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The Child's Right to Play

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USA



*American Association for
the Child's Right to Play*

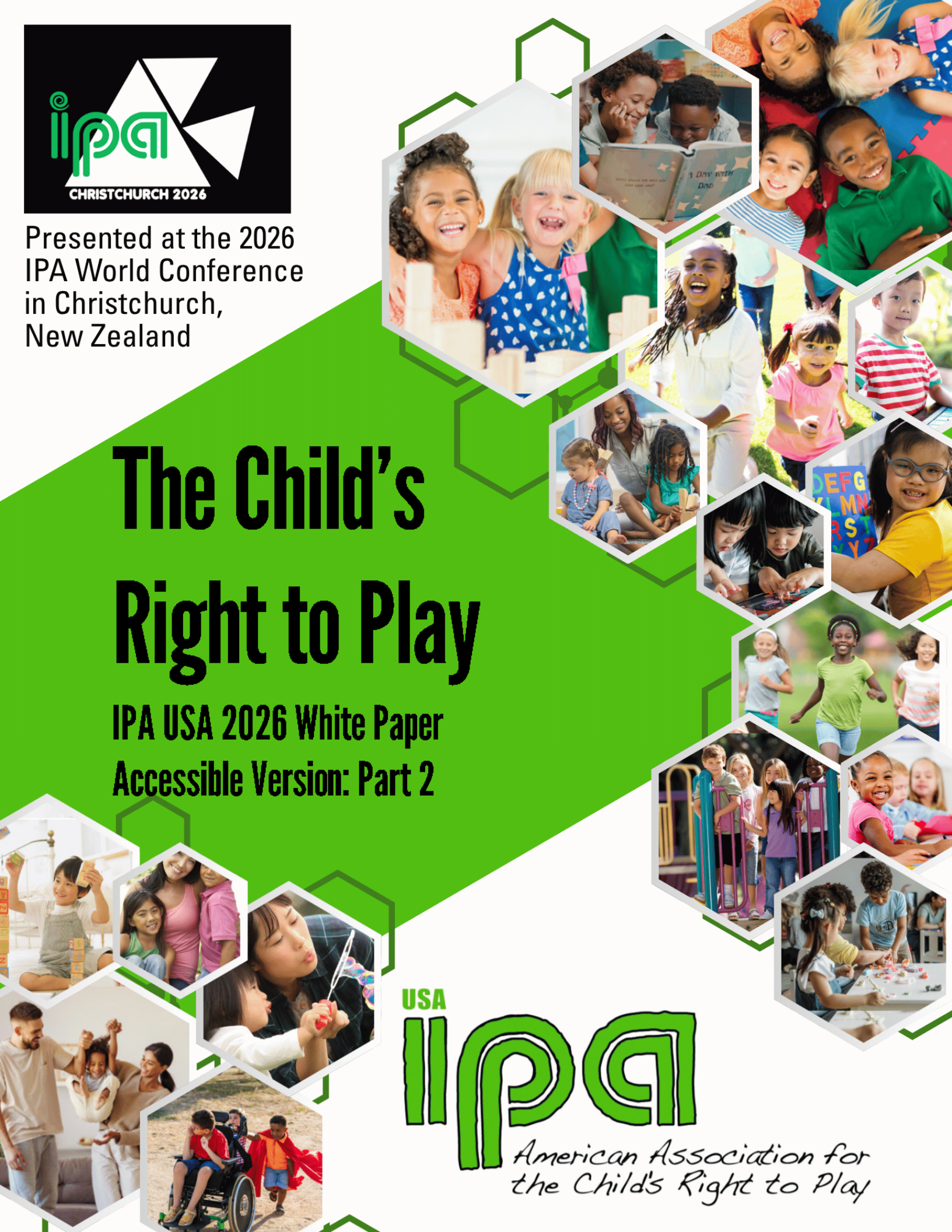


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Executive Summaries

Executive Summaries are organized by category, followed by author.



Advocating for Play with Parents and Caregivers

Parents and caregivers are among the most important advocates for children's right to play. The choices adults make, the environments they create, and the support they provide can profoundly influence children's opportunities for exploration, imagination, learning, and joy. The articles in this category highlight the essential role families play in protecting and promoting play in everyday life. From supporting pretend play and fostering meaningful family interactions through games to empowering parents as advocates for playful childhoods, these authors explore the many ways adults can nurture children's development through play. They also challenge caregivers to step back, recognizing that much of the richest learning happens when children have the freedom to direct their own play. Together, these articles provide research, practical strategies, and advocacy tools to help families create play-rich environments that support healthy development, strong relationships, and joyful childhoods.

Authors

Press Start. Activating Family Voices to Advance Playful Solutions

Jenn Beideman, MPA

Get-out-of-the-Way of Play: A Call-to-Action to Educate Parents

About Their Role in Play

Gennie Gorback, MEd & Kate Allen Fox, MPP

Indoor Play: Board and Card Games and Their Role in Parent-Supported Play

Abby Loebenberg, PhD

How Parents Can Support Play

Bengi Sullu, PhD

Imaginary Companions as a Window into Pretend Play and Child Development

Rebecca Wax, BA & Myae Han, PhD

Press Start. Activating Family Voices to Advance Playful Solutions

Jenn Beideman, MPA

Introduction

Play is fundamental for children's health, development, and overall well-being. Despite its many proven benefits, far too many children across the country still lack quality, safe, and accessible opportunities in their neighborhood (Gordon-Larsen et al., 2006). At a time of rising mental health challenges, social disconnection, and widening inequities, play is becoming increasingly critical for supporting children's overall health and well-being (Rigolon et al., 2021; Tonkin & Whitaker, 2021; International Play Association, 2020). Parents, residents, and youth living in their neighborhood know it best. Often, families know what they want to see in their neighborhood but lack the understanding to navigate complex government institutions.

Conclusion

Local change requires coordinated action and consistent advocacy. When families align around a shared vision for play, municipalities adjust policies, redirect resources, and formalize support for child-centered infrastructure. Families can get involved to make change in their neighborhood by: getting to know neighborhood administrators and public servants; letting your voice be heard at public meetings; getting to know your elected officials; recruiting your friends and neighbors; and getting involved with organizations that invest in the power of play. Progress does not occur by chance. It follows organized demand, credible data, and sustained public pressure. Parents, caregivers, and youth who mobilize effectively and consistently to transform their neighborhoods to support safe, inclusive play for everyone.

Get-out-of-the-Way of Play: A Call-to-Action to Educate Parents About Their Role in Play

Gennie Gorback, MEd & Kate Allen Fox, MPP

Introduction

Many parents value play for their children but misunderstand their role in creating a playful environment and how best to support play. Tired, busy parents may also overlook the value of child-directed play because of perceived safety issues, concerns about mess, and misunderstandings about its inherent developmental value. Parents may feel pressured to ensure their children advance academically and equate learning with structured activities rather than child-driven play (Fisher, 2008).

While many play-focused messages target parents, most parents still feel unsure about their role in building a playful environment and creating a culture of play at home. The good news is that overall messaging about the value of play for children is increasing. Parents are hearing about the value of play from sources such as children's entertainment, their kids' teachers, and social media. Medical professionals and other stakeholders are receiving more training on play and its relationship to overall well-being, with the American Academy of Pediatrics recommending that pediatricians write "prescriptions for play" at checkups for young children (Yogman et al., 2018). While pediatricians, classroom educators, governmental agencies, and nonprofit organizations can all help increase parents' awareness of their role in play, no one sector has claimed responsibility and ownership of the issue, and parents still seem uninformed on the nuances of creating an environment for child-directed play.

A multisectoral approach is, therefore, needed to educate parents and influence cultural norms around play. Play-related sectors and play professionals should develop succinct parental education messages to communicate that the most meaningful play often occurs when parents are involved as little as possible. This white paper serves as a call-to-action for communication and coordination across sectors around play independence.

Conclusion/ Recommendations

It is no overstatement to suggest that play is *the* most important activity in a child's life. As professionals interested in promoting true play—that is, play free from adults' over-interference—we must change cultural norms around play. Many parents who value play also misunderstand it, perhaps thinking that their active participation is required for meaningful play. Others fear judgment if they allow more free play or worry that their children will fall behind academically. To counteract these broader cultural norms that inhibit true play, we must work together and coordinate across sectors to reach parents with clear messages about how and why parents need to get out of the way of play. While some cultural norms work against play, interest in play is also increasing, making now an ideal time to increase public messaging to parents. Play professionals can and should capitalize on this moment, seeing it as a “call-to-action” for coordination in order to support and amplify each other's efforts.

