

TEXAS Parenting News

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOR PARENTS EVERYWHERE

WINTER 2006

"I'm a boy but I'm pretending I'm a girl"

Mr. Branson stops by the school to have lunch with his son. When he steps into the classroom, his jaw drops. There in the home center is 4-year-old Stefan, wearing a red skirt and silver necklace and carrying a purse.

"Daddy!" the child squeals, throwing down the purse and running to greet him.

"What are you doing in those clothes?" Mr. Branson asks.

"It's my turn to be the mommy," says Stefan.

Seeing children pretending to be the opposite sex can be surprising, even upsetting. What's going on?

Pretend play is a fundamental part of preschool classrooms. It helps children develop many skills, from language and thinking skills to social and emotional skills. During pretend play, it's common for children to take on roles that are either real or imagined. Children may pretend to be a dragon one day and a teacher the next.

It's also common for children to take on roles of the opposite sex. For example, a boy may pretend to be a mommy or a girl a daddy. Children are not born knowing that they are a boy or girl or what it means to be male or female. This must be learned.

According to psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, children learn about gender in stages. At first, children label individuals as male or female, based on visual markers such as clothing or hair length. Children at this stage believe that simply changing those features will change the gender. For example, if a child thinks that women wear dresses, then putting on a dress will make a person a woman.

As they mature, children may experiment with cross-gendered play to help them understand that gender is constant. Gradually they begin to understand that gender—their own and that of others—

doesn't change with different clothing. They may continue using cross-gendered play as a way to understand social role and expectations associated with being male and female.

How long children engage in cross-gendered pretend play varies by child. The majority of children outgrow this form of play by the time they enter elementary school.

Talking, acting, or dressing like a person of the opposite sex typically means that a child admires some behavior or abilities of that person. For example, when Jimmy wears a ballet tutu, he may be showing his fascination with the great leaps made by Odette in a performance of "Swan Lake" he has recently seen. Cross-gendered play doesn't mean Jimmy is confused about his own gender. Nor does it mean that he wishes he were the opposite sex any more than another boy believes he's a dragon.

Another reason for cross-gendered play is a lack of specific role models. If Molly has no father at



home, for example, she may pretend to be a father during play. Similarly, if Adam's grandmother were placed in a rehabilitation center for an extended period, Adam might pretend to be a grandma during play. Once the role models return to the children's lives, such behaviors are likely to decrease.

It's unwise to shame or embarrass children from engaging in cross-gendered play. Forbidding a certain kind of play can make it all the more enticing.

Cross-gendered play can be beneficial. Children learn to take on roles and characteristics that go

against the stereotype for their gender. Boys may learn to be more caring and nurturing, while girls may become more assertive. Such traits enhance development and may guide children to explore professions typically dominated by the opposite gender.

Ideally, parents will treat cross-gendered play in the same way they treat other types of pretend play. By playing freely, children can explore until they understand their gender role and then move on.

Adapted from an article by Tiffany Hamlett and Ron Fannin in *Texas Child Care* Winter 2006.

Top 10 tips for enjoying winter holidays

10. Stick to your daily routine as much as possible. When children miss a nap, fill up on french fries, and stay up too late at night, they get whiny and irritable.

9. Cut back on TV watching to avoid adding to the excitement and demands for the latest toys. Instead, read an extra story to your children, make a puppet from an old sock, or go for a short walk.

8. Involve children in holiday preparations. Slow down and let your child put stamps on holiday cards, decorate paper placemats or napkins, and mix cookie dough, for example.

7. If you take children with you to shop, limit your outing to only two or three kid-friendly stores. Take along a snack, and locate restrooms before you need them. Consider shopping by phone or online when possible.

6. When buying gifts for your child, consider one or two quality toys rather than several cheap or fad toys. Invest in a simple doll or truck, wooden blocks, and art supplies that allow children to use them in different ways.

5. If traveling by car, double check your child's safety seat. Remember to take any medications your child might need, along with the phone number of your family doctor. On long trips, take a

break every hour or two to stretch legs, get a drink of water, and use the restroom.

4. When opening gifts, remember that young children often show less interest in the gift and more in the box and wrappings it came in. Save a few boxes for your child to play with on cold winter nights. Save holiday cards and wrapping paper for craft activities.

3. After all the gifts are open, pack up the older toys and put them away for a while. When your child tires of the new ones, bring out the older ones, two or three at a time. Rotating toys in this way keeps children from feeling overwhelmed and makes older toys seem new again.

2. Rethink your expectations. No one has a perfect holiday season. Children will get cranky, and some things, like the weather, will be completely out of your control. Be realistic, choose what's essential, and let the rest go.

1. Carve out some special time to spend with your child. A couple of hours may be enough for a school-age child, and a morning or afternoon is better for a younger child. Make it relaxing and fun for both of you. This is a great way to say: "I'm crazy about you."

Hidden threats to learning

As parents we often assume that our children will learn simply by showing up at school and doing school-type things, like using books and reciting numbers.

But how well children learn can depend on unsuspecting factors in the first three years of their lives.

Lead-based paint

Although this is less a problem than it was 30 years ago, families that live in houses built before 1972 face some risk. Lead-based paint could be present in bottom paint layers and get exposed when newer layers chip off. The dirt around the house could also contain lead from early paint jobs.

Supervise children carefully so they don't ingest paint chips or dust. Lead can get in their blood and the brain, where it can damage developing neurons. If you're concerned, talk to your family doctor about having your child tested.

