

Pretend Play and Fantasy: What if Montessori Was Right?

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ABSTRACT—*Pretend play and fantasy are staples of childhood, supported by adults' provision of encouraging tools (like dress-up clothing and play kitchens) and by media. Decades ago, Maria Montessori developed a system of education based on close observation of children, and she concluded that pretend play and fantasy were not as helpful for children's development as the zeitgeist suggested (and still suggests). In this article, we present her views and relevant evidence, and ask: What if she was right? What if, as a culture, we are putting great effort and faith into activities and contexts for children that we believe help development but that might actually be less helpful than engaging in the real world?*

KEYWORDS—*pretend play; fantasy; Montessori*

The subset of play activities we call pretend play are a signature of the preschool years. Such play occurs when one intentionally projects a mental representation onto reality in a spirit of fun

(Lillard, 2015). During their second year, children around the world begin to use objects as other objects (Roopnarine, 2011). In the following years, they begin to use imaginary objects and project mental representations of different people onto themselves and their playmates, acting out scenes in sociodramatic play. Children everywhere pretend to do the activities they see adults doing (Gaskins, 2013; Lancy, 2016), and in some cultures, encouraged at times by media, they also pretend to be fantastical beings or superheroes (Haight, Wang, Fung, Williams, & Mintz, 1999).

A common view is that pretend play (whether fantastical or replicative) is essential to healthy development, engendering other positive developments such as creativity and intelligence (Ginsburg, 2007; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009; Paley, 2005). However, evidence for this idea is problematic (Lillard et al., 2013), and anthropologists often balk at the concept because in many cultures, pretend play is far less common, yet children everywhere become competent adults (Gaskins, 2013; Lancy, 1996; Parmar, Harkness, & Super, 2004; Singer, Singer, DiAgostino, & Delong, 2009; Tudge, Brown, & Freitas, 2011). In many cultures, children as young as 4–6 years care for younger siblings, tend herds in remote pastures, prepare family meals, and help run shops. Unlike parents in the United States, parents in many other cultures neither encourage pretending with toys nor instigate and engage in pretending with their children (Roopnarine, 2011). Instead, children are more likely to engage in activities with real objects and people (Tudge et al., 2011).

Reflecting local adult values, traditional Western preschools typically provide many toys to encourage pretend play, such as doll houses and kitchen props (Krafft & Berk, 1998), as do alternative schools like Reggio Emilia and Waldorf/Steiner (Edwards, 2002; Kirkham & Kidd, 2015). They also support fantasy, and their instructors read more fictional than informational materials to children (Kotaman & Tekin, 2017; Pentimonti, Zucker, & Justice, 2011). Montessori schools are an exception: They do not have pretend play or fantasy materials, and they have been criticized for these omissions (Kirkham & Kidd, 2015; Soundy, 2009).

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Why did Maria Montessori not encourage pretend play and fantasy in the classroom, and might she have been on to something? In this article, we explore this idea. We begin by briefly describing Montessori education (for more descriptions, see Gobry, 2018; Lillard, 2017; any of Montessori's books). Then we discuss Montessori's views of pretend play and toys that support it, as well as relevant research, and then repeat this plan with regard to fantasy. We close with a summary of our findings.

MONTESSORI EDUCATION IN BRIEF

Montessori education was developed in the first half of the 20th century by one of the first women in Italy to be trained as a physician. Maria Montessori worked initially with atypically developing children, then with low-income children, and finally expanded her work to children of all social classes around the world. Her primary source of evidence was her own observations, and her clinical aim was to support healthy development (Elkind, 1967). Montessori classrooms serve children in 3-year age spans (from birth to 3 years, 3–6 years, and so on, to age 18) with specific sets of didactic materials that are replaced gradually with books. Children get individual lessons (typically from birth to age 6) or small-group lessons (typically from age 6 on) with the materials, and then choose among materials they know how to use during 3-hr periods intended to encourage deep concentration on work. The materials are self-correcting (i.e., children can recognize and fix their own mistakes), so teachers do not mark (or even give) assignments; the teacher's function is to observe children carefully and time presentations of new materials appropriately for each child, connecting the child to the didactic environment. Because children are free to choose and receive neither external rewards nor punishment, in theory, they gravitate naturally to work that is challenging but do-able—similar to the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1967)—and repeat exercises until they master them. Montessori education incorporates two key features of play that Montessori considered crucial to self-development (Montessori, 2017): Children engage in activities voluntarily for their own sake, and they repeat the activities often (Burghardt, 2011). But unlike play, Montessori activities are real and directed to real ends. A key example is the Practical Life activities (e.g., table washing and snack preparation) children do in preschool with child-sized implements that are the closest things in the classrooms to toys.