Indoor Play: Board and Card Games and Their Role in Parent-Supported Play

Abby Loebenberg, PhD

Introduction

Board and card games are a way to play across one's lifespan. For children and adults alike, the philosopher Gadamer (2004) argued that the back and forth of play or "to-and-fro" nature of games is a key part of their structure. For young children, this might manifest itself in something as simple as learning skills like patience while taking turns, but for adults, as Boghain et al. (2019) suggest, this evokes the "ludic nature of the human being" (p. 51). From a social and cultural anthropological perspective, all societies utilize games as part of their social development. Shifts in the types of games played may mark social transitions (such as to adulthood) or gender (such as traditional games gendered for boys or girls). In any event, it is often key to the core social connections in the family that children are taught to play games and learn to engage in social gaming. However, this may take many forms in contemporary Western society, ranging from traditional card and board games to shared interests with parents in video games.

This paper suggests that parents and caregivers, such as grandparents, who wish to participate in children's development should not overlook the positive value of traditional analog board and card games, and makes several concrete suggestions as to how these games work as learning tools that appropriately match the developmental level of children at various stages of early and middle childhood. Drawing on my own work as an anthropologist of play, and interdisciplinary perspectives from core educational theories, this paper offers concrete suggestions of appropriate games for different age groups. Furthermore, it links these games to developing skills that parents can support when playing them with their children.

Conclusion

In conclusion, board and card games at home are a net positive for various age groups. By choosing, or adapting, appropriate games for various ages and skill levels,

parents and caregivers can support children's learning, social and behavioral skills and cognitive development in their home environment. Games for very young children (three plus) should highlight skills like turn taking, co-operation, dice-rolling, moving pieces, matching skills and dexterity. Slightly older children (four to five years old) can focus on more complex memory games, dexterity challenges and deductive reasoning before moving on to tile placement, abstract games, set collection and construction around age eight. The oldest children, aged twelve and above, can take on the most complex family games that include trading mechanics, worker placement, economic engine building and logic programming. Lastly, one should not overlook the importance of inter-generational skill building and the benefits of play across a lifetime that come from a family that plays games together on a regular basis. In caring for our youngest, we often care for our oldest as well.

How Parents Can Support Play

Bengi Sullu, PhD

Introduction

In my conversations with parents who are from a variety of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds about their childhood memories, I hear that they used to play *all the time*. Locations, activities, and people vary: at the lake, in the forest, in the streets with children from the neighborhood, in a hallway inside the apartment with a sibling, with the cassettes under the TV, or all alone all day. What remains across these accounts is that they played frequently. Play is universal, and in the past, it was abundant, informing the fond childhood memories of many. While almost all the parents I have spoken with lament that children do not get to play as often as they did in the past, they also frequently acknowledge that they have a role in play taking a backseat to other concerns about children (Lester & Russell, 2010). In the modern age, play has diminished due to a variety of pressures, academic demands, screen time, safety concerns, and other barriers.

Conclusion

Parents can support play by staying mindful of the transformative power of small, consistent interactions. Even when one cannot change everything about how they plan their days or where they send their children, being intentional about choosing opportunities that emphasize free play still matters. Allowing unstructured time, resisting the urge to overdirect, or simply making space can open up meaningful possibilities for play.

Imaginary Companions as a Window into Pretend Play and Child Development

Rebecca Wax, BA & Myae Han, PhD

Introduction

Among the many forms of play, imaginary companions - invisible characters created through a child's imagination - are often an overlooked component of pretend play. Defined as a construct of a child's imagination that others cannot see or physically interact with (Armah & Landers-Potts, 2021), these imaginary companions offer a unique contribution to the cognitive, social-emotional development of young children. Pretend play is a subset of play that involves an "as-if" stance where a player intentionally projects a mentally represented alternative into a current situation of play (Garvey 1990; Lillard 1993). Developmental theorists have long recognized the value of pretend play, including play with imaginary companions. Theorists such as Vygotsky (1978) believe the pretense of pretend play is a crucial developmental goal because of its ability to help children understand how to separate actions from reality and develop abstract thoughts. Piaget (1962) also acknowledges the significance of pretend play and considers it an indicator of developmental progress. For him, pretend play around 18 months indicates the development of the semiotic function, which separates an idea from its meaning and allows one to entertain mental content separate from the physical, present reality. Research also shows that children who engage in complex forms of socio-dramatic play exhibit greater language skills than nonplayers, better social skills, increased empathy, enhanced imagination, and a more nuanced understanding of others' intentions (Miller & Almon, 2009). They also exhibit less aggression and display high levels of critical thinking. Children often practice socio-dramatic play with their imaginary companions. In all, pretend play begins a child's training in social behaviors. Children who grow up with this type of play and enjoy expressing their playfulness are likely to be more sophisticated in their social lives and more adept in their everyday social relations (Sutton-Smith, 2008, pp. 80-123). Young children's imaginary companions are not merely whimsical fantasies; they are developmentally appropriate and an important form of pretend play that supports children's cognitive, social-emotional growth. Therefore, in this white paper, we argue that adults should recognize

the importance of children's imaginary companions and support their engagement in such play.

Conclusion

In summary, adults need a thorough understanding of play and must recognize when and how to facilitate it properly. Otherwise, they risk disrupting or even harming children's play. By providing clear links between imaginary companions and developmental strengths, we can help parents see the important role this type of play has in their child's growth. By validating and supporting a child's imaginary companion and pretend play tendencies, parents can foster children who are emotionally balanced, creative, and more socially skilled. Further research is necessary to determine how, if at all, parents' perceptions of their children's pretend play, including imaginary companions, change or evolve as their children move through preschool (Gleason, 2005). More research is also needed to understand better the connection between language skills and imaginary companions, as well as the relationship between neurodivergent children and their use of imaginary companions (Armah & Landers-Potts, 2021; Lillard & Kavanaugh, 2014).

White Papers



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Advocating for Play with Parents and Caregivers

[Press Start. Activating Family Voices to Advance Playful Solutions](#)

[Get-out-of-the-Way of Play: A Call-to-Action to Educate Parents About Their Role in Play](#)

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Press Start. Activating Family Voices to Advance Playful Solutions

Jenn Beideman, MPA

Introduction

Play is fundamental for children's health, development, and overall well-being. Despite its many proven benefits, far too many children across the country still lack quality, safe, and accessible opportunities in their neighborhood (Gordon-Larsen et al., 2006). At a time of rising mental health challenges, social disconnection, and widening inequities, play is becoming increasingly critical for supporting children's overall health and well-being (Rigolon et al., 2021; Tonkin & Whitaker, 2021; International Play Association, 2020). Parents, residents, and youth living in their neighborhood know it best. Often, families know what they want to see in their neighborhood but lack the understanding to navigate complex government institutions.

Problem Statement

Access to safe, accessible play is not just a quality-of-life issue; it is a fundamental equity issue (Rigolon et al., 2018; Reuben et al., 2020). Research shows that many children have fewer opportunities to play if they live in neighborhoods with fewer high-quality play spaces and parks (Roemmich et al., 2006). Kids in low-income and racially diverse communities often lack nearby and/or quality safe places to play, and when playspaces do exist, they are smaller or in poor condition, limiting kids' time for physical, social, and creative play (Rigolon, 2016; Huang et al., 2022).

Parents, residents, and youth living in their neighborhood know it best. Often, families know what they want to see in their neighborhood but lack the understanding to navigate complex government, nonprofit, and philanthropic institutions to make it happen. The inaccessibility of institutions of power makes it challenging to achieve meaningful change for families who may not engage with those systems regularly. Despite the complexity, parent and community advocacy is critical. Local municipalities are required to get feedback from residents and community members (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015). These comments shape capital improvements and neighborhood improvements (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015). Families have power and can work

alongside municipal leaders, public health officials, and organizations to ensure every child, regardless of their zip code, race, or income, has safe spaces to play, grow, and thrive.

Municipal governments respond to the people they serve. When parents and youth show up at council meetings, submit testimony, meet with elected officials, or partner with organizations dedicated to children's play, they demonstrate that these issues matter. Collective voices can shift priorities and unlock funding streams that directly benefit kids. Change is possible, and it is happening in communities that have mobilized for a collective vision for play.

Background

Rochester is an urban city in Western NY and home to 207,000 residents (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Many residents have access to parks and greenspace, with the city hosting 3,500 acres (City of Rochester, n.d.), and 84% of residents live within a 10-minute walk of a park (Trust for Public Land, 2023). Despite the access to an incredible park system, Rochester bears the marks of decades of concentrated poverty and segregation. Over a third of residents live in poverty; more than 40% of African American and Latinx residents are poor, and 20% of residents lack a high school diploma (ACT Rochester, 2023; United States Census Bureau, 2022). The loss of major employers such as Kodak has weakened the tax base, strained the school system, and driven an exodus of residents and wealth (Cowie & Heathcott, 2003; Gianniny, 2025).

