



# Sociodramatic Pretend Play: A vehicle to emotional self-regulation, language learning and school success

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We know that a child's vocabulary is the number one predictor of *academic* success. But what predicts *overall school success*? Increasingly, professionals are recognizing that it takes a lot more than pre-academic skills like reciting the alphabet and counting for a child to be successful at school (Younger, Garner, Hutchinson, Hirsh-Pasek, & Golinkoff, 2018). School readiness is impacted by children's ability to utilize their social awareness, understanding of emotions, and their language skills to communicate their feelings and needs, meet social expectations and get along with others (Slot, Mudler & Verhagen, 2017). In addition, taking others' perspective and negotiating with peers are among the "soft skills" that become increasingly important as children enter school (Slot, et al., 2017). So what is the key to children developing these "soft skills"? Research suggests that they are cultivated through pretend play – specifically, through dramatic role play where children have the opportunity to engage in emotional self-regulation.

## Emotional self-regulation

Emotional self-regulation is critical to children's long term academic and social success (Housman, 2017). Emotional self-regulation is an ongoing process that involves monitoring, evaluating and modifying emotional reactions to accomplish a goal (Galyer & Evans, 2001; Slot, et al., 2017). In other words, children need to be cool, calm and collected in order to engage and learn from their environment – both socially and academically.

Emotional self-regulation is not the only process responsible for keeping children calm, alert and ready to learn. It is one component of overall self-regulation, which is the body's way of integrating biological, cognitive and emotional information to keep us in our "happy place", or to maintain *homeostasis* (Binns, Hutchinson & Cardy, 2019).

Hanen's e-seminar on Pathways to Promoting Self-Regulation in Young Children describes children who are regulated as being "calm and alert, responsive, and participating" (McGill & Boaden 2019).

However, many children have difficulty with emotional regulation and show the following signs:

- intense emotional responses
- difficulty returning to a calm state
- sudden change in expression
- sudden actions/movement
- over-excited
- difficulty focusing
- difficulty with change

## Emotional self-regulation and language development

Children with language delays are generally poorer at regulating themselves (Aro, Laakso, Maatta, Tolvanen, & Poikkeus, 2014). Vocabulary, including feelings and “mental state words” that refer to the mind (e.g. *think, feel, know, expect*, etc.) help children conceptualize and begin to manage what they are feeling (Binns, Hutchinson & Cardy, 2019). However, if children are dysregulated, they have a harder time paying attention to and absorbing new vocabulary that they are exposed to in conversations. As a result, the relationship between language learning and emotional regulation is reciprocal. Any gains in a child’s ability to engage in emotional self-regulation should make it easier to learn language, and vice versa.

## How does pretend play promote emotional self-regulation?

Pretend play – specifically sociodramatic pretend play – offers a unique opportunity for children to practice emotional regulation. By 3 years of age, typically developing children begin to engage in role play (Halliday-Scher, Urberg & Kaplan-Estrin, 1995). When children take on a role and act out a situation, they get the chance to practice experiencing the associated feelings of that character on their own terms (Galyer & Evans, 2001). For example, a child who is typically afraid of heights, can pretend to be a brave firefighter who willingly climbs up a “ladder” to save the teddy bear.

Pretend play, therefore, sets the stage for emotional self-regulation by offering opportunities to practice the following:

- taking on an alternative state of mind and experimenting with emotions
- expressing emotions while in character that may contrast with the child’s actual feelings
- “feeling” and therefore managing emotions
- acting out highly arousing emotional events
- negotiating with peers regarding the development of the play

## The connection between pretend play and emotional self-regulation

Correlational studies that have investigated the relationship between pretend play and emotional self-regulation reveal some interesting themes:

- **What happens in play can be generalized to real-life** – preschoolers who engage in more emotional regulation during play have better emotional regulation in real life (Galyer & Evans, 2001). In addition, pretend play is significantly associated with emotional regulation outside of the play when observed in a naturalistic classroom play setting with peers (Slot, Mulder & Verhagen, 2017).
- **Frequent play for longer periods is key** – children who get lots of practice for longer durations engaging in the emotions associated with role-play, show a strong relationship with emotional regulation abilities outside of play (Galyer & Evans, 2001). In addition, more experience with sociodramatic play is related to increased emotional regulation one year later (Cabrera, Karberg & Malin, 2017).
- **It is less important to resolve the conflict** – frequency and duration of play (not conflict resolution within play) shows a strong relationship with emotional regulation abilities (Galyer & Evans, 2001).
- **Having one playful parent is enough** – a longitudinal study investigating the impact of low-income parents’ “playfulness” on children’s language and emotional development shows that having one playful parent is enough to predict better emotional regulation in toddlers. In this study, playfulness was measured using the Parental Playfulness Scale, which examined parents’ creativity, imagination, humour and/or curiosity during play (Cabrera, Karberg & Malin, 2017).

