

# CHAPTER 3

## PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

The Golden Age of Make-Believe



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**Motives for Make-Believe Play****Questions About Make-Believe Play**

What Are the Functions of Make-Believe Play?

How Should We Classify Young Children's Play?

How Should We Describe, Evaluate, and Explain Group Differences?

How Valid Are the Common Concerns About Young Children's Play?

**Summary**

The early childhood years could well be renamed the golden age of make-believe, because make-believe is what young children do so well. If adults played with dolls, they would likely use them for self-therapy and talk to the dolls about their feelings and troubles. Compare that dreary scene to a 4-year-old's tea party with imaginary friends or to the thrilling war play of a young boy shouting out battle orders to plastic soldiers. There's no question who is the more imaginative, more fantastic, more playful. The child wins every time. Why, though, focus on make-believe when young children play in so many different ways, such as by roughhousing, building with blocks, or drawing? Here, we do so because whatever the ways a young child is playing, usually there is make-believe.

This point was brought home in a classic case study by Sylvia Feinburg (Feinburg, 1976) in which she described her son Douglas's combat art. As a young boy, Douglas drew hundreds of pictures of battle scenes. To the casual observer, Douglas's drawing would simply be seen as drawing, but Feinburg saw it differently. She noted how Douglas, while drawing, made battle sounds, shouted out military orders, and otherwise indicated that, for him, drawing was hardly a matter of producing pretty pictures. Rather, it was a matter of make-believe.

Make-believe and fantasizing, then, lie behind much of young children's play, even when we don't see it directly. In fact, one of the major challenges for this age group is learning how to transfer some fantasy in the head to some play medium such as dolls, paper, blocks, or clay.

## ● MOTIVES FOR MAKE-BELIEVE PLAY

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The capacity and motivation for rich and imaginative make-believe play seem to come, in part, from the preschooler's basic predicament, which Lev Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1976b) explained so well. On the one hand, for the first time children between 2 and 3 can symbolize not only what is directly in

front of them but also the wishes and fantasies that are in their heads. On the other hand, they have so many wishes that cannot be satisfied: to drive a car, to control their parents—the list can be quite long. Think of what life would be like if you had so many powerful wishes that could not be adequately expressed in words and that could never be satisfied, or at least not satisfied for a very long time. How frustrated you would feel, perhaps to the point of despairing or of being constantly frustrated and angry.

To escape this predicament and to realize unrealizable wishes, preschoolers play. In play, they drive cars, become superheroes, spank babies, and give shots to protesting children. In play, then, they satisfy wishes. However, satisfying wishes is only part of the story. Interests are another.

Young children have decided interests, not just in the world at the end of their noses but in worlds in the past, in distant lands, and in their fantasies. For example, dinosaurs fascinate young children, for their size to be sure, but also for their diversity, and no doubt for their being monsters that have been tamed by extinction. And because they fascinate, young children bring dinosaurs into their play. This is what Piaget (Piaget, 1951) meant when he said that children, in their play, assimilate reality to their interests.

Wishes and interests are what drive most young children's make-believe play, but there is more. That young children become anxious and fearful is clear. What is not so clear is how they manage their anxieties. At certain moments, they don't manage well. Children's phobic reactions and night terrors are prime examples. However, at other moments, make-believe play helps them manage well enough. For example, one young child had been frightened when he went with his mother through a car wash. The swishing in confined and darkened spaces had disturbed him greatly. For several days he did nothing to recover from his trauma, but then he built a long funnel out of blocks and drove his matchbox cars down the funnel while making swishing sounds. Clearly he was reconstructing the car wash, and his furrowed brow indicated equally clearly that he was managing his car wash anxieties.

Wish fulfillment, interests, and anxiety management might seem enough to explain why preschoolers are so enamored with make-believe play, but there is one more item to add to the list. When young children play alongside each other, it isn't only their own play that interests them; it is also the play of others. Furthermore, this shared interest in each other's play begins a process that often ends in friendship. Once this happens, friendship becomes another motive for why young children play.

These, then, seem to be the main motives explaining why make-believe play preoccupies young children. However, scholars have raised at least four additional questions.

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**Photo 3.2** Make-believe play seems to function as an important way for young children to *understand reality*. Here a young girl pretends to be a grown woman.

### ● QUESTIONS ABOUT MAKE-BELIEVE PLAY

The first and most important question has been “*What are the functions of make-believe play?*” Here, scholars have struggled to determine the precise role that make-believe play serves in children’s cognitive, emotional, and social development. Does it cause or support children’s development, or is it like cartoons and pacifiers, something young children enjoy or find comforting but don’t really need?

