

The Power of “as if”

Young children love to engage in make-believe play. With the power of their imaginations, they can create mini-dramas in which they take on roles and use everyday objects to represent the props they need for their stories. Sometimes these stories mirror their real-life circumstances and sometimes their make-believe play portrays circumstances they wish existed.

For most children, the years between the ages of 3 and 5 or 6 are when they are most involved with make-believe or imaginary play. This type of play is characterized by an ‘as if’ quality - children act ‘as if’ they are a superhero, doctor, or parent; ‘as if’ the wooden block is an airplane, the soda straw is a stethoscope, and the towel wrapped around a neck is Superman's cape. They may also act ‘as if’ their life circumstances are different than they actually are. A child, for example, may hold her doll and act ‘as if’ she has a baby brother when in fact she is an only child.

The act of ‘as if’ is a statement of possibility; a statement that what is considered reality doesn't have to be as you know it. Children engaging in make-believe play are making the statement that they don't have to be tied to the here and now of their immediate place, time and circumstances; they can use their imagination to transform themselves into almost any one they want to be and the objects in their world into anything they need those objects to be. In their make-believe play children are declaring that they don't have to be tied to the way things are.

The time that young children spend transforming themselves and their world lays the foundation for the creative thinking we value in writers, filmmakers, painters, inventors and scientists. The world of Harry Potter, for example, never existed before the creative mind of J. K Rowling used words to describe it in all of its glorious detail. The images of Dr. Suess' Cat in the Hat and the Grinch didn't exist until he used his imagination and put some brush strokes onto a piece of paper. And who would have thought that a man would walk on the moon before President Kennedy announced on May 25, 1961 the goal of having men set foot on the moon by the end of the decade. Considering that it was less than three weeks since the first American had traveled into space, the goal of landing a man on the moon must have sounded somewhat unrealistic at the time. It was the act of imagining it was possible, however, that set the task of making it happen in motion. It was acting ‘as if’ it were possible that created the circumstances for it to become possible.

One of the main attributes of our existence as human beings that sets us apart from other animal species is this ability to free ourselves from the here and now. Through our imaginations we have the power to consider the possibilities: the possibility of who we might become as individuals, the possibility that our life circumstances might change, the possibility of worlds that never existed, and the possibility of what we might accomplish if only we put our minds to it. And the power of this imagination has its beginning with the young child who ties a towel around her neck and says to us, "Watch me. I can fly!"

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