

## CORE SKILL: THINK

# Imitation and Symbolic Representation



### What You Need to Know

Infants learn about imitation and symbols through interactions and experiences with trusted adults like you! Infants carefully observe your actions and gradually start imitating them. For example, when you regularly read books to young children, they may imitate you by making sounds as if they are “reading” with you. Older infants might even hold a book, turn the pages, and pretend to “read” a book. Through these interactions, infants are also beginning to learn that pictures and words symbolize things in the real world (e.g., a picture of a teddy bear symbolizes a teddy bear). You can foster infants’ imitation and symbolic thought by interacting with them in emotionally connected (e.g., make eye contact, share smiles, and be present) and stimulating ways (e.g., model, use gestures and sounds, and promote autonomy)!

### Things to Consider

Gestures and sounds are a great way to support imitation and symbolic thought – they hold meaning and/or stand for something else. For instance, “beep, beep” symbolizes a horn, or “tapping your lips” indicates that it is time to eat. Because infants like imitating you, encourage them to imitate sounds and gestures as often as possible!

### Development of Imitation and Symbolic Thought

Between birth and 9 months, infants may:	Between 8 and 18 months, infants may:
Engage in reciprocal imitation games (e.g., patting on a table or handing an object back and forth).	Imitate something someone did earlier (e.g., wiping up a spill or closing a door).
	Use a toy object in ways similar to objects they represent (e.g., talking on a pretend phone).
	Imitate everyday actions of others in play (e.g., feeding baby).

### Setting the Stage

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

- ◆ Read books and label pictures to help infants gradually understand that words and pictures symbolize things in our world.
- ◆ Sing songs or repeat rhymes that incorporate use of gestures and/or sounds.
- ◆ Provide simple materials that can be used to represent other objects or toys (e.g., a pot and a wooden spoon for a drum, a small container with beans inside for a rattle).
- ◆ Play games or use toys that encourage infants to imitate your actions. Model how to do it and let infants try them (e.g., show how to swat bubbles, bang things together, model using a sorting box, or talk using pretend phones)!
- ◆ Play matching games or activities with older infants (e.g., match people or objects with their pictures).



## Intentional Teaching Practices to Develop Imitation and Symbolic Representation

	Observe
OBSERVE	<p>Take time to notice how infants use imitation or symbolic representation. Which infants naturally imitate gestures and/or sounds? Do some seem interested in imitating what you do? Are there any specific activities/times (e.g., reading, singing, eating, or diapering) or toys (e.g., pretend phones, dolls, or a sorting box) that you can purposefully use to encourage infants' imitation and use of symbols? Consider who would benefit from extra support.</p>
	Narrate Imitation and Representation and Label Symbols
FOCUS	<p>Focus infants' attention by imitating sounds, using gestures, and explicitly labeling and narrating imitation and symbols. You can do this by making the most out of your daily routines and interactions!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◆ <b>Model imitation:</b> Take the blocks out of a container, and then put them back so that infants can try. Play with an infant to copy simple actions (e.g., stick out tongue, raise arms, or pat-a-cake).</li><li>◆ <b>Model representation:</b> Imitate animals (e.g., "ruff, ruff" for dog, "oink, oink" for pig) or vehicle sounds (e.g., "vroom, vroom!" and, "weeeeeeeoooo!") when playing. Sing songs about body parts (<i>touch or point to them</i>) during diapering.</li><li>◆ <b>Label symbols:</b> "You're eating an apple for dessert today. This is an apple (<i>show a picture of an apple or a pretend apple</i>)." Prompt older infants to match symbols (e.g., "Show me the elephant. Which one is an elephant?").</li></ul>
KEEP IT GOING	<p>Consider what you learned from observing infants as well as their reaction to your Focus. Find ways to intentionally support imitation and symbolic representation throughout the day.</p>