Despite Rochester's wealth of green space and parks, only 65 percent of residents say they would feel safe letting their child walk to a park in their own neighborhood (Common Ground Health, 2022). Just 25.5 percent believe their neighborhood is great for children to play outdoors — a rate three times lower than that reported by suburban families (Common Ground Health, 2022; Sienkiewicz et al., 2023). In a recent study conducted by Common Ground Health and the Strong Center for Developmental Disabilities (2026), less than half (43%) of respondents in the City of Rochester agreed that where they live is a safe place for children to play outdoors, compared to 84% of respondents from the suburbs (Common Ground Health, 2026). In neighborhoods of color, the gap is even wider, reflecting the enduring consequences of racist policies,

disinvestment, and systems that have failed to prioritize equity for generations (Hoffman et al., 2020; Rigolon, 2016; Mariner et al., 2024).

Strategies

1. Get to know your Neighborhood Administrators and Public Servants

Civil servants have authority in their government roles to make decisions. People are working every day to support the administration of services at each level of government. It is important to get to know them. They can make day-to-day decisions and oversee planning materials for key capital improvement projects, such as playgrounds. They control permits, enforcement, public-space use, and the flow of city resources. To promote change in your neighborhood, you need to understand who holds decision authority and how their process works.

In Rochester, NY, the Neighborhood Service Centers (NSC) serve as practical entry points into City Hall. The city has four NSC offices, one per quadrant. Each quadrant has an office led by an Administrator, with staff who connect residents to local government. At these offices, one can process business permits, request code enforcement, file nuisance complaints, obtain handicap parking permits, and secure garden permits for vacant lots (City of Rochester, 2026). More importantly, residents can build relationships. Lydia Rivera, a Mom, small business owner, and President of the Lyell Ave. Business Association (LABA) in Rochester, did just that. She was concerned about speeding cars around her local parks and the lack of safe places in her neighborhood. She began getting to know her NSC administrator, who connected her with the Director of Recreation and Parks Stewardship in the city's Department of Recreation and Human Services. Working alongside the Director, Lydia advocated strongly for more traffic calming around parks and play spaces and for the city to join the Trust for Public Land's 10 Minute Walk to Park commitment (13WHAM, 2018). This commitment led to the inclusion of safe routes to parks concepts in the City's Comprehensive Plan and, later, the Active Transportation Plan (City of Rochester, 2019; City of Rochester, 2023). Lydia also established a garden on her street, which she uses to host kid-friendly events like play days and movie nights.

When city staff know you and understand your project, they can flag timing issues, identify funding streams, and introduce you to the civil servants who can approve or adapt your idea. Projects move faster when they align with administrative priorities and when decision-makers trust the people proposing them. Getting to know public servants turns a one-time request into an ongoing partnership that increases the likelihood your neighborhood improvements move from concept to reality.

2. Let your voice be heard at public meetings

Get up and get out. Municipalities must host public meetings to get feedback from residents on proposed projects. This includes street redesign, public parks, master planning documents, and comprehensive plans. These are all opportunities to transform your neighborhood into a place for play. Go to your city and county's website, look at their monthly calendar, and sign up to receive their public meeting notices. Attend the meetings and share your perspective on capital improvement projects. They collect and consider these comments as part of a project's overall design. When municipalities are creating parks master plans or comprehensive plans, these documents guide the vision for future development and investment. Share what you want to see in your neighborhood. Be specific about the barriers you see and how you would fix them.

Families can also look for opportunities to speak at their elected bodies (City Council, County Legislature, School Board). These bodies typically have “speak to council” type opportunities. Visit your municipality's website and look for those opportunities to speak; these provide you a space to share your perspective on any issue. They are typically timed, but they can open the door to further conversation with your elected official.

Arwyn Fox knew she and her siblings could not go to the park across the street from their house because of public safety concerns and speeding cars, so she raised her voice to make change happen for her block. Arwyn went to the City Council and shared her concern about speeding cars on her street. Her advocacy, alongside her siblings', has led to additional traffic-calming signage and speed traps. She has not stopped there, though; over the last 8 years, Arwyn has continued to go to speak to the City Council,

Monroe County Legislature, and even Capitol Hill to advocate for playful opportunities for her peers.

3. Get to know your elected officials

Your elected officials work for you. They are in office to represent constituents in their district. This means that relationships are key. Call their office and learn about your elected officials' priorities. Tell them about yours and how it aligns with what they are looking to accomplish in office. This will help you move the needle in driving change. Remember to share that you are their constituent. Ask the office to set up a meeting with your elected representative, and/or invite them to an event in your neighborhood (block club party, annual festival). These meetings may be with the elected official or their staff. Do not be disheartened if staff are there at the meeting and not the official - staff are critical members of that elected official's team. When preparing for any meeting, take time to think about what you hope to accomplish. Look at whether this person can actually move your idea forward.

When preparing for your meeting, think about what you hope to accomplish. Each level of government has its own responsibilities and statutory requirements. Look at the person's priorities and whether what you are asking for is something they can help with. For example, asking a local municipal leader to lower the speed limit on your street is a great ask, but securing additional funding for capital improvements through state grants is better suited to state officials. Be specific in your request, and always follow up after your discussion. These meetings are typically short, so practice ahead of time so you don't get lost in the weeds and miss the chance to say what you are asking them to do for you. Develop your "5 W statement": that's the who, what, why, where, when breakdown of what you want; and the how you will follow up (Laswell, 1948). This is an easy way to prepare for potential questions, hone your message, and communicate what you are asking for.

For example, Toyin Anderson is a Mom, parent advocate, and community leader in Rochester, New York. Concerned about the lack of safe places to play in her neighborhood, Toyin started meeting with then-City Council President Lovely Warren to express her concerns. She dreamed of bringing a spray park to her neighborhood for

children and families to use all summer long. Toyin worked hard with staff and leadership; she did not give up; she continued to share her perspective and advocate for change in her neighborhood. After three years of advocacy, in 2016 Toyin stood beside Mayor Lovely Warren when the spray park opened in her neighborhood. Mayor Warren shared, "Toyin has been the community advocate for this project" (Spectrum News Staff, 2016). Toyin's tenacity and consistency brought her dream to light in her neighborhood.

4. Recruit your friends and neighbors

There is power in numbers. The more you show people care about what you want to see happen, the more likely they are to take action. For decades, residents of The El Camino neighborhood have banded together to advocate for change. The residents' commitment and passion for the neighborhood have led to several actions and advocacy to reclaim their space from the Open Air Drug Market. The residents partnered with local nonprofits, Ibero Action Development Corporation, Ibero American Action League, and others willing to support their advocacy. Working together, they collected signatures, built partnerships with their neighbors, and advocated for more playful opportunities for their neighbors.

The residents wanted to see vacant lots transformed into vibrant gathering places and their local playground made safe and inviting for children and their families. A group of neighbors, Ida Perez, Evette Colon, Gildred Aponte, Miguel A. Meléndez Jr., Dawn Bird, and others organized pop-up market days, play days, play streets, and piloted programming to demonstrate to municipal leaders that their neighborhood wanted these changes.

In 2020, the advocacy of residents in the El Camino neighborhood was successful and led to the development of 4 vacant lots into a new business incubator and market, "International Plaza" (Medina, 2020). The new playground at Don Samuel Torres, with the requested improvements, reopened in Spring 2021 (Medina, 2021). The work of Ida Perez, Evette Colon, Gildred Aponte, Miguel A. Meléndez Jr., Dawn Bird, and others shows that when you partner with neighbors to amplify your collective desire for your neighborhood, you can make real change happen. Their work continues as they focus on other projects to support children, families, and seniors in the El Camino neighborhood.

5. Get involved in organizations that care about the power of play

Residents and caregivers can partner with others who care about the child's right to play (UNCRC, 1989) and to advocate for playful opportunities in their community. Organizations like the National Parent Leadership Institute (NPLI) and the International Play Association (IPA) are vital resources that can support families as they advocate for change.

For example, the National Parent Leadership Institute (NPLI) focuses on civic capacity-building, equipping caregivers who want to advocate for change with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate municipal and state government systems. By participating in their programs, you can effectively learn to navigate each level of government and become an advocate for change (National Parent Leadership Institute, 2024). Many of the caregivers highlighted throughout this paper are graduates of this program.

The International Play Association USA (IPA USA) brings together scholars, advocates, and parents to advocate for all children's right to play (International Play Association USA, 2026). When you become a member, you join a network of people dedicated to advancing the power of play across the country and the world. Aligning with IPA USA lets you leverage national advocacy best practices, connect with advocates across the country, and access resources that can bolster your local efforts. IPA USA also has several state chapters that run on-the-ground play days and other advocacy events in municipalities and states across the country. In Rochester, families and caregivers can join the IPA USA Western New York chapter. Together, we advocate for better, more accessible play spaces and support play days in our municipalities (IPA - USA - WNY Chapter, 2026).

