

Imaginative Play is the Antidote: How to foster children's creativity, sense of agency, and emotional processing through play

KATHRYN YORK (PRODUCER): Hello and welcome to the Big and Little Podcast, from Boston Children's Museum.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KATHRYN (PRODUCER): When was the last time you let your imagination take the wheel? As kids, our imagination created endless possibilities. An old blanket was a superhero cape. Pots and pans, a full on drum set. Imagination has the power to make the ordinary novel and exciting. In the wake of an increasingly digital age however, many wonder, does imaginative play still hold the same space in children's lives?

In today's episode of Big and Little, Boston Children's Museum president and CEO Carole Charnow talks with Dr. Laura Rubin, founder of Portsmouth Neuropsychology Center, about the power of imaginative play for children's exploration, socialization, self-discovery, healing, and more. Let's get started. Thank you to PNC Bank for sponsoring this podcast.

CAROLE CHARNOW: Good morning, Laura. We're so happy to have you with us today.

LAURA RUBIN: Good morning. It's so wonderful to be here.

CAROLE: Thank you. I can't wait to hear your thoughts on all things related to imaginative play for children's healthy development. I'm sure you know and you're familiar with the Children's Museum here in Boston, that we do see play as critical for children's development. It's essentially the work of childhood. And we're concerned that self-directed child centered play is actually being squeezed out by other activities that could be resulting in stressed and sedentary children who are unable to gain the benefits of play.

At the same time, we're coming out of this extraordinary period of the pandemic that's really had a dramatic effect on kids. So we're very interested in hearing your thoughts on this today. But before we dive into the subject, could you tell us a little bit about yourself and about the practice that you have?

LAURA: Certainly. I'm a clinical psychologist and neuropsychologist at the Portsmouth Neuropsychology Center in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. And the practice focuses on providing evaluations and psychotherapy to children, adolescents, and adults. I've enjoyed teaching as part of my work, giving talks in the community, including participating in a TEDx Talk about reframing to wire your brain, as well as contributing to the media on a variety of topics. Then also I'm a mom to three. So certainly have seen in my personal life the benefit of imaginary play in young children.

CAROLE: Right. Could you tell us the ages of your kids?

LAURA: Yes. They're 17, 15, and 10.

CAROLE: Wow. And they're all three daughters, right?

LAURA: Yes.

CAROLE: Wonderful. Well, this gives you a very broad understanding of the topic not only as a practitioner, but also as a mom. So I think that'll be really helpful to our listeners. Working on the front

lines with children and families, what are you seeing in general that families may be facing at the moment. Any particular challenges that you're seeing in this post-pandemic period? Which isn't truly post pandemic, we're still in the pandemic. So what are you seeing out there with families?

LAURA: So I've certainly seen an uptick in mental health concerns in children. Whether it be the pandemic or a variety of societal challenges that have unfolded in the recent past, children have been negatively impacted. And for many kids, there's a sense of powerlessness that became particularly pronounced during the pandemic. And as families were stressed, so were kids.

That term "languishing" has floated about to really describe the feeling for both adults and kids of feeling empty, numb, feeling stuck. And for kids, this was particularly difficult during a critical developmental period. As they lost routines and their ability to play with peers during times of isolation. Having a sense of unpredictability about their world. So this created the perfect storm for depression and anxiety.

CAROLE: Do you feel that this vulnerability you're talking about is possible to reverse? I mean, how resilient do you think children are to come out of this?

LAURA: So children are extremely resilient. And I do believe that imaginary play is one way to help buffer that sense of unpredictability and for many kids provided an important safety zone to be able to get through the pandemic as well as to cope with some of those stressors we discussed.

CAROLE: Do you have any sense of when a parent should worry that their child's mental state is something that they need to actually address with their physician? Or is there a level of anxiety and discomfort that's sustainable? When should we worry, essentially?

LAURA: Well, that's a really good question. What I talk about with parents is that there are particular red flags that they can be on the lookout for. Some of those include signs of moodiness in children. So looking for signs of irritability, depression, or increased worries. Children can also become disengaged during times of extreme stress, whether it be from playing with friends or from academics or things that used to interest them.

So if you see your child withdrawing from those types of activities in a more pervasive manner, so not just for a day or for a week, but in a more pronounced period of time, is another thing to be looking out for. Children that are also depressed or anxious might have changes in their appetite or their sleep. They may also voice more negative thinking, talking negatively about themselves and showing signs of hopelessness about the future. So those would be some signs to suggest it might be good to talk to the pediatrician and potentially get a referral for talking with a mental health counselor.

CAROLE: Yeah, those symptoms all sound like things I've been through during the pandemic.

[LAUGHS]

Unfortunately, it's been really hard on parents as well. And of course, all the people who've lived through this. But we do know that play is the antidote. So our theme this summer at the museum is the summer of imagination. And we're trying to really engage families in play experiences that are hands on, that are joyful, and that really stress the imagination. So I'm curious, how do you define imaginative play?