A second central question has been “*How should we classify young children’s play?*” This is a question leading in two complementary directions. The first, what we might call a vertical direction, leads one to think in terms of different levels of maturity or development. For example, a stack of blocks intuitively feels lower down or less developed than a fully constructed fort with enclosed spaces, doors, and windows. The stack deserves to be classified as one type, the fort as another.

The second, what we might call a horizontal direction, leads one to think in terms of play occurring in different *media* or through using different kinds of actions. For example, playing with plastic soldiers leads to a very different type of play than playing with markers and paper. However, one is not more developed than the other; rather, they are on the same level, or horizontal. Similarly, gross motor and small motor play refer to different kinds of play actions. One is not more mature than the other.

A third central question has been “*How should we describe, evaluate, and explain group differences?*” At first glance, answering this question might seem straightforward and easy, since one can easily document differences. However, close observation reveals not only that this question is difficult to answer, but also that it is risky to try. As discussed in the introduction, falsely claiming there are differences or misinterpreting actual differences can lead to harmful stereotypes and prejudices. Too often, differences have incorrectly been taken to mean deficiencies.

The fourth central question has to do with the concerns that caregivers (parents, teachers, and therapists) sometimes have that certain kinds of play may cause or indicate problems. We put this question as follows: “*How valid are the common concerns about young children’s play?*” We will look at concerns about two common kinds of play—play with imaginary companions and war play—to show what scholarship and theory have to offer. In doing so, we see that scholarly observation and interpretation have applied, practical value. We begin with the first question.

## What Are the Functions of Make-Believe Play?

This is a hard question to answer when one cannot rely on experimental design to separate out causes from effects, and so scholars have relied mostly on careful observation and interpretation. The discussion that follows illustrates a few of the main insights gathered.

### *Cognitive Development and Make-Believe Play*

With respect to cognitive development, careful observation and interpretation have revealed much. First, make-believe play seems to help young children to *understand reality*. Scholars note that it begins as reconstructing familiar events, such as driving a car, going to sleep, and eating, as if the repetition of these events is a way to better understand them (McCune-Nicolich, 1981).

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Furthermore, even when make-believe turns fanciful, the physical and psychological rules governing fantastic worlds usually mirror the physical and psychological rules governing the real world, again pointing out that make-believe is about re-presenting and reflecting on reality (Harris, 2000). Dragons and superheroes may fly, but they do so because the conditions (wings) and motives (to fight bad guys) are not altogether different from those in the real world.

As a tool for understanding reality, make-believe play also serves to digest information. Once again, take dinosaur play as an example. Many preschoolers become dinosaur experts by gathering information on dinosaurs from books, museums, and films. However, this information needs digesting. For that to happen, preschoolers play by having plastic brontosaurus eat leaves, not meat, by drawing stegosaurus with those wonderful bony plates marching down their backs, and by having everyone flee before them when they pretend to be *Tyrannosaurus rex*. This idea about play functioning to digest information has been most closely associated with the work of Jean Piaget (Piaget, 1951), who emphasized that children often play with that which they have recently acquired.

The observations so far have to do with processing information and consolidating knowledge. Other observations have to do with acquiring *new tools for thinking*. The main thinking tool developed by make-believe play is that of symbolizing. Where would we all be without the ability to symbolize and re-present reality? Without this ability, life would be like a waking dream in which events simply happen and pass on without a moment's reflection.

As ability to symbolize develops, thought is freed from perception and objects take on meanings that are not determined by their physical properties. We see this especially in children's make-believe. As Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1976b) [pointed out, when a child uses a stick to stand for a horse, it isn't the stick itself that matters, but the meaning the child gives to it, the meaning that defines the stick as a horse.

To illustrate the significance of this playing with meaning, Vygotsky (Vygotsky, 1976b) cited the example of two sisters playing at being sisters. They did so by holding hands and dressing alike, actions they almost never performed in reality. However, by acting as they did, these sisters played with the meaning of being sisters, namely, that sisters are closer to and more alike to one another than are nonsisters.

A similar point has been made recently by Paul Harris (Harris, 2003). Harris distinguishes between the reality we know through direct observation and the equally important unobserved reality we know through the testimony of others. This unobservable reality becomes central when children

are later asked to think about distant objects and events, such as historical figures and historical events, and also about microscopic objects and events, such as the actions of germs and viruses on our immune system. To understand unobserved reality, one has to imagine, which is why Harris argues we should value the imagining going on in children's make-believe.