Lack of sleep

Families lead busy lives that can sometimes deprive children of much-needed sleep. In addition, children can have trouble breathing during sleep because of swollen tonsils or adenoids, which can make them irritable or seem hyperactive.

According to the National Sleep Foundation, toddlers need 12-14 hours of sleep a day, preschoolers 11-13, and elementary school children 10-11. To help children get enough sleep, establish regular nap and bedtimes. Offer soothing and enjoyable go-to-sleep routines, such as a warm bath, story, and a favorite blanket or stuffed toy.

Listen to your child sleeping. If your child snores a lot, consult a doctor about a possible respiratory problem.

Improper diet

Children younger than 2 years need enough fat in their diet to build the proper coating around nerve cells in the brain. Never give a baby or toddler skim or low-fat milk.

Drinking too much milk—more than 16-20 ounces after 12 months—could deprive children of

other nutritious food and put them at risk for iron deficiency anemia, which hinders the blood from carrying oxygen to developing neurons in the brain. Make sure to take your child for the routine one-year, well-baby check, when pediatricians check for anemia.

Make sure children eat breakfast. After fasting all night, the body needs glucose to fuel learning. Avoid sugary processed cereals and donuts. Instead serve foods high in protein and complex carbohydrates such as whole-grain oatmeal or toast, bean burrito, egg taco, fresh fruit, egg, and milk.

Too much TV and video

Television is a passive rather than active medium. The neural connections in a child's brain are not stimulated as much while watching TV as they are during hands-on play.

Don't put a TV in a child's bedroom. Offer toys, blocks, puzzles, and art materials for play. Turn off the TV during dinner and before bedtime. Don't allow viewing of violent or scary shows. Preview the so-called children's programs and videos to make sure they don't teach conflict and negative attitudes.

Lack of conversation

Whoever said children should be seen and not heard was all wrong. The neurons in a baby's brain need to develop connections that enable thinking and learning. These connections are formed through talking, playing, exploring, and using all the senses—looking, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting.

Follow your instincts to cuddle and rock your baby. Talk to your baby when diapering, feeding, and playing. Read to your child every day. Strong language skills are necessary for strong thinking and learning skills.

Respond promptly to your baby's cries to help the child develop trust and be alert for learning. Provide a safe home to play in and explore to encourage the child's curiosity and learning about the world. Most important, make learning fun—for you and your child.

Is your child a picky eater?

At dinnertime, Ms. Jones cuts up a piece of broiled chicken for 3-year-old Joshua, who's squirming in his highchair. She adds a spoonful of mashed potatoes and green beans to his plate.

Becky, age 5, surveys the food on the table. "Why can't we have fried chicken, like at Jennifer's house?"

"Fried foods are not good for you," says Ms. Jones. "Too much fat."

Joshua suddenly spits out a bite of chicken. "Yucky," he says.

Ms. Jones picks up the piece off the floor: "OK, just eat your potatoes and beans."

"No, I want down," says Joshua.

"Eat something first."

"No," he screams and shoves his plate onto the floor. Ms. Jones counts to 10.

Eating hassles are common with young children. Fortunately, eating problems usually don't last forever. Toddlers often test their growing independence by refusing foods, and preschoolers sometimes are too busy playing to eat. As parents, we often worry that our children aren't eating enough or the right kinds of food.

Here are some tips to help children learn appropriate behavior at mealtime.

- Talk with your pediatrician or caregiver about the kinds and amounts of food your child needs for healthy growth. Many children consume too much fat and not enough fruits and vegetables. Modify your menus to ensure a balanced diet.
- Look at your home eating routines. If breakfasts are rushed, consider having calm, relaxing breakfasts on weekends. If children get cranky right before dinner, consider offering a small, nutritious snack after school. On the other hand, if children are not hungry at dinner, maybe they are snacking too much.
- Plan a sit-down family meal at least once a day, such as in the evening. Turn off the TV and engage in pleasant conversation. Avoid discussing problems.
- Set limits you can enforce. "Take a small serving at first. Then if you're still hungry, you can have a second helping." "Take small bites and chew slowly. No spitting out."

- Give positive reinforcement immediately for appropriate behavior. "Becky, you're sitting quietly in your chair. I'll bet you're ready to tell us about your day." Ignore whining and other negative behavior as much as possible.
- Model the eating habits and table manners you want children to develop. "Jerry, please pass the bread."
- Prepare food in ways that encourage children to serve and feed themselves depending on their age and development. Pieces of cooked chicken and banana enable toddlers to eat with their fingers, for example. A small pitcher of milk makes it easier for 4-year-old Tommy to pour it by himself.
- Serve children's favorites alongside new foods. With Susie's favorite spaghetti, you might serve green beans or broccoli, for example.
- Prepare foods children don't like in different ways. Instead of cooked spinach, offer fresh spinach salad with strawberries or a spinach omelet. If children don't like milk, offer soups or puddings made with milk.
- Involve children in grocery shopping and meal preparation. They're more likely to eat new foods that they choose and help make.
- Avoid power struggles over food. If Leslie refuses to eat what's served, offer a simple substitute like cheese and crackers. If she still refuses, gently explain that those are her only choices. If she later gets hungry, explain that dinner is over and that she can eat at the next regular mealtime, which is breakfast.
- Avoid using food as a reward. Instead of celebrating with an ice cream cone, go to the park, or visit the library.

Texas Parenting News is published by the Texas Workforce Commission for free distribution. ©2006, TWC.

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