



Play and literacy: what is the connection?

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Play and literacy: what is the connection?

The quality of a child's 'pretend play' during preschool relates to their language ability and ability to retell a story when they reach early primary school. KAREN STAGNITTI and LOUISE JELLIE report.

WHEN LITERACY AND PLAY are used together in the same sentence, the type of play referred to is 'pretend play' (also called imaginative play). For example, playing mummies and daddies, or making up fictional characters in a play scene. A preschool child's ability to tell and comprehend stories which rely minimally on context (such as playing visiting the zoo in your backyard where no animals can be seen) can be compared to how well that child can pretend in play.

'Now you pretend you're the mummy and we're going shopping and I'm the little girl and I want a lolly but you won't let me.'

'This stick is the bridge and these boxes are the trucks and the trucks pick up the logs (that's these sticks) and bring them over the bridge so that we can have the logs to build the factory.'

If you have ever listened to children playing then the above snippets of conversation may be familiar. Children's play is often dismissed as having no academic value. This article challenges this assumption. Pretend play involves three key behaviours that are distinct from other forms of play. Firstly, the child uses symbols in play (for example, a stick becomes a bridge). Secondly, the child attributes a property to an object (for example, the doll is sick, the car runs out of petrol). Thirdly, the child refers to an absent object during play (for example, a space of air designated by the child represents a door). As children grow, their pretend play actions move from simple single actions (at 18 months) to complex sequences that involve other children and complicated story lines (5 years). Pretend play is the sort of play where children act out scenes and take on characters. It makes a unique contribution to children's development, including a child's literacy ability.

Pretend play and literacy skills have been linked in the preschool and early primary school age group. Symbols are used in literacy in the forms of reading, writing, problem solving and in pretend play in the form of objects substituted for something else. Pellegrini stated that literate behaviour referred to the child's ability to produce and comprehend language that was decontextualised (1985).

Decontextualised language means that words or actions are more important than the physical context of the individual. For example, a story about flying to the moon requires decontextualised language because the words are more important than literally being on the moon. Decontextualised language is used in cohesive texts where the meaning of the text relies solely on the meaning of the words and not the context. Compared to other forms of play, preschool children use more cohesive texts during pretend play because they need to explain the meaning of the play to others, for example, explaining to others the story line as well as meanings of objects used in play. Carol Westby (1981) drew attention to the fact that the inability to use decontextualised language was associated with lack of academic success in children with learning disabilities.

The child's use of symbols in pretend play is thought to be of primary importance to language development. In a child's early years, the development of language and pretend play are parallel to the extent that when children start putting two play actions together (for example, feed doll, put doll to bed) they also start to combine words (for example, 'dolly bed'). Children's pretend play develops at the same time as language and in some children pretend play ability develops before language. If a child's pretend play level is more advanced than language, the child has potential for more meaningful language. Children's pretend play ability can be used as a measure of a child's language potential.

Telling a story requires the ability to sequence events, create a cohesive text, use precise vocabulary, use decontextualised language, understand cause and effect, and structure the story so that the listener can comprehend the story. Westby reminds us that competent story telling (or narrative) provides information to the reader of what may be coming, how the characters behave, their thoughts, feelings, motivations and what they are likely to say. For example, in the story of Snow White children understand that the motive of the old lady selling the apple is to kill Snow White. The snippet of play conversation at the beginning of this article shows understanding about the motives of the mother and child characters.

Pellegrini and Galda (1993) reported several studies that examined the effect of play on story comprehension. One such study placed children in four groups with each group being given a different experience. In one group, the adult directed the children's pretend play; in another group an adult discussed aspects of a story with the children; in another group the children organised themselves in pretend play; and in another group the children drew pictures. Peer directed pretend play and adult directed pretend play were found to be equally effective in facilitating children's story comprehension and were more effective than discussion or drawing.

Suggestions for classrooms

Christie (1994) draws our attention to reenacting stories in the classroom as an aid to children's story comprehension. Christie found that reenacting stories helped all children in the early years of primary school and also improved the story comprehension of older primary school children who had reading comprehension levels below their age level.

Providing a play space area in the classroom with objects where children can interact with others stimulates children's language and play.

Conversations with children can extend children's language and narrative if the conversation concentrates on questions about the past (that is, using decontextualised language). Ask the children: 'What?' 'Where?' 'Who?' 'When?' so they have a chance to extend their answers. Backchannel (for example, 'huh huh' or 'and then what happened?') responses to encourage children to say more.

In order to see if pretend play had any value to literacy over time, Karen Stagnitti assessed the pretend play of 48 preschool children and three years later she assessed the same children with an Australian oral language assessment. She found that children who played elaborately with toys in their preschool years were better in their language skills of classification, comparing and reasoning about differences and similarities between objects and words in early primary school than children who had not been strong in pretend play at preschool. She also found that a child's ability in preschool to use objects as something else was a predictor of how well they could re-tell a story.

This result was unexpected and the reason for this connection is thought to be that the ability to use an object as a symbol in play requires the child to suspend the reality or meaning of the object. That is, when pretending a box is a car, the reality of the box is suspended while the child plays with the car. In the same way, when retelling a narrative, the child is free to use language that extends beyond the visual prompt of the pictures.

Children who engage in pretend play have been found to use more language more often, be better at problem solving and be better at developing stories compared to children who do not pretend in play.

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[top](#)