Recent observations have also stressed the contributions of make-believe play for developing narrative as a *framework for thinking* (Singer & Singer, 1990). The distinction is made between *paradigmatic* and *narrative frameworks* for thinking (Bruner, 1986).

Paradigmatic frameworks organize thinking around propositions, distinctions, and logic. They are used in conversations in which explanation and argument are most important. Narrative frameworks organize thinking around events and characters, and they are used when it is important to describe real and imagined dramas. Each framework has its place in the ongoing need to understand and know reality.

Finally, with respect to make-believe play's cognitive functions and value, some scholars speculate that in children's make-believe one can find the beginnings of *multiple intelligences* (Gardner, 1983). They observe that the various media used by make-believe (words, dolls, blocks, etc.) provide the means to develop verbal, spatial, and other types of intelligences. It is not that one can draw a straight line from block building to, say, architecture, or from doll play to writing novels. Rather, one can see in the early forms of make-believe play prototypes of later, more adult activities. The great architect Frank Lloyd Wright claimed that his architectural career began with his playing with blocks as a child (Wellhausen, 2001).

### *Emotional Development and Make-Believe Play*

We take for granted the distinction between feeling and thinking. We tip our hat to the fact that it is hard to separate the two, but we rarely question the value of making the distinction. Indeed, there seems to be value in recognizing that one can think and communicate with or without passion. However, what often gets overlooked in our focus on feelings is that they are never separated from thinking. In fact, the two (thinking and feeling) always influence one another. The lifelong struggle to mature means, in part, a struggle to connect thoughts and feelings. Posing the problem or challenge of development this way suggests that a major function of make-believe play is to connect thought and feeling.

For most of its history, clinical child psychology has focused on the *content* of children's make-believe when assessing children's problems with feelings. For example, if a child plays at spanking babies, the content of spanking



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might suggest feelings about newborn siblings or perhaps about violence in the home.

However, more recently clinicians have focused on the *structure* of children's make-believe play, or how well developed that play is, regardless of its content (Scarlett, 1994; Slade & Wolf, 1994). They see make-believe play as a tool for expressing and managing emotion and think that, for many children, the problem is not so much with having emotions as it is with not having a developed tool for expressing and managing emotions (Scarlett, 1994).

Take an example of two boys engaged in war play. The first simply repeats the act of pointing his finger and saying, "Bang, I shot you." The second, before shooting, announces he is G.I. Joe and then enacts scenes featuring army maneuvers. Neither play is well developed, but the second is more developed structurally because the child is assuming a fictitious role and constructing a scene removed from present reality. It turns out that these structural differences matter. Observation shows that the first boy is more apt to have problems actually being aggressive (Gould, 1972; Lynch, 1997). We will have more to say later about using structural criteria to evaluate war play.

Make-believe play seems, then, to support young children's emotional development by helping them *put symbols between their impulses and actions*. Rather than acting out their impulses, they can, in make-believe play, express them symbolically. This is an enormous step forward. The important point is not that make-believe allows children to express emotions; they can express emotions in their actions. What matters most is that make-believe play allows children to express emotions symbolically.

This same thought might be better communicated with a different word than *express*, which conjures up the image of letting off steam, and indeed the cathartic function of make-believe has often been explained using this image. However, a better term might be *embedding*, or putting emotions into something rather than leaving them to float freely. Consider the example in the text box.

### **Battle Scenes and Embedding Feelings**

Two boys of the same age drew pictures, both about dramatic battle scenes. However, the first boy's picture was simply a piece of paper covered with green finger paint. It was only by interviewing the boy that an observer could understand the boy's make-believe. He explained that the picture was of good guys sneaking up on bad guys



and engaging them in a fierce battle. He pointed to different sections of the picture to indicate where the soldiers were positioned and how the battle was being fought. Despite this clear explanation, the fact that the picture was unreadable indicated that the feelings and war drama were solely in the child's head rather than embedded in the picture.

In contrast, the second boy drew his battle scene with everything easily readable. There was an airplane dropping bombs, a building on the ground about to be destroyed, and combatants on both sides. The feelings and drama of this boy's make-believe were embedded in his picture and not just in his head. Not surprisingly, with respect to how he expressed and managed his feelings outside of play, the second boy showed much more maturity.

This is the primary way that clinicians and scholars have seen make-believe play and emotional development: Make-believe play allows children to express and embed feelings symbolically. In so doing, children link feelings to thinking and not simply to action. But clinicians and scholars have observed even more about make-believe's functions with respect to emotions. We will mention two specific functions, using Piaget's terminology.