LAURA: I like to think about imaginative play being about possibility. It's about wonder and curiosity and being able to take risks in safe ways. So when children are engaging in imaginary play, they may be role playing scenarios they've seen, experienced, or would even like to experience. So I think about the examples of the child taking out that large cardboard box, creating a castle or a spaceship. Even though they really would not be able to go to space in that moment.

But it's about that being able to transform yourself into another world and being able to take on all of the endless possibilities and joys of that moment.

CAROLE: And have you seen that in your practice? That this sort of imagination does transport children out of their mood of sullenness or depression?

LAURA: Yes. So in the world of psychology and doing psychotherapy with children, using imaginary play can be instrumental for emotional healing and teaching coping skills. So for example, in my office, I have a doll house, I have toy figurines, including animals and dolls. And when I work with children, part of the goal of the play is to help them process various emotional experiences, deal with traumas, and help them think of alternative ways of responding that are more adaptive in their day-to-day life.

So I think about a child, a little girl who I worked with whose parents were divorcing. And through the use of play, we were able to create an environment where she felt safe to explore her feelings through the use of dolls and anticipate what it might be like to go from mom and dad's house and have multiple changes that were impacting her in a place that was safe.

CAROLE: That's really interesting. And that promotes this healing process and helps them come to understand how to cope.

LAURA: Yeah.

CAROLE: Coping mechanism. And do you ever find that when children are playing in your session or in generally with imaginative play, that that can lead to their interest to learning about things that they're interested in and pointing towards their passions that they may have.

LAURA: Absolutely. So when children are engaging in imaginary play, they're exploring the possibility of taking on new roles. So thinking about the child who is pretending to be a cook or a teacher, lining up the stuffed animals and teaching them a lesson. Or playing doctor's kit. So it's teaching the possibility of, what might you want to do down in the future? And what are you really engaged with and passionate about? And gives a really open forum to explore those possible roles.

CAROLE: When I think about play it can be a solitary experience, or it can also be a very social experience. Particularly here in the museum when families come in. And the way that the museum is set up, children often play together. And I was just wondering, what do you see as the difference in value between this solitary play and the playing with other children?

LAURA: So both are critical. When I think about imaginary play in the context of a peer, what that provides is important skills for socialization abilities. So for example, when a child's playing with another friend, they may be working on perspective taking. So realizing that others have thoughts and feelings different from their own. They may be working on conflict resolution and negotiation. So when you're playing with others, not everyone gets what they want in the moment. So children have to learn to manage those unpleasant emotions of having to wait and take turns for that delayed gratification. It also involves social boundaries. So being able to say no or improve communication skills interpersonally. All of that is really critical in the foundation of becoming more social and developing that social competence. At the same time, children who are engaging in imaginary play on their own are still developing a variety of skills. So focusing on their problem solving, abstract reasoning skills, and thinking about different roles and possibilities.

What's also interesting is that children who engage in imaginary play are really also focusing on their executive functioning skills. Those are the skills that are required to plan and exert self-control and focus. So when you're planning out different scenarios, you have to think through and make decisions about,

what am I going to do in this moment? And if I'm playing, for example, with someone else and they introduce another play schema or another twist in the play, how do I respond and be flexible in that moment?

CAROLE: I'm thinking of this experience in the museum. How can a parent help to facilitate this socialization in a museum setting or in a play date? Is it best for them to just sit back and let the child do their own thing, or should they be trying to bring the kids together? What do you recommend in those circumstances?

LAURA: I like to think about imaginary play being very child led. So in that setting, the child is really setting the stage for what their interests are and being able to pursue that. So in that context, parents are important and able to help scaffold that experience. So for example, in a museum setting, they may be able to point out to children different options and then let the children pick based on what they're seeing. So the parents in a way might be able to see the big picture in a museum but then let the child direct what they may be engaging with. And in the context of that imaginary play, the parent might be able to help the child with elaborative language. So if they see a child working with [INAUDIBLE] blocks and creating a tower, the parent can help facilitate that skill by commenting or making comments. I see you're building that castle. I wonder what that window is for?

And that is allowing the child to develop their language skills by responding. And in addition, in terms of parents who might be facilitating imaginary play with their child and another peer, again, I like to think of it as being child led. But the parent or adult could point out different options or provide the necessary props for that play to begin in the first place.

CAROLE: You would be a very good salesperson here at the Children's Museum, because that's, I think, what our educators try to do, is provide those props for imaginative play and try to have prompts for parents, to help them lead their child to the next step. Sometimes we see in a museum, a parent is leading the child and almost interfering with the child's experience.

What would you say to a parent in that circumstance, either in your practice or if you saw something in a social setting where you felt you could say something?