PRETEND PLAY

Pretend play is encouraged by toys, and in examining Montessori's view of pretend play we begin with toys, as discussed in her book, *The Absorbent Mind* (Montessori, 1967/1995). After describing how infants unconsciously absorb features of the world to which they are exposed, she noted a profound change around age 3, whereby children become conscious and long-

term autobiographical memory begins. At this stage, she suggested, the mind still absorbs reality, but it is “helped and enriched by active experience” (p. 168), engendered by a child's hands. However, European children of the time were typically restricted to handling toys and sand (in sandboxes), which she thought unfortunate:

In countries where the toy making industry is less advanced, you will find children [...] calmer, more sensible and happy. Their one idea is to take part in the activities going on about them. They are more like ordinary folk using and handling the same things as the grownups. (p. 168)

Based on such observations, Montessori classrooms offer Practical Life exercises in which each child “can imitate the actions he sees in his home, or in the country in which he lives” with “implements specially made for him, of the right size to suit his diminutive proportions and strength” (p. 169). These implements are like toys in that they are small, yet they are used for functional purposes. “It was the children themselves who showed that they preferred [...] the small ‘real life’ utensils to toys” (p. 169), Montessori wrote. Montessori observed that being given the opportunity to engage in real activities not only made children happier than playing with toys, but also facilitated their self-development, which she saw as more important. This contrasts starkly with Vygotsky (1967), whose view that children develop through pretend play is more common in our culture today. Vygotsky considered pretend play a zone of proximal development, in that when pretending, children can perform activities they cannot yet perform outside of pretending.

Initially, Montessori put toys in the classroom. “We started by equipping the child's environment with a little of everything and left the children to choose those things they preferred. Seeing that they took certain things and that the others remained unused, we eliminated the latter” (Montessori, 1967/1995, p. 223). She went on to say that the same objects were chosen by children all over the world, making it “very clear that the children needed these things. A child chooses what helps him to construct himself. At first we had many toys, but the children always ignored them” (p. 223) in the context of the realistic activities available to them in Montessori classrooms.

Experimental Evidence

Thus, Montessori classrooms lack toys that support pretend play because Montessori found that children preferred doing real things when given the opportunity. We recently tested this preference by showing preschoolers a book with nine pairs of pictures. The pictures showed children engaged in real and pretend versions of the same activity, and we asked children which they would rather do—the pretend or the real activity (Taggart, Heise, & Lillard, 2018). The activities were ones young children could do or pretend to do: eat ice cream, ride a horse, bake cookies, feed a baby, cut vegetables, talk on a

telephone, ride a tractor, go fishing, and wash dishes. At no age did children prefer pretend activities; 3-year-olds had no preference, and 4- to 6-year-olds strongly preferred real activities. We also studied whether children who went to Montessori schools preferred pretend activities, since one might think they are deprived of opportunities to pretend. Children in Montessori schools also preferred the real activities, even more strongly than other children (Taggart, Fukuda, & Lillard, in press).

Next, we examined whether children's choices for real or pretend activities based on looking at a book of pictures (as in the first study, hereafter called the book task) aligned with their choices when given the opportunity to engage in each of those activities (Taggart, Rauén, Al Kallas, & Lillard, 2018). We provided 3- to 6-year-olds with eight toy and real versions of objects that could be used in the laboratory: a camera, a vacuum, a stethoscope, crayons and paper, a recorder (musical instrument), a spray bottle and cleaning cloth, a microscope, and a box of cereal with a bowl. One by one, we labeled and placed each pretend object on a shelf on one side of the room and its paired real object on a shelf on the other side. Children were given the opportunity to play with whatever objects they wanted for 10 min, after which we asked them to choose and justify their choice using the book task. Overall, children spent significantly more time at the shelf that contained the real objects; breaking the children into subgroups, 3- and 4-year-olds were ambivalent and 5- and 6-year-olds strongly preferred real activities. Children's preferences on the book task were significantly related to their behavior, but all children preferred real activities on the book task more strongly after having interacted with pretend and real objects—in this study, just 20% of all choices on the book task were pretend, and only three children (two of them 3-year-olds) chose more than three of the eight pretend activities from the book. This suggests that the Montessori children in the previous study preferred real activities because they had many opportunities to interact with real objects in their Montessori classrooms.

