



So you want to know more about...

War Toys

What's the Big Deal?

Maybe you had a toy gun when you were little. What's the big deal with letting kids play with fake guns or swords?

Times have changed. There is a lot more (and more graphic) violence in the media, and we are watching a lot more television. Our children have programming available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Kids have difficulty distinguishing between reality and fiction. Seeing so many people get shot/pounded/whatever **desensitizes** them to the effects of real violence. Children also don't understand that death is permanent until they are mid-elementary age.

Toy guns are changing, too. They look real enough that police sometimes mistake them for real weapons. If your child ever finds a gun, do you want him or her to pick it up and fire it to figure out if it's real?

It's true that **kids** will build a gun (or knife, or bow and arrow) out of anything — a piece of toast, a stick, some Lego® blocks—if you don't let them play with toy weapons. Here's the difference: there is no question that those things are **pretend** weapons, **and** they can be used to other ends. It's hard for children to control their behavior when they are playing with equipment that is intended to hurt people. They get caught up in the moment and swing too wide, actually hit others instead of missing, or escalate their own physical combat with others. They are still working on the difference between pretend play and real actions, and we don't want to make that line any blurrier.

Why do kids want to play with guns? **Power.** Several of our other *Purple Pages* deal with kids' need for power: **Aggression, Superhero Play,** and

Power Struggles.

At the center, we redirect war play behavior and give kids other ways to feel powerful:

- Using their intellect to solve problems;
- Using physical strength and agility productively;
- Using words instead of actions to express their needs and wants;
- Building awesome structures with blocks, Legos®, and milk crates on the playground.

We can't allow toy weapons at the center. It's disruptive to the group and counterproductive to our mission: giving kids opportunities to create, explore, and build social skills.

Our Policy on War Toys

- Toys that are made to look like weapons are not allowed at the center.
- War toys brought from home will be put away and returned to a parent at the end of the day.
- When children use any equipment as a pretend weapon, teachers will redirect them to more productive powerful play.
- We permit superhero play when children respect other children's boundaries.
- When groups of children become focused on war play, we make a special effort to promote nurturing and helping behaviors by doing dramatic play and teamwork activities, which encourage empathy and pro-social behaviors.

further reading

- ▶ *Bad Boys Don't Have Birthdays: Fantasy Play at Four*
Vivian Paley
- ▶ *The Recess Queen*
Alexis O'Neill
- ▶ *Who's Calling the Shots? How to Respond Effectively to ... War Play and War Toys*
Nancy Carlsson-Paige.

Re-sensitizing Kids to Violence

Kids see an incredible number of violent acts on television and in advertising. The American Psychological Association believes that exposure to television violence can have detrimental short- and long-term effects for children. Televised violence has three major consequences for young viewers:

- It makes them less sensitive to subsequent acts of violence.
- It makes them more fearful of the world in general and of things that can happen to them.
- It makes them more likely to behave in an aggressive fashion towards others.

Experts also agree that parents **can do much to reduce the impact of that violence on their children.**

Parents can:

- Reduce the number of hours children watch television. This alone can have a significant impact.
- Watch at least one episode of each program that their children watch. This way you will know the content and discuss things they see with them.
- When characters are violent, ask your child why s/he thinks the character made that choice. Was it realistic? Were there any other options? What would be the consequences if that happened in real life?
- Ban some programs altogether.
- Encourage children to participate in sports, playing games, or other social activities in place of some of their television viewing hours.

Frequently Asked Questions

Do you ever kick violent kids out of the center? Yes, if we can't keep the other children safe and/or meet the aggressor's developmental needs. This is a rare occurrence and removal from the program is a last resort. We seek advice from our consulting psychologist when a situation is this extreme.

How much aggression is too much? Children over 3 years old should not **regularly** be using physical means to get what they need. Everyone loses control occasionally, but a stomping tantrum in a 4 year old should not typically extend to lashing out, and should not be a daily occurrence.

I want my child to defend himself. Kids need to learn that violence is not an acceptable way to address conflict. It is hard for young children to know the limits of "acceptable" retaliation. Close supervision enables our teachers to keep close tabs on interpersonal dynamics among the children and give kids ideas for responding appropriately. Just like adults, children can best defend themselves by negotiating and using conflict resolution skills. Teachers are always available to mediate and step in when kids get physical.

Doesn't superhero play always escalate into violence? No, especially not if it's supervised. Teachers and parents can act as facilitators and offer alternative solutions when kids get stuck. They can also model empathy and pro-social behaviors within the framework for play that the children have established.

My child just got his [Fighting Robo Man] or his birthday and he had a total tantrum when I tried to take it away this morning. At the center, we have the benefit of being consistent working in our favor. Because we apply the same rules to all war toys, kids are less likely to persist trying to wiggle around them. We also have many other distractions that we can use to take attention away from the toy. We do have to say, though, when a parent believes that a child can't live without a particular toy, the child picks up on that. Our teachers don't relish playing toy police, but if you are having a rough drop off, we can help.

Are you against guns in general? I don't like my values being challenged in this way. War toys are not the same thing as real weapons. Our staff come from different backgrounds—some are pacifists, some are hunters. The issue isn't whether **guns are bad or good.** The issue is whether it's a good idea to **desensitize** children to the **damage** that guns, knives and other weapons can do. Because we deal with children at various stages of cognitive, social, and emotional development, and provide programs for families from a multitude of backgrounds, having war toys in the classroom creates a bad dynamic. It's out of line with our primary mission: giving kids the social skills they need to be confident and compassionate citizens.