

Understanding 'Aggressive' Play



Play is exciting – it's fun and it stimulates imagination. It also teaches children social skills such as co-operation and self-control, something all parents are keen to see. Toys help develop mental and physical skills by stimulating and prolonging play. Mothers are sometimes shocked when their sons, or even their daughters – some as young as two years old – ask for a toy gun, an action figure or a video game featuring martial arts fighting. These toys are popular; the vast majority of boys and many girls have played with toy weapons at home.¹ These toys are also controversial.

Some parents worry about children playing aggressive games or playing with toy weapons. Others say that aggressive play and pretend fighting with toys are all part and parcel of children learning appropriate behaviour. The debate will no doubt go on². Perhaps the following information will help you, as a parent, to make up your mind about what is best for your child.

Is it real or pretend?

Pretending to be aggressive is not the same as being aggressive. Aggressive behaviour is the intention to harm another person. Aggressive play includes make-believe fighting and rough-and-tumble, which has no intention to injure anyone. Play fighting requires a good deal of self-control and restraint of aggression, serving as practice for exercising self-control in more serious contexts. According to psychologist T. G. Power, "Professionals need to be careful not to equate play-fighting with serious fighting, and not to label a child as 'aggressive' simply because he or she prefers a particular kind of play. Given many children's interest and enjoyment in active, locomotor play, children



should be given numerous opportunities for this type of play as well. Such activities likely contribute to motor development, overall physical fitness, and possibly cognitive development"³

Aggressive toys or war toys are those that children use in play fighting and fantasy aggression. These include toys that resemble weapons and action figures. Contrary to popular belief, only a small minority of toys are action figures and toy weapons (6%) or video games with fighting themes (5%).⁴

Although elaborate efforts are sometimes made to prevent children from playing with toy weapons, nevertheless a sizeable percentage of boys and a surprising number of girls play with aggressive toys. Studies in Britain, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and the USA all report that about 60-80% of boys and about one-third of girls sometimes played with aggressive toys at home.⁵

According to the research, toy weapons and violent video games stimulate play fighting but have no effect on aggressive behaviour. There is no evidence linking aggressive toys to children's attitudes toward war or violence. For nearly all children who engage in it, aggressive play is exciting, active, and fun, full of fantasy and imagination.⁶

While adults may sometimes confuse real and pretend fighting, research shows that children as young as five are able to tell the difference between real aggression, which frightens them, and aggressive play, which they see as harmless fun.⁷ Children's experience of actual aggression in the home has much more influence on them than a toy – however fond of the toy they may be.

The toy is an intermediary between the child and the world. It is the family environment far more than the toy that is the key factor in the





child's character. Children become aggressive when their parents are aggressive or when aggression is allowed to go unpunished.

The Violent Crime Reduction Act 2006 prohibits realistic imitation firearms. This does not affect traditional cowboy guns or those modelled on firearms before 1870. So as to distinguish them from realistic firearms, toy guns must be bright red, orange, yellow, green, blue, pink or purple.



Boys r us: sex differences in aggressive play

By age two, and sometimes evident as early as one year of age, boys and girls tend to play differently and prefer different playthings. Boys prefer traditional "boys' toys" and girls tend to prefer "girls' toys" (although girls are more flexible about this).

Why do children play with toy guns?

No one is really sure whether the differences between boys and girls play are learned or inborn. Aggressive play has a biological basis⁸ and is also influenced by the child's experiences.⁹ Activity levels tend to be higher in boys. As a result they prefer toys that lend themselves to highly active play. One undeniable feature of aggressive play is its high level of activity, with running, chasing, and make-believe fighting, complete with sound effects.

The child's surroundings also influence aggressive play. Children in war zones often play war games, not only in imitation of the adults around them, but also as a means of coping with anxiety, fear and loss.¹⁰ Parents and grandparents who have traditional attitudes about sex-roles tend to buy "boys' toys" for boys and traditional "girls' toys" for girls. The toys purchased for children and grandchildren reflect the attitudes and prejudices of the adults who purchase them and not necessarily those of the children who receive them. Adults who purchase so-called 'violent toys' do not see them as violent, but as toys to be used in fantasy play.

What's a parent to do?

Kids need active rough and tumble play. Ensure that play is safe by providing a suitable place and plenty of time for active play. Provide children with a range of toys intended for active play - not just toys for fantasy aggressive play, but also playground equipment, slides, swings, balls, skates.

