As a newly certified preschool director, I was expecting my first unannounced, on-site visit with a healthy mix of excitement and anxiety. When the licensing representative finally arrived in October, it followed one of the more chaotic drop-offs of the semester. Although I had put out fires fueled by parents concerned with a flu outbreak, I was still working to solve “The Case of the Missing Backpack” and field telephone inquiries about whether I was happy with current fundraisers and school photographers.

“I’m Carol, with Child Care Licensing,” the friendly face said while extending her handshake. “I am here for your annual inspection.”

Years of hosting annual audits from another Texas governmental agency prepared me to remain calm and dutifully answer questions, while watching Carol drag a white glove across every piece of furniture, sniff every toy, peer into every filing cabinet, and otherwise examine the program for six hours. My own tendencies toward perfection paid off. The program was rewarded with an outstanding report, including numerous components that exceeded state standards.

Promoting imagination in preschool classrooms

One of the areas where staff excelled was cultivating the imaginations of young children. When Carol walked into Ms. Michelle’s 3-year-old classroom, she saw 16 children running around while laughing, talking, questioning, and playing out a rather robust medical scene. Some children wore doctors’ costumes and examined plastic babies and Lego®, people. Some children believed our 4-foot-tall Clifford the Big Red Dog was also in need of attention, so they self-selected veterinarian characters and tried to save Clifford from his nasty cough. Other children decided that the sick babies needed concerned mommies and daddies, so they removed their stethoscopes and demanded to know, “Why is Baby sick?” while cradling plastic offspring.

The room was vibrant with an organic and ever-changing scene of gurneys, operating rooms, recovery wards—an energetic space of young children playing fully in the present by allowing their imaginations to lead them to the next line of dialogue, scene, act, and ultimately curtain call.

Although Carol was impressed, and Ms. Michelle would glow for days, I was most impacted by the immediacy of these young imaginations. Sixteen preschoolers occupied nearly a half-hour of their own attention spans—and mine—with imaginative play.
that included the entire classroom community. Each child had a part, each child reimagined new roles, and each child learned a little more that afternoon about social norms and emotional regulation in high-energy situations—both while they played with classmates, and as they imagined life circumstances in medical emergencies.

What is imagination?
Imagination is one of the most important ingredients of a creative mind. For children to develop artistically, excel in the sciences and mathematics, and express empathy for friends who are different, they must first imagine the possibilities. For example:
- What can I create with this set of paints and 4-foot canvas?
- What will happen if I pour this into that?
- How can I be a better friend to my classmate who looks and sounds different from the rest of us?

According to researchers, imagination is a child’s ability to form rich and varied images or concepts of people, places, things, and situations when they are not present (Isenberg & Jalongo, 2014). Although Clifford the Big Red Dog was a stuffed toy that had never actually coughed, several 3-year-olds imagined a space where he was in dire need of medical intervention, and they orchestrated collective play accordingly.

Because imagination is at its peak in early childhood (Isbell & Raines, 2013), educators can continually cultivate it among preschoolers. By allowing children to experiment with life through wonder and curiosity, children gain an increased understanding of their world and a deeper talent for navigating difficult situations, one of the greatest benefits of a strong imagination.

Children who display healthy imaginative play have the same traits that predict resilience after a personal crisis (Metzl, 2009). Educators who nurture imagination equip children for life skills that may help ensure a happy and healthy adulthood, regardless of circumstances or situations. Imagination also promotes healthy development because it teaches self-reliance and enterprise, two important components in how young children develop identity (Erikson, 1950).

Benefits of imaginative play
Imaginative play is common in many preschool classrooms, as young children explore free time, engage in pretend play and sociodramatic play, and fully experience outdoor settings with all the wonder that nature offers. Children’s guided play, such as rules-based games and puzzles, does benefit children’s development. But imaginative play, in which children freely explore their own minds, leads to creativity and wonder.

