The Path from Imitation to Pretend Play

ZERO TO THREE Critical Competencies for Infant-Toddler Educators™

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Do you remember pretending as a child? Who did you like to pretend to be? What was the plot of your adventures?

Your memories of pretending are probably of yourself as a preschooler or older. But your mental capacity for pretending was already active in your brain long before then. In order to understand young children's capacity for pretend play, we must trace its roots back to infants' ability to imitate others, which is in evidence from the hour they are born, and how it becomes more complex and sophisticated with experience and brain development.

The Growing Complexity of Imitation

As newborns grow, some interesting changes happen to their ability to imitate others' actions. One change that develops over the first year is that babies' *increasing memory capacity* allows them to hold a mental representation in their memory of the objects and actions they observe for longer and longer stretches of time. This is one of the factors that helps babies to develop the understanding that a toy is still there even if it's covered up by a blanket or a person still exists even if she left the room—a concept about the physical world called **object permanence** that babies gradually learn during the second half of their first year.

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That same increased memory capacity means babies can remember and imitate an action they observed earlier with increasingly longer delays. This ability, called **deferred imitation**, emerges in its simplest form around 6 weeks old, when babies who see a model make an unfamiliar facial expression on one day will imitate the facial expression when they see that same person the following day.

This ability, as you might expect, becomes stronger and more complex as babies' brain connections become stronger and more complex as a function of maturity and experience. So, by 12–18 months old, babies can:

- remember an observed action and imitate it months later,
- imitate the actions of other children as well as those of adults (although adults are the preferred models),
- imitate a sequence of behaviors, and
- repeat an observed behavior in a different environment or context from where they observed it.

By early in their second year, babies also show a more sophisticated understanding of other people by adapting their imitation to reflect the adult's intention or goal, even if the adult's actual action failed. For example, a child might see an adult putting cereal into a cup but spilling some on the table. When given the cup and cereal, the child will place the cereal into the cup, demonstrating she understood the adult's goal, even though he didn't achieve it.

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Similarly, if the child observes the adult doing an action to accomplish a task but she can see an easier or more efficient way to do it, she won't imitate the adult's action but will imitate the intended goal using the better method. Scientists call this **rational imitation**, and it demonstrates just how much knowledge about both the physical and the social world babies have gained in the first year and a half of life!

By 12–18 months old, babies can:			
Remember an observed action and imitate it months later	Imitate the action of other children as well as adults (although adults are the preferred models)	Imitate a sequence of behaviors	Repeat an observed behavior in a different environment or context
By 24 months old, babies can:			
Show a more sophisticated understanding of people by adapting their imitation to reflect the adult's intention, even if the adult's actual action failed			

The Emergence of Symbolic Representation and Pretending

By the middle of their second year of life, young children have gathered a great number of mental representations of everyday life, and they begin to demonstrate their understanding of what people do and how things work by acting them out in pretend play. Simple imitation has grown into increasingly complex representations (RE-presentations) of the objects and actions they've observed many times.

In pretend play, toddlers not only repeat what they know but they can "play" with their knowledge in creative ways. For example, they begin to use one object to represent another, also called **symbolic representation**. Initially, young children are more likely to engage in pretending with materials that look and act quite similarly to the "real thing." An older baby might pretend to eat a plastic apple but won't pretend to eat a wooden block. However, over time with experience, toddlers' ability to use objects as symbols representing other things expands. A cardboard box can represent a car, and a block can represent a phone. By 2 years old, toddlers demonstrate their commitment to the "rules" of a pretend play scenario they've created and insist others do the same. If a 2-year-old is pretending the banana is a phone, you will hear protests if you try to use it as something else!

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What's especially interesting about toddler's pretend play is how socially embedded it is. Simple familiar roles and scripts—for example, a family member cooking dinner or going to work or an educator reading to the baby—are what make up children's first pretend play. Using one object to represent another usually happens when children are acting out a familiar behavior they've seen from a family member. The social situations that are so familiar and interesting to young children are the ones they are most likely to recreate.

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Infant–toddler educators can facilitate and extend pretend play by modeling pretending, following children's pretending ideas, and providing a wide variety of interesting props in the environment. By doing so, educators are supporting an important facet of children's cognitive development.

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