

Caring and Teaching

By observing children carefully, by taking a real interest and delight in what they do, and by playing games and having fun with children, you help them learn how to play and how to interact with other children. You also help them learn through their play. The *Developmental Continuum* will help you determine each child's developmental level for particular objectives. The information will help you decide what each child needs from you and how best to respond in ways that support each child's developing abilities.

Young Infants

Your relationship with young infants builds the foundation for all learning, including their ability to gain the most from imitation and play. Secure relationships make it easier for children to interact with other people, and they encourage children to play. Children's explorations become increasingly purposeful over time.

Julio (4 months) grasps a doll and immediately puts it into his mouth. Jasmine (8 months) has more ways of exploring. She may turn the doll over to examine it from different angles and then pat it gently.

As early as 2 months of age, babies are fascinated by each other. They get excited when they see other infants, and they stare at each other when they have chances to do so.⁴¹ If you work with 6- to 9-month-old infants, notice how they try to get and return the attention of other children by smiling and babbling. Offer safe opportunities for young infants to be together, and encourage their interest in what other children are doing.

As you care for young infants, take time to talk with them about ways they are imitating and socializing. Here are some examples:

- Repeat the language sounds a child makes: *I hear you saying, "Ba-ba-ba." Now I'm going to say it: "Ba-ba-ba." Can you do that again?*
- Describe what a child is doing: *You like watching the other children. I see you smiling at them.*
- Engage a child in repeating actions in a fingerplay: *You clapped your hands together! Let's do it again. Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker's man.*

Mobile Infants

Your playfulness and the various materials you provide become increasingly important as infants become more mobile. At this stage, infants explore objects and find out what they can do with them, sometimes by exploring new ways but often by imitating what they have previously seen others do with them. By about 10 months, an infant's brief action shows that she understands how an object is used, but she is not yet pretending. For example, she brings an empty spoon to her mouth while you are feeding her. Later, a mobile infant shows an awareness of pretending during an activity that only involves himself, as when he closes his eyes tightly and laughs while pretending to sleep.⁴²

As they get older, you might observe mobile infants amusing themselves by playing with materials in unconventional ways.

Willard (11 months) takes a hat, puts it on his foot, and looks at Grace with an impish grin. To participate in the game, Grace shakes her head, smiles, and says, "No-o-o, not there! A hat doesn't go on your foot." Willard continues the game, putting the hat on different parts of his body and waiting to see Grace's reaction. He finally puts it on his head and he laughs when she confirms, "That's right. A hat goes on your head!"

As much as mobile infants enjoy playing with you, they are also becoming quite interested in each other. By 9–12 months, they imitate and touch each other. They handle objects together and may play for longer periods. During the next six months, children begin to exchange roles in action games, such as taking turns chasing and being chased. When they have the opportunity to play with familiar peers, children tend to engage in the same kinds of play. Even at this young age, children seem to understand when another person wants to play and what the person wants to do.⁴³

Mobile infants are fascinating to watch. Take time to observe what they do and think about what you are learning before you decide how to respond. When you describe what children are doing and ask questions, you help them become aware of their actions. Here are some examples:

- Sing songs and fingerplays that involve simple actions: *Let's sing "The Wheels on the Bus." Can you make your hands go 'round and 'round?*
- Respond to a child who is pretending to be a dog: *Hello little puppy dog. Why are you barking? Are you hungry? Here's a bone for you"*
- Provide multiples of pretend play props, to minimize waiting and conflicts. *Here is another pot so you can make lunch, too.*

Toddlers

The pretend play of toddlers is more complex. Either their play involves another person or object, such as a stuffed animal, or the child acts out an activity that they have seen performed by someone else.⁴⁴ They enact simple routines, using objects in play as they are used in real life, such as combing a doll's hair or feeding a doll a bottle. Later they begin to substitute one object for another while they pretend, such as using a ring from a stacking toy as a bagel or a cylindrical block as a baby bottle to feed a doll. You will notice that children use objects that resemble in size and shape the ones they represent.

As toddlers learn more about the world, they typically develop fears about such things as loud noises, large animals, being separated from their families, and going to the doctor. Pretend play is one way that they cope with their fears.

Leo (18 months) stamps around the room, growling and swiping the air with his arms. He is assuming the role of the scary monster he most fears. By becoming the monster, he can control what the monster does and thereby experience some power over what he fears. Barbara responds, "Oh, my, what a scary monster! I bet that monster is looking for a friend. I'll be your friend, Mr. Monster. Come play with me."

By accepting this type of play, verbalizing what you think a child is feeling, and joining in, you can help toddlers work through fears that they cannot express directly. For this reason, pretend play is as important to a child's emotional development as it is to cognitive and social development.

