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# Parents

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3&amp;4 years

# The Magic of Make-Believe

**Here's why preschoolers spend so much time pretending—and how it helps them in real life.**

**M**y 4-year-old, Maja, lives in a strange and wonderful universe: Her "other" father lives in Africa; she has a little brother who always laughs at her jokes (she has a big sister in reality); and her invisible friend, Sofia, patiently listens whenever she tells a story. Have I mentioned that Maja can fly?

I usually play along with her flights of fancy because they seem so imaginative and innocent. But sometimes—when I'm setting an extra place at the table for Sofia or admiring Maja's magic carpet, for example—I wonder, is this behavior normal?

"Many parents find this stage a little peculiar," says Eleonora Villegas-Reimers, Ed.D., an associate professor of education at Wheelock College, in Boston. Just when 3- and 4-year-olds are becoming increasingly involved in the real world—going to preschool, having conversations, making friends—they're more drawn than ever to make-believe. "But a child's ability to imagine a whole other place for herself is an essential developmental step," says Villegas-Reimers.

"Children this age know there's a difference between fantasy and reality," adds Vivian Gussin Paley, a former teacher and author of *The Kindness of Children* (Harvard University Press, 1990). But they don't consider one to be more important than the other. Preschoolers adore pretend play because it lets them be in control. They can create the premise of the story without rules or pressure to succeed. Kids aren't just entertaining themselves; they're practicing the social, emotional, and intellectual skills they'll rely on in real life.

Your child's make-believe play reflects his understanding of the world around him. Acting out his experiences, from riding in an airplane to getting a shot at the doctor's, helps your child

make sense of them. Using a ruler as a phone or a box as a pirate ship—what psychologists call symbolic thinking—paves the way for working with symbols such as words and numbers.

Pretend play also helps kids become more comfortable with the give-and-take of relationships. "When a child talks to her favorite stuffed animal, it's almost as though she's rehearsing," explains Kim Dell'Angela, Ph.D., a pediatric psycholo-

With a little imagination, a big box can become a pirate ship.

BY KIM FLODIN

gist at the Ronald McDonald Children's Hospital of Loyola University Medical Center, in Chicago. Whenever 3-year-old Amelia Veitch gets home from her playgroup, she acts out taking turns and sharing with her dolls and teddy bears, says her mother, Alison, of Bellport, New York. Similarly, when a group of kids decides to play house or store together, the challenge of deciding who will have which roles and what will happen fosters sharing, cooperating, and compromising.

### Pretending teaches kids how it feels to be another person

Imagining they're someone—or somewhere—else is a safe way for children to explore being angry, scary, or heroic. "Kids love to try on the role of monster or dare themselves to face their fear of the unknown," says Jean Kunhardt, codirector of Soho Parenting, a New York City family-counseling practice. Pretending to be authority figures such as parents, teachers, and police officers also lets preschoolers feel more powerful. Taking on other personae—and experiencing situations from someone else's perspective—encourages empathy.

"It's very rare for fantasy play to be cause for concern," says Jacqueline Woolley, Ph.D., an associate professor of psychology at the University of Texas, in Austin. "In fact, a lack of pretend play is more likely to indicate a serious problem, such as depression or autism." However, if your child constantly relives a disturbing fantasy, consult your pediatrician or a psychologist.

It's best to appear unfazed by your child's pretending so he won't feel self-conscious. Try to resist correcting him ("Puppies don't eat pizza") or telling

## Is your child's best friend invisible?

any young children have imaginary friends. When you think about it, a pretend pal is the ideal companion—one who always takes your child seriously but requires nothing in return.

Having an imaginary friend doesn't mean that your child is lonely; research has shown that kids with make-believe buddies have just as many real friends as children who don't. In fact, a study by Jerome Singer, Ph.D., a professor of psychology and child study at Yale University, found that children with such vivid imaginations often have more advanced language skills, are able to concentrate better, are less likely to be bored, and are more cooperative with their peers.

Kids' imaginary friends are usually the products of their particular needs and let them express feelings that they might be uncomfortable talking about. If a child feels bad about misbehaving, he might act like the parent and scold his pretend playmate for hitting or not sharing. Fantasy friends can help a child cope with stressful situations, such as starting preschool or having a real friend move away.

Experts suggest that it's best to address your child rather than his imaginary buddy. This shows that you respect his special friend, while subtly making it clear that you understand what's real and what's not. Never make fun of your child, but do set reasonable limits, such as being firm that Daddy isn't going to give up his seat at the dinner table for the phantom family member.

him he's being silly. "Discouragement will only make your child more likely to hide his internal life from you in the future," says Dr. Dell'Angela.

"You can point out when your child's fantasies interfere with routines or rules just as you would tell her to clean up her toys at bedtime," says

Jacki Booth, Ph.D., a developmental psychologist at San Diego State University. "It's even okay to say, 'I'm tired of talking to Cinderella. I want to spend time with my daughter now.'"

While it's important to respect your child's fantasy play, don't assume that you're welcome to join in.

Paley recalls a group of preschoolers who had built a spaceship out of blocks. "A dad who was visiting the classroom jumped into the middle and said, 'Let's go to the moon!' He

meant well, but the children were startled and put off," she recalls. Explains Kunhardt, "Children often need the security of knowing that their parents are anchors to the real world." On the other hand, many preschoolers beg their parents to participate. A good rule of thumb: Wait until you're invited.

Your child's make-believe can seem truly magical when you view it as a window into her innermost thoughts and feelings. From this vantage point, it can be a learning tool for both of you. When Elise Lemanski, of Cleveland, turned 3, her birthday celebration was combined with a christening for her new baby sister. Afterward, her mom, Judith, saw Elise pretending to host a party where the birthday bear was sad because his friends hadn't come. Realizing Elise was upset that her family hadn't made a big deal about her birthday, Lemanski arranged a party for Elise's friends. "One of the most valuable things you can do as a parent is understand why your child uses pretend play and treasure her ability to do so," says Paley. □

