

15-minute In-service Suite: Make-Believe Play

Narrator: Welcome to this presentation of the 15-Minute In-Service Suite on Make-Believe Play. This suite highlights the key components of make-believe play, describes what play looks like for children birth to age 5, and provides practical ways to support make-believe play for all children.

The Framework for Effective Practice, or House Framework, helps us think about how we support children's school readiness. The elements of the framework are the foundation, the pillars, and the roof. When connected to one another, they form a single structure that surrounds the family in the center, because, as we implement each component of the house in partnership with parents and families, we foster children's learning and development.

Make-believe play is an essential part of the foundation since make-believe play is best implemented in a highly engaging environment with nurturing and responsive interactions with young children. Make-believe play is also an essential part of research-based curriculum and the teaching practices that you use every day. This presentation is one in a series of modules designed to help adults support young children as they learn positive behaviors, develop skills in STEAM math and writing, and engage in dramatic play. Let's take a closer look at the importance of make-believe play. Make-believe play is a type of pretend play that involves social interactions between preschoolers.

While infants and toddlers are still developing social skills, their explorations and experiences get them ready for pretend play. Research shows a relationship between make-believe play and self-regulation, oral language, social-emotional skills, creative thinking, and important cognitive skills in math, literacy, and science. We also know that when children have the support they need to play make believe, they develop important academic and social-emotional skills, like teamwork and emergent reading and writing. But before children truly engage in make-believe play, they need to meet certain developmental milestones that lead up to make-believe play.

First, infants learn to use object-oriented sensorimotor actions. In other words, children explore the physical properties of objects with their senses: touch, taste, sound, smell, and sight. Teachers, family child care providers, home visitors, and families are there to support this early exploration. As children grow, they begin object-oriented, or instrumental play. That means they explore the physical properties of objects by dropping or rolling them and learning to use them for their intended purpose. For example, a spoon goes in your mouth, and a shoe goes on your foot. We then start to see the very beginning of make-believe play, called pretend play. This is when toddlers begin to use objects in imaginary situations. They push a block pretending it's a car, or they put a spoon to their teddy bear's mouth to feed him. They are pretending.

Finally, we see make-believe play when pretend play becomes more social and includes a set of rules as children create their imaginary scenario and act out roles. To support infants in the early stages of play, give children a variety of toys: rattles, squeaking toys, or plastic blocks. This helps infants learn that different toys have different purposes, an important first step in make-believe play. Toddlers like toys that are similar to objects from the real world, such as keys, phones, or shopping carts. These toys help children build the foundation for make-believe play. Education staff can use the cycle for supporting make-believe play in the learning environment

to help children learn and grow. This includes choosing a theme that reflects your curriculum and children's interests; building children's background knowledge of the play theme by taking virtual or real field trips and reading books; working with children to brainstorm themes and determine the who, what, and how of the play, like who will work at the clothing store and what will they do; and finding props children will need to act out their pretend scenario, like cooking items, clothing, pictures, and menus.

Once you follow this cycle, you are well on your way to supporting high-level, make-believe play in your program. Education staff can help families create engaging, make-believe play experiences at home by brainstorming play ideas and finding materials around the house to support pretend play. It's also important to include children's cultures and home languages. You might use dress-up clothes and cooking utensils from the children's homes. Also, watch for ways children's make-believe play tells you about important cultural behaviors, such as how children eat meals or how family members interact with each other.

Regardless of your age, it's fun to play make believe. When adults play with children, it creates rich learning experiences. We hope you have new ideas to support children's make-believe play. For more information and more ideas, see the complete 15-Minute Suite on Make-Believe Play, and take a look at our tips and tools and helpful resources.