Piaget (Piaget, 1951) pointed out that make-believe play is often more than simply a way for children to express their interests. It also serves the emotional function of *liquidating* conflicts to get rid of bad feelings or, at least, to lessen their intensity. An example is the boy liquidating his car wash anxieties.

Interestingly, this kind of play occurs only when anxious or bad feelings are at medium intensity, not at high levels of intensity (Watson, 1994). After all, the boy with the car wash anxieties did not play out his feelings immediately. Rather, he went through a cooling-down period before he was ready.

Besides liquidating bad feelings, make-believe play can also compensate for frustrations suffered in reality. We have already encountered this compensatory function when discussing Vygotsky's observation that make-believe play helps young children realize unrealizable wishes. However, what has not been discussed is how this constitutes a step forward in the long process of maturing emotionally. Toddlers, much more than preschoolers, rely on adult caregivers to soothe and manage their emotions. For example, toddlers in a doctor's office are more apt to fuss and cling to their mothers, whereas older preschoolers are more apt to use medical toys to pretend to give shots and so on, and in so doing to manage their anxieties and frustrations on their own. The liquidating and compensating functions of

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preschoolers' make-believe, then, are a step toward learning how to manage their own emotions.

*Social Development and Make-Believe Play*

Scholars have made two primary observations on this subject. The first is that young children do not ordinarily relate to one another except when they are playing. Play in general and make-believe play in particular are primary contexts in which young children can connect and develop friendships. If a young child does not play or does not play well, he or she is apt to be socially isolated.

This point is illustrated by the example of young children who are sometimes referred to as “watchers and wanderers” (Kohn, 1966), children who have the intellectual and emotional wherewithal to make friends but who rarely do so in settings such as early childhood education classrooms. Close observation reveals that these children remain isolated not because they are rejected by other children but because they spend a good deal of time watching other children and wandering *rather than playing*. By not playing, they do not give other children the usual entrée for connecting (Scarlett, 1980).

The second observation is that make-believe play becomes increasingly joint make-believe. Even between parents and young children, there is usually a playing off of one another's make-believe, as when a parent responds to a child's “Have a (pretend) cookie, mommy” with pretend eating.

In early childhood, this joint construction of make-believe provides two conditions that develop friendships. The first condition is sharing feelings and experiences (Selman & Hickey-Schultz, 1990). That is, constructing make-believe together connects children by giving them shared feelings and shared experiences. The second condition is negotiating conflicts. Joint make-believe often proceeds through a series of negotiations marked by the ubiquitous “Let's pretend . . .” and “No, let's pretend . . .” These low-key negotiated conflicts help young children practice the needed skills of selling their wishes and ideas even as they remain responsive to the wishes and ideas of others. To be sustained over time, even young friendships demand equality between partners, so it is important for children to learn how to both lead and follow (Selman & Hickey-Schultz, 1990). Here is where social skills and cognitive skills combine. When young children engage in joint make-believe, they foster the most important of all social skills: thinking about others' thinking. Joint make-believe gives them practice in taking perspectives, or so scholars have assumed. Furthermore, when young children construct a full-blown story in make-believe, a story with different characters and scenes, they create characters with different points of view. In sum, make-believe provides an important context for developing social skills.



**Photo 3.3** The content of young children's make-believe is very much determined by gender. Here, a young boy plays with his wagon.

These, then, are how scholars have spoken about the main functions of make-believe play. As should be evident, these scholars have been among the most ardent proponents of the rhetoric of progress.

### How Should We Classify Young Children's Play?

The purpose of classifying young children's play is to describe, evaluate, and explain play, but not all classifications attempt to do all three. Classification that maximizes *description* in order to capture the variety of ways young children play may focus simply on play materials and actions. It gives lists of play types based upon different play materials—sand play, Lego play, play with clay, and so forth—and lists based on different actions, such as jumping and swinging actions or small motor and gross motor actions.

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Generally, classifications of types of play according to types of materials and actions imply no developmental sequence, although play with certain types of materials, such as dolls, usually appears earlier than play with other types of materials, such as markers and paper. Once again, classification in terms of types of play materials and types of actions is along a horizontal dimension.

Classification that emphasizes *evaluation* and *explanation* often does so by characterizing the *structural* features of play, such as whether it is symbolic or not. This kind of classification is used to explain the development of play in terms of underlying structural changes in the way a child thinks. For example, as discussed in the introduction, Piaget's division of play into *practice games*, *symbolic games*, and *games with rules* explains the underlying development in children's capacity to think symbolically. In a similar vein, Mildred Parten (Parten, 1932) describes social play in early childhood as developing from *solitary play* to *parallel play* to *associative play* and finally to *cooperative play*; thus play shows young children's increasing ability to coordinate their own perspective with those of others.

