

Pretend
Play
Among
3-Year-Olds

Edited by
MIRA STAMBAK
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English translation by
Hermina and Morris Sinclair
from the French
Les Jeux de Fiction entre Enfants de 3 Ans



LAWRENCE ERLBAUM ASSOCIATES, PUBLISHERS
1993 Hillsdale, New Jersey Hove and London

**Originally published by Presses Universitaires de France,
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Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers

365 Broadway

Hillsdale, New Jersey 07642

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jeux de fiction entre enfants de 3 ans. English.

Pretend play among 3-year olds / edited by Mira Stambak, Hermina
Sinclair ; English translation by Hermina and Morris Sinclair.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-8058-1243-1

1. Symbolic play. 2. Symbolism (Psychology) in children.
3. Imagination in children. 4. Social interaction in children.
5. Symbolic play—Case studies. 6. Symbolism (Psychology) in
children—Case studies. 7. Imagination in children—Case studies.
8. Social interaction in children—Case studies. I. Stambak, Mira.
II. Sinclair, Hermina. III. Title.

BF717.J4913 1993

155.42 '38—dc20

92-28297

CIP

Books published by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates are printed on acid-free
paper, and their bindings are chosen for strength and durability.

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Introduction*

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The four studies of collective pretend play among 3-year-old children presented in this book were carried out by a number of researchers who share a theoretical background, who use the same methods, and who have worked together for many years.

From the outset, our studies were based on observations of children acting, not in a laboratory setting, but in an environment with which they were familiar (i.e., the day-care center or kindergarten they frequented). We became aware that the observation of children acting spontaneously—in the presence of adults who rarely intervene, but who show that they are interested in the children's activity—contributed to our knowledge of various aspects of development. Videotapes of spontaneous activities, recorded in different situations and then transcribed and analyzed via similar methods, often revealed capacities of very young children that are rarely referred to in the literature (cf. Sinclair, Stambak, Lézine, Rayna, & Verba, 1982/1989; Stambak et al., 1983). It also became clear that different types of play objects often led to different types of activities, and that it thus was illuminating to vary the material conditions. Gradually, we also became aware of the need for collaboration between researchers and caretakers or educators.

Our theoretical framework of reference is that provided by Piaget's constructivism and interactionism. Piagetian theory considers the subject to be

*Translators' note: In references with two dates separated by a slash, the first gives the year of original publication, the second that of the English translation. Quotations have been taken whenever possible from the published English version.

active in the construction of knowledge, and to progress cognitively by transforming the relations with the world of objects as well as with the world of people—not as an organism that acts only in reaction to stimuli provided by the environment. This interaction leads to progressive construction, whereby new acquisitions are integrated into already existing knowledge, either by further elaboration or by a reorganization of existing knowledge. According to Piaget, one of the important mechanisms of progress is that of abstraction, which, especially in the first years of life, consists in detaching from its immediate context an already well-installed activity, still closely linked to a precise moment in time and a precise location in space, thus opening up possibilities for conceptualization.

One of our first studies (Sinclair et al., 1982/1989) concerned children between the ages of 1 and 2, acting individually on various types of objects in the presence of an interested, but nonintervening adult. Clearly, the children's activities were often derived from interactions they had had with others or from what they had seen other people, frequently adults, do (e.g., using a brush on the carpet). In our later research, social interaction, and more specifically peer interaction, hitherto rarely investigated in very young children, became our main object of study.

In his epistemological and psychological theory, Piaget emphasized the importance of interaction between persons who consider themselves equal. He stated that knowledge becomes objectivized only when it is shared with others, and that the necessity of sharing and cooperating is the same at all levels of development, including that of scientific research: objective knowledge is acquired only when "it has been verified (and not simply accepted) by other investigators" (Piaget, 1965b/1971, p. 12). Thus, it is only when our models or systems correspond to those of others that they can lead to further progress. Sharing ideas, discussing and arguing, or more simply playing together are essential ingredients in the construction of knowledge at all ages. Knowledge acquisition is in fact a co-construction in collaboration:

without interchange of thought and cooperation with others, the individual would never come to group his operations into a coherent whole: in this sense, therefore, operational grouping presupposes social life. But, on the other hand, actual exchanges of thought obey a law of equilibrium which again could only be an operational grouping, since to cooperate is also to coordinate operations. The grouping is therefore a form of equilibrium of interindividual actions as well as individual actions, and it thus regains its autonomy at the very core of social life. (Piaget, 1965a, pp. 174–175)

