

Toy Guns and Gunplay: Should Parents Be Worried?

By Dr. Todd Huffman, for the Eugene *Register-Guard*, August 2008

For some years a debate has been raging among parents, educators, and child health experts as to whether playing with toy guns and other fantasy weaponry encourages present or future violent behavior among children, or whether such play provides healthy outlets to their natural aggression, and otherwise inures them against the horrors of a sometimes violent world.

In particular, the fact of childhood fantasy gunplay has triggered basic yet complex questions as: should we allow our children to play with manufactured toy guns? Should we ban them altogether? Should we discourage children from using ordinary household items and play objects as pretend guns?

Are moms and dads who allow their kids gunplay ‘bad’ parents? Will I raise an overly aggressive child if I allow him or her to play with toy guns? And if I do, will my children and I be shunned by other parents?

Our society has yet to work out all the answers.

Stories abound of nervous school officials, in their well-intentioned but overzealous attempts to prevent another school shooting, meting out harsh punishments – including arrest, suspension, and even expulsion – for violations as minor as saying “pow” while pointing a human or a cooked chicken finger at a fellow grade-school student.

Of “zero-tolerance” parents pulling their children out of birthday parties, preschools, or simply off the playground because another child used his finger or the nearest stick as a pretend gun.

And of tragic incidents during which a law enforcement official, having mistaken a toy gun for a real one, shot and killed the child handling it. Such stories and more like them every day continue to kindle debate over what place, if any, toy guns and fantasy gunplay have in American society.

With so many highly publicized gun-related mass killings in our country over the past decade, there is little wonder that growing numbers of parents shudder at the thought of allowing their child to play with manufactured toy guns, or to engage in fantasy gunplay.

There is little wonder too when on our television screens, if not outside our front doors, we see firsthand evidence of the U.S having far more gun violence and more guns – 240 million of them – than any other country not at war, and many that are.

When it comes to guns, as it has come to be with so many cultural issues, we have become a nation of extremes. At one end, we take the subject of real guns far too cavalierly, at the price of the deaths to gun violence of eight children and teenagers each day, and of over one million Americans over the past forty years – more than died in all the wars of the 20th century.

At the other, we have allowed political correctness to overwhelm common sense in the manner in which we sometimes admonish young children – and the parents who let them – who pretend play with fantasy weaponry. Ask yourself this: is it silly or sensible to shun friendships with otherwise loving and strong families who allow their children fantasy gun or swordplay?

Children have played fantasy games involving the triumph of good over evil quite probably for centuries. Make-believe games and fighting play are a part of how children make sense of the world, of how they work out their impulses and the internal struggles we all share between our better and darker angels.

Many of today's adults, predominantly men, can recall fond childhood memories of playing Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett, complete with coonskin cap and gun, or of joining with friends to play cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, pirates, Jedis, soldiers or spies. There are 100 million adults or more in this country who as children played with fantasy weaponry – manufactured or improvised – and did not grow up to be Hannibal Lecter.

Which is why we must take care not to label as “violent behavior” what is really just playful aggression coupled with vibrant imagination. Rough and tumble play, even if involves fantasy weaponry, is often a healthy way for children to resolve competitiveness and form friendships. Children who play in fantasy battles with fighting toys are not doomed to live a life of crime.

As many a pacifist parent can attest, kids can turn anything into guns. Children are terrifically inventive, and can make the most unlikely object serve as a gun. Fingers, sticks, Legos, Tinker Toys – just about anything can be aimed and fired, complete with self-generated sound effects. Weaponry is just something some children are drawn to.

Especially boys. There seems to be something hard-wired with the Y chromosome that leads many boys to see a fully automatic rifle in a moss-covered branch, or a gleaming Arthurian sword in a cardboard paper towel tube. How do we tell the young child to resist this natural instinct?

We don't, and should not. We should do away with the political correctness which has led to the punishing or avoidance of children for playing action hero games, or pretending to “fire” guns using their fingers, or their sister's Barbie.

When it comes to fantasy gun and swordplay using improvised weapons, we should allow this type of channeling of aggression, all the while keeping close tabs on how it manifests itself. Play is play and violence is violence, and the wise parent recognizes the former and intervenes in the latter.

The wise parent also teaches their child every day to understand and respect the rights of others, and teaches them tolerance for diversity and how to resolve conflict through non-violent means. And the wise and nowadays all too rare parent prevents their child's exposure to violent television, movies, and video games at home and, just as crucially, when at the home of a friend.

But the loaded question is whether as parents do we enable the next step in pretend gunplay and buy toy guns for our children? The answer hinges on whether realistic toy guns themselves increase the tendency toward violence and the use of real guns at a later age.

While parents and child health experts on both sides of this debate are vehement in their viewpoints, the best that can be said of years of research is that little evidence exists either to support a cause-and-effect relationship between toy guns and aggression, or to discount one.

What is known with more certainty, however, is that when exposed to realistic toy guns while exposed regularly to realistic violence on television and in movies and video games, the natural aggressive drive of some children is exacerbated, and the child is more likely to grow up violent.

Said simply, play guns and swords are not harming our children so much as unrestricted exposure to the many forms of violent media available to them.

In a loving home in which there is a strong emphasis on education and respect, and a firm hand on the remote, a child's natural aggressive drive usually becomes a healthy competitiveness and ambition. In such a home, whether or not parents allow fantasy gun or swordplay, or provide cap pistols or squirt guns, is ultimately of little matter.

Personally I do not support the purchase of realistic toy guns. But I believe that allowing a child to play with a manufactured toy gun is not the same as encouraging violence, so long as the family bonds are strong, the education is consistent and repetitious, and the television is off.

As a society, we need therefore to worry less about gunplay and more about keeping our families strong.