

Child Development Labs

The Real Thing: Preschoolers Prefer Actual Activities to Pretend Ones

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Background

Pretend play is a predominant type of play during preschool, and it is often seen (without strong evidence) as crucially important to development. Dr. Montessori found children were not interested in pretend when they had real things to do. Do children prefer real activities? Parents lavish pretend items on children; do they think children prefer pretend activities?

Montessori Classroom



Conventional Preschool Classroom



Research Questions

- Do children prefer to pretend, or would they rather engage in activities for real? Why, for each?
- Does preference differ for children who attend a Montessori program?
- Do parents' expectations align with children's preferences?

Methods

Participants:

100 3-6 year-olds ($M = 58.49$ months; 57 female)
38 children enrolled in Montessori, 62 in other programs
83 parents of a separate sample of 3-6 year-olds
8 children enrolled in Montessori, 75 in other programs

Procedure:

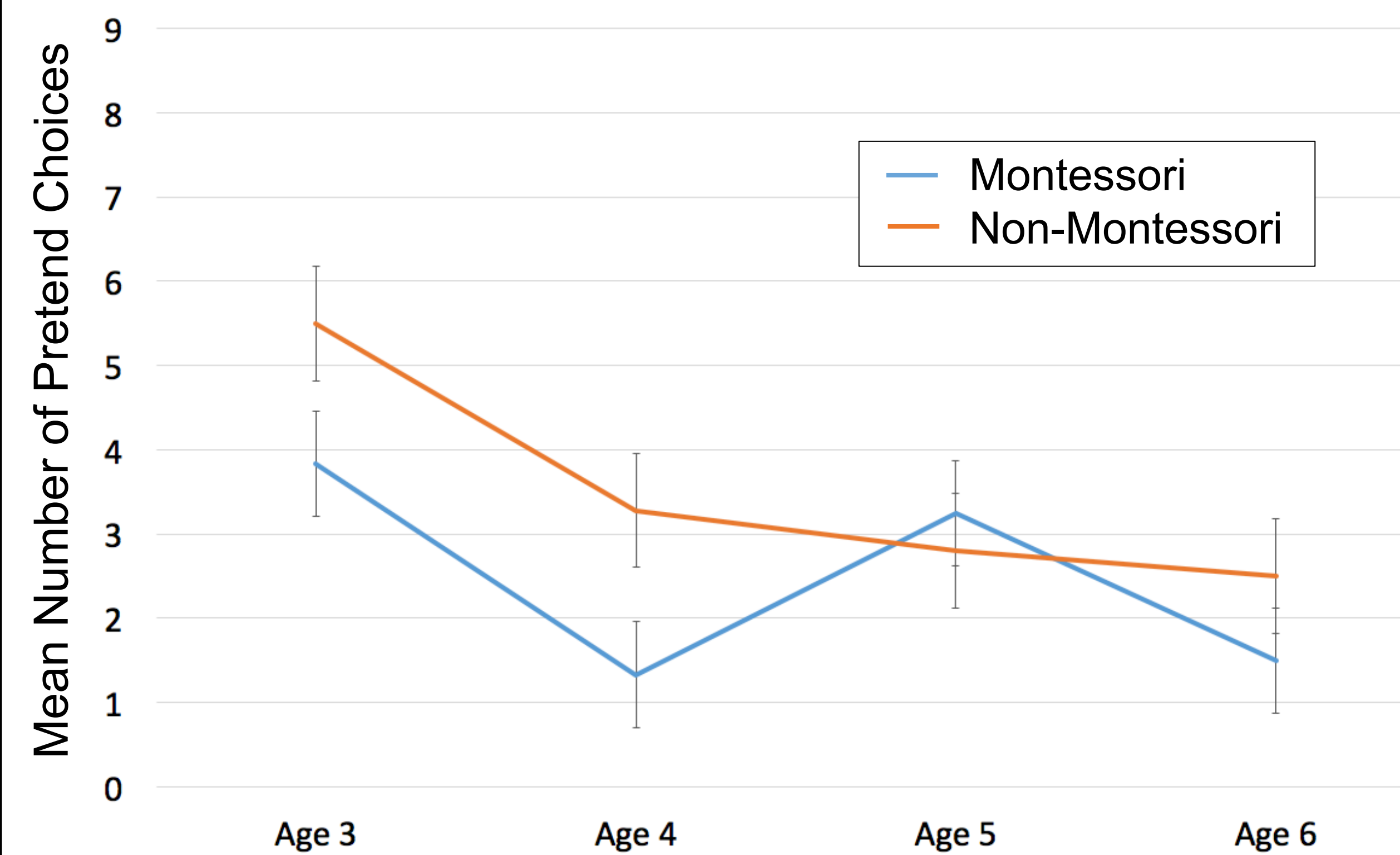
Children are shown a handmade book with 9 choices (see list on far right). "Look, this girl is pretending to cut vegetables, and this girl is really cutting vegetables. See? These are pretend vegetables, and these are real vegetables. Which would you rather do? Why would you rather [choice]?"



