



Boosting Children's Self-Control with Imaginary Play

This is a summary of information from Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child.

Parents and teachers can help children develop self-control by engaging them in play where they can practice certain skills. One activity is make-believe or pretend play. By making up their own rules for the roles they take, children think through how a person might act in that role, and what that person would or would not do. Following rules and acting out pretend roles lets children practice self-control while having fun. Younger children may need more support in this kind of play. But as children's skills grow, adults should give less support so the child can be more independent.

Play ideas may be taken from the child's everyday life, such as pretending to be a parent or a teacher. Both the child and the adult stick to their roles as parent/teacher or child. For example, the "teacher" might pretend to be give directions to a class. Here are some ways parents and teachers can support children's make-believe play:

- Children can learn about roles and settings outside their everyday life to use in play by taking field trips, having books read to them, and watching videos.
- Make sure children have a variety of toys to use in their pretend play as props. Younger children might need more realistic toys to use as props, such as a toy phone. Older children are more likely to be able to use other things for props, such as using a banana as a phone. Using everyday things in different ways helps children build flexible thinking skills.
- Let children make their props themselves. This helps children practice planning and carrying out actions to reach a goal. It also builds working memory, the ability to keep information in mind long enough to use it.
- Have children make a plan to guide their play. They can decide who they will pretend to be, what they will do, and then act it out in play. This helps children practice self-control by keeping in the role they have chosen and following the plan.

Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2014). *Enhancing and Practicing Executive Function Skills with Children from Infancy to Adolescence*. Retrieved from <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/activities-guide-enhancing-and-practicing-executive-function-skills-with-children-from-infancy-to-adolescence/>