Although Piaget rarely studied interaction between individuals, he considered such interaction to play a constructive part in cognitive development. In *La Construction du Réel Chez l'Enfant* (Piaget, 1937/1954), the chapter on the development of causality includes a section on "causality through imitation"

(p. 249 sqq) and his analysis of infants' actions reported in this section leads him to note "it is therefore very probable . . . that contact with persons plays an essential role in the processes of objectification and externalization" (p. 252). In *Le Langage et la Pensée Chez l'Enfant* (1923, 3rd rev. ed. 1948/1959, p. 250), Piaget remarked that what he called "genuine dialogues," implying discussion and cooperation, appear earlier (before the age of 4) and are also more frequent in exchanges between children than between children and adults. "Not only are exchanges with information more numerous between children, but the information is of a more evolved type. . . . It seems as though the conflict of opinions and intentions opened up a channel for discussion on a higher plane" (1948/1959, p. 246). Unfortunately, it was the notion of "egocentric language," as it was treated in that book, which principally retained the attention of psychologists; although Piaget clearly stated (1948/1959, p. 261) that he was interested in instances where children speak without trying to act on interlocutors and without distinguishing between their own and the point of view of others, he also stated that "socialized language comes no doubt as early as speech itself." Nonetheless, Piaget considered genuine discussion between children to be rare before the age of 4 and he did not study the development of this type of interaction.

Our observations in child-care centers led to our first studies on peer interaction with toddlers in their second year of life (Stambak et al., 1983). We were particularly interested in the role such interaction might play in cognitive development. Our analyses of the communicative and cognitive activities of these children, observed when playing in small groups with the objects at their disposal, showed that they often center their attention on the same idea of what can be done with the objects. Analyzing how these activities unfolded (until the group dispersed or passed on to doing something else) we came to distinguish two types of interaction that appeared to further the acquisition of knowledge.

On the one hand, the children adopt one another's ideas of possible actions and repeat them on the objects they happen to have taken up, whereupon they elaborate the actions further. The repeats are not simple imitations because they are carried out on similar, although not identical objects, or produce the same result by different means (e.g., putting a stick through a wooden ring, and piercing a little ball of modeling clay with a stick; taking several objects out of a box by hand, and emptying a box by turning it over). The children thus show detachment from specific situations and the beginnings of abstraction; the child whose idea was taken up by another as well as the child who took it up are now in the presence of a situation that could not arise had the actions been performed by one child alone. In the first place, the child who initiated the sequence now observes the action as it were from the outside, which, in our opinion, facilitates a detachment from one's own activity as well as a separation between action and object: Both are ingredients of the objecti-

vation of knowledge. In the second place, the children observe the two activities almost simultaneously, which provides greater opportunity for discovering relationships between the particularities of the actions and their effects on the objects than when the same actions are carried out (necessarily in succession) by one child.

On the other hand, the 2-year-olds may start playing together with the same objects. They may decide to put small toys into the same box, or they may start pretend play, as when one child plays at feeding another. Certain types of play can be pursued only with a partner, such as object exchanges or hide-and-seek. This necessity leads to an awareness of new problems: A partner has to be found and an agreement reached on what kind of play is to be shared. At this very early age, we observed genuine preverbal negotiations during which the children communicate their intentions and clarify their ideas to a partner who tries to understand them. Once an agreement to play a certain game is reached, early forms of collaboration can be observed: Each partner in turn elaborates the proposal of the other in order to keep the shared activity going. These nonverbal negotiations sometimes lead to conflicting ideas and desires, but such disagreements are often resolved by strategies that attest an already well-developed social intelligence. Our observations thus reveal various capacities, hitherto underestimated at this age, particularly a capacity for interpersonal coordination, which plays an important part in the acquisition of knowledge.

