



The Early Years: Toys That Promote Violent Behavior

Children have always been attracted to war play and war toys. But in the past 20 years, there has been a significant increase in the sale of war toys and action figures with weapons. The popularity of war toys is largely due to the increase in the number of television shows featuring war-related cartoons. Children are encouraged to buy and play with these highly realistic war toys by TV shows, movies, video games, and by promotional toys from stores and restaurants. Rather than creating their own games in which the war toy gradually becomes unimportant, some children use these toys to imitate the violent cartoons on TV.

Parents and teachers report the following negative effects on children's behavior as a result of increased use of war toys:

- Children become obsessed with war play and with the realistic-looking products that can be purchased and that are related to the programs they see on television.
- Children behave more aggressively with others when they imitate what they see on war-related cartoons.
- Children's play becomes less creative and less imaginative as they imitate what they see on TV or in the movies.

Parents play an important role in teaching their children to resist pressure from their friends and the media—including TV advertisers, cartoons, and children's programs—to buy certain toys. As a parent, you can explain that it is an advertiser's job to try to get people to buy their products, but it is the family's job to decide whether to spend money on that item. Viewing and discussing commercials and ads together helps both children and parents become more careful consumers.

If children still want to buy and play with war toys, parents can encourage appropriate adventure play by providing items such as inexpensive "dress-up" clothes resembling fire fighters, police officers, and historical figures—heroes and heroines—that reflect the family's cultural heritage. Your local children's librarian might suggest related children's books or videos that are entertaining, educational, and would engage your child's imagination.

If you have concerns about your child's use of war toys, you can talk to child care teachers and providers, school teachers, pediatricians, other health care professionals, parenting educators, and family counselors.

The information contained in this summary is taken from the Early Years chapter of the Violence Prevention Resource Guide for Parents by Peggy Patten and Anne S. Robertson (Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, 2001).

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