The benefits of imaginative play include strengthening social, emotional, and linguistic skills that promote a child’s growth and development. Specifically,
- Imaginative play boosts children’s problem-solving skills by inviting them to respond spontaneously. When two preschoolers realized the plastic babies receiving medical attention did not have parents to care for them, they shifted focus, recruited friends, and cast a mommy and daddy to take care of sick infants. These children identified a problem with an immediate solution and nurtured the collective imagination to play itself out for the next several minutes.
- Imaginative play allows children to explore their roles and feelings in multiple situations. When a relatively shy preschooler, who was known to be more of a follower than leader, realized he wanted a bigger part to play, he dragged the life-sized Clifford into the classroom’s center circle and announced, “Clifford is sick, too!” He navigated his own feelings about the scene and accommodated accordingly. Rather than assisting in surgery to fix a plastic baby’s broken head, he focused his

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attention on the dog who only he had heard cough.

- Imaginative play gives children permission to co-author their own social interactions and community practices (Stetsenko & Ho, 2015). Every child in the classroom had input into how the babies and Clifford would be treated. Every child participated in stage managing a carefully designed production, complete with costumes, props, choreographed movement, and dramatic monologues. The classroom community played toward a shared goal and every child felt included because everyone contributed to the collective imagination of the class.

- Imaginative play gives children an opportunity to informally nurture literacy development. As the preschoolers played out what became a sophisticated health care narrative, they crafted a story that demanded each child to think, reflect, speak, and act. The preschoolers became active participants (Cavanaugh, Clemence, Teale, Rule, & Montgomery, 2017) in learning how to best care for plastic babies and Clifford by identifying and negotiating the language around what was happening and how they would collectively respond.

- Imaginative play lets children share something valuable about themselves (von Benzon, 2015). Early childhood educators who listen to what young children say through imaginative play and wonder gain a window into each child’s priorities, passions, and promise. The little girls who were concerned that the plastic babies did not have parents expressed different passions than the little boy who was worried about Clifford. Too, the classroom leader did not so much imaginatively shift the health care stories, but did imaginatively direct the other 15 students through multiple scripts as they emerged. Each preschooler raised valid and diverse concerns, and Ms. Michelle, Carol, and I were made aware of what was most important to each child through their imaginative play.

**What is imaginative curriculum?**

Imaginative curriculum is less common in too many preschool classrooms because early education centers often rely on antiquated methods of teaching, such as rote learning and teaching one correct answer. Also, many preschools prefer toys and coloring sheets over developmentally appropriate manipulatives that spark children’s imaginations. When early educators incorporate opportunities for preschoolers to use their own imaginations to explore arts, sciences, culture, and language, they increase their students’ school readiness and help establish a foundation for years of academic success.

- Imaginative curriculum invites children to use storytelling to gain important language and literacy skills. Preschoolers are able to imagine a wide range of fictional and fantastical narratives about many of their experiences. When storytelling is incorporated into science, nature, math, visual arts, music, and language lessons, preschoolers readily explore the boundaries between content and self though their own imaginations that motivate and inspire continued learning.

- Imaginative curriculum helps children understand that personal decisions impact their own learning (Ogu, Malone, & Hassing, 2018). When children have opportunities to talk about, question, and engage their teachers and curriculum, they gain understanding of the educational process that will guide classroom experiences for the rest of their academic journeys. Most important, they become more open to challenge (Ogu, Malone, & Hassing, 2018) as they can imagine answers and alternatives that help them think outside the box. In so doing, they encourage classmates to do the same.

- Imaginative curriculum nurtures a child’s core competencies that are crucial for STEM education: collaboration, curiosity, exploration, creativity, and
critical thinking (Reighard, Torres-Crespo, & Vogel, 2016). These five concepts require an imaginative zeal that is naturally cultivated in preschool classrooms because they are all intrinsic in early childhood. One recent longitudinal study revealed that kindergarten students collectively thought of more than 100 uses of a common paperclip when they applied their imaginations. By the eighth grade, those same students could think of only a dozen uses, evidence that nine years of academic instruction that proposed only one right answer to any question had squelched their creativity and wonder (Abbaïs, 2011). Preschools that promote imagination give young children tools for lifelong learning and teaching.

### Tips for promoting imagination

Early educators can promote imagination in preschool classrooms in many ways. The National Association for the Education of Young Children offers excellent resources for teachers, and the Montessori and Reggio Emilia approaches to early education model diverse teaching methods that promote young children’s imaginations. Consider these simple ways to incorporate imaginative play and curriculum in your classroom.