Some professionals are already integrating opportunities for emotional self-regulation in play. For example, child life specialists use sociodramatic pretend in their practice to give medically fragile children an emotional outlet for their

complicated experiences at hospitals. They give children the opportunity to use real medical materials to take on the role of doctors and nurses. They also make comments during play that connect feelings to distinct behaviours (e.g. “When the bear feels sick, he cries”) (Luckenbill & Zide, 2017).

## Building the emotional self-regulation of children with language delays

Difficulties with receptive and expressive vocabulary can really limit children’s ability to engage in sociodramatic pretend play. Caregivers can support these skills by offering more scaffolding and explicit modelling of actions in play and the associated language. However, it may take some time before these children are ready to roleplay appropriately. Once a child is able to engage in some basic pretend such as mixing and serving toy food, the adult can begin to introduce the concept of role play by adopting a role, such as putting on a chef’s hat and talking about cooking for customers at a restaurant. As always, it is important to follow the child’s lead and include his or her interests.

When engaging in sociodramatic play with young children, especially those with language delays, there are some important guidelines:

1. **Aim to stay in role, without emphasizing conflict resolution** – *maintaining emotions* (vs resolving them) gives a child an ongoing opportunity to work through emotional arousal, appraisal and emotional regulation. More practice with this is linked to better emotional regulation in everyday interactions (Galyer & Evans, 2001)
2. **Talk about emotions and use mental state words (e.g. *like, think, feel, believe, etc.*)** – putting a child’s feelings, wants and perspectives into words helps him recognize how he feels and better understand the perspectives of others (Nilsson & de López, 2016). For example, “*You feel scared to get a needle from the doctor because it hurts.*”
3. **Model emotionally adaptive behavior** – just as an adult would model language for children to use, it is also important to model adaptive behaviours that children can imitate (Galyer & Evans, 2001). For example, “*I’m feeling frustrated. I’m going to take a deep breath.*”
4. **Aim to extend the pretend play for more turns to increase duration; 10 minutes recommended** – extending the play gives children more opportunities to hear and practice language (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002). Increasing the duration of sociodramatic play gives them more time to engage in emotional self-regulation.
5. **Encourage other children to join in and consider pairing a more isolated child with a sociable one** – more children equate to increased opportunities for negotiation, exposure to different perspectives and the ability to hear and use language. Pairing a more withdrawn child with someone more sociable can provide the less skilled child with positive social experiences as well as appropriate play and language models (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002).
6. **Take on a role yourself and make comments that encourage children to role play** – if a child is holding a toy cup in her “kitchen”, try making a comment like, “*I’m so thirsty! Can I buy a drink from your store?*” to initiate role play.
7. **During group play, set up interactions from outside the group by making a suggestion** – when children are playing, observe what they’re doing with toys. Make a related comment that might stimulate sociodramatic play. For example, “*Look at all the tools you’ve collected in your wagon! I think the fridge in the kitchen centre is broken. We could use a repair man!*”

## Building the emotional self-regulation of children on the autism spectrum

For children with autism, sociodramatic play can be especially difficult, given their challenges with perspective taking and theory of mind (the ability to understand the mental states of oneself and others based on observable behaviors) (Nilsson & de López, 2016). Research shows that children with specific language impairment (SLI) also demonstrate challenges with theory of mind (Nilsson & de López, 2016). These children may need practice with more foundational pretend play as well as lots of conversations around likes, dislikes and feelings. During role play, children with autism will benefit from explicit explanations linking feelings, actions and behaviours. For example, “Look at her face, she’s scrunching it up and holding the sock far away from her. She doesn’t like the smell and she must think it’s *disgusting!*”

### Summary

Emotional self-regulation allows a child to recognize and regulate their own emotions, which is a skill critical to maintaining a calm level of arousal that is necessary for learning. Adequate knowledge of one’s own emotional states makes it easier to understand the thoughts, feelings and perspectives of others which, in turn, helps children to relate better to their peers and adjust more easily to the social nuances at school. We now know that the Hanen strategies that we have been using to build language through play can also foster emotional self-regulation when applied in the context of sociodramatic play.

For more information on building children’s theory of mind skills, check out Hanen’s TalkAbility™ guidebook as well as our article on developing theory of mind through pretend play, *Let’s Pretend: The relationship between play and theory of mind in typical children and children with ASD*.

For more information on how different types of play foster early communication development see our other article from this month’s issue of Wig Wag Minute, *Does pretend play set the stage for early communication skills?*

## References

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### About The Hanen Centre

*Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.*

*For more information, please visit [www.hanen.org](http://www.hanen.org).*

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