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## *Introduction*

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Imagine that you are visiting a child-care center. You begin in the yard where toddler-age children are playing in a sandbox. One child shapes a pile of sand into a “cake” and says “birthday” while a child beside her fills a cup with sand, raises it to his lips, and does not take a drink. In the three-year-olds’ room a group of children are in the block corner near a long string of foot-long blocks. A girl says, “Pretend this is the magic snake.” A boy says, “Yes, but it is a train snake and I am the engineer.” In the four-year-olds’ room you see children dressed in flowing gowns acting out a fantasy play with kings, queens, and princesses. One child informs you that he is the dragon, the princess is going to run away, and the king and the queen will hunt for her.

You may conclude from your visit that social pretend play is a favorite, if not an important activity of childhood. Psychologists, parents, and early childhood educators have long been interested in children’s social pretend play. Research on children’s play suggests that besides being fun and interesting for both the children and the adults who watch them, play has important educational implications. Children’s social pretend play is linked to all aspects of development—emotional, cognitive, linguistic, and social. (See Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey 1987; and Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg 1983 for reviews of this literature.) In this book we argue that the development of children’s social competence, particularly of their competence in forming relationships with peers, is closely linked to their social pretend play.

The field of early peer relationships and friendships has been characterized by rich descriptive studies of relationship and interactive processes with little theoretical structure. Recently, Gottman and colleagues (Gottman & Mettetal 1986; Parker & Gottman 1989) and Howes (1987, 1988) proposed alternative models for the sequential development of social relation-

ships with peers in childhood. These two models have much in common. Both models distinguish between friendships and social acceptance or popularity with peers. Both models propose that social competence with peers develops as children master particular social tasks or processes in their interaction with peers and that the social tasks change with development. These tasks or processes are called "marker behaviors" of social competence. Individual social competence may be assessed by the presence or absence of these developmental markers. Finally, both models suggest that social pretend play has a central role in the development of social relationships and social competence.

The two models appear to differ in their consideration of the role or function of social pretend play. Howes argues that social pretend play in the early toddler period (children between the ages of 24 and 36 months) represents the communication of meaning and thus is a marker of social competence in that period. She further suggests that the marker of social competence for children during the preschool period (three to five years of age) is social knowledge of the peer group. In her model, the central task for preschool children is to understand that they are part of a larger social group and to differentiate between friendship and playmate relationships within the group. In contrast, Gottman and colleagues argue that the central social task for three- to seven-year-old children is to achieve coordinated play, the highest level of which is fantasy or social pretend play. Within the Gottman model the social task of middle childhood (elementary school-age children) is a form of peer group integration, specifically, inclusion in the same-sex peer group. For elementary school children, gossip replaces social pretend play as the social task. Thus, Gottman and colleagues identify a longer period, ages three to seven, in which social pretend play is a salient social process. Furthermore, Howes uses social pretend play as a marker of social competence in the developmental period prior to the period identified by Gottman.

One way of resolving the discrepancies between the two models is to examine the following question: How can social pretend play be a marker of social competence with peers during the toddler period and still be elaborated during the three- to seven-year-old period? One easy answer to this question is definitional. Howes's definition of social pretend play is based on observation (Howes 1988; Howes, Unger, & Seidner 1989). In the most complex form of social pretend play used by Howes, children need only to use pretend actions to engage in complementary roles. Toddlers can communicate meaning in social pretend play without any use of language. Gottman's (1983) primary data source is audio transcripts. Thus, he relies on verbal transformations and script content to identify social pretend play. Therefore, Howes and Gottman examine different forms of social pretend play. These different forms are rooted in different developmental periods.

A more complex answer to the question of discrepancies between the Gottman and Howes models lies within the function or functions of social pretend play. Gottman ascribes an integrative function to social pretend play. Children use pretend play to establish and maintain social relationships. In contrast, Howes ascribes a communicative function to social pretend play. Pretend enriches social play through the communication of meaning.

