

Playing with Guns, War Play, and Superheroes: What's the Big Deal?

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Children's fascination with war play and war toys is not new—items resembling war toys have been found from ancient Egypt and the Middle Ages—nor is the fascination with such toys peculiar to children in the United States (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1990, p. 10). What is different today, however, is the nature of war toys and war play among children. The deregulation of children's television in 1984 resulted in a sudden rise in war-related cartoons and a rise in the sale of war toys linked to these programs. According to Diane Levin, author of *Remote Control Childhood?*, “within one year of deregulation, 9 of the 10 best-selling toys were connected to TV shows, and 7 of these shows were violent. The sale of toys of violence, including action figures with weapons, soared more than 600% in three years” (Levin, 1998, p. 10). In addition, media “cross feeding” allows a child to view these same violent themes in a variety of media: video games, movies, the Internet, children's books, and comic books. Finally, the war toys produced today are highly realistic, sophisticated, and seemingly authentic (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1990, pp. 53-68).

Many parents and teachers of young children have observed changes in the nature of children's play as a result of violent play themes in popular media. Nancy Carlsson-Paige and Diane Levin report that some of the negative effects on children's behavior include the following (Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1990; Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 1995, pp. 67-71):

- an obsession or preoccupation with war play and with products related to programs promoting such play,
- increased levels of aggression among children as they imitate what they see in programs, and
- a lack of creativity and imagination in play because the content of children's play originates in TV cartoons or other media.

In a study on the relation between toy gun play and children's aggressive behavior, Watson and Peng (1992) found that toy gun play was one predictor of observed aggression in day care. Other important influences included parental attitudes and discipline practices, levels of parental physical punishment, and children's television viewing (Watson & Peng, 1992, pp. 371-389). In a commentary on parental influence on children's social behavior, Gary Ladd notes, “parents who tolerate war play may be condoning (if not promoting) a context that breeds antisocial behaviors and values (e.g., aggression toward others, stereotyped views of good and evil). Extrapolating upon this argument, it seems reasonable to propose that the lessons children learn in early war play may become familiar and well-rehearsed strategies for resolving real-life conflicts with peers, siblings or other associates” (Ladd, 1992, pp. 403-404).

How should parents respond when their children and their children's friends are preoccupied with the current superhero craze and with popular media-linked violent toys? Just saying “no” leads to parents' feelings of frustration, guilt, and inadequacy. A “just say no” policy at home seems fruitless because children are exposed to popular media culture nearly everywhere.

Diane Levin, early childhood educator and author, suggests the following approaches for parents to take to “combat the hazards of media culture” (Levin, 1998, p. 123, pp. 147-160):

- Keep TV sets out of children's bedrooms and in a more public place.
- Work out the limits on the amount of TV viewing.
- Try to plan in advance what programs will be watched.
- Try to select programs designed to promote children's positive development and learning.

- Limit viewing of violence (and other noneducational) programming as much as possible.
- Watch TV together as a family when you can.
- Talk about what your child sees on TV—including such topics as what is real and what is not, distinguishing between ads and shows, solving conflicts without using violence, and what you and your child liked and did not like about a show.
- Try not to buy products directly linked to violent TV shows or that are advertised heavily during violent programs.
- Choose toys that promote creativity, can be played with in many ways, and will stay interesting over a period of time.
- Ask your child's teachers and school for help and support.

In addition to measures taken at home to resist the harmful influences of media culture, parents can work for change at a larger level by adding their voice to the voices of others. Parents have formed coalitions with other parents, schools, early childhood programs, business leaders, community organizations, and health care professionals to advocate for a healthier media culture for children. Parents have used a variety of means to individually and collectively take action: writing letters to the editor about the issue of violence in the media; contacting elected officials to ask for support to improve the quality of children's programming and to limit advertising; setting up resource libraries at schools and child care programs to loan out quality videos for children; coordinating letter writing campaigns to television broadcasters, toy companies, advertisers, and local retailers about harmful media and media linked products; partnering with local toy stores to sponsor community toy gun buy back programs; sponsoring communitywide media turnoff efforts; and producing report cards that grade television stations on the quality of their children's programming.

Parents cannot control all or even most of their children's exposure to hazardous media culture, nor

would doing so necessarily provide the best lessons for children who will need to respond to popular culture throughout their lives. Parents should keep in mind the more important goals of helping children resist negative media influences, recognize and choose worthwhile media, and become informed and responsible media consumers (Levin, 1998, p. 137). The discussions children have with their parents about what is and is not worthwhile media, and the actions children observe their parents taking against harmful popular media, impart values that contribute to healthy character development in children.

For More Information

ERIC Clearinghouse on Information and Technology
<http://www.askeric.org/ithome/>

Center on Media Literacy
<http://www.medialit.org/>

Center for Media Education
<http://www.cme.org/>

Violent Toys, Nonviolent Toys: What's the Difference?
http://www.lionlamb.org/violent_toys.html

Make Cookies, Not War: TV-Related Toys and the "I Want That" Syndrome
<http://www.growsmartbrains.com/pages1/article2.html>

Parents Group Targets Violence-themed Toys
<http://www.post-gazette.com/headlines/19990509goodtoys6.asp>

Sources

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