

Believing in Imagination

Jin Tuan '20 • Imagination subheadline. This perspective is fully laid out except for this subheadline, so it can be an example/template for others.



Children play pretend and make believe in the dirt. After a certain age, rarely do we play pretend — but role-playing and other imaginative practices can hold value for adults, too. • Image: Cade Martin, CDC Public Health Image Library, provided by Dawn Arlotta

Almost every child makes believe, but after a certain age, rarely do we play pretend. Imaginary worlds are relegated to pages and screens, theaters and niche role-playing communities. Daydreaming is discouraged. While physical exercise seems to be an obvious part of a healthy routine, time for imagination, creativity, and mental exercise is often not counted into one's schedule. But why is it not incorporated more into our everyday lives?

In a world of pretend, we are forced to view a real-life situation from a different perspective. We set our own limits and push ourselves to solve problems that may

seem impossible in the real world.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, multiple research papers show the positive effects of play pretend on child development and the upkeep of any healthy mind. Lillard et al. (2012) suggests that play pretend aids in growth of social skills, relaxation, and also narrative development. But that's enough about toddlers.

Lillard's study defines pretend-play as activities "characterized by an 'as-if' stance," or "mentally represented alternative on to the present situation". Stripping down the components of make-believe reveal that it really is just that: make-believe. On its own, reenacting

imaginary situations is not inherently childish or weird, yet it's so often ridiculed and denounced. Pretend play allows one to run through and prepare for a real-life situation without facing the actual consequences of a mistake.

From learning centers to “hip” workplaces, play pretend can be incorporated beneficially in adult life. Individually, we are often told to imagine this or imagine that, but rarely do we collaborate or extend the imaginary world beyond the confines of our own minds.

For example, I'll ask you to do so right now. Imagine a world where collaborative play pretend is incorporated everywhere — in high rises and remodeled storage units, in hospitals and marketing departments.

In the workforce, play pretend can promote the flow of ideas and help employees better prepare for upcoming presentations. Often, in a world where we need a filter of skepticism to protect us from a web of falsehood, we shut our own ideas down before they even make it into reality. Sometimes, this skepticism turns into criticism that stifles the synthesis of new ideas before they are even shared.

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In fact, studies including one published by Russ et al. (2016) suggest that playing pretend truly does influence adult creative production. Marketing teams alternately role-playing as presenter and audience can not only force employees to actively think of possible issues in the product or presentation in the shoes of the audience but also increase confidence of the presenter in the face of live criticism.

Starting from 2008 with the development and use of

PARO, a therapeutic robot, by Japan's National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology (AIST), researchers have known the benefits of de-personalizing certain symptoms to draw out necessary information for treatment.

PARO, a toy seal, is found to stimulate socialization between patients and caregivers, as well as patients with each other. Patients suspend their disbelief and project their emotions and expectations onto PARO, which is seen as a living being rather than an electronic machine. By placing a pretense over the situation and thus suspending concern of real-life consequences, patients discuss their ailments with more freedom.

Playing pretend can ease the patient's stress of putting themselves in a more vulnerable position, allowing them to speak through the voice of a third-person character. Seen as non-threatening, PARO acts as a common ground for discussion between patient and caregiver, as well as a confidant. Ranging from those with dementia who are targeted by PARO and soldiers with PTSD to even children or those with social anxiety, the patient-doctor relationship that is so integral in the healthcare field can be strengthened by imagination.

In the vein of play pretend and imagination is daydreaming. Although at times, a wandering mind may distract from whatever task is at hand, Godwin et al. (2017) posit that daydreaming is a sign of a brain with higher intellectual and creative capacities. When performing simple tasks, these higher-efficiency minds allocate resources to other issues that concern the person, enabling them to better schedule and solve problems.

There is so much potential for play and imagination in the everyday life of not-kids. Whether it's just for fun or to promote creative efficiency in work, whether it's formally organized or between collaborators, we should take away the stigma of play-pretend and let ourselves imagine together. Who doesn't give themselves pep talks in the mirror or practice imaginary situations in their head? I think it's high time we share our isolated world of imagination with our peers.

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