

Pointers For Parents

Taking Time Out To Play With Your Child

(NAPSA)—A parent's day often starts before dawn and ends well after dark. In between, there's the commute, work, shuffling kids to activities, preparing meals and bedtime. With a full slate of responsibilities, many parents rely on the TV or computer to serve as virtual babysitters—after all, it's easier to handle the household chores when the kids are engrossed in their favorite video.

However, active play with children is critical to their physical and mental development. In particular, pretend play, which involves redefining an object's purpose and making up stories about it, is very important to a young child's mental development.

Pretend play can help children develop memory and language skills as they name the objects they use and verbalize their "stories." By playing the role of another person, children begin to learn empathy and understand emotion. Children also become familiar with ordering and sequence by keeping track of each of their imaginary characters' activities.

Pretend play can range from a tea party for favorite doll friends, where tea and water pour from empty cups, to acting out a confusing event in order to make it more understandable. Children use everything from regular household items to specific toys to stimulate their imaginations and create new stories. Blocks may



Playing with tiny dolls can help stimulate children's imagination.

become cars, trucks or trains; string may become spaghetti or hair; and a banana may become a telephone or a microphone.

In addition, certain toys also can encourage pretend play while providing lessons such as developing motor skills, sharpening senses and teaching how to share. Larger, life-size baby dolls may help an older sibling prepare for the birth of a new brother or sister. Small dolls, such as Polly Pocket, may stimulate make-believe fun because their mini size provides a fun twist on reality. Playsets with animal themes, or shops or seasonal scenes, provide backdrops that can help a child's story grow.

Parents can support kids' pretend play by participating and engaging with their child's cast of "imaginary friends" and made-up events, even if they seem out of this world. Playing together lets parents see how their child's imagination and creativity are expanding as their child translates ideas into action.