"Watching a child play or becoming a partner with a child in the play, you'll have a wonderful opportunity to learn more about that child—and probably more about yourself, too. Maybe you'll also find that by watching a child at play, you'll tap into some of the playfulness inside you—remembering your childhood and discovering new things about yourself."

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Choosing Playthings

Children's play depends on what they're thinking about or dealing with at that moment. They might play to try on different roles, figure out what the world is like, or work through some of their feelings and concerns. Or they may want to play just for fun. That's why the very best kinds of playthings are open-ended: blocks or stuffed animals, toy cars, or play clay and art supplies. Children can make of them whatever they're working on at the moment. Their play is then determined by their own needs. If most of their playthings are "single-action" toys, their play tends to be limited, as if they're following the "formula" of what the manufacturer determined.

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**Play Themes**

While children play with a wide variety of things and use them in uniquely different ways, there are usually just a few themes that children play about over and over again. In the preschool years children play mainly about "going away and coming back," "power and control," "good guy vs. bad guy," "nurturing and being nurtured," and "chase and rescue." All of these themes are naturally related to the things that they are working on in their everyday lives.

When children play about making their toy cars go away and come back, they may be dealing with the feelings they have each time their parents go away for work or for an evening out. In their real lives, children are the ones who are left behind and left wondering when and if their parents will return. When they play, the children are the ones who are in charge of when things go away and when they come back. As they play about such things over and over again with their toys, they come to trust that things -- and people -- can and will return.

Playing with those same toy cars can also be a help if children are working on self-control. If they can manage to keep their toy cars on a track made of blocks or masking tape, they can also start to feel that they're able to keep something else within bounds -- their own aggressive urges. If a household is disorganized because of a move to a new home, a child living there might line up all his or her toy cars in a row, needing to create some order, at least with the toys.

Children often use dolls or stuffed animals to try out what it feels like to be mothers and fathers who care for babies, prepare meals, and make rules. Children sometimes...
play about being mothers and fathers who punish little ones. There may be times when children play about being babies, sucking on toy baby bottles. Playing like that can be a relief from the pressures of being more grown up.

**Playing about Power**

One of the most compelling play themes in the preschool years is playing about having power -- even super power! Children now realize that grownups have power over most things that happen in family life -- when and what to eat, when it's okay to play, what's acceptable behavior, and when it's bedtime. Playing about power lets children be in control, at least for the moment.

A natural way for children to play about being powerful is by pretending to be grownup. With dressup clothes (niceskities, long skirts, hats) and grownup props (briefcases, toy telephones, pens and notebooks, cooking bowls and spoons), they can try out what it feels like to be the adults who seem to have all the power.

Children can also feel powerful when they use their playthings to make things happen, like when they construct tall buildings with blocks and knock them down. Or they can enjoy the power of creating a whole world of imagined or real things on paper or with play clay. Even though they don't have a lot of control over the real people or real things around them, children can put their toy figures in different situations and in that way "control" how those things act and react.

**Aggressive Toys**

Unfortunately, many toys are developed with one simplistic message: the way to have power is to have a weapon. Aggressive toys are highly appealing to children whose fantasies are filled with having unlimited power and control. The person with the gun literally "calls the shots."

Toys such as guns, swords, and water pistols give children the clear message that the way to handle conflict is to wipe out the "bad guys" with force. At a time in their lives when they're working on controlling their own aggressive urges, trying as best as they can to keep their own inner "bad guy" in check, it can be very satisfying if they can make sure the "bad guy" they feel inside is finished off or locked up in jail in their play.

Naturally, superheroes are very popular at this age. Playing about conquering enemies is important because it helps children feel more in control of their natural aggression. But the pretending can sometimes seem too real and scary. Parents need to stop scary play when they see that their children have become overly fearful. If things get too frightening, children need to be able to rely on their parents to help them understand that the toy alligator's teeth and the monster's growl are just pretend.

Parents are often dismayed that at a certain age, their young children turn almost everything they pick up into a "gun." When children play with pretend guns, it doesn't mean that they are likely to grow up to use real ones. Parents who feel uncomfortable about gun play need to let their children know it and let them know how they feel about it and about anything that involves people hurting each other.

**Electronic Games**

At their best and used selectively, electronic toys and video games can help children learn, problem-solve, and develop eye-hand coordination. But those toys and games often have limited and repetitive fantasies built into them. There's something very different about physically holding and manipulating three-dimensional toy farm animals and putting them anywhere and pretending they can eat, gallop, or sleep, than maneuvering two-dimensional pictures with very limited movement and options for placement.

Spending a lot of time making canned devices work means less time spent in the rich kind of play that young children need most -- play of their own invention, from their own imagination. It really helps a child for his or her parents to set healthy limits for any kind of "electronic" play.

**Parents' Role in Encouraging Play**
One way we show that we value our children's play is by offering them toys and times that can be used in all sorts of imaginative, creative ways. Children sense that we care about their play when we give them quiet time to play alone or with friends... with no distractions of television or radio.

With a simple suggestion from a parent, almost any toy can expand to another level with a child's imagination. If your child is playing with action-figure toys, you might want to offer an empty box for your child to make into a house or a car for those figures. If you're concerned about all the "fighting" that's going on between the toy characters, you might want to suggest that your child make a hospital or a home for the wounded people. That can also turn "chase" play into "rescue" play, something that many people in our society want to encourage in the next generation.

As careful as we parents may be about the playthings we offer and the ideas we suggest, children still ask for toys that we might find inappropriate. It can help to remember that just because a child asks for something doesn't mean he or she really wants it or needs it. Children are easily seduced by television ads -- and peer pressure, even in the preschool years. As parents, we can be honest and let our children know how we feel about those playthings. In that way, we're letting them know some of the important values of the family to which they belong.

Children's play is their work, and the more we encourage children to play, the more we will be giving them an important resource for learning and for growing -- all through their lives.