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## Do children learn from pretense?



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### ABSTRACT

Pretend play presents an interesting puzzle. Children generally must keep pretend separate from reality or else pretend would confuse their real-world representations. Children spend a great deal of time pretending, and so failing to take any information from pretend scenarios would present a lost opportunity; however, little research has investigated whether it is possible or efficient for children to learn new information they encounter during pretend play. In two tightly controlled studies using blind testers, we taught children information of two types (labels and object functions) in a pretend or real context. Children learned the novel functions in the pretend condition, and they inferred that the novel object would be similar in appearance to the substitute used to represent it during pretend. These findings coincide with other recent work suggesting that children can learn new information in pretend contexts that they can then apply to the real world, although this learning may differ in important ways from learning in real contexts.

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### Introduction

Pretend play is a prominent feature of early childhood, and it is often incorporated into educational settings. In virtually every preschool in the United States, one encounters evidence of the emphasis placed on pretending. Parents and teachers provide young children with costumes, props, and other toys to encourage them to engage in pretend play. Many such toys, such as play kitchens and doctor's sets, claim to help children learn about the real thing. Yet despite reams of research on the effect of pretend play on development (see [Lillard et al., 2013](#), for a review), very little research has focused on whether children can apply what they learn when pretending to the real world.

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Theories about the permeability of the boundary between reality and pretense exist on a continuum from complete permeability at one extreme to strict quarantine at the other, with selective transfer somewhere in the middle. Few theorists would advocate for the extreme versions of either of these views, but they are useful to consider as anchors for this continuum. Complete permeability could be a consequence of children failing to distinguish reality and pretense, really a form of Piagetian realism (Piaget, 1929). If complete permeability exists across pretend and real contexts, what is learned while pretending is transparently known in real contexts because the two contexts are not differentiated. However, this would not be an efficient system because many things encountered in pretense are not real and should not be learned; therefore, young pretenders would show evidence of far more confusion than they do (Lillard & Witherington, 2004). Leslie (1987) made this point clear; a child watching someone pretend that a banana is a telephone represents the banana as a telephone only momentarily, avoiding “representational abuse” that would cause the child to represent bananas as telephones beyond the pretense episode. As Harris (2000) put it, the pretense episode is “flagged” as a special temporary case of banana–telephone equivalence. Young children do not routinely confuse pretend and real worlds (Lillard, 1994; Woolley, 1997). The fact that the pretend world *must* be quarantined from the real world renders the idea that everything learned in pretending transfers to real impossible. When a mother says of the banana, “This is a telephone,” children do not then assume (outside of the pretend context) that the banana is a telephone.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from complete permeability is strict quarantine; pretend and real worlds are strictly separate, with no transmigration across them. We have just seen that at least some quarantine is logically necessary because children who pretend a banana is a telephone do not subsequently think bananas really are a kind of telephone. However, the pretend–real boundary cannot be completely impermeable either because children clearly use real-world knowledge when they pretend. Once pretenders decide a banana is a pretend telephone, they can use their real-world knowledge of telephones to guide their behavior (e.g., make the telephone ring, pick it up to their ear and talk into it). There is at least unidirectional transfer, then, with real-world information moving into the pretend realm (Nichols & Stich, 2000).

Having established that (a) children must distinguish between pretend and real, (b) there is not complete permeability across these contexts, and yet (c) real information must wend its way from the real world into the pretend world, we ask whether there is selective transfer in the opposite direction such that at least some information crosses from the pretend realm into the real realm? Many studies have investigated whether children will learn novel information from fictional stories (Ganea, Canfield, Simons-Ghafari, & Chou, 2014; Ganea, Pickard, & DeLoache, 2008; Richert, Shawber, Hoffman, & Taylor, 2009; Richert & Smith, 2011; Walker, Gopnik, & Ganea, 2014), but relatively few have investigated the analogous question in pretend play. Two recent studies might support the idea that some information can cross from pretend worlds to real ones, enabling learning from pretense (Sutherland & Friedman, 2012, 2013). In both studies, preschoolers were shown a puppet introduced as a “nerp” and then told about the nerp’s preferences and fears. For example, the nerp pretended to eat and enjoy a cherry (represented by a red bead) but pretended to dislike a carrot (an orange bead). Then (to demarcate the pretend and real situations) the experimenter put the puppet away and brought out a book with a photograph of a loris (an animal most children have not seen or heard of). Children were told that the loris was a nerp. For the test, children were asked four questions about what the nerp did and did not like; in some studies the questions were forced-choice, pairing objects seen previously with new objects, and in others they were open-ended. Children performed quite well on the forced-choice questions (e.g., “Do nerps not like to eat carrots or corn?”), but across several studies performance on open-ended questions (e.g., “Can you tell me what nerps do not like to eat?”) was approximately 50%. Because responses to the forced-choice questions might be due to recognizing what had previously been associated with nerps, the open-ended results suggest that learning from pretense, although possible, may be difficult for young children. In addition, in these studies there was no comparison case of extending from real to real; thus, we do not know how learning in pretense contexts compares with learning similar information in real contexts.

The current studies extend these prior findings in several ways. First, we made the break between the pretend and real situations more extreme to be even more certain that children would know pretending had ended before the real test began. This was accomplished by (a) using a different

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