These two types of classification can work together, especially when the structural criteria are used to define what develops in a particular play medium. Replica play (the more general term for doll play) and block play are two examples.

Replica play develops as simple representations of events (for example, a mother doll feeding a baby doll) evolve into full-blown stories or narratives (for example, a story about a mother rushing a sick baby to the hospital where a doctor performs an operation). Even during the preschool years, these narratives come to depict fairly elaborate story worlds with characters appearing to resolve problems on their own (Scarlett & Wolf, 1979).

Furthermore, in the development of replica play, at first actions alone carry the narrative's meaning, but with development, language takes over. A child begins to speak not only for and about story characters but also to the audience, who need help in interpreting what's happening in the story—what is called *meta-narrative* (“Pretend that . . .” and “Let's pretend . . .”) (Scarlett & Wolf, 1979; Winner & Gardner, 1979).

The structural development of replica play presents an interesting paradox that many adults do not appreciate: The realistic replica play of toddlers indicates that toddlers have yet to clearly distinguish fantasy from reality, whereas the fantastic, unrealistic replica play of older children indicates that older children have made a sharp distinction between fantasy and reality. This is illustrated by what unfolds in early childhood in replica play.

The play of toddlers is apt to be realistic and imitative, as when toddlers reenact familiar scenes such as driving a car, ironing a dress, or feeding a baby.

By age 3 or 4, scenes may be combined to form simple narratives, but the narratives lack the devices that make a story world appear to happen on its own. For example, young children sometimes become characters in their own stories, directly commanding doll figures where to go and what to do. By age 5, however, they typically are able to create not only familiar scenes, but fantastic scenes as well. Furthermore, the characters in these scenes and worlds seem to act on their own. The replica play of older children creates story worlds that appear to function autonomously, as explained more fully in the text box.

### Storytelling With Dolls: Creating Autonomous Story Worlds

Children begin the preschool years using dolls or replicas to enact familiar events and in ways that make clear that whatever the dolls are doing is the result of being pushed around by the children. However, with time and development, the dolls seem to take on lives of their own as children create devices to create the illusion that the dolls are making decisions and reacting to events within their own autonomous story world. Furthermore, in speaking about and for their dolls, children come to speak about things that are not visible, such as the thoughts and feelings of the dolls and the objects in the story world that are not part of the setting where the story is being told. By the end of the preschool years, children often can create entire autonomous story worlds, complete with characters facing problems and resolving them “on their own” in scenes that are quite fantastic and distinct from the actual scene where the play is taking place.

Paradoxically, the autonomous story worlds of older children indicate that they have greater awareness of what is real and what is pretend. By creating fantasy worlds separate and seemingly autonomous from the real world, children gain a firmer grasp of the distinction between real and pretend. This is perhaps nowhere better expressed than in the older preschooler’s use of *meta-narrative*, or speech intended to inform an audience or co-player about what is or should be happening within the story world. Visit any group of 5-year-olds playing together, and you are apt to hear a chorus of “Pretend that . . .” and “Yeah, pretend that . . .”

It seems, then, that as play with dolls develops, getting lost in some fantastic world is not a problem. What could be a problem is just the opposite, getting stuck in the real world (Scarlett & Wolf, 1979).

In sum, the structural development of replica play indicates an important structural development in the child’s thinking: the development of the distinction between fantasy and reality.

As another example of play’s development in early childhood and in a specific medium, block constructions usually begin as linear constructions—linear

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because they are made up of lines of blocks. They develop when their overall contours have defined and constructed tops, sides, fronts, and backs as opposed to being randomly placed blocks or just heaps of blocks. Block constructions become more developed also when the spaces between blocks are deliberate, not random, as when a child creates a series of arches, each with a space roughly equivalent to the spaces making up the other arches. These constructed (that is, nonrandom) spaces give to a construction a sense of having an inside or of having passageways. Even simple constructed spaces represent a significant achievement for the child, because space or nothingness has taken on meaning. In early childhood, then, a great deal develops structurally in block building. Furthermore, observers believe that this structural development reflects a developing understanding of space and shape (Forman, 1998; Wellhausen, 2001).

To summarize, classification systems are for organizing observations and for making careful observation possible. At times, they are for describing play types regardless of development. At other times, they are for explaining what is developing both within children and within their play.

