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Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Are Toy Guns Ever OK?

The meaning of violence: Many parents wonder why their child is so fascinated by guns and other weapons. Parents do not want their child to view weapons as playthings, and many parents consider prohibiting their child from using toy weapons. Parents can utilize an understanding of the meaning of aggression and violence for young children to guide their opinions about the use of weapons as playthings.

All children have loving feelings and wishes to connect, affiliate, and give to others. However, all children also possess aggressive feelings and wishes to disconnect, hurt, retaliate, and take from others. In fact, human beings are biologically wired to respond with angry feelings and aggressive thoughts to emotional or physical distress. Boys, for reasons that remain speculative, generally have stronger aggressive responses than do girls.

All children understand that the world contains aggressions because they have first-hand experience with their own aggressive thoughts and feelings. The rages of an unhappy infant, or the temper tantrums of the toddler or two-year old are examples of times when children experience strong aggressive feelings. Children who are in the midst of a tantrum are often temporarily overwhelmed with urges to destroy or hurt. Children's awareness of violence is expressed in the common childhood fear of "scary monsters." Children develop this fear whether or not they have experienced other people acting in monstrous ways or have seen scary monster movies. Although children do not have to be taught about or exposed to aggression and even violence in order to know that it exists, they need an environment in which aggression between people is kept within appropriate bounds and disagreements reach satisfactory resolutions in order to successfully master

their aggressive tendencies.

The meaning of play: Play is the young child's most important tool for emotional growth. From that standpoint, play is quite serious business. Play is a canvas upon which children paint a portrait of their feelings, hopes, worries, questions, and desires. In playing, children can experiment with solutions and thereby make progress with their developmental tasks.

The emotional development of children involves their confronting a progression of challenges that progressively rise to the foreground only to recede into the background after sufficient resolution. The need to master aggression is one of the major developmental challenges facing young children. Children must learn, for example, about the appropriate expressions of anger, the difference between aggressive thoughts and actions, and the fact that aggressive feelings are natural and present in all good people. Naturally, children turn to play so that they can learn what they need to learn about aggression. We should become concerned about children's relationship to aggression only if they appear to be overly pre-occupied with aggression in their thoughts or actions *outside the sphere of play*, or if the play aggression has an extremely violent or gruesome character.

How do toy guns fit in?: Parents should prohibit and hopefully eliminate unacceptable aggressive words, acts, and behaviors. However, children's aggressive feelings cannot be prohibited or eliminated. Children must have access to their aggressive feelings so that they can play with their aggression and develop more mature outlets. Any parental effort to eliminate these feelings through shame, guilt, or fear may even interfere with children's ability to ultimately channel their aggression into assertiveness, healthy competition, and achievement. Therefore, we recommend that parents comfortably accept their children's interest in aggressive play. Play is the arena suitable for a contained and controlled expression of aggressive feelings. Parental acceptance of children's interest in aggression should include a clear and firm expectation that children keep any hurtful aggressions within their thoughts and play and outside real relationships.

Children need time to learn to play successfully with aggression, including learning to play without scaring or hurting people. Play requires props.

Parental support of the use of guns as props conveys their understanding of the value of play as a tool to surmount aggressions. The best recipe that parents can use to support children's healthy mastery of aggression is to permit children to play with aggression, set clear limits about non-play aggression, and offer a family life that models conflict resolution without utilizing excessive aggression, such as corporal punishment.

Young children have not developed a clear sense of the differences between reality and pretend, and react emotionally to pretend situations as if they were real. Children under seven must therefore be shielded from all videos and other media that contain any use of weapons and other forms of violence other than playful and silly cartoon violence, such as bunnies going "splat" and getting up again. Exposure to realistic aggression will interfere with their ability to safely play with and master their imaginary aggression. For similar reasons, we recommend shielding children from the presence and use of real guns until they are at least seven years of age.

Some families have such strong negative opinions about guns that they do not want to expose their children even to toy guns. Such parents should comfortably follow their instincts. Since children can read the hearts of their parents, these parents might not be able to offer the toy weapons without conveying a mixed message. Of course, their children may wind up designing their own guns, or using their fingers! Parents who prohibit guns will have many other opportunities to support their children's aggression in play. A parent's overall attitude and behavior is the important issue.

The next time that a child tears around the back yard "killing" all the bad guys and tearing off their heads, we recommend that his or her parent smile and compliment their child's ability to take care of the bad guys. With such a supportive attitude, parents will be assisting their child to feel like a good person, increasingly comfortable with his or her control over aggression, and ultimately free from spending time worrying excessively about all of the "bad guys" in the world.

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