

Research on Peer Imitation Behavior in Roleplaying Games of Toddlers in Small Classes

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Keywords— *Small classes, roleplaying games, peer imitation behavior.*

Received: 03 Aug 2026;

Received in revised form: 01 Sep 2026;

Accepted: 07 Sep 2026,

Published on: 11 Sep 2026

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Abstract— *This study focuses on peer imitation behavior in roleplaying games among toddlers in small classes. Through observation, interviews, and literature review, the peer imitation behavior of toddlers in the fifth small class of H Kindergarten in Shishi City was observed. The study found that peer imitation behavior occurs frequently among toddlers in small classes during roleplaying games, covering role assignment, game actions, and verbal communication. These imitation behaviors are influenced by factors such as toddlers' cognitive development level, peer interaction ability, and teachers' guidance methods. This study proposes the following suggestions: guiding toddlers to imitate positively, strengthening teachers' professional knowledge, adopting different guidance methods for toddlers with different temperaments, enriching game content, and providing effective guidance.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Imitation behavior plays an important role in the process of toddlers' growth and learning. According to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, toddlers construct cognitive schemas by observing and imitating peers' behavior, which contributes to their social development. Roleplaying games in kindergartens enable toddlers to learn how to cooperate with others, express their thoughts and emotions, and gradually develop a correct self-concept through different materials and by imitating different roles, thereby better adapting to society and future challenges. This study analyzes toddlers' peer imitation behavior in roleplaying games, aiming to help early childhood teachers and parents more comprehensively understand the situation and influencing factors of toddlers' imitation behavior, and thus provide practical and effective strategic guidance for toddlers' development.

Regarding the role of roleplaying games, some researchers believe that roleplaying games promote toddlers' social skills; for example, Joe L. Frost pointed out that roleplaying games can provide toddlers with rich

social experiences, helping them learn how to get along with others, solve problems, and control their emotions [1]. Huang Xiaoli believes that in roleplaying games, toddlers not only improve their social cognitive level and promote the formation and development of self-awareness, but also deepen social-emotional experiences and cultivate social interaction behaviors [2]. Yu Xian pointed out that roleplaying games can cultivate toddlers' cooperation ability by optimizing the form and content of games [3].

As for research on toddlers' peer imitation behavior, many researchers have classified it from different perspectives. For example, Li Xue divided toddlers' peer imitation behavior by motivation into: convergent imitation for social interaction, divergent imitation to avoid punishment, playful imitation, learning-based imitation, booing, and unconscious imitation [4]; Zhang Yaqian argued that differences in peer imitation behavior in mixed-age toddlers' games are caused by multiple factors, such as gender differences, teacher preferences, teacher control over activities, and teacher presence [5]; Sun Yajie compared the characteristics of imitation

behavior between small classes and middle/large classes, such as that small-class toddlers usually imitate in pairs, the probability of imitation behavior in small classes is higher than in middle and large classes, and small-class toddlers' imitation behavior mostly occurs in the roleplaying area [6]. Foreign scholar Haslett B B et al. started from the process of peer interaction to explore how toddlers can better combine mutual imitation, turn-taking imitation, and verbal interaction skills in this process [7].

Researchers have also found that the relevant literature mainly focuses on the educational value of roleplaying games, such as Yu Xian pointing out that roleplaying games can cultivate toddlers' cooperation ability by optimizing the form and content of games [3, 8, 9]; and on the influence and types of imitation behavior, such as Li Xue arguing that peer imitation behavior may promote the development of toddlers' innovation and creativity, and that the realization of social interaction value in the imitation process is influenced by whether the toddler actor gives feedback [10, 11]. From the existing literature, a preliminary framework linking roleplaying games and peer imitation behavior has been constructed, but there is still room for expansion in theoretical depth, research methods, and practical application. Therefore, this study analyzes the current situation of toddlers' peer imitation behavior in roleplaying games, explores the educational problems behind it, and hopes to identify effective educational suggestions that can facilitate the positive development of toddlers' peer imitation behavior in roleplaying games.

II. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

2.1 Research Subjects

This study took 30 toddlers in the small class of H Kindergarten as the research subjects, and interviewed the head teacher C, assistant teacher S, and life teacher H of the class.

2.2 Research Methods and Instruments

2.2.1 Observation method

This is the main method of data collection in this study. A self-designed "Observation Record Form of Peer Imitation Behavior in Roleplaying Games among Toddlers in Small Classes" was used. The form covers the following core dimensions:

(1) Imitation object: Record the gender, temperament type (active, intermediate, quiet), and peer relationship with the imitator (intimate, ordinary, conflictual) of the imitated toddler.

(2) Imitation type: From the mode of expression, it is divided into "verbal imitation," "motor imitation," and "verbal + motor imitation"; from the nature, it is divided into "positive imitation" and "negative imitation."

(3) Imitation motivation: Four types of motivation are preset—"playfulness," "curiosity," "conformity," and "performance"—and are judged according to specific situations.

(4) Teacher intervention: Record whether intervention occurs, the timing of intervention, and the intervention method (active: suggestion, evaluation, stopping; passive: requesting help, inviting to play).

2.2.2 Interview method

According to the "Teacher Interview Outline on Peer Imitation Behavior of Toddlers in Small Classes during Roleplaying Games", interviews were conducted with three teachers. The interview content mainly focused on teachers' cognition of imitation behavior, analysis of influencing factors, and the application of educational strategies.

III. STATISTICS AND ANALYSIS OF PEER IMITATION BEHAVIOR OF TODDLERS IN SMALL CLASSES DURING ROLEPLAYING GAMES

Through the systematic sorting and in-depth analysis of 176 valid observation records, this study reveals several typical characteristics and internal regularities of peer imitation behavior in roleplaying games among toddlers in small classes.

3.1 Tendencies of Imitation Behavior: Gender Convergence and Personality Attraction

3.1.1 Gender tendency

The data show that imitation behavior has strong gender convergence. Imitation between the same gender (male-male, female-female) accounted for 82% of the total (144 times), while cross-gender imitation accounted for only 18% (32 times). This phenomenon is closely related to the development of gender role identity in small-class toddlers. At this stage, toddlers have initially established the group concepts of "boy" and "girl," and their game preferences have begun to diverge, so they are more inclined to choose same-sex peers as the objects of observation and imitation.

3.1.2 Temperament tendency

As shown in Table 1, active toddlers were imitated at a frequency as high as 59% (103 times), far higher than intermediate toddlers (38%) and quiet toddlers (3%). This indicates that in the peer "micro-society" of toddlers, those

who behave overtly, have full emotions, and are good at initiating interactions naturally become the "focus" of the group. Their behavior is more likely to attract peers' attention and imitation because of its high expressiveness and high feedback rate.

Table 1 Frequency statistics of being imitated among toddlers with different temperaments

Temperament type	Number of times imitated	Percentage
Active	103	59%
Intermediate	67	38%
Quiet	6	3%
Total	176	100%

3.2 Types of Imitation Behavior: Verbal and Motor Imitation and Positive Imitation as the Mainstream

3.2.1 Mode of expression: Integrated imitation of speech and action

In terms of the mode of expression, "verbal and motor imitation together" occupied an absolutely dominant position (99 times, 56%), while single verbal imitation (12%) or motor imitation (32%) was relatively less frequent. This finding profoundly reflects the cognitive characteristics of concrete-image thinking in small-class toddlers. For them, a game behavior is a "complete whole" that includes language, movement, facial expression, and even the use of props; a single element stripped of the context is difficult to understand and reproduce.

3.2.2 Behavioral nature: Positive imitation as the mainstream

In terms of nature, positive imitation was the mainstream (127 times, 72%), which benefits from the fact that roleplaying games themselves mostly simulate positive social life scenes and that teachers pay attention to encouraging prosocial behavior in daily education. However, 28% negative imitation (49 times) is still a warning signal that needs attention. These behaviors usually include imitating peers' fighting over things, disorderly placement of toys, imitating uncivilized language, or interrupting games. The emergence of negative imitation, on the one hand, stems from toddlers' limited cognitive level and their inability to accurately judge whether a behavior is good or bad; on the other hand, it also exposes teachers' deficiencies in immediate guidance and rule reinforcement.

