Why Are Children Playing?
For young children, play and work involve the same actions: interacting with people, manipulating objects, and making discoveries that help make sense of the world. Learning happens naturally through play. Play is the work of children. For school success, children must develop physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and creatively. Play is a crucial part of this development of the whole child.

What Is Pretend Play?
Young children from the toddler age and up engage in pretend or fantasy play, also called dramatic or sociodramatic play. Pretend play can take place at any time and in any setting. Children engage in this type of play as they pretend to be in another place. They may act out driving a car at the table. They are using pretend play when they take on the role of others they know – mothers, fathers, teachers, community helpers. A child who talks into a block held to his ear or acts out eating imaginary food is pretend playing. Children use this type of play to order and make sense of their world.

What Are Children Learning?

Pretend play stimulates social and emotional development. Children gain valuable interpersonal skills as they observe relationships and acquire an understanding of the feelings of others. Young children learn to take turns, play cooperatively, and express appropriate emotions. Dramatic play requires interaction and give-and-take experiences among children. To keep the play going, children must reach agreements about who they are and what they are doing.

Another important function of pretend play is the strengthening of children’s self-image. Pretend play provides opportunities for children to work through negative feelings and emotions and to try out new roles in a safe environment. Pretend play helps children gain a better understanding of themselves.

Communication is needed for pretend play. Oral language skills – as well as listening skills – develop naturally when children play and take on new roles. While play-acting alone, children may self-talk to set the scene and may describe the actions taking place. When children immerse themselves in a pretend world with others, conversation is necessary to make the “play” happen.

Through manipulating objects that support imaginative play, children have experiences with cause and effect as well as other concepts that aid cognitive learning. When playing store, they learn which keys to press on the toy cash register.
They select the number of dishes to feed play families in the housekeeping center. At block play, they learn that the large vinyl horse will not fit into the small truck.

Pretend play develops problem-solving and creative-thinking skills. When children assume roles and create pretend worlds, they select play materials and clothing. They design the sets in which to act out this play. Young children become “inventors” when they improvise a needed prop using a seemingly unrelated object.

This ability to pretend encourages children to become readers and writers. The desire to imitate others by holding a book and “reading” from memory, or pretending that their scribbles are grocery lists helps children acquire some of the earliest print literacy skills.

Additionally, because this type of play is so child-directed and so much fun, young children will usually stay focused and involved for a long period of time. This ability to sustain play enhances children’s attention spans and develops their ability to stay on task longer.

What Can You Do to Encourage Children’s Learning?
- Provide centers that invite children to engage in imaginary play. The housekeeping center is the area of the classroom generally recognized as the area designated for children to engage in pretend (or dramatic) play. Pretend play is encouraged by a variety of realistic props. The dolls, dress-ups, telephones, dishes, and home-like play furnishings and materials found here encourage children to take on the roles of family and friends.
- Other classroom activities that promote these types of experiences are play with puppets and stuffed animals. These soft-toy props for dramatic play support areas such as play stores or career centers (veterinarian’s office, doctor’s office, restaurant, etc.). By having career props available, children are encouraged through pretend play to recognize real-life roles played by the adults in their worlds.
- The block play center is another classroom area where the materials and props support pretend play. Children recreate towns, roads, landscapes, and other environments that set up opportunities to act out real-life scenarios in miniature.
- Pretend play frequently occurs outside, so equip the playground with play materials that foster these experiences. Children assume the roles of driver and police officer with trikes and riding toy accessories. Wheelbarrows and garden tools may lead to farm and gardening play. Plastic blocks and vehicles take imaginative block play outside. Giving young children open space and the opportunity to move freely may also suggest to them that they assume roles for fantasy hero games.
- Adults can help young children with creative play experiences by offering affirmative support. Accept that the banana is a telephone or that the pine cone is a hot dog, and interact appropriately. Correcting children – or handing them the “real” play prop – may interrupt the magic spell of fantasy play.
- Talk with the children. Describing their actions can help their role-play, extend their
learning, and build their vocabularies: “I see you listening to the puppy’s heart. You must be a veterinarian.” Ask questions that encourage young children to think creatively and expand their play: “What else are you going to do for the puppy?” Play with the children and model appropriate social behavior. Take “tea” together and say “Please pass the cream,” and “Thank you.”

• Understand that children may use pretend play as a way to work through problems that are of concern to them. Adults may be uncomfortable when a child who has lost a family member or a pet incorporates this into play. The adult may want to divert the play theme to more pleasant experiences. However, just as play is the work of young children, it can also be their therapy. Monitor the situation, but allow children the freedom to express themselves in ways they need in order to come to terms with their issues.

• Children are going to routinely participate in pretend play. It is a natural and important part of young lives. Recognize safe, appropriate, creative play wherever it takes place, and allow it to happen. Counters may become soup in the sorting bowls, or puzzle pieces may come to life. Children are controlling their learning and constructing their own knowledge whenever they are involved in pretend play.