In this book we will argue that social pretend play can fulfill several different developmental functions and that these functions change with development. If the function of social pretend play changes with development then social pretend play can be considered an important social task over a relatively long period in development. The Howes and Gottman models are not incompatible if the function of social pretend play changes with development. Within a developmental framework mastery of communication of meaning within social pretend play is the task of toddlers while the integration of social pretend play is the task of older children. We will argue that social pretend play is salient in the formation of both social interaction skills and friendships from the toddler period into middle childhood, but that there are changes in both the forms and the functions of social pretend play across these periods.

## Fundamental Assumptions

Two fundamental assumptions underlie this argument. We have assumed that the development of social competence with peers can be described as a series of sequential social tasks or marker behaviors. The idea that the social tasks serve as markers of competent behavior and that these tasks or markers change across developmental periods is central to developmental psychology (Wolhvil 1973). By using marker behaviors we are not arguing that related behaviors within a period are unimportant but that the selected task or behavior is a good representation of the construct during the particular period.

The idea of social tasks or marker behaviors is consistent with the idea of a dominant activity originally suggested by Vygotsky and later elaborated by another Soviet psychologist, Leontiev (Lisina 1985). Within these theories "activity" refers to a child's actions and operations. If we apply the Soviet notion of dominant activity to our work, activity refers to the communication behaviors used in playing social pretend. A dominant activity is the principal one at each stage of development. The dominant activity serves to organize all types of activities. Subsequent development depends on the dominant activity (Lisina 1985).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, according to the Soviet theory of activity, the form of social pretend play within one period would cause the transformation that results in the form of social pretend play in the subse-

quent period. Specifically, because children have mastered the communication of meaning within social pretend play, they can explore issues of control and compromise by negotiating social pretend play. Likewise, children can use social pretend play to explore trust and intimacy once they have resolved issues of control and compromise in social pretend play negotiations.

We also have assumed that one activity, in this case social pretend play, can assume different developmental functions. This is possible, in part, because the activity is complex. Social pretend play even in its most rudimentary form involves the coordination of an internal world that produces nonliteral transformations with the external world of social relations (Howes et al. 1989). More complex social pretend play engages the child in counterfactual or would-be thinking as children jointly manage multiple roles, invent novel plots, and deliberately interweave pretense and reality (Bretherton 1987).

The complexity and multifunctional nature of social pretend play contributes to a somewhat confusing empirical literature on the subject. Although children's social pretend play has a rich literature, researchers infrequently make explicit their assumptions about the function of the play for children's development. Thus, social pretend play is studied as a central task of social-cognitive development (e.g., Watson & Fischer 1980), of the development of social interaction with peers (e.g., Connolly & Doyle 1984) and as emotional development (e.g., Fein 1985).

## Functions of Social Pretend Play

If one is to impose an organizational structure on this literature the function of social pretend play must be defined. Bretherton (1987), in discussing the multifunctional nature of social pretend play, argues that the only social pretend function that could not be filled in other contexts is that of emotional mastery. Emotional mastery is defined as using pretend play to successfully work through fears and other emotional issues. Emotional mastery is distinct from the function of mastery of communication of meaning, and could occur in solitary pretend play as well as in social pretend play. Mastery of the communication of meaning can only occur in a social context because it is the ability to understand that nonliteral meaning can be shared and collaboratively elaborated.

Bretherton has selected a most important function for social pretend play. In contrast, in this book we will argue that social pretend play serves different functions in different periods. These two arguments are not totally incompatible. Although Bretherton acknowledges that metacommunication in pretense begins at about fifteen months, she limits her discussion of social pretend play to complex forms that involve multiple conceptual levels of rep-

resentation. These forms of social pretend play emerge during preschool. In contrast, in this book we will argue that by the preschool period social pretend play serves not only the function of emotional mastery through exploring issues of intimacy and trust but that it fills other functions in earlier periods.