3.3 Motivations of Imitation Behavior: Playfulness-Dominated Drive

An in-depth analysis of imitation motivation helps us understand the internal logic of toddlers' behavior. As shown in Table 2, playful imitation (55%) was the primary motivation, which fully conforms to toddlers' nature that "game is life and life is game." Through exaggerated movements, repeated language, and shared laughter, toddlers not only release energy but also create and share happiness, thereby quickly narrowing the social distance between peers. In addition, curiosity-driven imitation (22%) is the cognitive drive for toddlers to explore new roles and actions; conformity-driven imitation (15%) reflects toddlers' need for social belonging—their desire to integrate into the group and avoid being marginalized; and performance-driven imitation (8%) reflects toddlers' desire for the same recognition and attention after observing that a certain behavior can bring positive feedback from teachers or peers. These four motivations are not completely separate and often interweave in the same imitation behavior.

Table 2 Frequency statistics of motivations for toddlers' imitation behavior

Motivation type	Frequency	Percentage	Typical manifestations
Playfulness	97	55%	Accompanied by laughter, pushing, and exaggerated movements
Curiosity	39	22%	Continued observation and attempts to adjust after imitation
Conformity	27	15%	Following after multiple people imitate, without subjective intention
Performance	14	8%	Expecting feedback from teachers or peers after imitation
Total	176	100%	

3.4 Teacher Intervention: High Frequency Coexisting with a Single Method

Among the 176 imitation behaviors, teachers intervened 98 times (56%), indicating that teachers generally attach

importance to guiding the game process. However, the distribution of intervention methods (see Table 3) reveals deeper problems. In active intervention, "suggestion" accounted for the vast majority (62%), which reflects the educational philosophy that teachers tend to inspire rather than command. However, "evaluation" accounted for only 10%, indicating that teachers neglected to give immediate and specific positive feedback on toddlers' behavior and missed opportunities to reinforce good behavior. Meanwhile, "stopping" accounted for 28%, mostly used to deal with safety problems or conflicts, but if the method is too simple or crude, it may easily cause resistance in toddlers.

Table 3 Statistics of teachers' active intervention methods

Intervention method	Frequency	Percentage	Main situations
Suggestion	37	62%	When game plots are simplistic or progress stagnates
Evaluation	6	10%	When positive behavior needs reinforcement or reflection needs guidance
Stopping	17	28%	When safety risks or rule violations occur
Total	60	100%	

In passive intervention, "requesting help" accounted for 66%, indicating that toddlers already have a preliminary problem-solving strategy—turning to authority—when they encounter difficulties in imitation. How teachers use these help-seeking moments, transforming them into opportunities to support toddlers' autonomous problem solving rather than simply doing things for them, is the key to improving guidance quality.

IV. PROBLEMS EXISTING IN SMALL-CLASS ROLEPLAYING GAMES

Based on the above findings, this study identifies three problems in current small-class roleplaying games:

4.1 Teachers' "Educational Neglect"

"Educational neglect" does not mean that teachers do nothing at all, but rather that they fail to identify the educational value contained in seemingly ordinary

imitation behaviors. For example, in a kitchen game, the teacher kept observing toddlers imitating the same "cooking" behavior and language, and even when toddlers knocked over ingredients, the teacher turned a blind eye and did not guide the toddlers to deal with the problem or engage in more meaningful interactions. The consequence of such neglect is that it limits toddlers' creative thinking and keeps games at a low level of repetition; secondly, it deprives toddlers of the opportunity to express themselves individually through comparison and reflection; finally, it weakens toddlers' subjectivity and initiative in games.