LAURA: Well, I imagine a parent in that situation is very well meaning. So that is, they are seeing a situation and trying to perhaps provide their perspective about how things could unfold. But one thing that I like to tell parents is to be aware of what may be guiding their tendency to become overinvolved in children's play. For example, for some parents who may have more of a need to control the play or to have more structure around it based on their own comfort level, to be aware of those feelings.

And to take the opportunities to step back and see what unfolds if the child is left to initiate their own play ideas.

CAROLE: That sounds really, really helpful. And I think you're absolutely right, that parents are so well-meaning and they really want their child to have the richest experience. And so sometimes it's just a question of just stepping back and letting the child have their own direction.

When you think about imagination and imaginative play, do you feel that that is part of what we call creativity?

LAURA: So yes. There is a significant relationship between imaginary play and creativity. So when you think about young children, what's happening in their imaginary play? In essence, they're using what we call object substitution skills to represent other objects. So that example I mentioned earlier, the cardboard box that becomes transformed into a castle or spaceship.

So it's moving above and beyond the functional representation of what it is to the imaginary nature of what-- the potential of what it can be. So when children are doing that, they are creating their own worlds, creating themes. And researchers have found that imaginary play in young children is predictive of what we call divergent thinking later on in adolescence, which is the possibility of thinking of different solutions to solve problems.

CAROLE: Wow. That's really interesting. Do you think that creativity can be taught, or is this something inherent that has to be brought out?

LAURA: So for some children, they may have an inherent creative side to them that makes it fairly easy for them to engage in that type of imaginary play we've discussed. But at the same time, parents can play a huge role, as do teachers, in helping that creative process unfold. So what I like to think about and talk with parents about is they're hugely important to provide the environment and the context for which such play can occur.

Part of that is allowing children downtime. And this can be particularly challenging in our world today, which is filled with scheduled activities, ranging from school and athletics and art and lessons. Again, very well meaning. But at the same time, it's hugely important to allow that space for that spontaneous unfolding of imaginary play to occur.

CAROLE: Yeah. In fact, sometimes when the child is just musing, looking at the sky, singing, these are times when a lot of imagination is going on inside their head. It may look like they're not doing anything, but probably a lot is taking place, would you say?

LAURA: Yes, absolutely. I remember many days looking up at the sky and wondering what the cloud formations were and imagining different things related to that.

CAROLE: Yeah, we're very obsessed with doing things all the time. So sometimes not doing things allows that imagination to kick in. So you essentially feel that people are inherently creative, but some children may need a little bit more prompting to bring that out of them.

LAURA: Yes. And one key thing that parents can do in helping to facilitate that play, as we talked about earlier, is helping to facilitate it using language. So I talked with parents with young kids about sitting down on the floor with kids. Having the child lead the play. But for the parents to comment or ask questions and to help that child wonder. And when parents are doing that, they're in essence doing a number of really important things.

First, they're validating that what the child is doing is important. And that's hugely critical for the child developing self-esteem, as well as fostering the relationship between the parent and child. Second, as the parent is asking questions, it's fostering language development. So children are learning about vocabulary and sequencing language and responding in that manner.

CAROLE: When parents are trying to encourage their kids to play, when we have children, we usually have a lot of toys. We have a lot of games in our households. But there may be other ways to encourage imaginative play other than just having a set of blocks that are put together in a certain way. What do you think that parents need to give to their children to encourage imaginative play?

LAURA: So yes, I agree. It's not about buying all these toys that are expensive or prescriptive in nature. But I almost like to think about, what do you have in your household or the natural world? You don't really need much, and that's the beauty of it. So whether it be gathering leaves and flowers and sticks to create a fairy house, or whether it be having a box of props including a scarf, different objects that can be used

rather than buying things. But that's all you really need. And it's more about creating the scene and the setting than the actual items themselves.

CAROLE: So having a top or a box of, say, old hats, scarves. You mentioned going to thrift stores or yard sales to pick up some fun things that kids could use in a little play that they would make up as well.

LAURA: Yes.

CAROLE: I'm wondering whether it's ever too late to introduce imaginative play in a child's life. So if it doesn't happen early for whatever reason, can a playful mindset be able to be enjoyed, experienced by an older child?

LAURA: So what's nice is that you can foster imaginative play at multiple developmental time points. So a lot of the examples you've talked about have been at young children's levels or elementary school levels. But older children can certainly foster creativity and imaginary play in a variety of ways. It just would look a little bit different.

So for example, parents can help provide opportunities for older children to become involved in activities such as creating music, creating plays, writing, STEM activities. All of those types of activities can foster imagination and certainly be very developmentally appropriate for that age range.

CAROLE: I want to go back to the issue around mental health that we talked about earlier. So I think you've established that imaginative play can actually help with a child's mental health challenges. And you mentioned the circumstances of divorce. Would you use that under the circumstances of a death in the family or some other sort of mental health challenge?