### How Should We Describe, Evaluate, and Explain Group Differences?

Group differences can obscure the fact that children are children. This is as true for the way young children play as it is for other activities. The similarities outweigh the differences. Nevertheless, group differences need to be noted and understood because they indicate important variations in children's experience and in how they develop. We begin with gender differences in the play of young children.

#### *Gender Differences*

As mentioned in the introduction, before the early childhood years, not much differs in the play of girls and boys, which may explain why girl and boy toddlers often play together. However, sometime between ages 3 and 4, girls and boys often separate themselves into different play groups, even when adults wish they would stay together (Pitcher & Hickey-Schultz, 1983).

There may be a variety of reasons for this (Goldstein, 1994a). Some suggest biology, noting that boys are naturally and generally more active and aggressive than girls. Others suggest socialization, noting that in most societies there are plenty of pressures for girls and boys to play differently. For example, when one teacher showed a father of a 3-year-old boy the picture she had taken of the boy pushing a baby carriage, the father became upset and demanded that



this type of play be forbidden. Still others suggest the influence of television advertising, noting that it uses obvious gender stereotyping.

Whatever the reasons for gender segregation, the fact remains that by age 4 young children usually have grouped themselves according to gender. Little boys play with little boys and often with themes of power and aggression. Little girls play with little girls and often with domestic themes of caring and connection. These and other gender differences catalyze further divisions, so that by elementary school the division between the genders is wide and stable (Maccoby, 1998).

However, as previously discussed, if one looks not just at the themes and content of young children's play but also at its structure, little girls and boys do not differ. The play of both groups follows the same general lines of structural development and develops at the same rate, as described by Piaget, Vygotsky, Parten, and others. Boys and girls move from nonsymbolic to symbolic play and from parallel to cooperative play at about the same rates. Furthermore, if given equal opportunity to build with blocks, draw with markers, tell stories with dolls, and so forth, boys and girls perform at the same level. When it comes to ability and development, then, there are no significant gender differences.

### *Culture and Socioeconomic Status Differences*

In contrast, observations about the play of young children from different cultures and different socioeconomic classes have focused on differences in abilities, and these differences have sometimes been taken to indicate deficiencies. For example, in so-called traditional societies, which are largely rural, collectivistic, and not tied to technology and the printed word, the play of young children has sometimes been described as imitative, less imaginative, and dull (Ariel, 2002). However, the problem may be in the way observers have observed rather than in the way children have played.

In traditional societies, young children help with chores and so have less time for play. Furthermore, work for these children seems to serve functions we ordinarily reserve for make-believe play (Gaskins, 2003). Also, the adults in traditional societies are more apt to discourage make-believe as being of little value, sometimes even as being immoral or sacrilegious. In short, children from traditional societies aren't deficient in their play so much as they have less opportunity and support for it.

Nevertheless, when observers have followed children from traditional societies to their secret places away from adults, they have sometimes found that these children play much like children from industrialized societies (Ariel, 2002). Again, we need to be cautious about drawing conclusions about children from different cultures, especially when those conclusions label one group as deficient.



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Keeping these cautions in mind, we can still say there are important cultural differences in how young children play. The main ones have to do with parental attitudes and with whom young children play. In North American culture, most parents see children's play as essential for their development, so many North American parents retain control over their children's play—over what kinds of toys they buy, over what kinds of play environments they play in, and over whom they play with. Furthermore, young children generally play with siblings or peers, not with nonsiblings of different ages.

This is not the situation in other cultures. As mentioned before, Italian mothers view children's play as something natural, not as something needing adult control. When young Italian children play, they are more likely to be unsupervised and in mixed age groups, with older children looking after their safety (New, 1994).

What these cultural differences suggest for young children's long-term development is not clear. Some have suggested that, from an evolutionary perspective, it makes more sense for young children to play in mixed-age groups (Konner, 1976). Many have argued for less adult interference in children's play (Sutton-Smith, 1995). These and other interpretations suggest that North American ways of supporting young children's play may not be the best. However, once again it is difficult to draw conclusions.