Thought, in contrast to practical intelligence, operates with signifiers or symbols, and becomes gradually detached from immediate perceptions and actions in the here and now. Just as during the sensorimotor period, action schemes become organized into systems, symbols (in the broad sense of mental representations) also become organized into systems, especially into collective systems (e.g., natural languages, number systems, maps, etc.). We therefore decided to pursue our observational studies in the same situation using the same methods of analysis with children whose representative thought is in full spate of development (i.e., between the ages of 2 and 4).

Like many other authors, we considered that pretend play opens a particularly interesting window of observation onto young children's knowledge. In pretend play, children create symbols by their imaginative use of objects, their actions, gestures, postures and verbalizations, and combine these different behaviors in coordinated symbolizations; symbol creation and combination are two fundamental capacities that underlie human thinking. Symbol construction is a manifestation of cognitive capacities as well as a condition for their development. When Piaget studied rule games (1932/1932) and symbolic play (1945/1951), he focused his analyses and interpretations on the close link between thought and its representational foundations: In both studies he used his results to specify the characteristics of what he then called "intuitive" or "symbolic" thought of children between the ages of 2 and 7.

Several authors (e.g., Bruner, 1972) mentioned that, in play in general and pretend play in particular, one can observe not only the construction of symbols and conventions but also, more generally, a detachment from present spatiotemporal reality. Such freedom from spatiotemporal constraints is of course a characteristic of human language, and several authors have drawn a parallel between the acquisition of language and the beginnings of symbolic play (McCune-Nicolich 1981; Piaget 1945/1951; Vygotsky 1967, and others). But it is equally important to view this detachment from the immediate situation as a feature that distinguishes sensorimotor intelligence from thought. According to Piaget, sensorimotor intelligence is directed by the desire to reach a particular goal via an action and to discover new properties in the physical or social world; thought (from the end of the sensorimotor period onward) adds to this centration a desire for understanding, a focus on the why and how of the success or failure of practical actions. This detachment from the immediate context has yet other characteristics: It makes it possible to see a particular problem as an example of a more general one; similarly, Piaget considered that the capacity to imagine new possibilities is an essential characteristic of cognitive development.

In this perspective, it is possible to specify how the observation of pretend play provides opportunities for apprehending young children's knowledge in various domains.

1. The absence of material constraints in pretend play allows the observation of children's knowing-how and knowing-that before they can make such knowledge explicit. For example, Piaget (1945/1951, obs. 81) described how J. (2;5) pretends to prepare her younger sister's bath: She takes a blade of grass to serve as a thermometer and a big box as a bathtub, and announces the presence of water verbally. She plunges the thermometer into the bath, looks at it, finds the water too hot, waits a moment, puts the thermometer back into the water and says: *It's O.K. Goody!* It is unlikely that at her age she could really have prepared a bath or even helped to get it ready (cf. the difficulties in Example 3, following). But she clearly knows a lot about it; she knows what a thermometer is used for and she also knows that it is a precious instrument to be handled with care, because at the end she puts the blade of grass carefully into a box. Her knowledge could only be shown in pretend play, not in real life.
2. The absence of a focus on actions leading to an observable goal also makes it possible to gain insight into children's socioaffective knowledge. Piaget (1945/1951, obs. 81) reported that J. (2;1), when playing at feeding her doll, speaks to the doll just as her mother speaks to her in order to get her to continue eating: *Another little drop. To please Jacqueline. Eat another little bit.* J. shows that she has interiorized the situation in which she re-

fuses food while she is being encouraged to eat more. She is not reproducing the adult's utterances in a real situation in which she would try to make a real baby eat. Her doll does not eat anything, nor does the doll refuse to eat, thus no observable behavior elicits her encouraging talk and no observable effect follows it.

3. As has often been remarked, pretend play may involve the theatrical production of emotionally charged scenes and allow observation of the means used by children to resolve personal conflict. Piaget (1945/1951, obs. 84) reported how J. (3;11) was not allowed to go into the kitchen where pails of hot water were standing in preparation for a bath. J. said: *Well, then I'll go into a pretend kitchen! Once I saw a little boy who went into a kitchen, and when Odette came with the hot water, he went to the side.* J. continued on this theme, compensating for her frustration, and finished with symbolic acceptance: *So he didn't go to the kitchen any more.* The boy imagined by J. first showed that the adults who stopped him from going near the hot water were wrong: he knew very well not to get too close. J. herself was not given the opportunity to demonstrate this know-how; by inventing the little boy story she denied that the interdiction was justified and nevertheless complied symbolically.