Conclusion

Local change requires coordinated action and consistent advocacy. When families align around a shared vision for play, municipalities adjust policies, redirect resources, and formalize support for child-centered infrastructure. Families can get involved to make change in their neighborhood by getting to know neighborhood administrators and public servants; making their voices heard at public meetings; getting to know their

elected officials; recruiting friends and neighbors; and getting involved with organizations that invest in the power of play. Progress does not occur by chance. It follows organized demand, credible data, and sustained public pressure. Parents, caregivers, and youth can mobilize effectively and consistently to transform their neighborhoods to support safe, inclusive play for everyone.

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Get-out-of-the-Way of Play: A Call-to-Action to Educate Parents About Their Role in Play

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Introduction

Many parents value play for their children but misunderstand their role in creating a playful environment and how best to support play. Tired, busy parents may also overlook the value of child-directed play because of perceived safety issues, concerns about mess, and misunderstandings about its inherent developmental value. Parents may feel pressured to ensure their children advance academically and equate learning with structured activities rather than child-driven play (Fisher, 2008).

While many play-focused messages target parents, most parents still feel unsure about their role in building a playful environment and creating a culture of play at home. The good news is that messaging about the value of play for children is increasing overall. Parents are hearing about the value of play from sources such as children's entertainment, their kids' teachers, and social media. Medical professionals and other stakeholders are receiving more training on play and its relationship to overall well-being, with the American Academy of Pediatrics recommending that pediatricians write "prescriptions for play" at checkups for young children (Yogman et al., 2018). While pediatricians, classroom educators, governmental agencies, and nonprofit organizations can all help increase parents' awareness of their role in play, no one sector has claimed responsibility and ownership of the issue, and parents still seem uninformed on the nuances of creating an environment for child-directed play.

A multisectoral approach is, therefore, needed to educate parents and influence cultural norms around play. Play-related sectors and play professionals should develop succinct parental education messages to communicate that the most meaningful play often occurs when parents are involved as little as possible. This white paper serves as a call-to-action for communication and coordination across sectors around play independence.

Problem Statement

What is true play? If you ask parents to define true play, they might not know where to start. Many might describe pretend play but then stall. A few might quote *Bluey* or refer to a recent social media post. But how many would have a sense of what true play entails or that the most meaningful play probably happens when they aren't directly involved?

According to Dr. Peter Gray, a world-renowned psychologist who specializes in studying play, five key characteristics must be present for an activity to be defined as true play (Gray, 2017).

1. The activity must be *self-chosen and self-directed*, where the children decide what and how to play and are free to change the direction of the play at any time.
2. It must be *intrinsically motivated*, meaning there is no external reward for participating.
3. There must be some *mental rules* to the activity, which may not always be evident to the casual observer, but exist in the participant's mind.
4. The activity is *imaginative* in some way, which could be as overt as pretending to be superheroes or less obvious to the observer, such as a child pouring out a cup of pebbles over and over again.
5. For someone to consider a child's activity true play, the participant must be *alert and unstressed* (Gray, 2017).

Parents have a large degree of control over their children's environment. Depending on the family's norms and internal play culture, that environment can encourage play or quash it. Even parents who know that play is important may inadvertently stymie their children's natural impulses to play through consistent interruption, interjection, or overscheduling.

A well-intentioned parent, understanding the overall benefits of play, may, for example, offer to play MagnaTiles™ with his or her child and say, "Let's build a castle!" Excited to play with his or her parent, the child may start building a castle with his or her grown-up. The parent, who may have taken a college course in medieval architecture, directs the child on how to build turrets, a moat, and everything a castle

should have. The child may have a different vision or goal for their construction and may express frustration when they feel their play is being micromanaged. Thus, according to Dr. Gray, this would not be considered “true play,” as it is adult-directed rather than child-directed.

Similarly, if the child’s interest shifts into throwing his or her teddy bear at the castle and making it fall, the well-meaning parent may get frustrated and say, “If you’re not going to play right, I’m leaving!” Without an understanding of the nuances of following a child’s lead in play, the parent’s response sends unintended messages to the child about the kind of play the parent values. Really, the child could simply be exploring the trajectory schema, or maybe the child likes the sound of the tiles falling, or perhaps the child is learning about cause and effect while watching the parent’s reaction to the destruction, and not intentionally “playing wrong,” as the adult may have interpreted.

With the right support, many parents could change their family’s practices to let true play blossom. In our parenting book, *Go Play: How Parents Can Empower Kids to Build Their Own Worlds* (Fox & Gorback, 2026), we introduce the term “get-out-of-the-way play” as a succinct reminder that the deepest play often occurs when parents let kids take the lead.

Helping parents understand their role in play and changing cultural norms will require a large, coordinated movement that begins in the play community and spreads to other professions—including educators, healthcare providers, public health agencies, and governmental and nonprofit stakeholders—that can directly reach parents.

While parents increasingly understand the value of play, thanks to the efforts of many play practitioners, educators, and others, they often misunderstand their role in play, leading to ineffective implementation of play practices in and around the home. Education is needed across sectors to reach parents, but no single group is responsible for educating parents on the issue. Additionally, the pro-play messages parents do receive can be uncoordinated or even contradictory, blunting their impact.

Background

Extensive research suggests that play is the most valuable activity to support children’s development. Ginsburg (2007), in the American Academy of Pediatrics, states, “play is essential to development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth” (p. 182).

Many parents value play for their children in the abstract but misunderstand their own role. Some parents think fostering their children’s play requires active participation. For example, parents may believe that their children only benefit from playtime if the parent(s) sit down on the floor, crisscross applesauce, and create an hour-long imaginary scenario where a Barbie Doll™ is missing her beloved My Little Pony™ and needs a Troll Doll™ and a Beanie Baby™ to team up and help find it. Or, that the parent must plan an adorable handprint turkey craft for the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday.

Research shows children reap deeper benefits of play when adults are involved as little as possible. One study showed that children are less likely to identify an activity as “play” if adults are present (Howard, 2006). Another study found that parental over-involvement led to worse emotional regulation in kindergarteners (Obradović, 2021). Children require age-appropriate independence from adult interference to build autonomy and confidence. In general, a parent’s role in play is to create an environment—including time, mindset, physical space—for play to occur. After that, caregivers can look for ways to “get out of the way” of play by intentionally not interrupting. This allows children the space and autonomy for true play to occur.

Parental concerns about safety and conflict avoidance, among other issues, can lead parents to direct their children’s play, negating many of the potential benefits. Parental concerns can particularly curtail so-called “risky play,” which helps children develop cognitive, social, and emotional skills (Steiner et al., 2023). Additionally, when children can play without adult direction, they engage in peer interactions that help them solve problems and navigate conflict. A systematic review found that “parents’ perceived safety concerns are the primary barrier to children’s active free play. These

safety concerns are moderated by child-level factors (age, competence, gender) and broader social issues” (Lee, 2015, p. 1).

Parents, however, may be more likely to allow age-appropriate play independence when they perceive that other parents do as well. Parents cite potential judgment as a concern in allowing more autonomy for their children’s play (Riazi et al., 2021). Additionally, if more parents allow age-appropriate independent play, children may find playmates more easily.

Another barrier to play is increased academic pressures in childhood. From the emphasis on standardized testing to the increasing rigor of kindergarten, modern children are expected to know more and do more than children of previous generations. This push toward early skill attainment has sometimes come at the expense of self-directed activities and recess (Bassok, 2016) The American Academy of Pediatrics, however, has said that recess is “crucial and necessary component of a child's development,” (Murray & Ramstetter, 2013, p. 183) and further research has shown a relationship between recess, defined as a period of free play, and learning (Waite-Stupiansky, 2001).

Taken together, these factors suggest that parental education is required to change societal norms and help parents “get-out-of-the-way” of play. But who is responsible for educating parents, and what is the most effective way to do so?

Many sectors could help educate parents about play, including early childhood and elementary educators, healthcare providers, and public health organizations. None of these groups, however, have play or parental education at the core of their missions. Educators and healthcare providers, in particular, face limited time, resources, and many competing demands, so parental education around play often goes undone. Public health organizations, while recognizing the importance of play, often do not receive funding for play-specific education. They, too, face budget constraints, competing priorities, and, more recently, layoffs and budget cuts, especially at the federal level. Nonprofits, including the International Play Association, do important complementary work but lack the staffing to educate parents on a large scale.

While no single leader exists in parental education, many groups recognize the value of play and the need to help parents support it. Even popular culture is increasing its interest in play. Play advocates on social media also increase parents' knowledge of the value of play. How can this interest and enthusiasm be translated into meaningful change?

