



Why pretend play is important for school

Let's consider two things: 1) why children's ability to pretend in play is important before they go to school, and 2) why playing at school is important for learning.



Being able to play before you go to school

By the time typically developing children are 5 years old their play skills are quite complex. Children by 5 years are capable of playing with a group of friends. This means they are learning to negotiate, cooperate, argue and yes, this can involve fighting from time to time. They can pretend to be someone else for an extended period of time, for example, they can pretend to fly a plane, be a doctor, be a mechanic, or be a teacher. This involves them understanding what that particular person would say, what they would do and how they would act. Children can use any object and pretend it is something else, for example, a chair could be a train or a box could be an oven. They can plan out the play story and extend on this story.

So, why are these abilities important? To be able to do these things you need to be able to think of an idea to play. This usually results in a story that has a beginning, with problems in the middle, with characters who act in certain ways, and with an ending that resolves the problems that have occurred throughout the story. This is narrative competence and understanding story structure. Children don't know they have this ability - they just know they can play with their friends for a long time and they enjoy doing this.

Children who can play this type of play, enter school with lots of words, longer sentences, ability to understand another's point of view, and an ability to understand a social play context. Children who play to this level, also tend to be more aware of their emotions and emotions in others. They come to school with a lot of skills already in place and they are ready to learn and to build on their knowledge of the world.



Why playing at school is important

Playing in the playground is not an easy thing to do. You need to decide if you want to play by yourself, play with others, or join in on a team game. Recess time, or lunch time, is unstructured time and children who come to school with the ability to play can usually organise themselves into some sort of activity during lunch.

Playing in the classroom is more controversial. In the first year of school, it has been shown that if children act out a story, they understand it in more depth than if they just listened to it. Playing in the classroom is not just 'do what you like'. Schools that include play as part of their curriculum do so with careful thought and understanding of how children learn through play. There is quite a lot of research now that has been able to link pretend play ability to language, narrative language, and story comprehension. If success at school is measured through reading achievement, then how a child plays will give a lot of information about the pre-reading skills that child already has.

