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## Preschoolers understand and generate pretend actions using object substitution

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### ABSTRACT

Pretend play is often considered to be an imaginative or creative activity. Yet past experimental research has focused on whether children imitate pretense, follow instructions to pretend, or understand others' pretense. Thus, we cannot be sure that children's pretense is in fact novel or whether children simply copy or follow others' instructions. This is the first experiment to show that preschoolers generate their own novel object substitutions. In Study 1, 45 3- and 4-year-olds saw an experimenter use one object as another accompanied by pretend or trying cues. Children differentiated between the experimenter's intentions by imitating the actions accompanied by pretend cues and correcting the actions accompanied by trying cues. In addition, when the experimenter made her intentions to pretend or try explicit, children produced significantly more novel object substitutions not modeled or verbally requested by the experimenter within a pretend context than within a trying context. Study 2 replicated these findings with 34 3-year-olds using a repeated-measures design. However, it found no relationship between children's copying or generation of object substitutions and divergent thinking, inhibitory control, or pretense during free play.

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## Introduction

Pretend play is considered to be an imaginative or creative activity (e.g., Fehr & Russ, 2016; Harris & Kavanaugh, 1993; Hoffmann & Russ, 2016; Russ, Robins, & Christiano, 1999; Wallace & Russ, 2015; Wyman, Rakoczy, & Tomasello, 2009). Yet past experimental research focused on whether children imitate pretense, follow instructions to pretend, or understand others' pretense (e.g., Harris & Kavanaugh, 1993; Hopkins, Smith, Weisberg, & Lillard, 2016; Rakoczy, Tomasello, & Striano, 2004, 2006; Wyman et al., 2009). Thus, we cannot be sure that children's pretense is in fact novel or whether children simply copy or follow others' instructions. Some experimental work has attempted to capture children's novel pretense (Nielsen & Christie, 2008; Rakoczy et al., 2004). However, we argue that what looked like novel pretense in these studies could be explained by deferred imitation. This is the first experiment to show that preschoolers create their own novel object substitutions without relying on deferred imitation.

### *Generating object substitutions*

Pretend play differs from functional play in that the actions performed during pretend play are technically incorrect (e.g., drinking from empty cup, talking to banana; Hoicka & Gattis, 2008; Hoicka, Jutsum, & Gattis, 2008; Hoicka & Martin, 2016). One form of pretend play, object substitution, requires temporarily suppressing the typical action for the object while performing an action that is typical for another object (e.g., pretending banana is phone; Tomasello, Striano, & Rochat, 1999).

Naturalistic research suggests that children perform object substitution during free play from 2 years of age (e.g., Belsky & Most, 1981; McCune-Nicolich, 1981). However, these studies do not provide information on the content of their play. In addition, it is difficult to determine whether children's object substitutions are generated by children themselves or are copied from others (immediately after observation or using deferred imitation; see Hoicka & Akhtar, 2012).

Experimental research suggests that 2- and 3-year-olds perform object substitutions (e.g., Harris & Kavanaugh, 1993; Hopkins et al., 2016; Wyman et al., 2009). In a typical pretense experiment, the experimenter performed a pretend action (e.g., feeding a toy monkey a banana where the banana was a yellow block), after which the child was asked to perform the same action ("You give the monkey some banana") (Harris & Kavanaugh, 1993, Experiment 2). Most children successfully produced object substitution (brought the yellow block to the monkey's mouth). Therefore, while demonstrating that 2-year-olds can imitate object substitutions, this does not tell us whether children can generate their own object substitutions.

Some studies found that children generate object substitutions when the experimenter has not modeled the pretend action (e.g., Harris & Kavanaugh, 1993, Experiments 3 and 4; Hopkins et al., 2016, Study 1). However, in these studies experimenters gave specific verbal prompts to do specific pretend actions. For example, Hopkins et al. (2016) gave 3- to 5-year-olds objects that were different in shape and function from the target pretend object (e.g., using a ball to pretend to write). They then said, for example, "Pretend that you are writing with this." The majority of children successfully performed pretend actions correctly, showing that a model was not required. However, children did not invent their own object substitutions but instead acted out those invented by the experimenters.

One study attempted to examine novel object substitutions directly. Nielsen and Christie (2008) asked 2- and 3-year-olds to play with a dollhouse and different toys: dolls, toy items (e.g., bed, couch, toy hamburger), and functional items (e.g., string, piece of cloth). After modeling three pretend play scenarios (e.g., using pen lid as toothbrush), children again played with the dollhouse. Children produced significantly more object substitutions after modeling, and about half of the object substitutions were not modeled by the experimenter. However, the study did not give examples of the types of novel object substitutions performed. Therefore, if a typical object substitution was pretending that some cloth was a blanket, children may have literally thought that the cloth was a miniature blanket and, hence, did not use object substitution. Furthermore, given that the pretend situation was likely quite familiar—playing with a dollhouse—those actions that looked novel to the coders may have been

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