

## Psychology

# Children Prefer the Real Thing to Pretending

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Pretend-play is a favorite pastime for American children. They mentally transform the here and now, preparing pretend meals in toy kitchens, frolicking around on fake horses, and feeding baby dolls with plastic bottles. By age 4, children spend approximately 20% of their waking hours engaged in such play, and yet many of their pretend activities could be done for real. Indeed, several popular pretend activities, such as preparing food and caring for babies, are done for real every day by many children around the world.

We wondered: when given the choice, do American children prefer pretend-play activities to their real-world counterparts? For example, would they rather cut wooden vegetables held together with Velcro using a wooden toy knife, or would they rather cut fresh vegetables with a real knife? Our research, recently published in *Developmental Science*, begins to address this question.

We asked 100 preschoolers (ages 3 to 6) to choose between pretend and real versions of nine different activities (e.g., riding a horse, cutting vegetables, washing dishes, and fishing) and justify their choices. We found that although 3-year-olds were 50-50, by age 4, children strongly preferred real activities. Of the nine activities, there was not a single one that the whole sample of children preferred to pretend rather than really do. Children told us that they preferred real activities because of their functionality and utility: doing real things leads to real-world outcomes, and they like that. For example, to justify her choice to really feed a baby, a child said, “We could learn how to feed babies in case my mom becomes a babysitter and I help.” In contrast, on those occasions when pretend choices were selected, the most

common reasons were ability, avoidance, and permission. Children expressed wanting to avoid a negative outcome they feared could result from the real activity, or appealed to their own perceived lack of ability. For example, one child justified his choice to pretend to rather than really fish with, “Because I might pull up a shark or a big dangerous other thing.”

These findings are interesting to consider with regard to current preschool curricula. Opportunities to engage in real activities differ widely across preschool classrooms in the United States. Children in conventional preschools are often encouraged to pretend, and are believed to learn various skills through these pretend engagements. In contrast, children in [Montessori preschools](#) are not encouraged to pretend, something for which Montessori education is commonly criticized. Instead, through Montessori’s practical life exercises, children engage in real activities that other children might only pretend to do (e.g., cutting fruits and vegetables, washing tables, baking biscuits, and so on). Perhaps surprisingly, children’s responses in this study suggest that they would like to have more opportunities for real engagements.

In sum, we have found that even though they are at an age where pretending is a popular activity, American children express a desire to participate in the real world. They want to help their parents wash dishes and bake cookies, and they want to really go fishing and feed babies. These findings challenge the Western assumption that play is the superlative activity for children. It appears that, to some extent, children view pretending as a substitute for activities that they would rather do for real.