

LET'S PRETEND!



Encouraging pretend play in children with social communication difficulties

Pretend play is a critical part of children's development. When a child pretends to be a chef stirring soup or an astronaut going to the moon, he's building many different skills, including:

- Language skills
- Social and emotional skills
- Problem-solving and thinking skills

What the research says about pretend play

In young children with autism, studies have shown that:

- better pretend play skills at age 3 and 4 are linked to better language skills at ages 8 and 9.
- the more varied and flexible a young child's pretend play, the more advanced his thinking skills are at ages 8 and 9.

Children with autism or social communication difficulties often do not pretend as often as other children, and when they do, their play tends to be less complex. So adults must take some extra steps to provide them with the opportunities and encouragement they need to learn.

Helping your child learn to pretend

There's a lot you can do to encourage your child to develop his pretend play skills. Here are a few things to think about to help you get started:

Observe how your child is playing now

- Is he using toys in "expected" or intended ways?

If your child is using toys in the way they were intended to be used (for example, stacking rings or banging a toy drum) and he's combining many different actions together (for example, putting a toy car on top of a car ramp, pushing a lever to make the car speed down, and then putting the car back on top of the ramp) then your child has already developed advanced **functional play** skills. This is the stage at which children are ready to learn to pretend. Your child can now learn to pretend using real objects or miniature objects in "expected" ways – for example, he can learn to brush a doll's hair with a comb, or pretend to be a doctor using a toy doctor's kit.



Tip!

If you feel your child may not be ready for pretend play yet, visit the Hanen Autism Corner for other tips and information for how you can encourage your child's learning during everyday activities.

hanen.org/autism

- **Does he already pretend with realistic objects?**

For example, does he pretend to comb a doll's hair with a real brush or give a doll a drink with a miniature tea cup? If so, he's ready for you to help him expand his pretend play skills by **adding more pretend actions to create a sequence** — for example, giving the doll a drink and then wiping its mouth with a cloth. And when your child is already pretending with a sequence of actions, you can help him **pretend with invisible objects** (for example, holding his empty hand up to his ear to talk on a "phone") and **substitute one object for another** (for example, pretending a banana is a phone or a book is a birthday cake).

Join in your child's play

To encourage your child to pretend, you need to get his attention by joining in the play he's already doing.

- **Observe your child as he plays** — Make sure you take the time to observe exactly what your child is doing and how he's pretending. That way, you can include his interests when you join in the play.



- **Join in by imitating your child with your own toy** — For example, if he is "feeding" a teddy bear with a spoon (an early stage of pretend play), you can get your own stuffed animal and spoon and do the same thing. Remember to make a comment, like, "Look, you're feeding Mr. Bear and I'm feeding Mr. Rabbit!" This will get his attention! Then you can interact with one another by going back and forth feeding your toy animals.

Show your child a new pretend play action

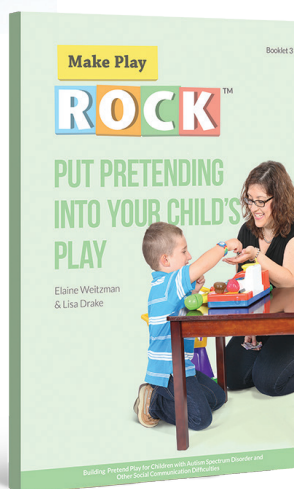
Now that you have your child's attention, show him how to extend his pretend play by adding a new action to make a sequence. For example, if he has a toy kitchen set, you can help him learn to pretend to make soup for his bear before feeding it to him. Model the action by pretending to stir soup in a pot for your stuffed rabbit, making sure to comment at the same time: "Look, I'm making soup for Mr. Rabbit to eat" (as you "stir" the soup with a toy spoon). "He's very hungry!"

Give your child a chance to copy the new pretend action

Once you've shown your child the action, **wait expectantly** to see what he'll do. Waiting patiently, without saying anything, is the best cue you can give your child to tell him it's his turn to do something. If your child doesn't copy your action by making soup for his own bear, you can give him other cues, like:

- **Showing him again** — repeat the new action many times, commenting as you do it, to help your child understand.
- **Telling him what to do while pointing** — point to the toy pot and spoon and say, "Mr. Bear is still hungry! Make him some soup."
- **Using hand over hand help** — you can take your child's hand and help him stir the soup in the pot, commenting, "Look, you're making soup for Mr. Bear!"

Make sure to keep the play fun and keep it going by feeding your bears the food you've made for them!



These ideas are from the new Hanen guidebook, *Put Pretending into Your Child's Play*. In this book, you'll find many more examples and tips for how you can help your child take the next step in pretend play based on his current stage and interests.

Find out more at www.hanen.org/pretendplay.