We have identified three functions of social pretend play. These functions are initially the communication of meaning through mastery of social pretend forms, subsequently expressing and exploring issues of control and compromise by negotiating social pretend play meanings and scripts, and finally, exploring issues of intimacy and trust within social pretend play. We suggest that each of these functions assumes greater importance within a particular developmental period. Following the argument begun by Howes we will argue that mastery of the communication of meaning in social pretend play is a central function of social pretend play in the toddler period. We will then suggest that expressing and exploring issues of control and compromise is a new and salient function of social pretend play in the early preschool period. Finally, following Gottman and Bretherton's models, we will argue that emotional mastery or exploring issues of intimacy and trust is the major function of social pretend play in older children.

By linking particular functions of social pretend play to particular age periods we do not mean to imply either a sequential model or that social pretend play has only one function within an age period. Certainly preschool children are still mastering the more subtle forms of social pretend play negotiation. Toddlers do form friendships (Howes 1983) and social pretend play between toddler-age friends may have elements of self-disclosure. Thus, toddler social pretend play may serve intimacy functions.

However, we will argue that there is a single most important function of social pretend play within a developmental period. This argument is consistent with the notion of social tasks or marker behaviors representing social competence in a particular developmental period. The argument of a single most important function is also consistent with the idea of dominant activity. Thus, social pretend play fulfills a single most important function during each developmental period. The form of social pretend play during a period contributes to the reorganization of the form in the next period. The particular function of social pretend play is closely tied to the demands for social competence within each period. The demands for social competence are, in turn, determined by the social, cognitive, and linguistic skills of the child and the increasingly complex social contexts for development.

In discussing the changing functions of social pretend play we are assuming that as the child moves from the toddler to the preschool stages of development he or she is in contact for longer and longer periods with an increasingly varied peer group. This assumption is true for children enrolled in child care. With age the number of children in the child-care peer group

increases while the amount of adults provided for each child decreases. For children living in more traditional families the transition between toddler and preschool periods is usually marked by either enrollment in a formal preschool program or increasing amounts of time in the informal neighborhood peer group.

## The Partner in Social Pretend Play

In our organizational scheme it is important to consider characteristics of the social pretend play partner in order to understand the changing functions of social pretend play. Social pretend play by definition is a social rather than individual activity. It is impossible to generate social pretend play without a partner. The function of this play is influenced, as we shall discuss, by the nature of the available partner. For example, adult-child social pretend play differs in features and, we will argue, function, from peer social pretend play.

The literature on pretend as opposed to social pretend play is composed of studies in five different partner contexts: child alone or with an adult who elicits but does not join in play; mother-child pretend play; sibling pretend play; and pretend play between age-mates. There is an implicit organization by age within these studies. Studies of solitary pretend play and mother-child pretend play rarely extend to preschoolers. Studies of sibling pretend play cluster in the toddler period. Studies of social pretend play between peers are most common with preschool-age children. In discussing the functions of social pretend play we will limit ourselves to the four dyadic partner contexts. We will not consider solitary or elicited pretend play. We also will not consider large group social pretend play. Children younger than four or five rarely engage in social pretend play in groups larger than two or three. Even with the older preschoolers, when six or seven children may be in the game most interactive play occurs within dyads. We will also not consider adult-elicited or play-training or tutoring pretend play. There is excellent literature on this topic initiated by a pioneering study by Smilansky (1968) but it is beyond the scope of this book (see Johnson et al. 1987 for a review).

The function of social pretend play assumed by the researcher pre-determines the age of the play partner. If the researcher is primarily interested in the mastery function of social pretend play then studies of the transmission of the culture of play from expert (mother or older sibling) to the novice (the toddler-age child) are especially interesting. Children who are mastering the communication of meaning in social pretend play can use the scaffold provided by a partner who has mastered this play device. As we shall see, mothers and siblings often provide a structure for the play and coach the younger child in playing techniques.

Studies of mother-child pretend play drop out about the time that theme and script negotiation assume greatest importance in social pretend play. We suspect that pretend play becomes less interesting and enjoyable for mothers who are probably engaged in multiple real-life arguments with the child. For the child, pretend play with siblings and peers may be a safer avenue for exploring control and compromise than pretend play with the more powerful adults.