Some parents let their children play with brightly coloured water guns, but not more realistic toy guns. Some restrict toy gun play at home but permit it outdoors or whilst playing at friends' houses. Other parents (or grandparents) allow children any kind of toy guns, feeling that what is important is how the child uses the toy, not what it looks like. If you disapprove of a particular toy, don't buy it. A flat refusal might make a toy seem even more attractive to a child, so be careful to explain your reasons for refusing. If you feel the need to compromise, you might allow your child to 'earn' the toy either by doing chores or by paying for it from an allowance.

The value of play, its importance for human survival, is that it allows for the creation of imaginary worlds and the enactment of fantasy roles without having to bring them about.

Encourage your children to play with a wide range of toys and don't worry if some of their games appear aggressive. Real fighting is something else altogether, and should not be praised or encouraged.

In particular, parents and educators should make efforts to give children the space needed to develop and expand their own fantasy worlds, in accordance with their individual needs, and to provide opportunities to express these mental and emotional processes in verbal and artistic forms. This may be of particular importance to boys who, overall, encounter more difficulties in our societies in expressing their inner worlds and who are often negatively sanctioned for imitating aggressive behaviour stimulated by media. Producers have a responsibility to offer children texts and characters that open up possibilities for experimenting with a wide range of roles and plots that are not constrained by gender, race, and other common stereotypes...¹¹



Set clear guidelines for the use of toys and video games. Be consistent and firm - but not aggressive - in your disapproval of aggressive behaviour.

Participate in your children's rough and tumble play from time to time. Play is one way children have of understanding the world of adults. Be constructive, use it as an opportunity to discuss violence, guns, war and peace.

Children growing up in a warm, loving environment, with parents who discuss violence and war, have nothing to fear from toys or video games.

Penny Holland ends her book *We don't play with guns here* with a quote from psychologist Jerome Singer¹²: **"While I certainly do not wish to propose that providing millions of children with toy soldier sets would alleviate real violence in the world and generate pacifism, I do want to emphasize that such toys can be conducive to generating imaginative play without provoking overtly violent behaviour. I am much more concerned about the millions of children who have no toys..."**

- 1 G Wegener-Spöhring. (2005). War toys in the world of fourth graders: 1985 and 2002. In J. Goldstein, D. Buckingham & G. Brougère, *Toys Games and Media*. London: Erlbaum
- 2 P.K. Smith. (1994). The war play debate. In J. Goldstein, *Toys, play and child development*. Cambridge University Press.
- 3 T. G. Power. (2000). Play and exploration in children and animals. Hillsdale NJ & London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, p. 395.
- 4 Entertainment Software Association. (2006). http://www.theesa.com/facts/sales_genre_data.php
- 5 P.K. Smith. (2004). The war play debate. In J. Goldstein, *Toys, play and child development*. Cambridge University Press. M. W. Watson & Y. Peng. (1992). The relation between toy gun play and children's aggressive behavior. *Early Education & Development*, 3 370-389.
- 6 J.F. Benenson, et al. (2007). The development of boys' preferential pleasure in physical aggression. *Aggressive Behavior*, 33, 1-13.
- 7 J. Hellendoorn & F. J. H. Harinck. (1997). War toy play and aggression in Dutch kindergarten children. *Social Development*, 6, 340-354. P. Holland. (2003). *We don't play with toy guns here*. London: Open University Press. B. Sutton-Smith. (1988). War toys and childhood aggression. *Play & Culture*, 1, 57-69. G. Wegener-Spöhring, G. (1994). War toys and aggressive play scenes. In J. Goldstein (Ed.), *Toys, play, and child development*. Cambridge University Press.
- 8 S.A. Berenbaum & M. Hines. (1992). Early androgens are related to childhood sex-typed toy preferences. *Psychological Sciences*, 3, 203-206.
- 9 M. W. Watson & Y. Peng. (1992). The relation between toy gun play and children's aggressive behavior. *Early Education & Development*, 3 370-389.
- 10 E.P. Bonte & M. Musgrove. (1943). Influences of war as evidenced in children's play. *Child Development*, 14, pp. 179-200.
- 11 Maya Götz, Dafna Lemish, Amy Aldman & Hyesung Moon. (2005). Media and the Make-believe worlds of children. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. (p. 203)
- 12 Penny Holland. (2003). *We don't play with toy guns here*. London: Open University Press.

The National Toy Council is concerned with child welfare. Its members include representatives of the Child Accident Prevention Trust, British Toy & Hobby Association and its toy safety advisory service, National Association of Toy & Leisure Libraries, Institute of Trading Standards Administration, Kidscape, national press and renowned academics.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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View all of the National Toy Council's leaflets at www.btha.co.uk

