



P: Pretend play: Promoting positive emotions in children

'Z-A of Play: P' by Zhen Rao

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Many children spend lots of time pretending to be various characters, to be at various places, and do various activities. Despite the varied pretend worlds they create, children engaging in pretend play seem to share a common feature. Whether they are pretending to be a chef or a monster, or whether they are pretending to be happy, tired or scared, children often laugh or smile when they are in their imaginary world. This is especially the case if others join them in their pretend worlds, be it parents, siblings, or friends.

Pretend play can be funny

So why is pretend play often accompanied by children's expression of positive emotions? We think there might be several explanations for this. First, pretend play creates a condition of incongruity. Whether it's a toddler behaving like an elderly person, or a stick ridden on as a horse, the mismatch between the real person/object and the pretend actions directed toward it provides a context for children to experience humour. Research into this has indicated that early experiences of pretend play can impact upon children's sense of humour long-term. As children's language and imaginations develop, they'll begin to appreciate more complex kinds of humour, like riddles, jokes, and sarcasm.

Pretend worlds can be a 'safe harbour'

Second, pretend play also offers a unique opportunity for children to explore various emotions and try out responses to scenarios. Different from real life situations, children are in control of what happens in their pretend world. They could choose to pretend to be in danger, to be in a fight with friends, or even to be sick or dead. As the pretend world is not real, the consequences are minimised, and children can use the pretend world as a "safe harbour" to express their feelings. For instance, children might play "teachers" to express their worries towards going to a new school, or play "doctors" to make sense of their fears towards a hospital trip.

Pretend play can help make sense of hard experiences

Third, for children facing adversity, pretend play can help them organise fragmented emotional experience into more meaningful narratives, and transform their experience of fear, anger and loss. For example, chronically ill children have been observed engaging in spontaneous pretend play reframing their experience of illness. The flexibility of pretend play allows children to adjust their response to the same emotional challenge each time when they pretend. By shuttling back and forth between emotions of different intensity, children can keep their pretending at an appropriate emotional level and practice regulating their emotions. The sense of control and autonomy that children feel in pretend play could also help alleviate their negative emotions and promote their positive emotions.

Tips for parents/carers and teachers:

1. Younger children may like to use props that are more realistic (e.g. toy chairs, tables, cups, animal and human figures) to pretend, while older children are less constrained by the available objects in their play.
2. You can make your own pretend props, such as drawing and cutting out pretend people, pretend money, and pretend food.
3. Children can be quite different in terms of what they like to pretend. They might also stick to the same pretend scenario for a considerable time. You could introduce new elements in their pretend play by taking a pretend role, but it's important that children have the choice and feel a sense of autonomy, so try and follow their lead.
4. When children play together, they may spend considerable time discussing, negotiating (or even arguing about) pretend roles and scenarios. This is quite common and can provide children the opportunity to learn to co-operate with others and regulate their emotions.



Chinese version 中文版

许多孩子花很多时间把自己想象成不同的角色，去不同的地方，做不同的事情。尽管孩子们的想象世界千差万别，但沉浸在假装游戏中的孩子常常有一个共同点：无论是假装当厨师还是假装当怪兽，无论是假装心满意足，还是假装恐惧害怕，进行假装游戏的孩子们脸上常常挂着笑容——特别是当父母，兄弟姐妹或朋友等其他加入他们的假装游戏中时，更是如此。

为什么儿童的假装游戏经常伴随着正面情绪呢？我们认为有几种可能的解释。首先，假装游戏创造出一种“不相称”的状态。比如一个刚会走路的孩子模仿老人的举止，又比如一根树枝被当作马来骑，这种真实的人或事物与假装行为之间的“不相称”为儿童提供了体验幽默的机会。研究表明，早期的假装游戏经历可影响儿童幽默感的发展。随着语言和想象力的发展，儿童可逐渐理解更为复杂的幽默，比如谜语，笑话和讽刺。

其次，假装游戏为儿童提供了一个独特机会，让他们在游戏中探索各种不同的情感，并尝试对不同情景进行回应。虽然儿童无法掌控现实生活，但他们却可以在假装游戏中掌控自己的想象世界。他们可以选择假装遇到危险，假装和朋友打架，甚至假装生病和死亡。这些事件的后果在并非真实的想象世界中被最小化，于是孩子们可以将假装世界当作自己的“安全港湾”来表达自己的各种情绪。比如，孩子可能会玩“当老师”的假装游戏，来表达自己的对即将去新学校上学的担心；孩子也可能玩“当医生”的假装游戏，来理解自己对去医院看医生经历的害怕情绪。

最后，对于身处逆境的儿童，假装游戏可以帮助他们重新组织碎片化的情感经历，以他们更容易理解的方式来描述这些经历，

并改变他们恐惧、愤怒和失落的经历。比如，观察发现，患有慢性疾病的儿童自发进行假装游戏来重新描述自己的患病经历。假装游戏的灵活性使儿童得以在每次游戏时，对同样的情感挑战做出不同的回应。假装游戏使儿童可以在不同程度的情绪之间近时退，将自己的假装游戏控制在最适合的情感程度，并练习调控自己的情绪。儿童在假装游戏中感受到的自主性也能帮助缓解他们的负面情绪，并提升他们的正面情绪。

给父母/儿童照顾者和老师的小贴士：

1. 年龄较小的儿童可能喜欢用更像实物的道具（比如玩具椅子、桌子、杯子、动物和人物模型）进行假装游戏，年龄较大的儿童在进行假装游戏时则较少受现有物品的限制。
2. 您可以自己制作假装游戏的道具，比如绘画和裁剪假装的人物、假装的货币或假装的食物。
3. 孩子喜欢假装的内容可能差别很大。有些孩子也可能喜欢在一段时间内反复玩同样内容的假装游戏。您可以通过角色扮演来为孩子的假装游戏加入新的元素，不过重要的一点是，要让孩子有选择和感受到自主性，试着在游戏中跟随孩子的步伐。
4. 孩子们在一起玩时，可能花很多时间为假装游戏的角色和情节进行讨论和商量（甚至争吵）。这种情况很常见，同时也为孩子提供了学习与他人合作和调控自我情绪的机会。

Read more

- Supporting the development of empathy: The role of theory of mind and fantasy orientation - [Brown, Thibodeau, Pierucci, Gilpin \(2017\)](#)
- Emotion, imagination, and the world's furniture - [Harris \(2017\)](#)
- Prospective relations among preschoolers' play, coping, and adjustment as moderated by stressful events - [Marcelo and Yates \(2014\)](#)
- The role of pretend play in supporting young children's emotional development - [Rao and Gibson \(2019\)](#)



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