Play;
Our Child’s Work
Dear Parents,

Do we often ask ourselves whether we are engaging our children in work disguised as play or are we allowing them the space to explore who they want to be?

Raising our children in a multilingual Singapore society is a tedious job in itself because we not only want them to be conversant in English, we also hope for them to be able to communicate smoothly with their grandparents who probably speak languages other than English. As academic-driven as our parenting can be, let us not forget to let our children play – where it is child-centred and not objective-driven.

I hope that through this booklet and the activities included which could encourage greater interaction within the bilingual household, you will better understand play and more importantly, pretend play and how it is associated with the development of speech in our children.

Sincerely,
Grace Chow
Are Singaporean Kids playing enough?

Or do we pack their day with these classes?

Certainly, there is an element of ‘play’ in these activities but we must not forget play should be voluntary for the child – enjoyable, fun and unplanned with objectives – and he is given space to use his imagination and creativity to discover.

In this, as parents, we have the responsibility to develop them into creative and unique individuals.

Research has shown that play amongst Singapore kids are often associated with manipulative toys focusing on the development of spatial skills – which are related to mastery of mathematics for example. This overemphasis on purposeful play hinders creativity and takes away opportunities for them to be flexible thinkers as well as social skills like problem-solving, communication and empathy.
What is Pretend Play?

- Imaginative, fantasy and make-believe play
- Where the child pretends as if they are something or someone real
- For example: a child might pretend to sell food at a shop, or being a policeman.
Is Pretend Play different from Purposeful Play?

Yes!

**Pretend Play**

Pretend play is not purposeful play and will benefit our child in the areas of:

- Take Turns
- Sense of responsibility
- Learning of moral values
- Language development
- Solve problems

**Purposeful Play**

- Intentional
- Involuntary way of learning academic concepts
'Play’ in the pre-school setting in Singapore takes a different form. It is oriented towards purposeful play.

Lessons have objectives to meet and a typical ‘play’ session will have a checklist the educator has to check off.

Imaginative play has given way to purposeful play.
So, what are the benefits of Pretend Play?

- Pretend play enables kids to gain practice with using symbols and this strengthens his foundation in language.
- New vocabulary such as ‘sword’, ‘pirate’ that he may not be exposed in his daily life can be learnt through pretend play and thus contributes to his language development.
Pretend play positively impacts the child’s language development - Object Substitution

- Besides vocabulary expansion, pretend play inculcates the use of symbols in which we call object substitution.

- Research has shown that as early as 13 months, through pretend play, the child is able to substitute one object for another.
For example,

A. The child may use an empty cup as a cup of tea in it.

B. Use a wooden block as a car

These examples of symbolizing are seen through our child’s pretend play and has been said to be associated with expressive and receptive language development.
What are Receptive Language Skills?

- Typically develops before expressive language
- Related to the understanding of words and gestures.

Successful mastery

- Child is like a sponge who can absorb the rules of a language and apply it by using it in spoken words
What are Expressive Language Skills?

It is when the child:

- Begins to convey meaning
- Express needs
- Ideas and thoughts
Tracking my child’s symbolic play development

11 months – 18 months

At around 18 months, child can use one object to represent another object and engage in one pretend action at a time.

For example,

• Using a play spoon to stir in the kitchen play area
• Picks up a banana pretending that it is a telephone and saying ‘Hi!’ to it
19 months – 24 months

At this stage, the child will imitate the actions he sees in adult behaviour.

For example,

- Pretend to feed a baby doll with the play spoon and bowl
- Making a toy aeroplane ‘fly’/ take flight
- Using a wooden block as a telephone
- Using keys to unlock the door
At this stage, just as the child is learning to combine words into sentences, he is learning to combine pretend actions together. The child is also able to act out a sequence of pretend actions corresponding to a familiar routine. It is normal for the child to still use unrealistic objects in replacement of the real ones, if they are similar to the shape of the real object.

For example,

- Child may pretend to take a toy bowl and spoon, pour cereal or milk into it and feed it to a doll.
Stage: Series of less familiar actions

31 months – 36 months

At around 36 months, the child’s pretend play will involve less familiar themes, more sequenced steps (complete 3 or more actions in a sequence) and take on assigned roles.