Appropriate Approaches/Strategies

Fortunately, parental education is beginning to shift. Nonprofit organizations such as *Let Grow* provide parental education about play and independence through websites, media appearances, and grassroots campaigning. Some health organizations, such as Kaiser Permanente, also ask parents about their children's play habits, giving pediatricians an opening to start conversations about play (Ignite Healthwise, LLC Staff, 2024). Parenting books about play, including our title, also help increase parents' knowledge and skills in this area.

These efforts alone, however, are unlikely to change broader cultural norms. A larger play-based movement is needed to empower parents with the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to facilitate true play. Because multiple sectors are involved in educating parents about play, a coordinated and succinct message may be more effective in reaching parents and changing their attitudes.

Call-to-action—Due to rising cultural interest in play, the time is ripe for play and play-adjacent professionals to coordinate on parental education. This white paper is a “call-to-action” for groups and individuals interested in educating parents on play to work together to create actionable and consistent messages for parents—thereby amplifying the messages' impact and cultural reach. Play organizations could create this messaging and then spread it more broadly to educators, healthcare providers, journalists, and others who can carry the message forward to parents.

Conclusion/ Recommendations

It is no overstatement to suggest that play is *the* most important activity in a child's life. As professionals interested in promoting true play—that is, play free from adults' over-interference—we must change cultural norms around play. Many parents

who value play also misunderstand it, perhaps thinking that their active participation is required for meaningful play. Others fear judgment if they allow more free play or worry that their children will fall behind academically. To counteract these broader cultural norms that inhibit true play, we must work together and coordinate across sectors to reach parents with clear messages about how and why parents need to get out of the way of play. While some cultural norms work against play, interest in play is also increasing, making now an ideal time to increase public messaging to parents. Play professionals can and should capitalize on this moment, seeing it as a “call-to-action” for coordination in order to support and amplify each other’s efforts.

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Indoor Play: Board and Card Games and Their Role in Parent-Supported Play

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Introduction

Board and card games are a way to play across one's lifespan. For children and adults alike, the philosopher Gadamer (2004) argued that the back-and-forth of play, or the "to-and-fro" nature of games, is a key part of their structure. For young children, this might show up in something as simple as learning patience while taking turns, but for adults, as Boghain et al. (2019) suggest, it evokes the "ludic nature of the human being" (p. 51). From a social and cultural anthropological perspective, all societies utilize games as part of their social development. Shifts in the types of games played may mark social transitions (such as to adulthood) or gender (such as traditional games gendered for boys or girls). In any case, teaching children to play games and engage in social gaming is often central to family social connections. However, this may take many forms in contemporary Western society, ranging from traditional card and board games to shared interests with parents in video games.

This paper suggests that parents and caregivers, such as grandparents, who wish to participate in children's development should not overlook the positive value of traditional analog board and card games, and makes several concrete suggestions as to how these games work as learning tools that appropriately match the developmental level of children at various stages of early and middle childhood. Drawing on my work as an anthropologist of play and interdisciplinary perspectives from core educational theories, this paper offers concrete suggestions for appropriate games for different age groups. It also links these games to skills parents can support while playing them with their children.

Problem Statement

Indoor play is sometimes considered a substitute for outdoor play in educational settings, mostly because children spend so much time at their desks and deserve an enriching outdoor environment where they can get fresh air and engage in free play,

including running, jumping, climbing, and other healthy outdoor activities. This paper does not diminish the importance of outdoor activities for children. However, it acknowledges that, outside of the school environment, or through specific after-school activities and programs, not all parents or caregivers can offer outdoor play. There are several reasons why this might be the case. However, the most obvious ones are the risks (real or perceived) of the outdoor environment. This could be as simple as excessive heat, a common and significant factor that affects much of the United States during the summer months. Caregiver fatigue and disability are other contributing factors that shouldn't be overlooked, as four times as many people live in multi-generational households in the United States as they did in the 1970s; 11% of those people are under the age of 18 (Pew Research, 2022). However, the opportunity for older generations to support play should not be underestimated. Lastly, children's social isolation outside of school is a consideration. While current research acknowledges that there is limited data on this topic, a recent study suggests that particularly pre-adolescents grappling with social isolation (bullying, rejection) require more support, even if they are not causing problems at home or at school (Norwalk et al., 2021).

Background

Two major educational theories commonly describe childhood development and the increasing complexity of play. Piaget (1953) introduced his work in *Origins of Intelligence in the Child*. This foundational text is still widely used, especially for active learning in educational and psychological theory. When considering manipulable objects, such as board and card games, we can directly correlate some of Piaget's stages of cognitive development and types of play. This demonstrates how a child's understanding of games evolves as they grow older. In their infant years, during the sensorimotor stage (birth to two years old), young children gain physical knowledge about game pieces by touching, grasping, or putting them in their mouth. This corresponds to Piaget's idea of functional play, or a child's repetitive actions for the sheer pleasure of movement. In the preoperational stage (two to seven years old), children learn to sort and classify objects, but struggle to follow rules. They may need help in this regard, or divert into imaginative play using game pieces. In this stage, Piaget describes play as symbolic or as fantasy, where children play make-believe and

pretend. As children progress to the concrete operational stage (age seven and up), they develop the logical thinking needed to understand and apply rules. This enables them to learn cooperative and strategy-based games. Piaget labeled this stage of play as “games with rules,” and Smilansky (1968) added “constructive play” in this age range. Children can use objects in an organized, goal-oriented way and participate in activities with pre-established boundaries. Lastly, at the formal operational stage, adolescents and adults develop abstract reasoning skills. They can think clearly about game mechanics, anticipate opponent strategies and moves, and even invent their own games and game variations.

Lev Vygotsky’s work is used in education to understand interactions between teacher and student, and it can be equally applied to interactions between parents and children. His work helps parents explain games and teach children to play. If we accept that children progress through a series of developmental stages, which may differ depending on the child, it is also worthwhile to consider that the parent, or caregiver, will take on the role of expert in explaining games and authorizing rule changes. Thus, we should also consider Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory of cognitive development, particularly his term “zone of proximal development,” or ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). In board and card games, the child’s ZPD is the gap between what they can do independently and what they can do with support. However, they need support from a parent or teacher. The parent, or caregiver, acts as what Vygotsky calls a “more knowledgeable other” (Vygotsky, 1978). Scaffolding, or temporary help (such as extra rules, suggested moves, or explanations), helps the child succeed at playing the game. Vygotsky’s theory shows how parent-supported play helps children internalize skills and eventually move toward independent concepts and strategic play. Thus, supported, collaborative play that meets the child at their current cognitive level fuels growth.

Lastly, when considering board and card games in the context of the family, and remembering Vygotsky, parents and caregivers should not be afraid to adapt the contents of a game to meet the children where they are in their development and to make up rules or adapt rules to make the game more fun for the children. In board game design, these are called “house rules.” But families will often describe these types of rules as “the way we play” versus “the way it is supposed to be played.” These types of

house rules can often accommodate younger children by making a game move faster (shortening rounds), giving children more resources (like more money in Monopoly), or providing a “do-over” roll to avoid frustration. Rather than being seen as lesser, they should be seen as encouraging adaptive play that can be removed when the children are old enough not to need them, somewhat like bumper lanes when bowling, and they can discourage poor behaviors like cheating.

Appropriate Approaches

In the following tables, I recommend a list of indoor games based on practitioner observations, expert recommendations, and illustrative examples. On rare occasions, I include untested suggestions based on game designers' personal recommendations. Please remember that every child and family is different, and no list can be definitive or complete. However, I would like to offer parents and families a place to start learning of age-appropriate board and card games. I have included games from around the world and games that can be played with a simple deck of cards or a homemade board, for those who prefer not to buy commercial games, as well as a column explaining what mechanics the games emphasize. I hope this list has something for everyone. A few games are out of print at the time of writing, which I have noted. This is hopefully temporary, but many second-hand copies are likely available. Product names, game titles, trademarks, and registered trademarks are the property of their respective owners. References to commercial products in this paper are for identification and educational discussion only and do not imply endorsement by the authors or publishers.

