



DUVET DENS AND CARDBOARD CARS

THE BENEFITS OF SHARED IMAGINATIVE PLAY

THE ESSENTIALS

- Imaginative play builds brains. It helps children develop language, empathy and resilience.
- It doesn't need to be fancy. A stick can be a wand or a bridge.
- Let children lead. They will create incredible worlds if we let them.
- A box of household objects or some dressing up clothes can unlock hours of play.
- Join in, don't direct, just let the magic happen.

UNDERSTANDING IMAGINATION

There's something magical about watching a child turn a cardboard box into a car or a spoon into a superhero gadget or a magic wand.

Imaginative play is how children rehearse the world. It helps them try out new ideas, work through big feelings and build a deeper understanding of what it means to be human. It is a vital part of development.

Research from University College London, the University of Oxford and the University of East London show that when children play imaginatively, it helps their brains develop, supports their emotional wellbeing, and teaches them important social skills. The latest findings from the Institute for the Science of Early Years (University of East London), supported by Kinder, have emphasised the role of shared play - where adults and children create stories and ideas together – as a key contributor to empathy and emotional resilience.

Children who regularly engage in imaginative play show higher levels of empathy, better problem-solving and more flexible thinking. Imaginative play helps with emotional wellbeing, resilience and even long-term academic success

Spontaneity is the key, you don't need to plan it. In fact, the best imaginative play happens when adults let their child lead.

Too often, we feel pressure to provide a photo-worthy setup with themed resources. But actually, all your child really needs is time and a few everyday household items. A scarf becomes a cape. A bowl is a hat, and a garden (or the park) is a jungle waiting to be explored.

HOW TO SUPPORT IMAGINATIVE PLAY

- Make a 'creation box'. Fill it with everyday bits you'd usually throw away or repurpose. Things like cardboard, string, paper rolls, yoghurt pots and bits of old fabric are all brilliant for developing the imagination.
- Collect dressing up bits. It doesn't need to be costumes. Old hats, handbags, sunglasses, shirts, pieces of fabric and scarves will do nicely.
- Bring toys into your play: Incorporate your child's toys into the experience to enrich imaginative play with added narrative and character.
- Join in, don't direct. You don't need to plan play. In fact, it's better if you don't.

Children will invite you in when they want to, and that's when the best shared moments happen.

The research by the University of East London on collaborative, imaginative play highlights how an adult's presence—when they join in at the child's invitation rather than lead—adds a sense of security and enriches the experience for the child. This shared play, especially when adult and child create side-by-side or together, has been shown to strengthen relationships and build self-regulation skills.

Imaginative play does not need structure, props or be 'photo worthy'. The best play comes from children's own ideas. All we need to do is make space for it, let go of the control, and watch their amazing worlds unfold.

Don't forget to join in... Play is also REALLY good for you too!