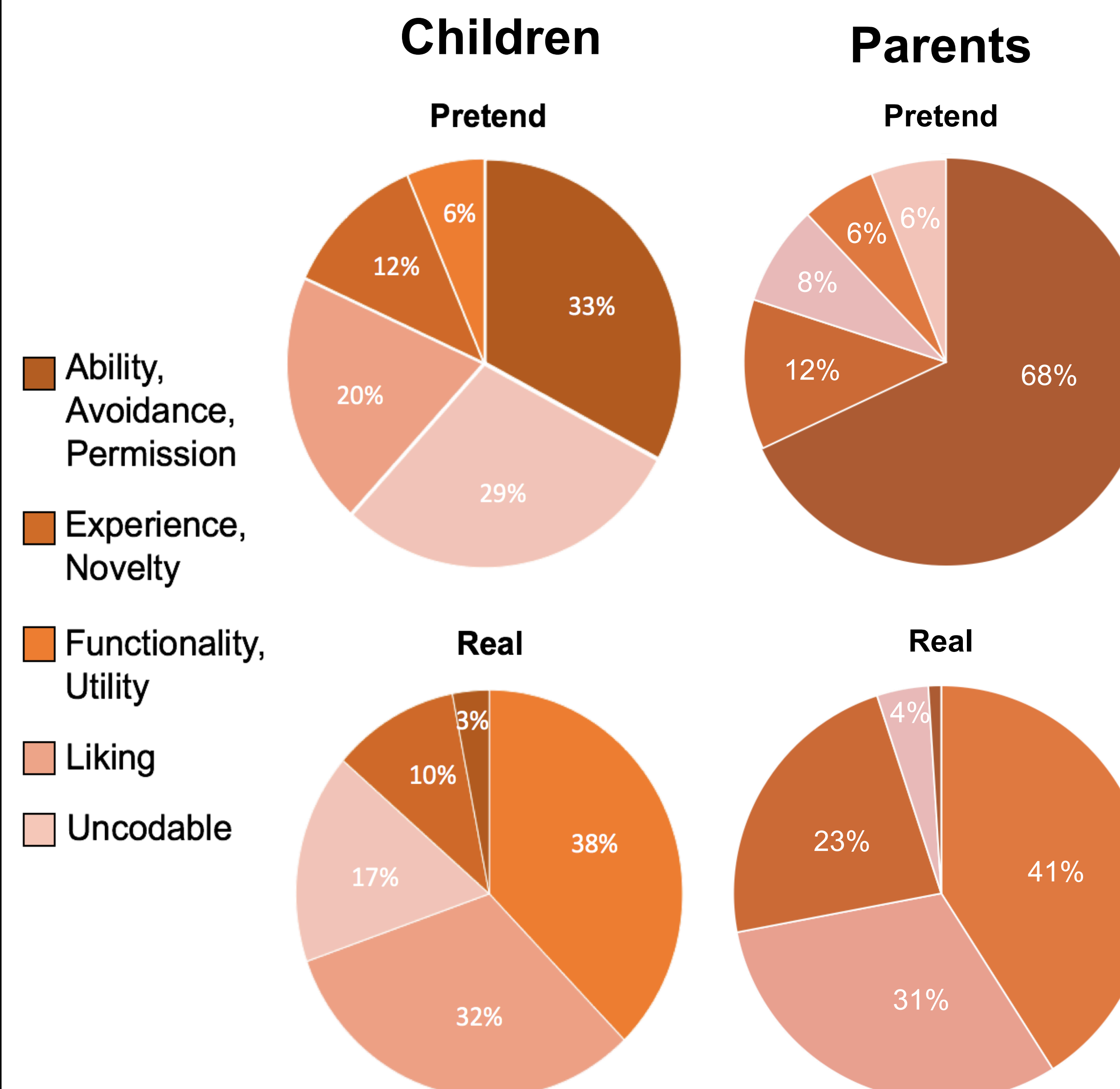
Parents:

"Do you think your child would rather pretend to or really cut vegetables? Why would your child choose to [choice]?"

Results



Justifications



Item	Children		Parents	
	Choose Pretend	Choose Pretend	Choose Pretend	Choose Pretend
Eating Ice Cream	*** 17%	*** 5%	*** 70%	*** 12%
Riding a Horse	*** 31%	*** 12%	*** 55%	*** 37%
Baking Cookies	*** 26%	*** 37%	*** 29%	*** 37%
Feeding a Baby	* 40%	* 37%	*** 29%	*** 37%
Cutting Vegetables	* 33%	* 41%	*** 29%	*** 37%
Talking on the Phone	** 33%	* 41%	*** 29%	*** 37%
Riding a Tractor	48%	*** 29%	*** 29%	*** 37%
Fishing	** 34%	* 37%	*** 29%	*** 37%
Washing Dishes	54%	** 35%	*** 29%	*** 37%
Percent of Choices	35%	36%	*** 29%	*** 37%

Compared to chance: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Children

Overall, children chose pretend for 3.14 of 9 activities ($SD = 2.61$, range = 0-9). On no activity did children prefer pretend. Preference for real activities grew stronger with age and was stronger in Montessori children.

Main effect of Age Group: $F(3, 92) = 5.82$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$

Main effect of School Type: $F(1, 92) = 4.12$, $p = .045$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$

Montessori, $M = 2.55$, $SD = 2.44$

Non-Montessori, $M = 3.50$, $SD = 2.65$

Montessori children were significantly more likely than non-Montessori children to prefer really cutting vegetables ($p = .001$) and fishing ($p = .049$).

Children's reasons for their preferences are in the pie graph. Pretend was preferred when children felt unable or afraid of the real activity.

Parents

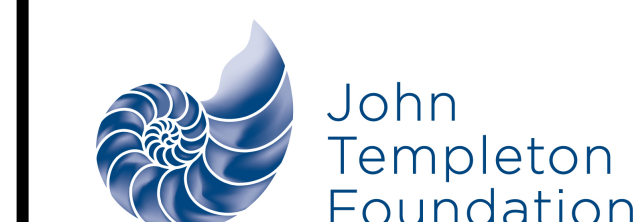
Parents predicted pretend for 3.23 of 9 activities ($SD = 1.76$, range = 0-7). Parents believed children would only prefer to pretend riding a horse. They understood that children like doing useful things.

Conclusions

- Children strongly preferred real activities, especially when in Montessori.
- Children chose real activities because they are functional, useful, and provide novel experiences. When they chose pretend activities, it was because they were afraid of, unable to, or not allowed to engage for real.
- Parents accurately predict that children prefer real activities.
- Our cultural emphasis on the importance of pretend play might be mistaken.

References

- Taggart, J., Heise, M. J., & Lillard, A. S. (2017). The real thing: Preschoolers prefer actual activities to pretend ones. *Developmental Science*.



Questions or Comments? Contact Angeline Lillard, lillard@virginia.edu