4.2 Negative Imitation: Negative Contagion of Group Behavior

Because small-class toddlers' thinking is still immature and their judgment is weak, once negative behavior is initiated by an influential toddler, it is easy to spread in the group. For example, at the beginning of a game, Xiaoya imitated her mother's usual appearance, picked up a bottle to feed the doll, and showed impatient negative behavior. "Father" Yangyang saw this and imitated it, saying in an impatient tone, "Go to sleep, go to sleep." Other toddlers also imitated the "mother's" negative behavior when they saw it. In this case, when the "mother" made negative behavior, the other toddlers did not make independent judgments. If teachers fail to intervene in time, this imitated negative behavior will be implicitly reinforced. Over time, it may become fixed as a bad behavioral habit and affect the construction of a positive game atmosphere in the class.

4.3 The "Blindness" and "Randomness" of Imitation

The cognitive development level of small-class toddlers determines that their imitation behavior often has blindness (not distinguishing good from bad, accepting everything) and randomness (attention easily shifts, imitation is fragmented). This profoundly reflects toddlers' weak awareness of rules, unclear purpose, and unstable social role cognition. The challenge for teachers is how to help toddlers establish and internalize game rules without suppressing their autonomy, so that imitation behavior moves from disorder to order and from blindness to understanding.

V. GUIDANCE STRATEGIES FOR SMALL-CLASS ROLEPLAYING GAMES

5.1 Establish Models and Realize Value Guidance

5.1.1 Consciously establish positive models

Teachers can discover and praise toddlers who show prosocial behaviors such as cooperation, sharing, innovation, and persistence during games, and use whole-class activity time to explain specifically to toddlers why these positive behaviors are worth learning.

5.1.2 Conduct "value clarification discussions"

When negative imitation occurs, organize mini-discussions to guide toddlers to think about the consequences of behaviors and make value judgments, so that they actively abandon bad imitation and choose positive behaviors.

5.2 Improve Teachers' Guidance Ability in Roleplaying Games

5.2.1 Improve teachers' observation and interpretation ability

Train teachers not only to "see" imitation behavior, but also to "read" the motivation, cognitive level, and social needs behind the behavior, and investigate the professional knowledge and skills that teachers need to increase in guiding game activities, and provide professional assistance in this regard.

5.2.2 Enrich guidance methods

When observing that toddlers' imitation behavior has entered a relatively stable stage, teachers can flexibly use multiple strategies such as role-substitution intervention, heuristic questioning, and concrete evaluation to guide them to expand game plots and think about subsequent plots, reduce simple imitation, and strive to promote meaningful imitation that facilitates development.

5.3 Provide Guidance Based on Differences in Toddlers' Temperament

Toddlers have different temperament types and need individualized instruction. For example: 1. Choleric toddlers are easily excited, lack patience, and have relatively weak rule awareness. Teachers should first affirm their enthusiasm and active participation, then skillfully introduce rules, guide them to control their emotions, and encourage them to give full play within the rule framework. 2. When sanguine toddlers imitate peers' game plots, teachers can use questions to guide them, stimulate them to expand game content, and timely guide them to focus on one role or plot to cultivate their concentration. 3. Phlegmatic toddlers are more cautious in roleplaying games, and their imitation behavior is slow and meticulous. Teachers should be patient enough, give them sufficient time to observe and imitate, and give them affirmation. 4. Melancholic toddlers dare not easily try imitation in roleplaying games. Teachers should give them more care and encouragement. Before games, teachers should actively invite them to participate, choose simple and easy-to-operate roles, give praise and encouragement, and pay timely attention to their emotional changes.

VI. CONCLUSION

From this study, it can be seen that roleplaying games have an important impact on toddlers. Therefore, teachers should enhance toddlers' ability to engage in positive peer imitation behavior, be familiar with the role of roleplaying games in cultivating toddlers' social interaction, imagination, and creativity, and attach importance to the significance of roleplaying games in toddlers' growth, so as to better guide toddlers in carrying out games and lay a good foundation for cultivating well-rounded toddlers.

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