



The Fascination of Dinosaurs

Some people say dinosaurs are extinct. Lucy Daniels Center likes to say that they are immortal, living on in the hearts of four and five-year-olds, especially boys. Parents notice this, and are wondering why dinosaurs fascinate young children so. Since dinosaurs are so compelling to so many children, we can surmise that they see many important things in the “dinosaur story”. When we understand more fully the appeal of dinosaurs, we will also have achieved a deeper appreciation for the inner life of children.

Interest in big and little: First, dinosaurs capture the interest that young children have in “big and little.” Children live in a world made for big people. They are always looking up! Of course, this is much more than an issue of size; it is also an issue of power and control. The big people run their lives and the world. Most children wonder - and even worry a bit - will I ever get to be big? How long will it take? If I do get to be big, will I know how to be a grown-up like my mommy and daddy?

Many dinosaurs are quite big, even bigger than grown-ups. Children who are reading or imagining about dinosaurs may be pretending that they are the giant creatures. This imagining helps children to pretend that they are more powerful than the giant adults and escape their worries about growing up. But not all dinosaurs are big. Some are tiny. Some are fierce and others are gentle. Dinosaurs also offer a diverse cast of characters allowing children to construct images of their own families, of families that they wish they were a part of, and of families that they wish to have one day. Because dinosaurs are real but also because they lived very long ago, children can immerse

themselves in a world that is both real and not real, an ideal “zone” for the imaginative and constructive play children use to develop in a healthy way.

Why do bad things happen?: Children are often perplexed by the question: Why did the strongest and biggest creatures of all disappear? Don’t the strongest survive? Most grown-ups provide answers based on the current scientific understandings: a meteor fell from the sky (not so comforting!).

Children generally have a different explanation because they tend to assume that all events are either rewards or punishments for the “good” or “bad” actions of the people (or dinosaurs!). Bad things happen to bad people; the dinosaurs must have been punished for being bad.

Adults still have remnants of this kind of thinking, which might re-emerge, for example, when an adult feels that an illness, which befalls a loved one “is not fair.” It can seem as if there is a standard of fairness that rules the world, one that requires bad events as “just desserts” for bad deeds.

Worries about aggression: But what crimes might the dinosaurs have committed that would have deserved the punishment of extinction? Many children decide that the dinosaurs were punished for their aggression. After all, many dinosaurs were mean and destructive in the mythology that every child is taught.

With this background, we are ready to think about the fact that even children whose play or behavior is not particularly aggressive may have a fascination with the aggressive aspects of dinosaurs. When parents say that they would not characterize their child as aggressive, generally they are noticing that their child is generally considerate and kind and would be upset if he caused another person undue pain or suffering. These important achievements indicate that a child is finding ways to surmount and overcome his inevitable aggressions. In fact, children know a great deal about raw anger, even about destructive thoughts, because they live with themselves. Every child has sometimes felt like a tyrannosaurus rex, with urges to bite, hit, and hurt. And

every child wonders, will I be punished for my thoughts as well, not just my actions?

Dinosaurs help mastery: So, a child's fascination with dinosaur aggression originates in his or her efforts to manage and surmount their own aggression in behavior and in attitude. Paradoxically, children are fascinated with the dinosaurs and their tenuous ability to control aggression because they care so much about not behaving in a "dinosaur" way. A child's task is to behave kindly and also to develop a tolerance and acceptance within himself or herself for the inevitable aggressive thoughts. Children are probably able to achieve a little more mastery and control over their aggression each time that they participates in aggressive dinosaur fantasies. In such play, children are able to provide themselves with incentives to control their aggression by reminding themselves that violent dinosaurs do not get rewarded with longevity; they are able to provide themselves with some distance from their own impulses by imagining that wild and strange "creatures" - not little boys - are the ones that hurt others; and they can even find constructive alternatives to their own aggressive plans by exploring ways that the dinosaurs can work together affiliatively.

Playing with dinosaurs and thinking about dinosaurs helps children to move beyond their worries about whether they can control their aggression, not hurt others, and not be punished. Children learn that, unlike dinosaurs that actually bit and devoured, they can keep their impulses as thoughts and dreams, increasingly controlled and tamed. In this way, children learn a crucial life lesson about the difference between thoughts and impulses, and actions.

As children progress into the grade school years, they begin to achieve more order and routine in their inner life and devote less time to fantasies. Many children develop a more intellectual interest in dinosaurs at this time. Older children learn to order and categorize, and in doing so, learn to better use their intellect to cope with anxiety provoking topics represented by the dinosaur mythology.

The information that children accumulate about dinosaurs gives them a sense of control over the dangers that the dinosaurs represent. It is as children are saying: "With knowledge, I can feel more prepared to manage the dangers from within myself. I can also feel more prepared to manage the dangers from outside myself, such as from other scary people or even from returning dinosaurs."

Are there times that play with a dinosaur should be a cause for concern? Certainly. Parents should be concerned if the child generally cannot keep his concerns "in play." Such inability to keep the concerns in play is manifested by tumbles into wildness, impulsivity, and scaring of others. When such a breakdown of the play occurs, the child's play has lost its make-believe quality and is not longer functioning as a container within which mastery can occur. Another indication that child is not able to use the play as a container occurs when the play is excessively graphic, such as if the play is gory and involves details about blood and tearing apart of flesh. Play that is functioning on behalf of the child's progressive development should rarely descend into the caverns of the "R" rating!

Next time that a parent sees a child, or another child, showing their interest in dinosaurs, we recommend that stopping, listening, and marveling, and perhaps finding a way to show understanding of the marvelous young inner worlds that the old world of dinosaurs helps new children to explore.