For example,

- Pretending to be a waiter at a restaurant.
- Assign roles to self and others when playing within the dramatic area. An example of a dialogue ‘I’ll be the daddy, you will be the baby’.
At this stage, the child pretends about imaginary themes and engages in extended pretend play that follows a theme. That would include castles and superheroes, which do not exist, or the child has not had experience to it yet. In pretend play, the child also uses abstract things to represent other things.

For example,

- Using sand or dough to represent a birthday cake and a stick or straw to represent a candle
How can I involve myself in my child’s play activities?

1. Follow your child’s lead

- In joining the activity your child is doing, your child will most likely want you to be his playmate.
- Play becomes naturally fun and spontaneous because you are attending to his interests and playing together with him in ways he enjoys.
- Pretending with your child will help him learn to play with others too. Next, your child will extend this pretend play with other children, where he will learn to take turns and collaborate.
Introduce a new pretend play action

- Show your child how to extend his pretend play by adding new actions to make it a sequence.
- For example, using his toy kitchen tools, help your child learn the act of sequenced actions by making soup for his toy rabbit before feeding it. Then, pretend to stir the soup in the pot for the toy rabbit, meanwhile to comment ‘Look, I’m stirring the soup for Mr Rabbit to eat’ and ‘He must be really hungry’.
Let your child copy your new pretend play action

- After showing your child a new action, allow him some space to see what he might do next before releasing cues to let him know it is his turn.

If your child does not reciprocate the pretend action, consider prompting him with these cues:
- Showing it again – repeating this new action several times.
- Also, you may consider commenting which might help with his understanding.

For example, guide him while you point – point to the toy spoon and pot and comment ‘Mr Rabbit is still hungry! I think he needs more soup.’
**Hands-on activities for the Bilingual household**

Here are some pretend play activities you may want to consider to have with your child:

A. Open a playdough bakery stall

- Materials that you need

- This is a good opportunity for your child to practice or learn new multilingual literacy skills with other speakers in the home environment
○ Try exposing your child to new vocabulary in another language other than the main home language (for example, Mandarin, Malay or Tamil)

○ Then, speakers other than English can approach the child and ask to be made a particular pastry from the young baker. For example, grandparent can request for 蛋糕 Dàngāo, repeat this a few times till the child shows understanding.
By getting ready stuffed animals (patients) and a toy doctor kit, try to encourage or initiate a pretend play session with your child.

- Materials you need: Some stuffed animals, toy doctor kit, chairs and a table to be the examination table
- Encourage dialogue with your child. For example, you may ask ‘why is doggie looking sad at the waiting area?’ ‘Do you think he is sick?’ It is a good opportunity for your child to learn empathy for others or the pets in this case.
But what if my child does not know how to pretend?

If that is the case, you may want to start off the play with your child. Pick up a toy he likes and do a simple action yourself to give your child an idea.

For example, consider with self-pretend first.

Take a toy cup and pretend to drink from it and say ‘mmmm... yummy milk’. Next, place the cup in front of your child and see if he imitates after you. If he does not, do not panic. It is most likely; your child is not interested in the toy and you may want to observe his interests to better decide what interests him.
If your child is not responsive to pretend play, it is certainly not the case that he lacks imagination. He might enjoy spending time playing in the pool and at the sand pit, those activities entail the element of make-believe too!

What is more important is being there for him and providing him a nurturing environment to play.

However, if your child shows signs of delayed speech, does not initiate speech or engage with others after promptings given, you may consult a developmental pediatrician to find out more.
Conclusion

In conclusion, it is my hope that through this information booklet you have a clearer picture of the type of play that is prevalent amongst Singaporean children and how in particular, the adoption of pretend play might bring about benefits for our children.

If there is one thing I hope for, through this booklet would be, as parents, in our constant search to provide the best footing for our child, is to give them ample imaginative space to experiment through play and discover more about their surroundings. Lastly, time set aside for play is never time wasted because there is so much more we have yet to discover about them!
References


