

# What is Mature, Extended, Pretend Play – Exactly?

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On Sunday, Paul Tough published [an article in the New York Times Magazine \(http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/27/magazine/27tools-t.html?\\_r=1&em\)](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/27/magazine/27tools-t.html?_r=1&em) about how the Tools of the Mind curriculum for preschools and kindergartens enhance children's self-control. He covered the some of same ground as we did in our chapter of NurtureShock, and it was nice to see the material covered thoughtfully by another journalist. (Full disclosure: Tough has been Po's occasional editor, but we had no input or influence on his reporting.)

So we thought we spend some more time addressing the 60 to 90 minute section at the core of Tools – mature pretend play. How does it unfold, and how can this be recreated at your preschool, or even in your home?

In a typical Tools classroom, the majority of the room is split up into several different centers, each decorated to look like a different location.

Before the kids ever play in any one center, they spend a week learning about the location it represents. If the new location is a fire station, they read storybooks about life in a fire station. Maybe a fireman will come to class for a talk. The kids may even get a field-trip to a real fire station. Drawing upon what they've already learned about the real location, each kid decides upon a character he is going to portray within the fire house center (the fire truck driver, the dispatcher), and then he plans out what he will do as this character. The kids play fire station for a week; each day, the child chooses a new role to play. The remainder of the class day is spent with the kids learning about the next center – say a doctor's office or police station. Every month, all of the centers are redecorated into new locations.

On one of our visits to a Tools preschool in a Denver suburb, centers in a classroom included a small Italian restaurant, with tables covered in checked tablecloths, menus, candles, pictures of Italy on the wall. There was a version of an outdoor frozen pond: the floor was covered in mylar and cotton-ball snow drifts, with gloves, hats, and paper-plates for ice skates if the kids wanted to go pretend-skating. In the middle of the class, there was a mock-up of a McDonald's drive-through window. Complete with a toy stove, plastic food, and a toy cash register.

Before it's time to play, all the kids develop a "play plan." Choosing which character he will be, each child draws a picture of himself as that character, doing the planned activity. At the bottom of the picture, he writes: "I am going to (action)." For the youngest kids, writing may just be drawing a few lines, each line representing a word. Even minutes later, you can ask him what is on his play plan, and he can tell you exactly what he "wrote." He understands that squiggle as easily as you

read this.

On this particular day, the kids were going to play McDonalds. One boy decided he was the cashier. A couple girls wanted to be customers. Other kids chose the role of cook.

After a few minutes of finishing the play plans, they began play. The customers got in plastic toy cars, and they pushed themselves up to the "window." They gave long orders of what they wanted; burgers, fries, a shake. Some kids had special requests – no lettuce, extra cheese, please. The girls often took on a role of mommy, ordering for their kids.

The cashier hurriedly scribbled lines on a pad of paper, taking down the orders. He repeated the orders back to the customers; if he was right, he barked back to the kitchen area what the cooks needed to prepare. The only thing that distinguished him from a real cashier is that a real cashier probably wouldn't have cared as much. He was absolutely focused, writing down orders, adding up what everything cost, handling the customers' payments and making change. Play McDonalds is incredibly expensive – a burger cost about 25 bucks. But the customers would dig into their pretend purses and come up with the money. Of course, some complained about the prices going up, since their last visits.

Then things hit a snag. One boy in the kitchen didn't seem quite sure what to do. Bewildered, he just stared at all the activity going on in the front of the restaurant.

"Tommy, what was your plan?" a teacher asked the child.

"A cooker," he replied.

"Then, get out a pan," she suggested.

That was all Tommy needed. Soon there were toy pans all around. Plastic patties flew from pan to plastic bread. He was carefully making sandwiches, complete with toy lettuce and tomato – customizing the orders per the cashier's instructions. Once the sandwiches were ready, he carefully placed them in real to-go containers. As soon as he finished one order, there were three more to fill. He was proud when he correctly finished an order. He complained when the cashier was impatient or unclear.

The customers kept zooming right back to the end of the line, to order more food. They would make a point of being new customers or returning customers: "It's not as good as the last time," one would proclaim. Three minutes having gone by since she placed her last order.

Throughout, these four and five year-olds really were an uncanny little replica of a McDonalds staff and clientele.

Because there was a shortage of cars for the drive-through, one little boy got bored waiting for his turn. So he started wandering around, fooling with a couple of the other kids who were in line.

Catching this, a teacher asked him, "What was that in your play plan?"

"No." he replies.

"What was in your play plan?"

"Customer."

Without another word, the child immediately went back into the line to place his next order. And he kept in character for the remainder of the time.

In Neptune, New Jersey, we saw similar scenarios played out at the preschool level. One preschool-class was playing farm. During the non-play hours, the teachers taught the kids about all the farm animals, and the kids were growing real bean sprouts. During play time, they had centers in the class devoted to milking cows, picking vegetables, threshing the hay, and a farm stand for selling the vegetables. Another class played “mail carrier.” At one center the kids wrote letters to their grandparents and put them in mailboxes; mail carriers took them to the processing center to be sorted, then other mail carriers delivered the letters. We also saw “beauty parlor” and “grocery store” being enacted.

It’s important to note that during the kindergarten year, children were no longer simply creating play scenarios from scratch. Rather, they’d act out the roles in books they’d recently read. In the first half of the year, these were fables like Three Little Pigs – each corner of the room was a different pig house. By the second half of the year, (or in some schools during first grade), the children would act out the plotlines from the Magic Treehouse series, such as the edition when Jack and Annie go back in time to ancient Egypt.

One of our favorite kindergarten scenarios was in a classroom of kids playing “schoolhouse.” This was fascinating to watch, as the students “acted” like students – it was very meta. Other children took the role of teachers. In one center was recess, and another center was the lunchroom. A few children were crossing guards. The most interesting moment occurred in one of the “classrooms,” where three kids were attempting to read sentences on a chalkboard while another girl, acting as teacher, encouraged them on – one by one. The sentences on the board, I recognized, were pulled from one of the Magic Treehouse books. I watched one boy, pretending to be a student, truly concentrate and fight to use his phonics skills to read the whole sentence. I had the sense that, if he weren’t pretending to be a student, and was instead just a regular student doing this with a real teacher, he would have given up. But by taking on the pretend role of “student,” he kept to his role and managed to read aloud.

Tools of the Mind is not an easy curriculum to learn to teach. After a summer of training, the first year in a school is really kind of a practice year for the teachers (we felt this especially to be true for the kindergarten and first grade years). However, many elements of the curriculum are borrowable and/or portable. Scaffolding mature, extended play is something that can be done anywhere, anytime with children – be that at school or at home.

One more clarification: in Tough’s article, he mentioned the debate between those who want preschools to teach reading and writing and those who want children to use the preschool years to develop self-control and symbolic abstract thought before they learn to read and write. It was our observation that no such tradeoff was being made by the kids in the Tools classrooms. Principally, this was because they were learning to write play plans for themselves as early as age three, and enjoyed doing it. By kindergarten, most kids were able to approximate full sentences, on their own. These kids weren’t entering first grade really skilled at executive function but lagging on the basics of reading and writing. The children we saw were measurably *ahead* on writing and reading. In Denver, they are having to rewrite the first and second grade curricula, because the Tools kids have already completed most of that work in kindergarten.