

Home > Blog > 3 Ways To Help Your Child Express Emotion During Pretend Play

# 3 Ways to Help Your Child Express Emotion During Pretend Play

Written by [Jennifer Moncayo-Hida](#)  
Apr 21, 2017



When your child pretends their teddy bear is an astronaut flying through outer space they are using their imagination and engaging in pretend play. But what does it mean if the teddy bear is frightened as he flies past planets in his spaceship?

If you watch children at play, emotion is often involved in the story. For example, a monster is chasing a puppet who is scared. Dolls are happily eating at a picnic. A pretend parent is angry and scolding a child for not cleaning their room. Play is filled with pretend emotions and emotional themes.

Research by Sandra W. Russ, Ph.D., a clinical child psychologist and a Distinguished University Professor of Psychology at Case Western Reserve University, and her colleagues found that the feelings expressed in play are important in creative thinking for both preschool children and elementary school children.

When kids express negative emotions in pretend play, like one puppet is beating up another in a wrestling match, there is nothing to worry about as long as the negative emotion is expressed within a story that makes sense and has imaginative components. Meaning the wrestling match ends with a winner or a scolding parent puts the child in a pretend time-out. In these scenarios, "the child is learning to regulate the negative emotions," writes Sandra W. Russ in the Center for Childhood Creativity's [Creativity Trend Report: Volume 2](#).

In addition, scientists discovered that preschool children who expressed more aggressive emotions in their play stories showed more prosocial (or helping) behaviors and less aggressive behaviors in the classroom, according to a study featured in the journal *Early Education and Development*.

"This makes developmental sense because these children feel comfortable expressing negative [emotion] and practicing the modulation of it in pretend play," says Russ, a leading scholar in creativity. "In other words, children are using their creative expression to learn important skills about coping with negative feelings."

The feelings children show in their pretend play have been linked to divergent thinking, or the ability to generate many ideas. As a parent, you can easily guide your child to help them incorporate healthy emotions into their pretend play skills.

## 1. Provide Play Prompts

You can help your child incorporate feelings into their play by using prompts that include emotion. For example, ask your little one to play out a story about a boy going to a birthday party and having fun. Or ask your child to pretend they are going camping and they get scared when they hear noises in the dark.

## 2. Promote Group Play

Encourage group play with other kids when possible. A recent study with elementary school girls found that children's imagination and emotion during play increased after participating in small group play sessions facilitated by an adult.

## 3. Participate and Praise Play

Join in on the pretend play! For example, say "How about we pretend this Lego is a baby bottle!" Researchers found that adult play facilitators help children think creatively during play when they model it, enjoy playing, and also praise the child's play behaviors.

### Learn More

To learn more about emotion in pretend play, read the [Creativity Trend Report: Volume 2](#) by the Center for Childhood Creativity at the Bay Area Discovery Museum. The report features a section written by professor Sandra W. Russ, Ph.D., where she discusses her seminal research on creativity, play, and emotion.



#### About the Contributor

Jennifer Moncayo-Hida is a Senior Communications Manager at the Bay Area Discovery Museum.

[More posts by Jennifer](#)

### Visit Us

- Visit Us
- Hours & Admission
- Directions
- Calendar
- Bean Sprouts Café
- Discovery Store
- Museum Map

### Exhibits & Events

- Exhibits
- Events
- Museum Calendar

### Camps & Classes

- Camps & Classes
- Winter Camps
- Spring Camps
- Summer Camps
- Fall Camps
- Family Classes

### Parties & Rentals

- Parties
- Birthday Parties
- Baby Showers
- Event Rentals

### For Educators

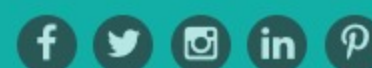
- For Educators
- School Visits
- Try It Truck
- Connections
- Professional Development

### Blog



Our mission is to transform research into early learning experiences that inspire creative problem solving

- [ABOUT US](#)
- [CONTACT US](#)
- [PRESS](#)
- [MEMBERSHIP](#)
- [JOBS](#)
- [CALENDAR](#)
- [DONATE](#)
- [SIGN UP FOR EMAIL](#)



Our Newsletter

Enter email