

SYMBOLIC PLAY

What Is This Developmental Skill?

Symbolic play is the ability to use one object, action, or idea to represent something else. A child may use a block as a phone, pretend an empty cup contains a drink, or act as though a doll is a real baby. This reflects growing imagination and abstract thinking.

How Does This Normally Develop?

Symbolic play often begins during the second year of life. Children first imitate familiar routines, such as feeding or putting a doll to bed. Later, they create longer stories, assign roles, and use objects in flexible ways. Language development helps children describe and expand their pretend ideas.

How Can Neglect Interfere with Its Development?

Children learn pretend play through observation, shared attention, and repeated interactions with caregivers. When these experiences are limited, play may remain concrete or repetitive. Chronic stress may also keep children focused on immediate safety rather than imagination.

What Might This Look Like?

A child may rarely pretend, use toys only literally, repeat the same short sequence, or struggle to create stories. Some children repeatedly reenact themes involving danger, abandonment, or control and become distressed when others change the storyline.

Parenting Implications

Provide dolls, figures, animals, dress-up materials, and everyday objects. Follow the child's lead and add ideas gently without directing the play. Read stories together and invite the child to act them out or create different endings.

From Understanding to Attunement

Difficulty pretending does not mean a child lacks creativity. Symbolic play grows when children feel safe enough to explore ideas, relationships, and experiences beyond what is immediately present.