Table 1*Games with Minimum Player Age of 2*

Game	Player Count	Time to Explain and Time to Play	Designer	Publisher	Main Mechanic	In Print (2026)
Haba My Very First Orchard	1-4	5 min (exp) 10 min (play)	Reiner Stockhausen	HABA	Cooperative, dice rolling	Yes
My First Animal Upon Animal	2-4	5 min (exp) 10 min (play)	Klaus Miltenberger	HABA	Dexterity, stacking	Yes
Here, Fishy, Fishy	2-4	5 min (exp) 15 min (play)	-	HABA	Turn-taking, dexterity	Yes

Table 2*Games with Minimum Player Age of 3*

Game	Player Count	Time to Explain and Time to Play	Designer	Publisher	Main Mechanic	In Print (2026)
Candy Land	2-4	2 min (exp) 15-20 min (play)	Eleanor Abbott	Hasbro	Race to the finish, luck	Yes
Memory	2-6	2 min (exp) 10-15 min (play)	-	Traditional card game, multiple publishers	Memory, matching	Yes
Uno Junior	2-4	2 min (exp) 10-15 min (play)	Merle Robbins	Mattel	Hand management, color matching	Yes
Go Away, Monster	2-4	5 min (exp) 15 min (play)	Shanon Lyon	Peaceable Kingdom	Cooperative, memory	No
Feed the Woozle	2-5	5 min (exp) 15 min (play)	-	Peaceable Kingdom	Cooperative, language development, and dexterity	Yes

Table 3*Games with Minimum Player Age of 4*

Game	Player Count	Time to Explain and Time to Play	Designer	Publisher	Main Mechanic	In Print (2026)
My First Carcassonne	2-4	5 min (exp) 15-20 min (play)	Klaus-Jürgen Wrede	Z-Man Games, Hans im Glück	Tile placement, area control	Yes
Snakes and Ladders/ Chutes and Ladders	2-4	2 min (exp) 15-20 min (play)	-	Traditional Game Multiple Publishers	Race to the finish, luck	Yes
Go Fish	2-5	2 min (exp) 10 min (play)	-	Traditional Game	Set collection, memory	Yes

Game	Player Count	Time to Explain and Time to Play	Designer	Publisher	Main Mechanic	In Print (2026)
				Multiple Publishers		
Hoot Owl Hoot!	2-4	5 min (exp) 15 min (play)	-	Peaceable Kingdom	Cooperative, set collection	Yes
Karuba Junior	1-4	5 min (exp) 15 min (play)	Rüdiger Dorn	HABA	Cooperative, tile placement	No
My First Loteria	2-10	5 min (exp) 15 min (play)	-	Traditional Card Game Multiple Publishers	Luck, bingo	Yes
Slapjack	2-6	2 min (exp) 10 min (play)	-	Traditional Card Game	Speed, reaction, card collection	N/A
Pig	5+	2 min (exp) 5-10 min (play)	-	Traditional Card Game (Bicycle Cards)	Set Collection, Dexterity, Speed	N/A

Table 4*Games with Minimum Player Age of 5*

Game	Player Count	Time to Explain and Time to Play	Designer	Publisher	Main Mechanic	In Print (2026)
Cluedo Junior/Clue Junior	2-4	5 min (exp) 20 min (play)	-	Hasbro	Deduction	Yes
Trouble	2-4	5 min (exp) 15-20 min (play)	-	Milton Bradley, Hasbro	Roll and move, luck	Yes
Outfoxed!	2-4	5-10 min (exp) 20 min (play)	-	Gamewright	Deduction, Co-operative, Grid movement	
Click Clack Lumberjack/TacTac Jack	2-7	5 min (exp) 15 min (play)	-	Mayday Games	Dexterity, stacking	Yes
Rhino Hero	2-5	5 min (exp) 15 min (play)	-	HABA	Dexterity, stacking	Yes
Blokus/Blokus Duo/Blokus XL/Blokus Trigon	2-4	5 min (exp) 20-30 min (play)	Bernard Tavitian	Mattel	Abstract strategy, area control	Yes
Marbles	2+	5 min (exp) 10-20 min (play)	-	Traditional Game	Dexterity, aiming	N/A
Jacks	1+	5 min (exp) 10-15 min (play)	-	Traditional Game	Dexterity, hand-eye coordination	N/A
Dominoes	2-4	5 min (exp)15-20 min (play)	-	Traditional Game	Tile placement, pattern matching	N/A

Table 5*Games with Minimum Player Age of 6*

Game	Player Count	Time to Explain and Time to Play	Designer	Publisher	Main Mechanic	In Print (2026)
Catan Junior	2-4	5-10 min (exp) 20-30 min (play)	Klaus Teuber	Kosmos, Catan Studio	Resource management, area control	Yes
Connect 4	2	1 min (exp) 5-10 min (play)	Howard Wexler	Hasbro	Pattern building, spatial reasoning	Yes
Ticket to Ride: First Journey	2-4	5-10 min (exp) 15-30 min (play)	Alan R. Moon	Days of Wonder	Set collection, route building	Yes
Guess Who?	2	5 min (exp) 10-15 min (play)	Ora and Theo Coster	Hasbro	Deduction, questioning	Yes
Stratego Junior	2	5 min (exp) 15 min (play)	Jacques Johan Mogendorff	Jumbo	Deduction, spatial reasoning	Yes
Rory's Story Cubes	1+	2 min (exp) 15 min (play)	Rory O'Connor	The Creativity Hub	Storytelling, dice rolling	Yes
Checkers	2	5 min (exp) 10-30 min (play)	-	Traditional Game Multiple Publishers	Abstract strategy, elimination	Yes
Pass the Pandas	2-4	5 min (exp) 15 min (play)	-	Gamewright	Dice rolling, push your luck	Yes
Jenga	2+	1 min (exp) 10-20 min (play)	Leslie Scott	Hasbro	Dexterity, stacking	Yes
Qwirkle	2-4	5 min (exp) 30-45 min (play)	Susan McKinley Ross	MindWare	Tile placement, pattern building	Yes
Kariba	2-4	5 min (exp) 15 min (play)	Reiner Knizia	Helvetiq	Set collection, trick-taking	Yes
Mancala	2	5 min (exp) 10-20 min (play)	-	Traditional Game Multiple Publishers	Abstract strategy, counting	Yes
Charades	4+	2 min (exp) 15+ min (play)	-	Traditional Game	Acting, deduction	N/A
Ice Cool, Ice Cool 2	2-4	5-10 min (exp) 20 min (play)	Brian Gomez	Brain Games	Dexterity, flicking	Yes
Tsoro Yematatu	2	2 min (exp) 5-10 min (play)	-	Traditional Game	Abstract strategy, line creation	N/A
Morabaraba	2	5 min (exp) 10-20 min (play)	-	Traditional Game	Abstract strategy, line creation	N/A
Gomoku	2	2 min (exp) 5-10 min (play)	-	Traditional Game Multiple Publishers	Abstract strategy, line creation	Yes
Donjara	2-4	5-10 min (exp) 15-20 min (play)	-	Traditional Game	Tile drafting, set collection	N/A
Bug Hunt	2-4	5-10 min (exp) 15 min (play)	-	Ravensburger	Cooperative, dexterity	Yes

Table 6*Games with Minimum Player Age of 7*

Game	Player Count	Time to Explain and Time to Play	Designer	Publisher	Main Mechanic	In Print (2026)
Carcassonne	2-5	10-15 min (exp) 30-45 min (play)	Klaus-Jürgen Wrede	Z-Man Games, Hans im Glück	Tile placement, area control	Yes
Sequence	2-12	5 min (exp) 15-30 min (play)	Doug Reuter	Jax Ltd.	Pattern building, hand management	Yes
Potato Pirates, Potato Pirates 2, Potato Pirates 3	2-6	10-15 min (exp) 30-60 min (play)	Aditya Batura, Lim Jia Xuan	Codex Games	Programming, hand management	No

Table 7*Games with Minimum Player Age of 8*

Game	Player Count	Time to Explain and Time to Play	Designer	Publisher	Main Mechanic	In Print (2026)
Machi Koro, Machi Koro 2	2-4	10 min (exp) 30 min (play)	Masao Suganuma	Pandasaurus	Dice rolling, engine building	Yes
Turing Tumble	1	5-10 min (exp) 15-30 min (play)	Paul & Alyssa Boswell	Turing Tumble LLC/Upper Story	Logic, programming	Yes
Rummy	2-6	5 min (exp) 20 min (play)	-	Traditional Card Game (Bicycle Cards)	Set collection, hand management	N/A
Loba	2-4	10 min (exp) 30-45 min (play)	-	Traditional Card Game (Bicycle Cards)	Trick-taking	N/A
Canasta	2-6	10-15 min (exp) 30-60 min (play)	-	Traditional Card Game (Bicycle Cards)	Set collection, melding	N/A
King of Tokyo	2-6	10 min (exp) 30 min (play)	Richard Garfield	IELLO	Dice rolling, push your luck, hand management	Yes
5 Minute Dungeon	2-5	5+ min (exp) 5-20 min (play)	Connor Reid	Wiggles 3D	Hand management, take that	Yes
Kingdomino	2-4	5-10 min (exp) 15-20 min (play)	Bruno Cathala	Blue Orange Games	Tile drafting, tile placement	Yes
Azul	2-4	10-15 min (exp) 30-45 min (play)	Michael Kiesling	Plan B Games	Abstract strategy, tile drafting, pattern building	Yes
Dixit	3-6	5 min (exp) 30 min (play)	Jean-Louis Roubira	Libellud	Storytelling, hand management, deduction	Yes
Men at Work	2-5	5-10 min (exp) 30 min (play)	Rita Modl	KOSMOS	Dexterity, stacking	No

