



Education: Words and Meanings

Exploring the Term: “Imagination”

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Children’s Imagination

The word “imagination” is defined as the ability to “form mental pictures of people or things, or to have new ideas” (Cambridge Dictionary). However, the definition does not give us a robust understanding of imagination, particularly in regard to the following questions: Where does imagination come from? Is imagination significant? Most importantly, how do children acquire imagination? How do we support children’s development of imagination? In addition, what are the possible future implications for the imaginative child? As educators, exploring these questions will provide a *deeper* understanding of what “imagination” means for our children in their present and in their future lives. The word “imagination” is filled with possibilities for our children.

Origin of Imagination. Exploring the word “imagination” begins with young children and their play. Vygotsky wrote to Elkonin (2005) that “before play there is no imagination” (p. 14). Essentially, children’s play leads to their development of “abstract thought and imagination” (Bodrova & Leong, 2015, p. 380). When children are born, they do not have the ability to hold thoughts and the meaning of objects in their minds (Pellegrini, 1985; Piaget, 1952; Stone & Burriss, 2016). Play is the conduit for this process to unfold in young children.

Vygotsky (1976) refers to a specific type of children’s play called symbolic play. Symbolic play is a significant cognitive development for young children as they begin the gradual process of representing objects and events symbolically; the mental action of having one object stand for another object (Stone & Stone, 2015). The child begins using the process of symbolic play to separate the meaning of an object as it stands in reality and is able to substitute it for a new meaning. For example, the reality of a block of wood is that it is a block of wood. However, through play the child is able to take the block of wood and replace the real meaning with a new meaning by calling it a car (Stone & Stone, 2015; Stone & Burriss, 2016; Vygotsky, 1976). The block of wood now “stands for” a car. Symbolic play for the young child is the development of

representational thought where the child is using the wood block as a “symbol” to represent or “stand for” a different meaning such as a car, or the block could “stand for” a cookie, or even a spaceship.

As children play, they begin to make new transformations such as a pencil becomes a monster’s claw, a rock becomes money, and a stick becomes a sword. The child begins using symbolic play to make these important transformations which enables children to “*think* at the abstract level” (Stone & Burriss, 2016, p. 61). Children get good at these transformations and are able to transform themselves into other people such as becoming Batman or Goldilocks. Eventually, children are able to “think” and transform ideas without objects. As Stone and Burriss (2016) note, “The thought represented in the brain can stand alone without the support of a substitute object” (p. 61). Thus, the process of symbolic play leads to abstract thought and eventually leads children to *imagine*. As Vygotsky notes, “before play there is no imagination” (Elkonin, 2005, p. 14). At this stage, children begin engaging in imaginative, fantasy play (Stone & Stone, 2015). In this new world of imagination, children can invent things that are not yet a reality (Stone, 2017). This journey through play to imagination is a significant cognitive advance for children.

The Significance of Imagination. The ability to invent things through imagination that are not yet a reality is an extraordinary human quality. In our world, imagination has led to considerable advances inspired by imagination. Consider L. Frank Baum’s (1917), author of *The Lost Princess of Oz*, description of imagination:

“Imagination has brought mankind through the Dark Ages to its present state of civilization. Imagination led Columbus to discover America. Imagination led Franklin to discover electricity. Imagination has given us the steam engine, the telephone, the talking-machine and the automobile, for these things had to be dreamed of before they became realities” (p. 11).

In today’s world, imagination is a priceless commodity. For example, in the business world, Reeves and Fuller (2020) share how

“[I]magination — the capacity to create, evolve, and exploit mental models of things or situations that don’t yet exist — is the crucial factor in seizing and creating new opportunities, and finding new paths to growth. While imagination may seem like a frivolous luxury in a crisis, it is actually a necessity for building future success” (Reeves & Fuller, 2020, para. 1).

From the world of science, Einstein said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress, giving birth to evolution. It is strictly speaking, a real factor in scientific research.” In medicine, Shaywitz and Ausiello (2004) believe that imagination is essential, for without it we will lose our best hope for defeating illnesses and diseases. In the art world, creators use imagination to inspire paintings, literature, films, and music (*The Power of Imagination*, 2023). They are dreaming up “worlds that seem impossible, and to provide the unseen, infinite blueprint for the reality of tomorrow” (Mekhail, 2025, para. 19).

Explorers such as Columbus and Marco Polo, whose imaginations led them to unexplored lands, set in motion our imaginations to reach for the stars. Consider Astronaut Neil Armstrong who said, “With courage, imagination, and the will to explore - nothing is impossible,” and he became the first person to walk on the moon. The journey around the moon by Artemis II in 2026 brings astronauts closer to returning to the moon and eventually to Mars (NASA.gov., 2026).

Writer J. K. Rowling states: “Imagination is not only the uniquely human capacity to envision that which is not and therefore the foundation of all invention and innovation. In its arguably most transformative and revelatory capacity, it is the power that enables us to empathize with humans whose experiences we have never shared.” (Kinch, 2023, para. 18).

The Support for Children’s Imaginative Play. Haughey (2025) notes:

“You can go anywhere in the world and witness children harnessing play purely through their beautiful, innate instinct to do so. We all have access to this incredible force of nature through all stages of life. It drives infants to roll over, crawl, pull up on tables, and ultimately walk. Play drives development. Play is the most powerful force on the planet. It has taken us to the moon and developed electric cars and artificial intelligence. Play drives innovation. It is our access to being fully self-realized. When we don’t play, we don’t develop” (p. 88).

Children’s play, thus opens the door of imagination for every child, and imagination fuels human ingenuity. Unfortunately, many schools have abandoned imaginative indoor and outdoor play for our children in an effort to instill information rather than to encourage and nurture children’s imagination. Stone (2025) advises that “it is important to note the role of adults in regard to children’s play. It is essential for parents, caregivers, and educators to understand that play is not a curricular goal designed to reach a standard or objective. Play belongs to the children” (p. 70). As adults, we can strongly support children’s play without controlling it (Stone, 2025). Adults can provide opportunities for children to play indoors and outdoors. In so doing, as Gray (2014) adds, “in play, children discover and pursue their passions, with no bells interrupting them, and develop skills related to those passions, which can lead eventually to rewarding and enjoyable careers” (p. 10).

The Imaginative Child in the Future. In her article, “Play as the Learning Medium for Future Scientists, Mathematicians, and Engineers,” Bergen (2009) shares how play enables the invention of future ideas and products needed by society. Vygotsky (2004) adds, “. . . imagination, as the basis of all creative activity, is an important component of absolutely all aspects of cultural life, enabling artistic, scientific, and technical creation alike” (p. 9). CEO Jim Loree states, “Never in our lifetimes has the power of imagination been more important in defining our immediate future” (Reeves & Fuller, 2020, para. 45).

Haughey (2025) adds, “We don’t know exactly how children’s play interests will someday translate into the contributions they’ll make to the world, but we can be the springboard that provides them with every opportunity to pursue what makes them special and unique” (p. 89-90).

Providing children with play opportunities in the present will afford them the possibilities of imaginative, creative, and enriched lives in the future (Cho et al., 2017).

Imagination, developing in the world of children's play, is an extraordinary gift we can provide for our children for not only their present happiness, but for their future happiness as well. Children's imaginative play will also be an inspiration for the world's amazing creations in the future.

"The imaginative child will become the imaginative man or woman most apt to create, to invent, and therefore to foster civilization" L. Frank Baum.

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