



# Speech-Language Pathology

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## Symbolic Play: The Building Blocks of Imagination

It is important for children to learn to pretend or imagine. They begin to do this by getting an idea about what they want to do (i.e. a tea party; police officer, etc.). Once they have an idea, they can use toys in unexpected ways to help them pretend to do something. Children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) have great difficulty pretending. One part of pretending is using one object to represent another. This is called symbolic play. We know that when children with ASD use objects to pretend, they say more words (Smith, Miranda, & Zaidman-Zait, 2007). Below are some ways you can teach your child how to pretend:

### Ways to use toys “symbolically:”

- A facial tissue can be used as a blanket for a doll
- A stick can be used as a microphone.
- An empty paper towel roll can be used as a musical instrument or telescope
- A block can be used as a car or train

### The Pretend Play “Team:”

- Involve the whole family, but begin with the family members that live with or are most familiar to your child—Mom, Dad, siblings, grandparents, etc.
- Once your child is comfortable, less-familiar family members, friends, and neighbors can play too!

### Beginning to Pretend:

- As much as possible, involve your child in real household routines (e.g. making dinner, doing laundry, etc.)

- Once your child is familiar with your daily household routines, re-create them in a pretend manner. For example:
- Make a pretend meal with play food
- Re-create bath time or bed time with a doll
- Act out familiar community routines with your child (e.g. going through a drive through; to a restaurant; to the video store, to the grocery store, etc.)
- Don't forget that you can use symbolic objects too!

### Change it up!

- Vary the play routine by using different items. For example:
- Change the meal that is made with the play food (e.g. make breakfast instead of dinner)
- Change the item that is given a bath to an animal or different doll
- Change the routine that is done with a doll (e.g. if your child usually gives her doll a bath, this time have her make a meal for the doll)
- Change the restaurant in a community pretend play routine

### Sequence Play Routines:

- Create a routine where a doll is given a bath followed by bedtime; or a child drives a car to the grocery store, followed by a restaurant