If a researcher is concerned with the self-disclosure function of social pretend play, then studies of same-age peers, particularly of friend partners, are interesting. Studies of social pretend play with peers increase at a time when friendship is a central concern for children (Corsaro 1985; Parker & Gottman 1989). Issues of intimacy and trust are central to friendships and, as will be discussed, children's friendships and their pretend play are also interrelated.

The nature of the play partner-child relationship as well as the age of the partner are relevant in defining functions of social pretend play. If the function of social pretend play is to master communication of meaning then we might assume that mastery will be more complete if the play partner is sensitive and responsive to the child's attempts to communicate. Therefore, children with secure attachments might be expected to excel at social pretend play because secure attachments are formed from experiences with a sensitive and responsive partner. Several studies do report a link between the child's attachment relationship with the mother and the child's symbolic play with both the mother and with peers (Bretherton et al. 1979; Matas, Arend, & Sroufe 1978; Slade 1987a). Similarly, children with siblings who were particularly skillful at eliciting and responding to beginning attempts to communicate pretend might master social pretend play before children with no siblings or less sensitive siblings. Therefore, the nature of the sibling-child relationship might be expected to influence the quality of sibling-child play (Furman & Buhrmester 1985) although there are no studies that directly address this issue.

Friendships, particularly friendships that are especially close and/or stable, might be expected to influence both the exploration of control and compromise and the intimacy and trust functions of social pretend play. Gottman (1986) reports that preschool friends have more harmonious play than acquaintances. We suspect that this relation between friends and the ability to negotiate play would also be true during the toddler period. Later in the preschool period children who are friends may use social pretend play to explore their fears, achieve trust, and for intimacy functions. Children who do not have friends or are less well adjusted may have more difficulty with this function of social pretend play. Several studies report differences in social pretend play between friends and acquaintances (Gottman & Parkhurst

1980; Howes & Unger 1989; Roopnarine & Field 1984). We will examine these studies for differences in the use of social pretend play.

## Summary

Social pretend play is considered a marker of social competence in two recent models of the development of social relationships and social competence. Although these models appear, at first, to have used social pretend play in contradictory ways, we suggest that the models are compatible if the functions of social pretend play are assumed to change with development. We propose three different functions of social pretend play during childhood. During the earliest period of social pretend play the function of the play is to master the communication of meaning. As children develop sufficient linguistic and cognitive skills to engage in social pretend play negotiations, we see the function of social pretend play changing. The function of the play becomes exploring issues of control and compromise through negotiation. Finally, once children become expert players of social pretend we see the function of social pretend as exploring issues of trust and intimacy.

We further suggest that the social pretend play partner is important in understanding the functions of social pretend play. Mastery functions are enhanced by more expert partners and by partners who are sensitive to the child's attempts to communicate. Harmonious negotiations and intimacy and trust functions are influenced by the relationships between play partners. Children who are friends may be more likely to successfully resolve issues of autonomy and control and to use social pretend play to explore intimacy and trust.

Much of the research on social pretend play is descriptive. We have taken an inductive approach to this material, using the descriptions of play to support our notions of the functions of social pretend play and to generate a set of generalizations and hypotheses useful to future research.

## About this Book

This book is a product of a research group in the Developmental Studies Program at the University of California at Los Angeles. We met weekly from the winter of 1986 through the summer of 1989 to discuss the interrelations among the development of early peer relations and social pretend play. The central ideas of the book and the research agenda suggested were generated



through discussions among the group participants, Carollee Howes, and her graduate students who author or coauthor sections of the book. The book is organized according to social pretend play functions: mastering the communication of meaning, exploring control and compromise, and expressing intimacy and trust. Each section begins with a review chapter written by Carollee Howes, in collaboration with Olivia Unger and Catherine Matheson. These review chapters describe the function of social pretend play and explore the significance of both the play partner's age and the child's relationship with the partner for social pretend play within the period. The review chapters are followed by several illustrative studies. These illustrative studies, not published elsewhere, are original designs suggested by the review chapters. They were designed to elaborate productive research directions. We hope that the book will encourage other researchers to work in this area and to continue to elaborate the developmental functions of social pretend play.