

Question: My daughter only wants to play with her dolls and dress-up clothes. Sometimes, I think she should play with and learn about other things. Should I increase her play options?

Your child is exploring what it means to be a girl when she plays with what might be considered typically "girl" toys, like dolls or dress-up. You can help her expand on her interests in different ways by promoting the life skill of Self-Directed, Engaged Learning.

Self-Directed, Engaged Learning: It is through learning that we can realize our potential. As the world changes, so can we, for as long as we live—as long as we learn.

1

Encourage your child to think about all of the roles women and men take.

You can use what Catherine Snow of Harvard University and her colleagues call "extended discourse" to help your daughter reflect on what girls and boys as well as women and men can do today.

Talk with your child about all of the things women and men can do, you are enlarging her views of what it means to be a female and a male. Here are some suggestions for conversation starters:

- **Challenge your child to think about other play ideas.** Talk with her about women you have seen doing different jobs: "Remember when you saw a woman who was a doctor or a sports star?" You can ask her: "What would happen if you dressed up like a doctor today?" or "Maybe the princess would like to play sports."
- **Ask her to think about activities that both boys and girls like to do,** like make music or build things.
- **Point out children playing with all kinds of toys and materials.** You could say: "Sammy is playing with that stuffed animal. He's pretending to be a father."
- **Point out people in all kinds of jobs in daily life:** "Look at the policewoman driving the police car." These real life examples will give your child direct experience with all kinds of people and differences. She might even be motivated to learn more about these jobs from what she sees.
- **Change the names or genders of familiar characters in songs and stories.** For example, "Old MacDonald" can be a girl: "On that farm she had a horse ..."

2

Build on and extend your child's interests.

Craig Ramey of Virginia Tech Carilion School of Medicine and Research Institute and his wife, researcher Sharon Ramey, have reviewed approximately 800 studies to identify what parents and caregivers do that best promotes the development of intelligence, social competence and academic achievement. The first principle they emphasize is encouraging exploration. Craig Ramey says:

When we encourage [children] to explore, we let them know that the world is a very interesting place and that they are going to have a great time as they sort of meander through it—if they keep their eyes and ears opened and their sense of touch going. They're going to discover things about the world that will be of enormous benefit to them.

Elaborating and extending children's experiences are essential to promoting learning. Your child's interests can become the launching pad for all kinds of new interests and understandings.

- **Encourage your child to express herself creatively.** For example, have her paint or draw a picture of her favorite doll. Then ask her to tell you a story about it and write down her words.
- **Does your child like to dress up?** Ask her to find costumes and act out one of her favorite stories. Encourage her to take different roles in the play—sometimes she can be a princess, but sometimes she can take another role.
- **Take a trip to the library.** In the words of Kathy Hirsh-Pasek of Temple University: "Books can take us to worlds well beyond their covers." Show your child picture books and books with realistic photographs that are about topics she is interested in. If she likes ballerinas, you can introduce her to stories about famous ballerinas, paintings of dancers and pictures of different kinds of dance costumes from around the world.
- **Look for what else sparks your daughter's interests and find ways to build on those.** Is she interested in animals? Find books about that animal or go on the Internet to look up information. Think about your role as creating an ever-widening circle of experiences for her.