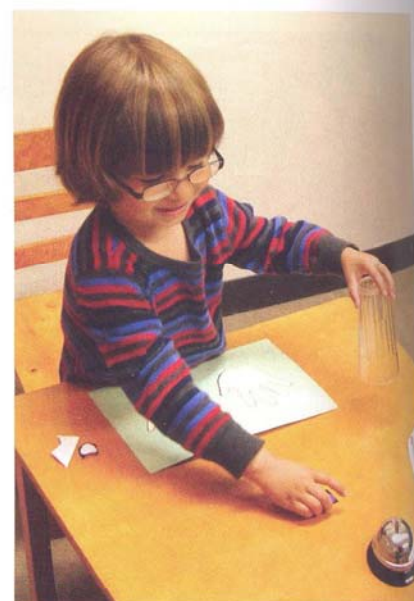


Kid Think: Studying Developing Minds

by Shannon McClure



Ever wonder what a child gets out of a good old fashioned game of pretend? According to Dr. Jennifer Van Reet, Associate Professor of Psychology at Providence College and the creator of P.C.'s Kid Think program, it may be much more than we ever imagined!

Kid Think is an innovative research program developed by Van Reet to investigate if and how young children use pretend play to learn about the real world. After graduating with a Ph.D in Developmental Psychology from the University of Virginia, Van Reet came to Providence College in 2008 to not only teach what she loves, but to engage in her own developmental research, looking at how pretend play develops in young children and how they integrate it into the real world.

Assisted by play experts and student-researchers Kelly Murner (class of 2015), Lauren Elia ('16), and Ana Leon ('16), Van Reet recruits toddlers and preschoolers to participate in various play-based studies.

"Kid Think has a dual mission - to create new knowledge and to provide training for students who want to learn more about children and conducting research," Van Reet said.

All the student researchers participating in Kid Think are studying psychology and wish to pursue it further after graduating.

The Kid Think studies consist of one 30-minute visit either at the Providence College campus or at the Mind Lab, located in the Providence Children's Museum. The visit involves the children playing with the play experts and responding to questions and tasks regarding their pretend play. Responses are then compiled and analyzed to look for patterns of behavior.

Van Reet finds the children's thought processes and actions fascinating.

"We are looking at how pretending develops in young kids," she

said. "How is it that a 2-year-old can engage in pretend play when there is still so much they don't know about the real world?"

This question earned Van Reet a two-year grant from the Rhode Island IDeA Network of Biomedical Research Excellence program.

Van Reet shares her study findings not only with the academic community, both through publications and conferences, but also with the local community of parents and teachers through her website, KidThink.org, and newsletter.

"We are always asking how our work might be helpful to teachers and parents," she said.

Would you and your child be interested in participating in a Kid Think session? Kid Think is currently recruiting for two pretend play studies to be conducted in Summer 2014 - one study for children 17 - 24 months and a second study for children ages 3 - 5 years.

"We are looking for about 100 toddlers and about 45 3- to 5-year-olds," Van Reet said. "I hope that if you have a child in this age group, you will consider participating!"

The toddler study will be investigating the link between pretending and self-control and the 3- to 5-year-old study will be investigating if pretending is a good environment for learning.

"Can they learn a rule with pretending and take it back to reality?" - that is a question Van Reet is looking to answer.

Any family interested in one of the summer studies can visit the Kid Think website at KidThink.org or contact a play expert at PCKidThink@Gmail.com or 401-865-2342.

Going to the Providence Children's Museum? Stop by the Mind Lab, Kid Think's interactive exhibit, Mondays, 10 a.m.-12:30 p.m., and Thursdays, 12:30-3 p.m., during the month of July. Kid Think will also be at Fagnoli Park in Providence on July 15 for some fun activities as well as a summer concert.