

CORE SKILL: THINK

Imitation and Symbolic Representation



What You Need to Know

Preschoolers are naturally working to increase their understanding of the world around them, including culture, experiences, and environments. 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 an 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. While exploring symbols, be mindful that some symbols and their meanings can vary depending on the context or culture it’s from or in.

Symbolic thought and pretend play can look different in children with disabilities. For example, a child may repetitively arrange toys to mimic an observed play activity, or a child may use gestalts/scripts to symbolically communicate their feelings. Additionally, children with disabilities may use fewer variations of imitation and symbolic representation in their play. Provide many opportunities for them to observe and engage in using these skills.

Development of Imitation and Symbolic Thought

Between 36 and 48 months, children may:	Between 48 and 60 months, children may:
Consistently use imagination in play and other creative works.	Develop more elaborate imaginary play, stories, and other creative works with peers and adults.
Begin to communicate creative ideas to peers and adults.	Engage in social and pretend play.
	Use objects to represent something else during play.

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 in your centers to prompt children to engage in new types of play.
- ◆ Finger plays (e.g., “5 Green and Speckled Frogs” using your hands to represent the frogs).
- ◆ Art or craft activities where children are encouraged to make something that represents something else.
- ◆ Post visuals in centers to cue children to explore a toy in a new way. For example, next to the animal puzzle, you can post a visual for “eat” to prompt children to pretend to feed the animals before putting them in the puzzle.
- ◆ 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	<p>OBSERVE</p> <p>Carefully observe how children use imitation or symbolic representation. Which children engage in pretend play?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Are they able to <u>plan</u> their play (e.g., “I’m going to be... and you are going to go to...”)?◆ Do they take on <u>roles</u>? Do they follow the “rules” of those roles? Do these roles have social relationships with each other?◆ Do they use <u>props</u>? Are they exact replicas (a toy phone to be a phone) or not (a block to be a phone)?◆ Do they <u>extend</u> their play? Do they keep up for at least 10-15 minutes? Maybe even an hour?◆ Do they play in <u>various</u> centers throughout the week? Do they use different toys?◆ How do they use <u>language</u> to deepen their play? Do they describe the scenario and roles?
FOCUS	<p>Narrate Imitation and Representation and Label Symbols</p> <p>Focus children’s attention by explicitly narrating your <i>own</i> acts of imitation and symbolic representation and labeling symbols.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Model taking a role: Sitting in a box, say, “I’m driving my rocket ship to the moon! Woohoo!”◆ Model creating a symbolic representation: “I’m painting a picture of that bird!”◆ Label symbols: “You drew a picture of your mom, so I’m writing ‘mom.’” or, “This sign means STOP.” <p>Language and play skills are deeply intertwined. While these skills are not prerequisites for each other, they often naturally develop alongside each other. This is why narrating, labeling, and modeling is especially important to support this skill. For children who are often engaging in functional play (playing with toys as they are intended to be used), expand their play and language by modeling symbolic sounds such as <i>boom</i>, <i>vroom</i>, <i>beep</i>, <i>ding dong</i>, or animal sounds.</p>
SCAFFOLD I	<p>Suggest Roles</p> <p>Join in the pretend play with children and focus on encouraging them to try out new roles (e.g., parents, doctors, teachers, animals, scientists, explorers). Avoid stereotyping children into gender-specific roles to ensure that every child has an opportunity to explore different roles.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Help them consider and stick to the characteristics and “rules” in their new roles: “What does a dad do when the baby cries/what should we do?”, “What does a doctor use this for?” To further support children to take on these roles, you can also provide visual cues of individuals performing actions. For example, a visual of a doctor using a stethoscope to listen to a patient’s heart.◆ Help them develop social relationships between their roles: “Oh, you two are sisters getting ready for a trip to see your grandma!”
SCAFFOLD II	<p>Encourage Use of Props</p> <p>Prompt children to use props in their pretend play.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Provide or model suggestions, but also allow children to be the “directors” by following their lead.◆ Use objects that are exact replicas: “Can you use this mop to clean the restaurant floor, please?”◆ And those that are not exact replicas: “You need to make a call? Here, you can use my phone (<i>handing them a block</i>).”
KEEP IT GOING	<p>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.</p>