

What Good Comes From Pretending?

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Hang out with a 3-year-old and you will quickly be transported to a world of unicorns and superheroes, pretend tea parties and invisible spaceships. Young children spend hours pretending. But why would they spend so much time exploring imaginary worlds when there is so much to learn about the real one?

Pretend play may help children to develop an essential kind of reasoning—counterfactual thinking, which helps you figure out what would happen if things were different. Often, for adults, counterfactuals apply to the past. *What if I hadn't lost that wallet?* But they have implications for the future. *What if I put a tracking tag in the wallet next time?* Thinking about how the past could have been different may lead to regret, but that's the price we pay for the hope that comes from imagining a different future.

Counterfactual reasoning is hard. You have to simultaneously think about the real world and an alternate scenario. Children start to use counterfactuals only at around age 4 and become adept with them much later. But pretending starts as early as 18 months, and it's a lot like counterfactual thinking—you imagine a way the world might be and then work out what would happen next.

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