Game	Player Count	Time to Explain and Time to Play	Designer	Publisher	Main Mechanic	In Print (2026)
Klask	2	2-3 min (exp) 5-10 min (play)	Mikkel Bertelsen	Klask ApS	Dexterity, action	Yes
Qwixx	2-5	2-5 min (exp) 15 min (play)	Steffen Benndorf	Gamewright	Roll and write, push your luck	Yes
Rummikub	2-4	5-10 min (exp) 20-30 min (play)	Ephraim Hertzano	Pressman Toy	Set collection, tile placement	Yes
Tunk	2-4	5 min (exp) 15-20 min (play)	-	Traditional Card Game (Bicycle Cards)	Hand management, set collection	N/A

Table 8

Games with Minimum Player Age of 10-14

Game	Player Count	Time to Explain and Time to Play	Designer	Publisher	Main Mechanic	In Print (2026)
Castle Panic (10)	1-6	10-15 min (exp) 45-60 min (play)	Justin De Witt	Fireside Games	Cooperative, trading, dice rolling	Yes
Forbidden Series (Island, etc.) (10)	2-5	10-15 min (exp) 45 min (play)	Matt Leacock	Gamewright	Cooperative, set collection	Yes
Clans of Caledonia (12)	1-4	20-30 min (exp) 60-120 min (play)	Juma Al-Joujou	Karma Games, etc.	Worker placement, economic engine building	Yes
Tiny Epic Series (Galaxy, etc.) (14)	1-5	15-20 min (exp) 30-45 min (play)	Scott Almes	Gamelyn Games	Cooperative, worker placement, push your luck	Yes

Conclusion

In conclusion, board and card games at home are a net positive for various age groups. By choosing or adapting appropriate games for different ages and skill levels, parents and caregivers can support children's learning, social and behavioral skills, and cognitive development at home. Games for very young children (three plus) should highlight skills like turn-taking, co-operation, dice-rolling, moving pieces, matching skills and dexterity. Slightly older children (four to five years old) can focus on more complex memory games, dexterity challenges and deductive reasoning before moving on to tile placement, abstract games, set collection and construction around age eight. The oldest children, aged twelve and above, can take on the most complex family games,

including trading mechanics, worker placement, economic engine building, and logic programming. Lastly, one should not overlook the importance of intergenerational skill building and the benefits of play across a lifetime that come from a family that plays games together regularly. In caring for our youngest, we often care for our oldest as well.

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How Parents Can Support Play

Bengi Sullu, PhD

Introduction

In my conversations with parents who are from a variety of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds about their childhood memories, I hear that they used to play *all the time*. Locations, activities, and people vary: at the lake, in the forest, in the streets with children from the neighborhood, in a hallway inside the apartment with a sibling, with the cassettes under the TV, or all alone all day. What remains across these accounts is that they played frequently. Play is universal, and in the past, it was abundant, informing the fond childhood memories of many. While almost all the parents I have spoken with lament that children do not get to play as often as they did in the past, they also frequently acknowledge that they have a role in play taking a backseat to other concerns about children (Lester & Russell, 2010). In the modern age, play has diminished due to a variety of pressures, academic demands, screen time, safety concerns, and other barriers.

Problem Statement

First, heavy academic demands on children have pushed play to the margins in favor of educational performance. Coupled with the increasingly individualized burdens of child care and enrichment that parents in the United States must shoulder, play is further diminished as parents plan their children's time and interactions. Parents and caregivers often prioritize academic skill acquisition over play, undervaluing its role in their children's academic development. Many people believe structured/enrichment activities are associated with better cognitive and socio-emotional developmental outcomes. While this may be true, these activities often reduce children's free play and exploration time. Parents also have persistent safety concerns, and the pervasiveness of digital technological tools (which prioritize structured interactions and games through apps and systems) and screen time further limit children's playtime. Funding for play programs and initiatives that prioritize free play is also limited (or unsustainable), which contributes to shrinking free time and the space where children can engage in unstructured play. Parental beliefs, combined with structural factors, can significantly

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limit the time and opportunities parents have to play with their own children. In particular, the lower value ascribed to “free” play compared to structured activities and digital technologies often creates an unbridgeable emotional gap despite physical proximity among family members, ultimately reducing the time parents can meaningfully allocate to playing with their children.

Background

As children get older, parents’ emphasis shifts from play to learning, even as early as preschool (Bongiorno, 2018). This shift rests on a play-learning binary, reinforced by neoliberal education policy that manifests in accountability measures, including standardized testing, which percolates down to the preschool level (Kane, 2016). These trends are not unique to the US and have global reflections. For example, a parent from Turkey observed that the academization of preschool puts pressure on parents and teachers to show that children did much more than play. Another parent (who is also a teacher) noted the pronounced difference between constructed preschool and elementary school environments, with elementary school outdoor design appearing much less play-oriented than preschool, reflecting the underlying assumption that as children age, they no longer need play.

While research on digital technology and children often focuses on parental anxieties about the time children spend online or on screens, the inverse relationship is also noteworthy. Research demonstrates that parents’ smartphone use negatively impacts children’s emotional intelligence (Nabi & Wolfers, 2022). Play is an activity built on intrinsic motivation, curiosity, self-direction, autonomy, and independence (Gray, 2015). At the same time, the quality of adult involvement is an important determinant of children’s play quality (Brown & Freeman, 2001; Hakkarainen et al., 2013). Parental involvement in play matters because it is linked to parents’ belief that play supports children’s development (DiBianca-Fasoli, 2014). By playing a facilitative role, adults can enhance children’s free play (Gaviria-Loaiza et al., 2017). While the ability to facilitate play cannot be separated from the stressors that might limit the time and resources parents can allocate to play (Aldoney et al., 2022), parents can still support play in many ways.

Appropriate Approaches/Strategies

In outlining these strategies, I want to summarize insights from conversations I had with parents and play advocates from Turkey, which I believe are useful for parents worldwide who want to support children's play. Adults can facilitate play, most easily by opening physical space for play at every opportunity. One support is to create different corners of the house for play rather than designating only rooms or specific locations for play. One parent reflected that being cognizant and respectful of children's spatial needs, just like one would be of an adult's, could make a difference.

Another strategy for play facilitation that maximizes fun and joy is to let go of the tendency to "teach" and instead let children take the lead. While it sounds easy, it takes reflection on the adult's role in children's development and on deconstructing established, normalized scripts for how to interact with children, which are generally based on a hierarchy that positions children as less developed. It takes practice to learn how something is done and to respect children's vision for their own plan, creation, and sometimes, destruction. Parents can cultivate a deeper appreciation of this vision during playtime with their child by using "joint attention" (Chawla, 2007), which helps them form a shared focus of attention in a particular moment.

Digital technology holds a ubiquitous place in children's lives, which is further solidified after the pandemic. An important strategy for parents to support play could start with reconsidering their own relationship with technology, stepping beyond the familiar complaint about children's screen time or digital technology addiction. They can assess how and when they use digital technology and screens. How often are they checking their phone? Can they put aside devices and focus on an activity for a prolonged time? This might invite children to play not through mere limitations on screen time (which can be important and necessary), but by authentically generating curiosity and a desire to be part of a process.

Conclusion

Parents can support play by staying mindful of the transformative power of small, consistent interactions. Even when one cannot change everything about how they plan their days or where they send their children, being intentional about choosing

opportunities that emphasize free play still matters. Allowing unstructured time, resisting the urge to overdirect, or simply making space can open up meaningful possibilities for play.

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Imaginary Companions as a Window into Pretend Play and Child Development

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Introduction

Among the many forms of play, imaginary companions - invisible characters created through a child's imagination - are often an overlooked component of pretend play. Imaginary companions, defined as constructs of a child's imagination that others cannot see or physically interact with (Armah & Landers-Potts, 2021), offer a unique contribution to the cognitive and social-emotional development of young children. Pretend play is a subset of play that involves an "as-if" stance where a player intentionally projects a mentally represented alternative into a current situation of play (Garvey, 1990; Lillard, 1993). Developmental theorists have long recognized the value of pretend play, including play with imaginary companions. Theorists such as Vygotsky (1978) believe that the pretense in pretend play is a crucial developmental goal because it helps children understand how to separate actions from reality and develop abstract thinking. Piaget (1962) also acknowledges the significance of pretend play and considers it an indicator of developmental progress. For him, pretend play around 18 months indicates the development of the semiotic function, which separates an idea from its meaning and allows one to entertain mental content separate from the physical, present reality. Research also shows that children who engage in complex forms of socio-dramatic play exhibit greater language skills than nonplayers, better social skills, increased empathy, enhanced imagination, and a more nuanced understanding of others' intentions (Miller & Almon, 2009). They also exhibit less aggression and display high levels of critical thinking. Children often practice socio-dramatic play with their imaginary companions. In all, pretend play begins a child's training in social behaviors. Children who grow up with this type of play and enjoy expressing their playfulness are likely to be more sophisticated in their social lives and more adept in their everyday social relations (Sutton-Smith, 2008, pp. 80-123). Young children's imaginary companions are not merely whimsical fantasies; they are developmentally appropriate and an important form of pretend play that supports children's cognitive, social-emotional growth. Therefore, in this white paper, we argue that adults should recognize

the importance of children's imaginary companions and support their engagement in such play.