Such features of pretend play are found in individual as well as in collective play. In individual play, however, the child can attribute symbolic meanings to objects and actions without specification or justification. In collective play by contrast, symbolic meanings as well as the theme and elaboration of the fiction must be shared between partners, for the success of collective fiction depends on the coherence and duration of the scenes constructed together; and this calls for harmony between the partners' ideas and desires. Collective pretend play thus allows us to study reciprocal adaptations via explanations and arguments on which the equilibrated exchange of thought between equals depends. In Piaget's theory, this type of discussion is as essential to the construction of objective knowledge as is the equilibrium between assimilation and accommodation to an individual's successful interaction with the world of objects. The study of collective pretend play thus provides opportunities for observing not only young children's knowledge, but also their capacities for constructing equilibrated exchanges of thought. The characteristics of such exchanges were defined by Piaget (1965a, p. 162) with reference to children of say 6 or 7 onward. Grice (1975), in his maxims for adult discussion, provided similar formulations. For Piaget, the three following characteristics are essential:

1. The partners possess a common framework of reference, a shared system of symbols and definitions, in the sense that they do not exclusively use personal symbols and subjective meanings.
2. The partners show that they do not abandon propositions that have been

accepted as valid. This “conservation of propositions” is genuine only if it is the result of a common accord, not when one partner imposes constraints authoritatively.

3. The partners show reciprocity of thought: “their discussion results in shared propositions or in distinct, but reciprocal propositions that can be coordinated.”

In our view, the four studies published in this book confirm the hypothesized privileged status of spontaneous collective pretend play for our understanding of the thinking of young children as well as the special interest of the age of 3. The variety of observational situations (in the familiar surroundings of the day-care center but sometimes in the playground and in the presence of different objects) brought to light several, often unsuspected aspects of sociocognitive development. Without going into details, we can describe some of the findings and explain why they were interesting from our point of view.

All of the contributors noted many of the themes described by others: excursions, picnics, birthday parties, and other events in the children’s daily lives. As has often been pointed out, such play episodes show the children’s knowledge of social events; but we consider the enactment of such themes to have a favorable influence on cognitive development in general. At the age of 3, children are able to function symbolically via the use of language, and also via the attribution of symbolic meanings to objects and actions. This representational ability allows them to play everyday scenes in an abbreviated form, focusing on essential moments. Such temporal compression provides opportunities for the children to apprehend logical, causal, and spatiotemporal relations between activities without the constraints of physical objects and of actions that must be carried out in succession over a certain time. Moreover, this representation is shared; it requires and allows the children to construct explicit links with the past (they often remind one another of an already enacted event) as well as with the future (they propose further developments of the theme). In their schematic, temporally compressed reproductions of familiar events, the children thus show more than their social knowledge; a network of various temporal and causal relations is activated, partly constructed during the play episode itself.

In chapters 1 and 2, the absence of toys that suggest particular themes and symbolic uses (such as cups, plates, combs, dolls, etc.) led the children to construct a shared system of meanings for the symbolic transformation of objects. The children were aware that they needed to establish shared meanings for objects such as small blocks, wooden bars, and the like, if these were to be used in pretend play. They understood that “neutral” objects lend themselves to multiple symbolic uses (each object on its own, or in combination with another object) and in certain episodes, described in chapter 1, they transform the attribution of meanings to the objects into the theme of the play itself. Each

partner makes it clear that an object is treated as if it were something else; the partners often take turns doing this (as in a dialogue), but without creating a scenario or a narrative. In other episodes, the shared system of reference serves to link the various elements of the play theme. The children communicate, often at length, about the imaginary activity to be acted out: A plan is suggested in action or expressed verbally; if necessary, roles are given to the partners, which sometimes leads to negotiations; and their various ideas are clarified and confirmed. The theme and its elaboration are worked out while the fiction is being acted, just as when adult actors engage in improvisation, and this demands a certain removal from one's own pretend actions. The children thus construct the common reference framework that is indispensable for interindividual coordination and the elaboration of the scenario. The strategies by which such shared symbolic frameworks are constructed depend to a large extent on the familiarity of the theme. The analysis of the processes leading to the construction of the framework in different situations brings to light various modalities by which the condition for equilibrated exchanges of thought is brought about.

