The relative efficacy of pretend play as a learning context

Emily J. Hopkins

University of Virginia, University of Pennsylvania

Background

- How does learning from pretense compare to learning the same information from a non-pretend activity?
- Pretend play could be a positive context for learning because children are highly motivated and capable of more sophisticated thought during pretense (Vygotsky, 1967).
- A few studies have shown evidence of learning from very simple pretend episodes (Hopkins, Dore, & Lillard, 2015; Sutherland & Friedman, 2012, 2013).
- However, if children keep pretense separate from reality, they would not be likely to learn from it.
- Is pretend play more effective than non-pretend play for teaching new information?
- Does fantasy content affect learning from pretense?
- Fantasy content has been shown to affect children’s learning from storybooks (Hopkins & Lillard, under review; Richert et al., 2009; Richert & Smith, 2011; Walker, Gopnik, & Ganea, 2014; Weisberg et al., 2013).
- Children may learn less from fictional worlds that have less overlap with reality.

Method

Participants

61 four- and five-year-olds (32 girls); Mean age = 59.5 months; Range = 48.6 – 71.9 months

Play Period

Children engaged in 6-10 minutes of play with an experimenter. During the play period, the experimenter demonstrated two novel problem-solving strategies that involved constructing novel tools:

- “Surmt”: Used to retrieve something that fell out of reach
- “Tulver”: Used to pick up an object inside a small container

Three between-subjects conditions:

- Real Condition (n = 20)
  - Building with blocks
  - Painting a picture

- Realistic Pretense Condition (n = 21)
  - Pretending to be builders
  - Pretending to be artists

- Fantasy Pretense Condition (n = 20)
  - Pretending to be fairies
  - Pretending to be wizards

Dependent Measures

- Solution transfer
  - Will children apply the novel strategies to solve a problem outside the play period?

- Object transfer
  - Do children believe that surmtts and tulvers exist in the real world?

- Fantasy/Reality Discrimination
  - How good are children generally at distinguishing reality from fantasy?

Engagement: Overall engagement in play period was coded from video on a 5-point scale.

Memory: Children answered 9 questions about the events of the play period.

Results

- There were no significant effects of condition on learning of the problem solutions or the novel object categories.
- Across conditions, the ability to categorize real and fantastical entities predicted learning of problem-solving strategies and acceptance of the novel objects as real.

Conclusions

- Pretend play had no effect on transfer relative to a matched non-pretend activity.
- Fantasy content had no effect on transfer, although it led to lower engagement and poorer memory.
- Pretend play can be an effective way of teaching information to young children, but it is not necessarily the most effective way.
- Better fantasy/reality discrimination predicted higher transfer; thus, transfer represents a responsible strategy, and not confusion about what is real.

References


Acknowledgements

This study was completed as part of a doctoral dissertation at the University of Virginia under the supervision of Dr. Angelina S. Lillard. Thank you to her and to the members of the Early Development Lab. This study was supported by grants from the NSF and the Brady Education Foundation to Dr. Lillard.

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