Problem Statement

Some parents have expressed concerns about the implications of a child having an imaginary companion and wonder whether they should adopt a supportive or discouraging role in their child's fantasy play (Taylor & Mottweiler, 2008). Play is considered a culturally constructed activity that parental beliefs, including child-rearing practices and values, can influence. This suggests that sociocultural contexts may influence the prevalence of imaginary companions (Göncü & Gaskins, 2007). Parents also facilitate pretend play based on their beliefs and attitudes about its value. Haight and colleagues (1997) propose that parents' gender roles influence their beliefs and views on pretend play. Some parents consistently perceive their daughters' fantasy levels and involvement in symbolic play as higher than their sons', which may stem from the types of recreation they deem appropriate for girls or boys (Gleason, 2005). Although parents may have more favorable views about which of their children engage in pretend play, their perspectives do not appear to differ when they hold a fixed positive or negative view of pretend play, suggesting that parents of children of any gender typically support or have concerns about pretend play for the same reasons. In the Gleason study (2005), mothers exhibited more positive attitudes toward pretend play than fathers, which may correlate with differences in parental attitudes (Langlois & Downs, 1980). Longitudinal research is necessary to determine if these views change as children progress through preschool (Gleason, 2005).

Background

A phenomenon that receives relatively little attention in early childhood development is a child's play with imaginary companions, a term usually used to explain a construct of a child's imagination that others cannot see or physically interact with (Armah & Landers-Potts, 2021), but has now been extended to include episodes of play with personified objects and extended role play where children adopt alternative personas similar to imaginary companions (Singer & Singer, 1990; Taylor, 1999; Taylor & Mottweiler, 2008). Children begin creating these companions around ages 2 to 4 and

do not need a lengthy history of social relationships or interpersonal interactions to develop these personalities or invisible friends (Armah & Landers-Potts, 2021; Taylor & Mottweiller, 2008).

Research has reported that the prevalence of imaginary companions among children is as high as 65%. However, most studies indicate that between 20% and 35% of children have imaginary companions (Giménez-Dasí et al., 2016). Researchers who examine imaginary companion play suggest that imaginary companions may fill a void left by parents who step back and give children more independence as they transition out of preschool (Aguiar et al., 2017). They may also help improve self-esteem, provide comfort, or relieve boredom (Hoff, 2004; McLewin & Muller, 2006). Several studies demonstrate that children with imaginary companions are more likely to be firstborn or only children (Bouldin & Pratt, 1999; Gleason et al., 2000). Research indicates that most children's imaginary companions disappear as children gradually stop playing with and talking to them (Bouldin & Pratt, 1999). Other children's companions vanish after they start preschool, or after the child believes their imaginary companion left without explanation, moved away, or died.

As children develop a growing awareness of their gender roles, their beliefs and ideas are reflected in their play habits. Boys may receive less encouragement to engage in pretend play and have fewer opportunities because their parents have less positive attitudes toward this type of play (Gleason, 2005). Other studies do not suggest that girls are more inclined to engage in fantasy play; rather, boys and girls express this play differently (Carlson & Taylor, 2005). Boys tend to create imaginary companions with more masculine traits that function as ego ideals. At the same time, girls are more likely to form imaginary companions that allow them to fulfill a nurturing role. These outcomes may reflect how they conceptualize gender roles (Carlson & Taylor, 2005; Singer & Singer, 1981).

Language skills are one aspect of development correlated with imaginary companions. Preschool children with imaginary companions have been found to have more advanced vocabulary and longer utterances than children their age without imaginary companions (Singer & Singer, 1990; Taylor, 2010). The more complex and

diverse language children with imaginary companions use enhances communication with others (Bouldin et al., 2002; Lin et al., 2018; Roby & Kidd, 2008). Research shows that children with imaginary companions can create richer narratives when telling stories about both fictional and personally experienced events (Trionfi & Reese, 2009). Although a link exists between imaginary companions and richer narratives, the reason for the link is uncertain. Researchers speculate that the correlation stems from the practice children gain through decontextualized conversations, both during interactions with their imaginary companions and when they tell others about them (Trionfi & Reese, 2009). Success in referential communication tasks requires substantial metacognitive functioning, and researchers also postulate that children with imaginary companions show better metacognition because they can engage in activities that help them understand others' mental lives (Roby & Kidd, 2008).

Researchers suggest that children with imaginary companions demonstrate creative skills, such as forming new concepts (Brann, 1991). They are more likely to concoct stories, engage in fantasy play, participate in creative activities, and express ideas fluently (Bouldin & Pratt, 1999; Hoff, 2005). Imaginary companions are unique in terms of creativity because this type of imaginary play allows children to use and communicate symbols in hypothetical situations. Childhood imaginary companions are associated with more creative personalities and occupations in adulthood (Kidd et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2003). Research shows that adults with childhood imaginary companions are more likely to excel at complex, detailed scenes than those without (Firth et al., 2015).

Studies also show that children with imaginary companions do not perceive themselves as less competent than peers without imaginary companions (Taylor et al., 2004). These individuals generally enjoy companionship and receive more opportunities to practice interacting with others, making them more likely to seek out both real and imaginary friendships (Gleason, 2017; Roby & Kidd, 2008). Self-regulation of behavior in coordination with others' needs and desires is crucial for successful social interactions in adulthood, and playing with imaginary companions offers a wider range of social situations and experiences than typical play (Gleason, 2017). Playing with imaginary companions might help a child

relate to and manage overwhelming negative emotions. Children's interactions with their imaginary companions allow them to practice the social skills they wish to apply and avoid those they do not, without the negative implications that could arise from practicing conflict resolution with a real peer (Gleason, 2017). Practicing friendship skills risk-free helps prepare a child for the early childhood task of creating and managing friendships.

Appropriate Approaches and Strategies

Not all children discuss their imaginary companions with their parents, but those who do may hold significant conversations about their play (Taylor & Carlson, 1997). Parents who know about their children's imaginary companions often talk with their children about them, but their children are less likely to allow them to speak directly to the companions (Gleason & White, 2005). This illustrates that children's imaginary companion play occurs, at least in part, within the parent–child relationship. Children's imaginary companion play with parents can help them navigate social roles and manage emotionally charged situations. Unlike other parent-child interactions, a child leads the way and establishes the boundaries during imaginary companion play. Parents must respect that imaginary companions are solely the child's creation (Klein, 1985). According to the literature, failing to acknowledge a child's expertise about their imaginary companions can negatively affect this play (Gleason, 2017). This can lead to situations in which the child no longer interacts with their imaginary companions, the dynamics of play change, or children become frustrated with their parents' lack of understanding of the imaginary situation. Adults must understand that children need the freedom to accept or reject their suggestions and opportunities to engage in diverse forms of play. Here are some strategies parents can use when they see children playing with imaginary companions.

- Parents should recognize and appreciate a child's imaginary companion.
- Let children introduce their imaginary companions to their parents if they allow it, but do not force it.
- Respectfully follow your child's lead during play with their imaginary companion, supporting their creativity while maintaining healthy boundaries.

- If you can, ask questions about the imaginary companion's thoughts and reactions in various situations to prompt creativity and deeper thinking in children.
- Ensure your child understands the difference between fantasy and reality in play and in different situations.

Conclusion

In summary, adults need a thorough understanding of play and must recognize when and how to facilitate it properly. Otherwise, they risk disrupting or even harming children's play. By clearly linking imaginary companions to developmental strengths, we can help parents see the important role this type of play plays in their child's growth. By validating and supporting a child's imaginary companion and pretend play tendencies, parents can foster children who are emotionally balanced, creative, and more socially skilled. Further research is necessary to determine how, if at all, parents' perceptions of their children's pretend play, including imaginary companions, change or evolve as their children move through preschool (Gleason, 2005). More research is also needed to better understand the connection between language skills and imaginary companions, as well as the relationship between neurodivergent children and their use of imaginary companions (Armah & Landers-Potts, 2021; Lillard & Kavanaugh, 2014).

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