

Summary of Symbolic Play Development

AGE	PROPS	THEMES	ORGANIZATION	ROLES	LANGUAGE USE IN PLAY
by 18 months	uses one realistic object at a time	familiar everyday activities in which child is active participant (e.g., eating, sleeping)	short, isolated pretend actions	autosymbolic pretend (e.g., child feeds self pretend food)	language used to get and maintain toys and seek assistance operating toys (e.g., "baby," "mine," "help")
by 22 months	uses two realistic objects at a time	familiar everyday activities that caregivers do (e.g., cooking, reading)	combines two related toys or performs actions on two people (e.g., uses spoon to eat from plate; feeds mother, then doll)	child acts on dolls and others (e.g., feeds doll or caregiver)	uses word combinations to comment on toy or action; uses word for intents, needs, feelings ("want that," "mad," "hungry")
by 24 months	uses several realistic objects		multischeme combinations of steps (e.g., put doll in tub, apply soap, take doll out and dry)		talks to doll briefly; describes some of the doll's actions (e.g., "baby sleeping"); uses phrases and markers for ing and plurals/possessives
by 30 months		common but less frequently experienced or especially traumatic experiences (e.g., shopping, doctor)		emerging limited doll actions (e.g., doll cries)	talking to doll and commenting on doll's actions increase in frequency; uses
by 3 years		observed, but not personally experienced activities (e.g., police, firefighter); compensatory play--Re-enacts experienced events, but modifies original outcomes	temporal sequences of multischeme events (e.g., prepare food, set table, eat food, clear table, wash dishes)	child talks to doll in response to doll's actions (e.g., "don't cry now," "I'll get you a cookie."); brief complementary role play with peers (e.g., mother and child; doctor and patient)	use complete sentences with past tense and future aspect; children may comment on what they have just completed or what they will do next (e.g., "Dolly ate the cake," "I'm gonna wash dishes.")
by 3 1/2 years	miniature props, small figures, and object substitutions			attributes emotions and desires to dolls; reciprocal role taking with dolls (child treats doll as partner--talks for doll and as caregiver)	use dialogue for dolls and metalinguistic markers (e.g., "he said"); use words to refer to emotions and thoughts
by 4 years	imaginary props (language and gesture help set the scene)	familiar fantasy themes (e.g., Batman, Wonder Woman, Cinderella, etc.); violent themes common	planned play events with cause-effect sequences (e.g., child decides to play a birthday party and gathers necessary props and assigns roles)	child or doll has multiple roles (mother, wife, doctor; firefighter, husband, father) child can handle two or more dolls in complementary rolls (dolls are doctor and patient)	use language to plan and narrate the story line; use of connecting words so, because, but-effect
by 6 years	language and gesture can carry the play without props		multiple planned sequences (plans for self and other players)	attributes thoughts and plans to doll more than one role per doll (doll is mother, wife, doctor)	elaboration of planning and narrative story line; uses sentences with temporal markers, then, when, while, before, first, next

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