

Ideas for Encouraging Symbolic Play

Play is strongly linked with language. With language, we use words as symbols eg when I say the word table you understand that this stands for or symbolises the real object.

Symbolic play involves using an object as a symbol, e.g. a teddy stands for/symbolises a live person. Toys or pictures can be used as symbols e.g. a toy spoon can represent a real spoon or a block can represent a car. Being able to use one thing to stand for or symbolise another is an important step in learning words. This usually happens at around the age of 15 months.

Activity	What you will need
Involve a doll or teddy in everyday situations e.g. when having a bath, give the child a doll and a sponge.	Doll/teddy, cup, spoon, facecloth, bed.
Tea Party Use pretend food at first and introduce other things eg a red brick be used as an apple (symbolising).	Tea set, real food, toy food, pictures of food.
Large Doll Play Pretend with dolls and teddies using real life routines that your child is familiar with e.g. washing, dressing, feeding, putting to bed. This is more pretend than symbolic play.	Doll/teddy, box for bed, blankets, cups, prams.
Miniature Doll Play By 18 months children can recognise miniature toys. Start by playing with the real object and then introduce the miniature version e.g. the child pretends to eat with a spoon and then give the child the miniature spoon. Demonstrate to the child how to use the miniature with a teddy or a doll.	Box (house), toy furniture, dolls, doll clothes.
Farm Animals Use their animal sounds, make them jump or run, give them a ride in a tractor or trailer, give the hens pretend eggs (blocks or chocolate eggs), give a doll a ride on a horse, give the animals food from a trough e.g. an empty matchbox or make them eat grass, make them escape from the field and go on an adventure, make the animals talk to each other and sing nursery rhymes such as 'Hey diddle, diddle', 'This little piggy went to market' etc.	A selection of farm animals, blocks (as fences, walls of a field, food), empty matchbox, tractor.

Adapted from Lynch and Kidd, 1999