In chapter 2, which concerns pretend-play episodes in the day-care playground, the authors observed that certain symbolic frameworks were conserved in time and in space by a large number of children and that they served for a variety of pretend-play themes. Such propagation of symbols and rules for pretend play may well be an important constructive factor in the establishment of a sort of microculture within a community of children.

In chapter 3, which describes the activities of small groups playing with a doll and some toy kitchen utensils, the objects at the children's disposal have their own symbolic and social meaning, and it was thus not necessary to construct a reference frame. In this situation, the children are preoccupied with other aspects of their interactions during pretend play. According to Bateson (1955), play in such a situation has two levels, one concerning communication between partners in their fictional roles (mother, baby, etc.), and the other concerning communication between the partners themselves as individuals with their own personality, affinities, and moods. In this chapter, particular attention is paid to the socioaffective aspects of pretend play.

Chapter 4 shows other facets of collective pretend play. The observations were made in a day-care center where the caretakers were interested in puppets, and occasionally gave shows for the children. The episodes reported concern occasions where the children themselves were the puppet masters. The analysis reveals yet other types of knowledge elaborated by children. Their capacity to assimilate the general features of a puppet show (presentation of characters, ways of soliciting the audience's attention, etc.), after having assisted as spectators at only a few shows, are quite astonishing. They immediately entered into the interpersonal relations between the puppet actors. The partners attributed roles to their puppets and staged characters who have similar status

(e.g., two friends, two teachers) as well as characters who have complementary status (e.g., teacher-pupil, aggressor-victim). The interaction between these characters may be conflictual, making the show dramatic. In dramatic scenes, the children manifest their already well-developed knowledge of the kind of relations that may exist, relations that they may have experienced themselves, or observed between others. They also show their knowledge of rules of behavior governing daily life. They distinguish serious transgressions from less serious ones; they know what "crimes" should be punished, and know that the seriousness of the punishment should correspond to the seriousness of the crime. This kind of knowledge often appears in what the children say about the actions they have the puppets perform: They comment upon the events. Just as in the case of knowledge of interindividual relations, we must conclude that their knowledge of the rules of social behavior goes beyond simple know-how. A certain interiorization must have taken place: At earlier ages, children can already behave in real-life situations according to certain social rules and can even foresee reproaches that may follow certain transgressions; but to be able to create fictional situations and to envisage both the role of somebody who judges the behavior of others (usually an adult) and the role of the one who is judged is evidence of knowledge at a higher level.

The importance of analyzing the processes of reciprocal adjustment observed in the different types of collective pretend play needs to be stressed. In all four studies, the authors observed moments when the children tried to come to an agreement, either at the outset or in the course of play. At these times, the children negotiate and show their capacities for mutual adjustment most clearly. They endeavor to conciliate two apparently contradictory desires: that of using the many possibilities in pretend play for developing a theme that pleases each of them personally, and that of having the particular satisfaction of developing a theme together. Sometimes the negotiations are stormy and nearly bring the action to a close. But generally, as in almost all the examples given, the children manage to resolve their conflict and to come to an agreement. Subtle strategies are used to convince partners to accept this or that idea. Sometimes, however, the ideas proposed are not understood. This does not necessarily prevent further elaboration of the play: The children already know how to ask for clarification, and the child whose idea was not understood may be able to be more explicit.

The duration and emotional tone of the negotiations appear to differ according to the type of play. When there are external constraints (such as the necessity to keep the audience amused during a puppet show) negotiations are brief and efficient. The children appear to be aware that the situation requires a quick solution. By contrast, when pretend roles with a clear affective connotation have to be distributed (e.g., who will be the mother, and who the baby) negotiations may become conflictual. This seems to happen often when the children communicate on two different levels, as shown by Schwartzman (1978),