- **Picture books** are the best way to introduce storytelling to preschoolers, even among children who demonstrate strong early reading skills (Rustin, 2016). By displaying pictures that invite children to voice the characters, you nurture preschoolers’ imagination about what is happening, why, to whom, when, where, and what will be the outcome if characters play out their roles. When you encourage children to engage with a wide range of imagined others (Alicea & Lysaker, 2017), they enhance their ability to express empathy by thinking about walking in someone else’s shoes.

- **Props, costumes, and other dramatic tools** invite preschoolers to step into roles and sets of emotions that are outside their typical experiences. While dollhouses and kitchen centers of pretend play are useful, preschoolers often embody what they see, hear, think, and feel as a member of their own families. Also, superhero costumes and princess dresses encourage role play of tropes that are not so much imagined as they are already scripted. But when you introduce children to less familiar props, such as farmer overalls, pirate eye patches, animal masks, first responder vests, and pilot hats, you will nudge children’s imaginations into worlds of new ideas and wonder.

- **Early educators who model questioning** teach young children that imagining all options is a positive and healthy response to learning. Question everything with a respect for the storyteller. Ask questions such as: “What made you draw that picture?” “Why did you choose that way to build a block house?” “How did you decide to create a playdough flower?” “What inspired you to perform that impromptu dance?” When preschoolers have opportunities to talk about what is on their minds, they are developing the imagination and language to invite others into their own worlds. Let preschoolers ask the questions. During show and tell, for example, invite classmates to ask questions about items that are being shared. Teach children the art of asking, “What if,” during lessons in science and nature. Promote questions as a way to learn more deeply about a new concept and do not be afraid to tell children that you don’t know a definite answer, or perhaps even that a definitive answer does not exist.

- **Simple toys and manipulatives** work best to promote imagination in preschool classrooms (Cavanaugh, Clemence, Teale, Rule, & Montgomery, 2017). As you know, puzzles teach children cooperation and logic skills, and household centers teach children conflict-resolution skills. But it’s the simplest materials and manipulatives that encourage
maximum imaginative skills through curiosity and wonder. A lump of clay can become a hundred different things to accompany a newly imagined story, and colorful scarves, musical instruments, a pile of Legos®, or sidewalk chalk can invite children to create a performance, idea, or entire world that has never before been experienced.

Books that promote imagination
Almost any book can be used to promote imagination when an educator invites children to fully engage in the story. Inviting preschoolers to act out a favorite character or talk about why characters make certain choices can help young children better imagine the worlds they read about in books.

Some of the best picture books can help preschoolers imagine “What if” the same circumstances that happen to the story’s characters happen to them.

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- *It Came in the Mail* by Ben Clanton. Ask preschoolers, “What would you like to receive in the mail?” “What would be scary to receive in the mail?” “What would you do if you received 10 monkeys in the mail?” “What if you received a hot air balloon?” Invite preschoolers to tell stories about their imagined deliveries.

- *Harold and the Purple Crayon* by Crockett Johnson. Ask preschoolers, “If you had a purple crayon, what would you draw?” “What could our whole class draw together if we all had purple crayons?” Invite each preschooler to select a favorite shade of purple and collectively design a wall-sized mural for the classroom. Encourage children to tell stories about their drawings.

- *Beyond the Pond* by Joseph Kuefler. Ask preschoolers, “What do you think lives in the creek, [pond, alleyways, etc.,] beyond our playground?” “What do you wish lived there?” “What would happen if we welcomed those creatures into our classroom?” Invite preschoolers to tell stories about creatures that live in the community’s ponds.

- *What To Do with a Box* by Jane Yolen and Chris Sheban. Ask preschoolers, “What can we do with this box that is made for crayons?” “What can we do with this box that is made for a pair of shoes?” “What can we do with this box that once held a washing machine?” Invite preschoolers to come up with as many different uses for each box as they can imagine and then design a special box for classroom use. Celebrate the most colorful design, the most unusual use, or the most collaborative design of the boxes.

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**About the author**

Renee De Assis is a doctoral student at Texas Woman’s University. Her research interests include imagination and spirituality among young children.