LAURA: So certainly. Imaginary play is certainly the medium with which children can process their feelings, develop coping skills. If there is a particular concern such as an adjustment difficulty or trauma, such activities are likely best under the guidance of a mental health professional. But that mental health professional can also work with the parent to help them develop activities in the home setting that can generalize that continued emotional expression and coping skill development.

CAROLE: Yeah, I want to drill down on this a little bit more. So if a child is a little blue for whatever reason and the parent brings out the box of imaginative props and they have a nice time and they go on and have dinner and they go they go to sleep well, and so we know all is well. But say we're not sure all is well. Where can a parent turn?

I mean, you did mention a pediatrician. Are there specialists like you who are working with kids who have deeper challenges? Is this usually done by a social worker or a therapist? I mean, what would parents be looking for if they were more concerned about their child?

LAURA: Yes. So talking with the pediatrician is an initial good step. And that discussion might include getting referrals for different mental health professionals. That professional may be a social worker, clinical psychologist, individuals that have expertise in working with children that has struggled with a variety of concerns such as anxiety, or depression, or trauma. So that's one way to go about it.

Other parents may find it beneficial to get additional information about if they have concerns about what their child is showing. And there are a number of great websites. One of them that comes to mind is the Child Mind Institute, childmind.org. And they have a Family Resource Center, where you can look up a variety of concerns and get a little bit more information to understand, should I be concerned about this? Is this developmentally appropriate? Or what type of guidance do I need to seek next?

CAROLE: So I wanted to ask you also, can imaginative play help a child's mental health? Help improve a child's mental health?

LAURA: Absolutely. So I see in my clinical work daily the important role of play in mental health. And it occurs in a couple of different ways. So on one hand, children who may not have the language skills or the emotional literacy to describe their feelings may be able to use play to help communicate what they're feeling. So I'm thinking of the example of the child whose parents were divorcing. And through the use of dolls, they were able to have the dolls communicate a variety of feelings states that they were not able to safely describe were their own at that time.

And through the process of therapy, the child was then able to accept the range of conflicting emotions that they were projecting onto the dolls. So that does help with emotional expression and identification in children. Imaginary play also helps with self-regulation. So this refers to how children can manage their moods and behaviors. So when children are engaging in play, they're able to express their feelings in a more indirect way, and they may not be able to feel safe enough to do that directly to adults. But in play, it feels much more comfortable.

Imaginary play also helps kids develop a sense of agency that they can develop the rules and determine the outcomes, no matter what it is. And when we're thinking about what's been going on in kids' lives for the past several years where they had a huge sense of powerlessness, you can imagine the importance of this in the context of developing a sense of control in an environment where they frankly didn't have much control. And throughout this process, the imaginary play can ultimately reduce stress in children's lives. That's a really good antidote to a lot of these problems.

CAROLE: So really the takeaway here is that imaginative play is very, very healthy for a child. It helps promote creativity. It can help solve some of their sadness, if they're feeling such. And it can even be used to address more serious mental health challenges. And it's something that people can do at home. But you also suggest that if parents are concerned more seriously about their kids, they should really speak to their pediatrician or their family doctor and see if they can get more help.

But that the Child Mind Institute and any other resources might be a way for them to move forward.

LAURA: Yeah.

CAROLE: Does that sound like a good sum up?

LAURA: Yes, I think that's excellent.

CAROLE: Yeah. And you have a number of other resources, too. I know we're going to be able to list those on our website. But do you want to talk a little bit about some of the things that you have available for families?

LAURA: Certainly. So on our website, which is www.portsmouthneuro.com, we offer a blog where we provide information to parents, teachers, providers about a range of childhood topics. Could be developmental concerns, issues related to learning and education, as well as mental health. So that can be helpful to learn more about a variety of topics.

And we also have a monthly constant contact e-newsletter, which can get distributed to parents and providers. And if anyone is interested, they can go to the website and sign up for that e-newsletter.

Another fabulous resource for parents who may not be quite sure where to start in helping their children and fostering imaginative play is the book *Make Believe-- Games and Activities for Imaginative Play* by Dorothy and Jerome Singer. And this resource has a range of activities that parents can use to set the stage for imaginary play and also provides more information about the importance of imaginary play in general.

CAROLE: Thank you so much, Laura. This has just been incredibly powerful to hear your insight into imaginative play and child development. And I really hope that our listeners can take away a lot of things to think about. I know I certainly have benefited from listening to you. And I really want to wish you all the very best with your wonderful practice. And I know you're doing such great work in the world for children and families. So thank you so very much.

LAURA: Thank you so much.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

KATHRYN (PRODUCER): That's it for today's episode of the Big and Little Podcast. Stay tuned for more, and we hope you subscribe and leave us a review.