

Pretend Play: Laying the Foundation for Literacy

by Roberta Schomburg

Many people think that play and learning are opposites...we even say things like, "Stop playing and get to work." It's no wonder that parents and teachers may not realize the connections between a child's ability to make believe and his or her ability to read and understand words.

Pretending and reading are both based on abstractions-using symbols to represent things that aren't there. For instance:

- A child who uses a block to "stand for" the idea of a telephone is moving closer to the ability to learn that the printed word "telephone" can represent the idea of a telephone.
- A child who can pretend to be a grocer selling apples and oranges is more likely to be able to imagine the grocer described in a math problem who is selling 7 apples and 4 oranges.
- A child who says, "Let's pretend that we went to the zoo and came back" is more likely to be able to understand that a series of printed words can "stand for" a sequence of events in chronological order.

In my work with preschool children, I often find that a child's level of pretend play is a better indicator of readiness for formal reading instruction than many of the "readiness tests" that we use. Watching a child at play helps us learn how well he or she can put things together in a sequence (necessary for comprehension of what they have read) and the level to which he or she can use symbols to stand for things that are not there.

And some of the gifted teachers that I know tell me that by watching children at play and writing down what the children say, they are building a bridge to early reading. When children help read back what they have said, they are demonstrating their recollection of play events with the help of the printed word.

So let your children pretend, encourage them to pretend, and know that in doing so you are laying the foundation for later success in reading and writing. In the words of Mister Rogers, "Play is the real work of childhood."

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