

Building Your Child's Brain

Babies use their five senses (touch, taste, smell, sight and sound) to explore their world. As they develop, they begin to understand the basic function of things (“If I push this button, the pony will pop out of the barn!”).

Now, as preschoolers, they take this knowledge and combine it with a growing imagination to come up with fantasy scenarios about why and how things happen. As kids go through these magic years, fantasy will move to reality as they further fine-tune their understanding of the world.

Take, for example, the vacuum cleaner. A 2-year-old might throw a tantrum because he fears that, just as the dog hair got sucked up off the carpet, he will too. But a year or two later, instead of collapsing into tears, he might pretend he's being chased by the vacuum “monster” — and gain confidence from knowing that it will never get him. By age 6, he knows that his fear of being swallowed up by a vacuum is irrational — there's no way his entire body can be sucked up that little tube!

Pretend play lets kids try out new roles for themselves and allows for creative problem-solving. It also helps them deal with another hurdle of the preschool years: intense emotions. Baby dolls might be put in “time out” and scolded for actions suspiciously similar to your little one's latest offense. An imaginary friend (who's a bigger troublemaker than your child ever could be) might be conjured up to help your child deal with feelings of guilt and remorse following a moment of lost control, such as hitting a playmate.

Self-control is a tough skill to learn, and pretend play helps kids practice it as well as play out the frustration it creates.

Encouraging imaginative play

Here are some ways to encourage your child's world of make-believe:

- **Go along with it.** When kids leap through the air and tell you they're flying, don't tell them they're only jumping. Instead, feed the fantasy: “Wow, you're so high up! What can you see on the ground? Maybe you should take a rest on that nice puffy cloud.” Or even better, start flying with them.
- **Choose old-fashioned toys.** Blocks, dolls, arts and crafts, and molding clay are all toys that require creativity and therefore spur imagination.

- **Limit electronic toys.** Whether it's a handheld entertainment system or a “junior” laptop, try to avoid toys that need batteries. Creativity is stifled when the toy, rather than the child, directs the play.
- **Read to your child.** And while reading, ask mind-opening questions: “If you were the caterpillar, what would you eat?” and “What do you think will happen next in the story?” This not only encourages imagination but promotes language skills and fosters an interest in books.
- **Schedule downtime.** Make sure kids have free time every day to play on their own. Aside from encouraging creativity, it teaches them to use their own resources to amuse or soothe themselves.
- **Limit screen time.** When kids watch a movie or even an educational program, they experience someone else's make-believe world instead of using their own imaginations. Some subjects on TV are not appropriate for preschoolers. Young kids also are more influenced by advertising since they can't tell the difference between commercials and actual programs. The same goes for digital advertising inserted in online games and apps. Experts recommend limiting screen time (which includes TV, DVDs, computers, smartphones, and tablets) to no more than 1 hour of quality programming per day for kids 2 to 5 years old.

Older kids

The time in childhood when kids begin to form a conscience, differentiate between right and wrong, and act not just on impulse but because something is the “right” thing to do is called “the age of reason.”

The age of reason explains why many second-graders are masters at sharing — they can consider the feelings of others. And it also explains why monsters that once lurked under the bed have suddenly disappeared. A child this age realizes that since he never saw the monster, it probably does not exist.

As kids continue to grow, their imagination and creativity will translate into art, music, creative writing, and help with critical thinking.

The critical thinking that inspires kids to dig deeper for information and grasp more complex ideas is their next key skill. And it's the tool that will turn them into decision-makers and problem-solvers who will make you proud as they mature into their teen years.

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