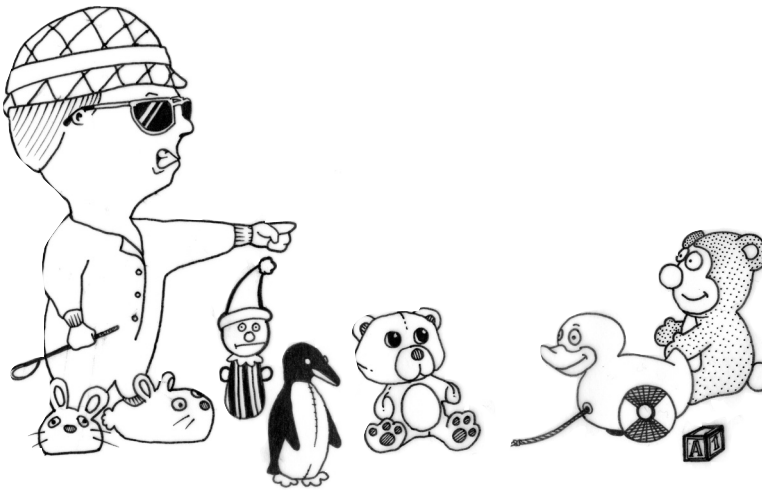
As for socioeconomic status (SES) and preschoolers' play, as mentioned in the introduction, Sara Smilansky (Smilansky, 1968) conducted a study of children differing in socioeconomic status and concluded that lower-SES children's play was less imaginative, more repetitive, more imitative, and, overall, less developed. For a while, research on SES and young children's play seemed to confirm Smilansky's results, but more recently those results have been questioned.

The main question has been about the research results being based solely on observations made in the classroom. These results could be more about a particular setting's effects on poor children than they are about poor children's abilities to play. Indeed, this seems to be the case, as the following example makes clear.

In one middle-class day-care center, a boy from an economically disadvantaged home seemed quite lost. He spent much of his time indoors wandering around, getting into trouble, not playing much and not playing well. But when he was outside, on the playground, everything changed. Outside he became a leader in highly imaginative superhero play. Apparently the classroom with its activity corners and play materials had little to do with his experience at home.

This example and many more like it suggest that future research on culture, SES, and play in early childhood needs to be more cautious about interpreting abilities on the basis of play in one setting only. If we aren't more cautious, we end up stereotyping whole groups of children and treating them as being deficient when they are not.

Cultural differences and differences related to socioeconomic status will continue to raise concerns about possible deficiencies, but without good research and an eye toward the big picture, we should be cautious and not treat these concerns too seriously. This brings us to our fourth and final question for understanding what scholars have to say about young children's play.



### How Valid Are the Common Concerns About Young Children's Play?

Adults, especially adults who are parents, often have concerns about young children and their play. Two examples are concerns about children playing with imaginary companions and concerns about children engaging in war play. Scholarly discussion and theory on this point have practical implications for important areas such as parenting.

What does it mean when a child creates an imaginary companion? Is the child losing touch with reality? Should we be discouraging war play? Might war play foster real violence or insensitivity to violence? These are a few of the questions raised by adults when observing children playing with imaginary companions and with themes of war.

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These concerns have two things in common. First, they connect early play with later problems on the basis of some surface similarity. For example, having an imaginary companion at age 4 has a surface similarity with a symptom of schizophrenia, a disease that usually does not show itself before adolescence. Second, these concerns focus mostly on the content and themes of play (for example, the theme of death and destruction in war play) rather than on its structure (for example, whether the war play depicts elaborate battle scenes or simply isolated acts of pretend shooting).

For the most part, the results of research on these issues have been quite positive. Although children with and without imaginary companions do not differ significantly, there is some evidence that those who play with imaginary companions are more advanced in their social understanding, less shy, and more able to focus attention (Taylor, 1999).

The main finding, however, is not that having imaginary companions makes young children better but that there is nothing wrong or harmful in having imaginary companions and probably a good deal that is right and helpful. Imaginary companions seem to serve the same positive functions as make-believe in general.

Despite these positive findings, some parents and certain special groups actively discourage play with imaginary companions. Often they do so out of religious belief, as the text box describes.

### **Imaginary Companions and Religion**

Most parents in Western cultures look on make-believe and imaginary companions as positive expressions of children's imagination. However, this view is not shared by everyone in the world. For example, many Indian parents from Hindu traditions see in children's communion with unseen companions a connection with real beings that inhabited their children's past lives, and they become concerned that their children may not be oriented enough in the present. In certain fundamentalist Christian groups, parents see playing with imaginary companions as being deceitful and associating with the devil. How these diverse views influence children and children's play is unclear. It may be that imaginary companions live on in children's lives regardless of parental beliefs and attitudes (Taylor & Carlson, 2000).

