

Kids who play
make-believe are
less likely to act up.



The Great Pretenders

Think children would be totally bored with imaginary play by this age?
Nope—their fantasy lives are out of this world. BY CHERYL LOCK

Your child's toy stethoscopes, capes, masks, and other dress-up gear have seen a lot of action in the last few years. But he probably won't outgrow them anytime soon. "Pretend play can be more elaborate at ages 5 and 6 because kids have a larger vocabulary, more dramatic ideas, and better concentration," says Vivian Gussin Paley, author of *A Child's Work: The Importance of Fantasy Play*. In fact, 5-year-olds who often play pretend with their peers are more self-confident and focused than kids who don't, according to a study from the University of British Columbia. Help your child get into the act.

Set the Scene

At age 3, your daughter may have needed just a crown to be a princess. Older kids don't just want to be a character—they

spend a lot of time building a backdrop too, says Doris Bergen, Ph.D., professor of educational psychology at Miami University, in Oxford, Ohio. Keep empty cardboard boxes to create doctor's offices, castles, and supermarkets. She'll probably want to gather props from around the house too. So don't freak out if your sauce pot becomes a doll swimming pool. Just ask her to promise to put the props back at the end of the game.

Join the Fun

Chances are your kid will ask you to be part of his imaginary games. If you can, jump on in. It's a great opportunity to help build your child's vocabulary without his realizing it. For instance, if your role is the patient in a doctor's office, you can use the word "vaccination," or if you're the customer at a restaurant, you can

ask the chef to “sauté” the vegetables. “Children will use these words when they play the game again,” says Elena Bodrova, Ph.D., principal researcher at Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, an organization that advocates for school improvements in Denver. Another benefit: When you participate, kids feel they came up with a good game (how many times have you whined about playing another round of Chutes and Ladders?) and that further sparks their imagination.

Have a Casting Call

Host a group playdate and ask the other moms to bring their kids with dress-up props. While kids get around to make-believe games during most get-togethers, it will become irresistible if they have a firefighter’s hat or a toy guitar to jump-start their pretend play. Put out your child’s costume trunk, too, in case someone needs a “wardrobe change” as they act out their storyline. “It’s okay to start kids off in a specific direction for a pretend-play game, but then back out and let the kids be in control of the theme,” says Dr. Bodrova.

See a Show

Many cities have children’s theaters that use a mix of adults and kids as actors—and it would be inspiring for your

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* Wild West

This hat will turn your daughter into a bona fide cowgirl in two seconds. (\$4; halloweencostumes.com)



* In Disguise

Going from superhero to magician, your kid will use this cape a lot. (\$6; orientaltrading.com)



* Rock On

This light-up microphone is great for a lyric-filled round of play. (\$3; centurynovelty.com)



drama queen to attend a production featuring children who are slightly older than she is. “Just by watching, she can learn a lot about dialogue, costumes, and how to talk like different characters,” says Dr. Bergen. “You might find her incorporating some of what she saw in her own pretend games.” □

Q & A

My daughter’s best friend had her ears pierced already, but I think 5 is too young to do it. How can I explain to my daughter that she has to wait?

Say that different families have different rules, but that you’ve decided she needs to be at least 10 (or whatever age you’ve determined is appropriate). If you like, you can explain why. “But don’t give her the idea that the topic is in any way negotiable,” says Joshua Kellman, M.D., a child psychiatrist at the University of Chicago Medical Center. Nor should you pass judgment about her friend’s family, since piercing is a personal (and often cultural) choice. Think of this as a practice run for the many times in the future when your daughter will say, “But all the other kids are doing it!”