

Open your mind to  
see it

Business



A group of kids is seen playing on the jungle gym.

Today's game is the lava game. The rules are simple: the ground is hot lava that will kill the child if touched, but the child must make their way across the play set to win. At first this looks like harmless fun, kids imagining hot lava, some even pretending they're secret agents. But a closer examination will reveal something not found in fantasy, but reality: problem solving. This applies critical thinking used by scientists.

Not too long ago, the theory behind the fantasy was it was an escape.

Fantasy was used to take the child out the harsh environment of childhood and place that kid into a world where they can do anything. "There is no evidence that fantasy is therapeutic," says Alison Gopnik, author of the article "The Real Reason Children Love Fantasy." Scientists now argue that a child "playing pretend" is an outlet to display scientific reasoning.

Suddenly Special Agent Steve becomes Steven, Master's degree in engineering. Children learn, it's what they do.

At a young age, children observe the world around them and figure out what to do based on said observations. This trend is not seen exclusively in human children. Gopnik compares animals to humans. Wolf pups and lion cubs learn by watching their parents. These young animals also use play to learn.

As explained in "The Real Reason Children Love Fantasy," pups will rough house with each other to learn proper hunting skills such as stalking and subduing prey. Kids play to learn too. Gopnik explains playing also teaches skills in a safe, controlled environment. No wolf in their right mind would send their 18-month-old into the wilderness to learn how to hunt. They learn

by play-fighting each other. And no parent in their right mind would let their child use the stove to cook, but the pretend stove with plastic food is ok.

By playing pretend children learn to live in reality. Adults pretend too, but in a confined box of practicality. An adult can imagine what the work week will be like based on the transgressions of the week before. Some adults, however, have a much bigger box. Gopnik displays this box in the form of Isaac Newton. Sir Isaac Newton created the Laws of Physics by fantasizing what would happen to the fallen Apple if such and such happened to it. He dreamed it, and today we are using it. Those kids playing the lava game aren't escaping from our world; they're creating a safer version of it for learning. They build an environment to survive in ours. Scientific reasoning can be seen at a young age. You just have to open your mind to see it.

See the lava, see the learning.