests, fears, sensory concerns, and how they play is also gathered to help with engaging and interacting, and knowing if anything may impact on the child's ability to participate.

The Play Assessment

The child's play is assessed using the Pretend Play Enjoyment Developmental Checklist (PPE-DC). The PPE-DC considers the child's play ability in relation to 6 play skills (7-13), their enjoyment when they play, and how they see themselves (self-esteem). (14)

The child plays freely with the materials and are given assistance to engage with the materials if necessary. (14)

Play Sessions

Play sessions are individually planned depending on each child's interests, beginning play level and needs. (2) Activities are introduced one at a time through the session. (2)



Pretend play skills

The Learn to Play program focuses on six skills that feature in pretend play:

- Play scripts
- Sequences of play actions
- Object substitution
- Doll/teddy play
- Role play
- Social interaction (2)

What do these mean, and how do they relate to language, narrative and social skills? ...



These are the stories in a child's play. Scripts begin with what the child is familiar with; what they experience in the home. A young child may pretend to cook or to feed a toy. The stories progress to include television and book characters, to eventually stories and characters that they create themselves.

(11, 14)

This skill relates to the ability to tell a story (narrative). (14)

Play Scripts



Sequences of play actions

Sequences occur when play actions combine together in an order that makes sense. Young children will perform a single action and may do it many times, such as put a teddy in bed. As they develop they may put teddy in bed and cover it up (2 logical actions).

Sequences become longer and more complex, and repetition ceases as the child's play develops. (14)

This skill relates to organising and creating logical sequences. (11)



When a box becomes a rocket ship, or a feather is a magic wand, a child is substituting one object for another. They are using symbols. Young children will use objects that are physically similar when they pretend. As they develop they can use any object to be anything.

(11, 14)

Object substitution

Language, social competence, and problem-solving are connected with this skill. (1, 14)



Doll/teddy play

When this develops, children are able to see their toy as having separate feelings and needs to themselves. They interact as if the toy is alive.

It is an important skill as it relates to being able to understand the points of view of others.

(11)



Social interaction

Children's play becomes more social as they develop. A young child begins with watching and copying adults. This progresses to playing beside other children but not 'playing' together. As the child develops they are able to discuss and create play ideas with others. Eventually play develops to include negotiation, cooperation, and problem solving. This contributes to social competence.

(2, 14)



(3, 23)

Role play

When a child becomes someone else such as a doctor, a superhero, or an animal, they are playing a role. It begins with a young child copying actions. An older child might play briefly in a role. As this develops, the child can play a role with others and stay in it for the duration of the play.

The child has to understand how they should act to be in the role. What does a teacher do? How does the animal behave?

(11, 14)

Who may benefit from Learn to Play?

Children who:

- Do not understand how to play or how to join in playing with others
- Have difficulty with social interaction
- Play at a level lower than expected for their age
- Are very inflexible
- Have a language delay, difficulty telling a story or with comprehension
- Have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), learning difficulties, or special needs

(1, 24)

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Additional Information:

The Learn to Play website: <https://www.learntoplayevents.com/>

Contains information and resources for parents, therapists, and teachers related to play and the therapy.