

Infant-toddlers' play and imagination sparked by adult involvement

Adults play an essential role in helping the development of play and imagination among infants and toddlers, new research by an Australian Catholic University academic in partnership with Monash University shows.

The research reveals infants and toddlers as young as four months can engage in collective imagining with the help of adults. They gradually demonstrate an understanding of the changing roles of play items such as toy trucks from being concrete objects, to artefacts, to props.

Lead researcher and ACU associate lecturer Susan Yu said the findings showed the importance of adult involvement in helping infant-toddlers to develop their ability to play and to imagine.

“This research provides us with exciting new insights into the under-researched area of the development of infant-toddlers’ play and imagination,” Ms Yu said.

“The findings show that the involvement of adults plays a crucial role in this important development.”

The study, published in *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, is part of a national program of research at Monash University’s Conceptual PlayLab which is funded through ARC Laureate Grant 2018-2024 (awarded to Sir John Monash Distinguished Professor Marilyn Flear).

The foundational work on supporting children’s play and imagination in this study is based on Flear’s Conceptual PlayWorld model.

Using the story *We’re Going on a Bear Hunt*, 18 Melbourne-based families with infants and toddlers aged between four and 24 months were supported with collaboratively-designed ideas on how to bring the story to life through play such as dramatizing the “splash splosh” scene through the river, putting on binoculars to look for bears, and using real grass as a sensory link to the “swishy swashy” grass in the story.

“We found that by co-constructing these imaginary experiences with the children, adults were able to help them give new meaning to objects and their actions, which then supports the development of their play and imagination,” Ms Yu said.

“The rich data collected through interviews with families and dozens of hours of digital video data of play sessions has filled the gap when it comes to understandings of the play and imagination of infants and toddlers aged under two years old in family settings.

“It’s clear that infant-toddlers have the capacity to engage in collective imagining with adult support.”

Monash University’s Dr Prabhat Rai, who leads Conceptual PlayLab’s work with families, said the Conceptual PlayWorld empowered parents and children to develop play and imagination and learn STEM in their home environment.

“These aims feature prominently in Ms Yu’s doctoral research project, which was supervised by Monash University,” she said. “This research shows how we can empower families with the skills and knowledge to inspire and celebrate children’s imaginations.”

Ms Yu said she hoped the findings of the study would help families to understand the value of play.

“It’s important that adults in family settings take the initiative to create motivating conditions for playing with their children, not to mention being a great way to bond and have fun,” she said.

Click [here](#) for a link to the study.

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