

[<<Back](#)

The magic of make believe



3-4 year olds are particularly fascinated by fairy tales starring princesses, evil witches and superheroes -- perfect characters for a theater production!
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By Aviva Patz

FROM THE PAGES OF **kid** **complishment**

Parents have always wanted to provide their children with as much enrichment as they can. Today, that means even three- and four-year olds spend their days flitting from soccer to music to swim lessons with hardly a break in between. But the best research shows that what kids need most for optimum growth and development is good old-fashioned playtime, when they can use their blossoming imagination.

"Young children learn numerous skills through make-believe play," says Yale University child development expert Dorothy

Singer, EdD, author of *Make-Believe: Games & Activities for Imaginative Play* (Magination Press). "They expand their vocabulary and creativity, they learn to use expressive language, they problem-solve and they use empathy."

Toddlers also use pretend-play to make sense of the world around them, trying on the roles of mom, teacher, mail carrier, chef and more. All you need to supply is a safe space, a block of uninterrupted time and a few props -- like dress-up clothes, basic art supplies, a cardboard box or laundry basket -- to get the party started. Here, an age-by-age guide to imaginative play, with tips on how you can further that play with your child.

18 - 24 months

Have a parade! Make-believe kicks in as young as 18 months, when you might see a child "feeding" a teddy bear or doll. Creating a parade builds excitement about this emerging sensibility. It also gives a toddler a chance to do what he loves best -- walking and marching, which are relatively new skills that he still likes to practice. Grab some pots and pans or simple instruments and get your child banging out some noise. Sing, if you're comfortable, or just talk in time with the rhythm. March with your music around the house or the yard, and pretend you're passing fascinating people and places. "Wave to the fire fighters at the fire station!" Ask your child, "What do you see?"

2 - 3 years

Zoo-trip in a box Older toddlers relish a chance to see animals, act like animals, make animal noises and hear you make animal noises. Seat your child in a large cardboard box or laundry basket and pretend it's a car. Go through the usual motions of starting the car: pretend to strap in, put the key in the ignition and make the whirring sounds of the motor. "A tremendous benefit of imaginative play is learning sequence and order," Singer says. Now get ready to enter the animal kingdom! Ask your child, "What are those monkeys doing?" "What do the monkeys sound like?" Take turns spotting animals and imitating them. Have your child invent a new, never-before-seen animal. Does it have fur, scales, or spots? Does it roar, squeak, cluck, moo, or hum?

3 - 4 years

Stage a puppet show This age heralds what learning experts call the "high season of play," when kids are bursting with imaginative ideas. They'll create elaborate structures, complex plots involving several characters and silly games complete with rules. They're particularly fascinated by fairy tales starring princesses and princes, evil witches and superheroes -- perfect characters

for a theater production! To create a puppet stage, flip over a cardboard box or laundry basket and throw a towel or blanket on top. Make simple hand puppets out of old socks or finger puppets out of gloves, or use puppets you already have on hand. Kids can re-enact existing fairy tales or create their own. Help them get started and then be sure to step back and let them take over the show. If your child needs direction, ask leading questions such as "How will Kezra get past the tiger?" and "How does the story end?" When it's over, clap wildly and watch your child beam with pride.

4 - 5 years

Create a restaurant Role-playing is a favorite activity among the pre-school set. They love to be doctors, fire fighters, mail carriers, airplane pilots, car washers and librarians. They especially love playing "restaurant." Help them decorate placemats, set the table with plates, silverware, napkins and cups, and design a menu. Ask, "What foods are you serving today?" Invite their toys (dolls and bears) to the table and have your child take their order, jotting words or scribbles onto a small pad of paper. Compliment your child on the friendly service, the elegant presentation, the delicious meal or some other standout quality. Tell her: "I'll definitely come back to this restaurant!"

TIP: Play Along

If your child suddenly morphs into a dinosaur, doctor or superhero, play along and talk directly to his new alter ego. Ask questions to keep the game going.

Aviva Patz has written for numerous national publications including Parents, Parenting, Health, Self, Redbook and Marie Claire.

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