Of all the concerns that adults have about children's play, concerns about war play outweigh the others, so we will review the debate on this

issue. Over the past 15 years, this debate has heated up, fueled no doubt by increases in the number of movies and television shows exposing children to violence. For whatever reasons, parents, teachers, and some researchers have raised concerns and, in some cases, taken action. Not too long ago, one parent organized a campaign to have the children of Worcester, Massachusetts, exchange war toys for toys without war as their theme. But is this concern about possible harmful effects of war play legitimate? Is it true that war play might stimulate real violence or inure children to violence?

Like so many issues pertaining to play, there is no hard evidence suggesting that war play has long-term effects, good or bad. However, there are considered arguments among scholars on both sides of the issue. On one side is the argument that today's war play is so influenced by television that it has become unimaginative play that probably stimulates bad actions if not overt violence (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1987). On the other side is the argument that war play is natural to childhood and may well help children make sense of the world they live in (Wegener-Spohring, 1994).

There is, however, a third argument or perspective that may offer a way out of the war play dilemma. This is based on data suggesting that structurally undeveloped play in general and undeveloped war play in particular may well be associated with behavior problems (Gould, 1972; Lynch, 1997). All war play is not the same structurally, and as we have already seen, structural differences matter.

Consider, for example, the war play of the 4-year-old in the following box. By attending to its structure (that is, to the way characters, actions, and scenes are developed) and not to its theme or content, who would argue that this play is anything but wonderful?

### One Child's War Play

Between age 3 ½ and 5, Evan immersed himself in war play, reenacting with miniature figures scenes from early American wars. The American Revolutionary War in particular fascinated Evan. Almost daily and for over a year, with his blocks and with little figures of Redcoats and Minutemen, Evan built and rebuilt the Old North Bridge and carried out his version of the battle fought over two centuries ago. Not surprisingly, at first Evan's "Battle of the Old North Bridge" play was mostly make-believe. But out of it, Evan developed a genuine interest in history and in depicting the various characters, actions, and scenes that make the Battle of the Old North Bridge such a fascinating story.

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In the course of 1 year, Evan used his battle play to process all kinds of information he sought outside his play: through having books read to him and videos shown to him about the American Revolution, through visiting and revisiting museums dedicated to colonial history, and through witnessing reenactments. Always Evan was the initiator, the one who sought out further information, from information about the names of the Minutemen and Redcoats to what the Minuteman fifer played on the way to the Old North Bridge, to exactly how the Minutemen wore the buckles on their shoes. By age 5, Evan was not a bad historian, at least with respect to his knowledge of early American wars. And what's more, he was a pacifist, confessing to his father one evening, "I wish there were no wars."

It seems, then, that banning or curbing war play makes little sense, both for reasons of evidence (or the lack of it) and for reasons of theory and common sense. War play, like any play, may best be judged not by its content but by its structure.

## ● SUMMARY

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In this chapter, we have shown why most young children are highly motivated to engage in make-believe play. We have also shown why scholars generally have seen make-believe play as providing support for young children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. We have seen how classification systems are used to describe, evaluate, and explain young children's play, noting, in particular, classification systems that attend to play's structure. We have discussed group differences associated with gender, culture, and socioeconomic status, noting how differences can be misleading by falsely interpreting differences to mean deficiencies. Finally, we have discussed why common concerns about young children's play are often unfounded, noting how, on the basis of surface similarities between children's play and problems later on, adults wrongly see play as having long-term causal effects. Furthermore, we have seen that it is more play's structural development and not its content that should be the focus of assessment.

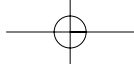
In this chapter, we have emphasized make-believe play to the exclusion of purely physical play, in part because make-believe is the hallmark of young

children's play but also, in part, because physical play is more prevalent in late childhood. In the next chapter, we will discuss physical play, along with the games with rules that typify play later on.

## KEY WORDS, NAMES, AND IDEAS ●

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Anxieties  
Assimilation of reality to interests  
Associative play  
Compensate  
Content vs. structure  
Cooperative play  
Embedding and expressing feelings  
Expressing emotions  
Feeling and thinking  
Friendships  
Games with rules  
Gardner, H.  
Gender segregation  
Harris, P.  
Horizontal vs. vertical classifications of play  
Joint construction of make-believe  
Liquidating  
Make-believe play  
Managing anxieties  
Meta-narrative  
Multiple intelligences  
Narrative as a framework for thinking  
Paradigmatic and narrative frameworks



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Parallel play

Practice games

Piaget, J.

Replica play

Solitary play

Symbolic games

Symbolizing

Thinking tool

War play

Wish fulfillment

Wishes and fantasies

Vygotsky, L.

