Play and Pretence

What is pretend play and how does it link to a child’s emotional development?

As a popular form of childhood play, pretend play has long been regarded as a window on children’s emotional development. Typically performed in an ‘as if’ way, pretend play is defined as spontaneous activities that include at least one of the three forms of pretence:

- Object substitution (e.g. using a banana as a phone)
- Pretend attribution of properties (e.g. pretending to be at a nice warm beach on a cold day)
- Imaginary objects (e.g. an imaginary car or food)

During pretend play, children not only create diverse roles from pirates to monsters, but also emotional encounters faced by these imaginary characters. Characters can feel happy, sad, angry, or worried, just like in the real world. Why do children engage in these pretend emotions? What empirical evidence has been found regarding the links between pretend play and children’s emotional competence?

The research evidence for pretend play

The role of pretend play in children’s emotional development has been proposed from various different perspectives. Vygotsky, for example, pointed out that pretend play has dual emotional effects – a child “weep in play as a patient, but revels as a player”. When taking an imaginary role, a child needs to act against immediate impulse, and therefore demonstrate “greatest self-control” in play.

By shifting between emotions of varying intensity, children maintain their pretend play at a manageable emotional level, which serves as a vehicle to express and regulate their emotions.

Bretherton also argued that pretend play provides children a unique opportunity to exercise their emotional mastery.

Recent studies have lent support to the links between pretend play and children’s emotional competence. For example:

- Children who showed higher levels of imagination during play were rated as having better emotion regulation by their parents.
- Pre-school children who engaged in more role-taking and acting scored higher on emotional understanding interviews.
- Children whose play was high in fantasy scored higher in an affective empathy task.
- Dramatic pretend play games improved emotional control among four year-old children with low socio-economic status.

How can you support children’s pretend play?

To facilitate pretend play at home and at school, teachers, parents and carers can give children interesting and versatile objects that will stimulate the imagination – empty boxes, costumes, a wooden spoon. Alternatively, try creating an ‘as if’ scenario that encourages a child to enter into an imaginary world by asking questions like “imagine you are on the moon – what would that feel like and what would you see?”
References

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6. Pretend play, creativity, and emotion regulation in children (Hoffmann & Russ, 2012)

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8. Supporting the development of empathy: The role of theory of mind and fantasy orientation (Brown et al., 2017)

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