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## Pretend play may not drive child development as much as once thought

December 2012, Vol 43, No. 11

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Using only the power of their imaginations, children can transform a box into a boat, or a living room into a peril-fraught jungle. But while many famous theorists, including Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, have posited that pretending fuels children's intellectual and creative development, that may not be the case, suggests University of Virginia psychology professor Angeline Lillard, PhD, online in *Psychological Bulletin*. (<http://psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/2012-22641-001/>)

After reviewing 150 studies on pretend play conducted over the last 50 years, Lillard and her colleagues conclude that there's no solid evidence that pretend play leads to creativity, problem-solving, intelligence, emotional regulation, storytelling and other abilities. Most studies on the topic, the researchers found, suffered from methodological flaws.

"We enjoy pretending so much, we want it to be a positive thing for child development," Lillard says. "Every time there is a glimmer of a result, researchers really grab onto it and blow it up."

University of Miami educational psychology professor Doris Bergen, PhD, who wrote commentary on Lillard's article, agrees that past research on pretend play isn't as robust as once thought. "Many of the studies that said they are studying pretend play ... were really quite directive, with adults giving children objects to play with and telling them what to do and when to do it," she says. "Real pretend play often happens far away from adults, occurs spontaneously and develops over the course of hours or entire summer afternoons."

While Bergen expects that future research will find academic benefits for pretend play, she hopes that psychologists won't lose sight of the fact that having a rich inner life may be its own reward. "Pretend play doesn't have to be educational to be important," she says. "It's a vital and meaningful part of children's lives."

—Sadie Dingfelder

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