Across these experiments, children's justifications for their choices were similar. Children preferred real activities because they liked to feel efficacious and to accomplish real things. When children chose pretend activities, it was because they were afraid, unable, or not permitted to do the real activity. In summary, these studies suggest that given equal opportunities to engage in real or pretend activities, children prefer to do real things with real objects rather than to engage in pretend activities with toys. These findings support Montessori's conviction that providing many toys for pretend play is not aligned with what most children want.

What if children simply do not know what is good for them? Perhaps pretending is important for healthy development, even if children do not prefer it. But what if Montessori was right? What if it is better for children's development to engage in real activities and have opportunities to feel like an efficacious participant in the work of the family or society, yet as a culture we

spend tremendous amounts of time and money encouraging pretend play as if it were the superlative activity of early childhood? According to Montessori:

Although the children in our first school could play with some really splendid toys, none cared to do so. This surprised me so much that I decided to help them play with their toys, showing them how to handle the tiny dishes, lighting the fire in the doll's kitchen, and placing near it a pretty doll. The children were momentarily interested but then went off on their own. Since they never freely chose these toys, I realized that in the life of a child [pretend] play is perhaps something of little importance which he undertakes for the lack of something better to do. A child feels that he has something of greater [importance] to do than to be engaged in such trivial occupations. He regards [pretend] play as we would regard a game of chess or bridge. These are pleasant occupations for hours of leisure, but they would become painful if we were obliged to pursue them at great length. (Montessori, 1966, p 12)

FANTASY

Pretend play is sometimes called imaginative play (Singer et al., 2009) and fantasy play (Paley, 2005). Montessori saw fantasy as expressing “unsatisfied desire” (Montessori, 1997, p. 41), an inability to adapt to reality (like Piaget, who was president of the Swiss Montessori Society; Baumann, 1999). Instead of supporting fantasy in its own right, Montessori teachers use children's fantasy play behaviors as clues to how they might help connect children to what is real. Montessori thought that understanding reality was the best use of the imagination. “We often forget that imagination is a force for the discovery of truth” (Montessori, 1967/1995, p. 177; see also Taylor, 2013), she wrote. She observed that once children concentrated their imagination on real things, they lost interest in fantasy (Montessori, 1989, pp. 45–46), and that the real world offers abundant material to stimulate children's minds.

Experimental Evidence

Just as children prefer real activities to pretend ones, experiments show they prefer real stories to fantasy ones (e.g., Barnes, Bernstein, & Bloom, 2015), at least when fantasy is not confounded with familiarity (Robinson, Larsen, Haupt, & Mohlman, 1997), as it often is in American preschools where fantasy books are far more common (Mantzicopoulos & Patrick, 2011). Both teachers and parents believe that preschoolers prefer fantasy and expose children to it more than to books about real life (Pentimonti et al., 2011). This matters to learning: Children generalize content less from fantastical and cartoon books than from realistic books (Richert & Smith, 2011; Walker, Ganea, & Gopnik, 2014). In addition, watching fantasy animation apparently interferes with executive function (Lillard, Drell, Richey, Bogusweski, & Smith, 2015). Perhaps because our brain evolved to process the natural world (Geisler, 2008), processing fantasy

can overwhelm neural resources required for executive function tasks.

Yet some research suggests that fantasy can confer advantages; under certain circumstances, preschoolers perform more optimally on tasks during or after they are exposed to fantasy. In one study, an adult read a story about two magical events, either before or after children were asked to solve a problem in an analogical transfer task (Hopkins & Lillard, 2018). In this kind of task, children are shown a problem solution in one domain that they need to transfer to a problem in a different domain, like using a stick to reach something they cannot reach with their body. When the magical events (e.g., walking through a solid wall) happened *before* the solution was presented, 5-year-olds transferred the solution to a new problem; when they happened *after* the solution was presented, the children did not transfer the solution. In another study, preschoolers revealed a deeper understanding of the mental state of pretense when exemplified by fantasy characters (Sobel, 2006). One interpretation is that static (unanimated) portrayals of magic, in moderation, attract children's attention, which improves their learning and reasoning. Supporting this, in one study, researchers initially found superior syllogistic reasoning in fantasy contexts, but they later identified attention as the cause and concluded that other means of getting children's attention were as effective as fantasy (Harris & Leever, 2000). In summary, fantasy might not uniquely assist learning so much as attract attention, which can also be done by realistic means, and fantasy of the sort we typically present to children can interfere with learning. Imagination is a tool that can help children understand reality, but children's media often presents animated portrayals of what is not and could never be true. Again, according to Montessori:

If what is called the infant imagination is the product of "immaturity" of the mind, the first thing to do [...] is to enrich his mind by knowledge and experience based on reality. And having given him these, we must allow him to *mature in liberty*. It is from freedom [in] development that we may expect the manifestations of his imagination. [...] The power to imagine always exists, whether or not it has a solid basis on which to rest, and materials with which to build. (Montessori, 1917/1965, pp. 203–205)

SUMMARY

Our culture places high value on children's pretend experiences, as indicated by the number of toys in Western homes and preschools, and the relative lack of implements intended to encourage young children's engagement in real tasks. We also provide children with abundant fantasy: Many children's books feature animals that talk, and many children's television shows are animated with impossible actions. Adults bestow pretend and fantasy on children because they think it is fun and desirable for children, and because they believe it is crucial to healthy development (Parmar et al., 2004; Pentimonti et al., 2011). The

amount of time middle-class American children spend in pretend play is consistent with this: In one study of children observed at home, 4-year-olds pretended about 1 in every 5 min (Haight & Miller, 1993); in another, they engaged in far more play than realistic tasks such as chores (Tudge et al., 2006).

Yet research suggests that children prefer reality. At age 3, they do not prefer pretending to real activities, and by age 5, they clearly prefer engaging in real activities and reading books about real people and events. Furthermore, reality is more useful for their development in many cases. Fantasy interferes with learning more than it helps, and the help it provides might be due to engaging children's attention, which can be done using realistic means. Given these findings, why do parents and most preschools persist in valuing pretend over real, for example, by providing toy kitchens but not involving children routinely in preparing meals?

We know of no good data on the issue, but suggest a socioecological framework to answer this question. In most cultures, and our own culture in years past, children worked alongside adults gathering food and in other domestic activities, and children incorporated play into those activities. With the Industrial Revolution, adults moved into factories and coal mines, and children came with them until around 1900, when child labor laws were enacted in concert with compulsory schooling laws. This initiated a sharp division between the daytime activities of children and adults, although young children played in school. However, recently, the testing movement has pushed didactic instruction downward into preschools (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). Outside of school hours, children's activities today are more organized (e.g., sports, music lessons), reducing time for both play and the real contributory activities characteristic of Montessori Practical Life. In addition, increased watching of television and engaging in other media (Singer et al., 2009) has usurped time when children might engage in play or real activities. In general, over the past two centuries, adults have increasingly directed children's play (Chudacoff, 2011).

Parents' reluctance to engage children in real activities today is also likely due to increasing concerns about safety (Singer et al., 2009; Valentine & McKendrick, 1997), as well as their own time constraints since involving children in activities tends to lengthen the time it takes to accomplish them (Lancy, 2016). In addition, the cultural zeitgeist tells parents that play is the superlative developmental activity, so when children are not in school or at their structured after-school activities, parents with sufficient funds give children playrooms full of toys in which to spend their time. In effect, children are relegated to "play chess" all the time. But clearly, children prefer real activities, and these activities may be more helpful for development.

Thus, the research appears to support Montessori's observations and counter common beliefs and intuitions. So we ask: What if she was right, that real objects and activities, and a grounding in reality (see Lillard & Woolley, 2015) are better for

development? What would acknowledging her truth mean for our choices of toys and activities, children's media, and preschool curricula? While at home, children today spend most of their waking hours in front of television, where most of the content they view is fantastical; wealthier children also have masses of toys to play with. Children might instead watch realistic shows about nature and other cultures, read realistic books, and participate in hands-on activities that allow them to contribute to family life. In preschools, activities could be more clearly related to real life, so children would learn math by measuring things they need to measure, like ingredients in cooking. Children could have more opportunities to do real things and learn real skills.

To be sure, play and imagination are great sources of joy and discovery, key elements of what we call the good life. Yet perhaps in our enthusiasm for the endless possibilities of the human imagination, we push children into fantastical realms when reality could in fact be a better point of departure for children's journeys into the unknown. What if Montessori was right?

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