Take time to encourage children's interest in pretending. You can do this by talking about what they are doing and by joining their play. Here are some examples:

- Provide props: *Here are some empty food boxes to put in your shopping cart.*
- Pretend along with toddlers: *Will you please take me for a ride in your car?*
- Describe what a child is doing: *I see that you are taking the baby for a ride in the carriage. Are you taking her to the park?*

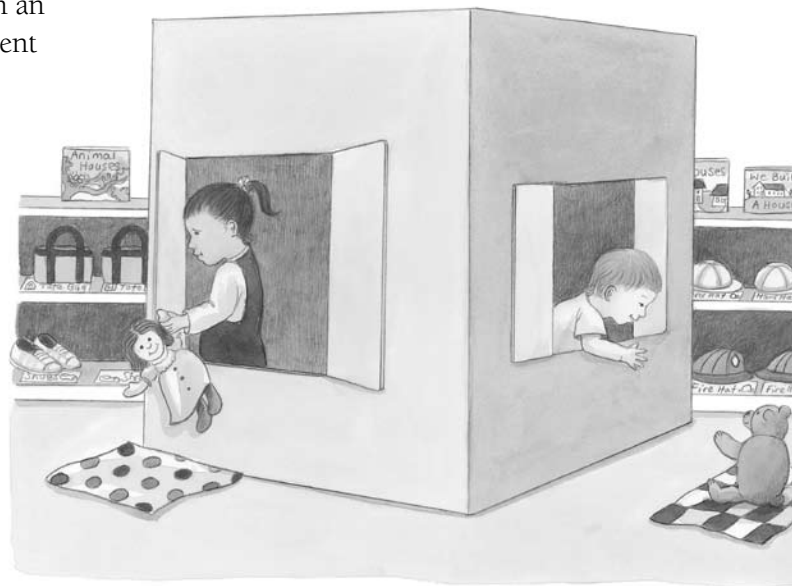
Twos

The play of 2-year-olds becomes increasingly social and complex. At first, they share a common play theme without combining their activities with each other. For example, they might both pretend to make lunch, but each will pretend to pour milk instead of one child's pretending to serve the other. By about age 30 months, children begin to assume roles that go with another child's role, such as pretending to be a parent when the other child is pretending to be a baby.⁴⁵

Sometimes children get so immersed in their play, you might have difficulty getting their attention for another purpose. Play is also a child's private reality at that moment,⁴⁶ so a child who has assumed the role of someone else might correct you when you call her by her given name.

Gena (30 months) tells Ivan, "I not Gena. I Pooh Bear." Ivan plays along, "Okay, Pooh. It's time to eat your honey."

Twos are beginning to plan their play. They reenact events and announce what they are going to do. They also combine a sequence of tasks while they pretend.⁴⁷ For example, Jonisha may gather together several items needed to "play baby," and then hold the doll, pretend to feed it, and put it to bed. Two children might put on firefighter hats and pretend to put out a fire together. They may pretend with objects that do not closely resemble what they represent, such as by picking up a piece of string, pretending that it is a hose and using it to squirt imaginary water on an imaginary fire. This is an important achievement and shows that they are able to imagine a hose, fire, and water without relying on realistic props. Their increasing ability to use language to communicate with each other also makes their play more complex and interesting, and it helps them keep their play going.



Chapter 12: Imitating and Pretending

When twos engage in this type of pretend play, encourage them by providing the materials they need, talking with them, and participating in the play. Here are some examples.

- Provide props to extend children's interests: *Did the car break down? Uh, oh! We'd better get the tool box and see what we can do to fix it.*
- Describe what a child is doing: *I see that you are wearing the firefighter hat and that you have a hose. Is a house on fire?*
- Participate in pretend play by taking on a role: *Hello? Hello? Is this the doctor? I have a sick baby here. We need to see the doctor. Is she in the office today?*
- Encourage a child to pretend without props: As you hand the child an imaginary phone, say, *The doctor wants to talk to you.*
- Ask open-ended questions to encourage imaginative thinking and expressive language: *I see you have packed your suitcase. Where are you going? How will you get there?*

Young children engaged in pretend play have many ideas and are often very imaginative. Take time to observe and appreciate what they are doing. Then take on a role, yourself; join them in their pretend play; and help them interact with other children. Always match the child's pace, recognizing that some children—because of a disability, temperament, or inexperience—may respond more slowly or need more support from you.

Responding to and Planning for Each Child

As you observe children imitating and pretending, think about the goals, objectives, and steps of the *Developmental Continuum*. Consider what each child is learning and how you should respond. Here is how four teachers who are implementing *The Creative Curriculum* use what they learn from their observations to respond to each child and to plan.

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