

## CORE SKILL: THINK

# Imitation and Symbolic Representation



### What You Need to Know

Toddlers are naturally working to increase their understanding of the world around them. They learn a lot by carefully observing and later imitating your actions, words, gestures, and sounds. Understanding and using symbols is an important leap in their development, as well. The concepts of imitation and symbolic representation (see below) are slightly different. However, we will focus on supporting their development together because they share a key component for doing so – pretend play. Often, people focus on the important social skills being developed through play, but pretend play also provides opportunity for **imitation** (e.g., playing “house” or “school”) and **symbolic thought** (e.g., using pretend food).

### Things to Consider

**Symbolic representation** means understanding that symbols hold meaning, stand for something else, and/or represent ideas or processes. Our world is filled with symbols. For example, words communicate ideas, numbers represent amounts, and arrows tell us where we can and can’t go. Supporting symbolic understanding helps children understand the world around them and gets them ready for later academic skills.

Symbolic thought and pretend play can look different in children with disabilities. For example, a child may repetitively arrange playdough into letters, or a child may use gestalts/scripts to symbolically communicate their feelings. Provide many opportunities for children to observe and engage in using early pretend play skills.

### Development of Imitation and Symbolic Thought

Between 9 and 18 months, children may:	Between 16 and 36 months, children may:
Imitate something that someone did earlier (e.g., wiping up a spill or closing a door).	Watch and imitate more complex actions involving multiple steps (e.g., setting the table).
Use a toy object in ways similar to objects they represent (e.g., talking on a pretend phone).	Imitate someone else’s conversation in play.
Imitate everyday actions of others in play (e.g., feeding the baby doll).	Use objects or symbols to represent something else (e.g., using a block as a phone, or play dough as food that they’ve cooked).
	Understand that symbols have meaning, such as a sign.

### Setting the Stage

Activities and materials that support the development of imitation and symbolic thought:

- ◆ Pretend play experiences (e.g., a kitchen area, provide a bathtub and bottles for baby dolls, a blanket with pretend food for a picnic, create a bus or car by lining up chairs, or a rocket ship with an old box). When possible, cycle out toys to encourage children to engage in new types of play.
- ◆ Finger plays (e.g., “Itsy Bitsy Spider” or “5 Green and Speckled Frogs” using your hands to represent the spider or frogs).
- ◆ Art or craft activities where children are encouraged to make something that represents something else.
- ◆ For early communicators, provide opportunities for symbolic communication by using core/fringe vocabulary boards or gestures. Symbolic communication links a visual representation of an item/action (symbol) with the actual item/action. For example, provide visuals of snacks during snack time and allow children to point to the snack they want.



# Intentional Teaching Practices to Support Imitation and Symbolic Representation

OBSERVE	<b>OBSERVE</b>  Carefully observe how children use imitation or symbolic representation. Are children engaging in play that goes beyond functional play (playing with toys how they were intended to be used)? Which children engage in pretend play? If they do, do they use objects to represent something else? Are they taking on roles? Which children may need support to move beyond early play?
FOCUS	<b>Narrate Imitation and Representation and Label Symbols</b>  Focus children's attention by explicitly <b>narrating</b> your <i>own</i> acts of imitation, symbolic representation, and labeling symbols. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◆ <b>Model taking a role:</b> Sitting in a box, say, "I'm driving my rocket ship to the moon! Woohoo!"</li><li>◆ <b>Model creating a symbolic representation:</b> "I'm making a snake with my play-dough!"</li><li>◆ <b>Label symbols:</b> "You drew a picture of your mom so I'm writing 'Mom,'" or, "This sign means STOP."</li></ul> Language and play skills are deeply intertwined. For children who are often engaging in functional play and/or have limited language, expand their play and language by modeling symbolic sounds such as <i>boom, vroom, beep, ding dong</i> , or animal sounds.
SCAFFOLD I	<b>Suggest Roles</b>  Join in the pretend play with children and encourage them to try out new roles (e.g., parents, doctors, teachers, or animals). Avoid stereotyping children into gender-specific roles to ensure that every child has an opportunity to explore different roles. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◆ For younger toddlers, stick with simple, basic roles that they are familiar with (e.g., pat your baby doll and say, "Let's be mommies and daddies and walk our babies.&gt;").</li><li>◆ For older toddlers, help them consider the characteristics and "rules" in their new roles (e.g., "What does a dad do when the baby cries/what should we do?" or, "What does a doctor use this for?").</li></ul>
SCAFFOLD II	<b>Encourage Use of Props</b>  Join in children's play and prompt them to use props in their pretend play. <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◆ Provide or model suggestions, but also allow children to be the "directors" by following their lead (e.g., child serves you blocks with a spoon and you "eat" them rather than suggesting that they get the pretend food or build something with the blocks).</li><li>◆ Younger toddlers may need/use exact representations (e.g., a pretend phone) where older toddlers may be ready to use objects that are <b>not</b> exact replicas (e.g., a block to represent a telephone).</li></ul>
KEEP IT GOING	Consider what you learned from observing children as well as their reaction to your Focus and Scaffolds. Find ways to build the activities in the Setting the Stage into your regular routines.