

Beyond Banning War and Superhero Play

Meeting Children's Needs in Violent Times

Diane E. Levin

Four-year-old Jules is particularly obsessed. Telling him no guns or pretend fighting just doesn't work. When he's a good guy, like a Power Ranger, he thinks it's okay to use whatever force is needed to suppress the bad guy, "because that's what a superhero does!" And then someone ends up getting hurt. When we try to enforce a ban, the children say it's not superhero play, it's some other kind of play. Many children don't seem to know more positive ways to play, or they play the same thing over and over without having any ideas of their own. I need some new ideas.

THIS EXPERIENCED TEACHER'S ACCOUNT captures the kinds of concerns I often hear from teachers worried about how to respond to war play in their classrooms (Levin 2003). These expressions of concern about play with violence tend to increase when violent world events, like 9/11 and the war against Iraq, dominate the news.

Play, viewed for decades as an essential part of the early childhood years, has become a problem in many classrooms, even something to avoid. Teachers ask why play is deemed so important to children's development when it is so focused on fighting. Some are led to plan other activities that are easier to manage and appear at first glance to be more productive. Reducing playtime may seem to reduce problems in the short term, but this approach does not address the wide-ranging needs children address through play.

Diane E. Levin, Ph.D., is a professor of education at Wheelock College in Boston. For many years her work has focused on how to promote children's healthy development, learning, and behavior in violent times.

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Why are children fascinated with war play?

There are many reasons why children bring violent content and themes into their play. They are related to the role of play in development and learning as well as to the nature of the society in which war play occurs (Carlsson-Paige & Levin 1987, 1990; Cantor 1998; Levin 1998a, 1998b, 2003; Katch 2001).

Exposure to violence. From both therapeutic and cognitive perspectives, children use play to work out an understanding of experience, including the violence to which they are exposed. Young children may see violence in their homes and communities as well as in entertainment and news on the screen. We should not be surprised when children are intent on bringing it to their play. Children's play often focuses on the most salient and graphic, confusing or scary, and aggressive aspects of violence. It is this content they struggle to work out and understand. Typically, the children who seem most obsessed with war play have been exposed to the most violence and have the greatest need to work it out.

Need to feel powerful. Most young children look for ways to feel powerful and strong. Play can be a safe way to achieve a sense of power. From a child's point of view, play with violence is very seductive, especially when connected to the power and invincibility portrayed in entertainment. The children who use war play to help them feel powerful and safe are the children who feel the most powerless and vulnerable.

Influence of toys linked to violent media.

Children's toys give powerful messages about the content and direction of play. Open-ended toys, like blocks, stuffed animals, and generic dinosaurs, can be used in many ways that the child controls. Highly structured toys, such as action figures that talk and playdough kits with molds to make movie characters, tend to have built-in features that show children how and what to

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play. Many of today's best-selling toys are of the highly structured variety and are linked to violent media. Such toys are appealing because they promise dramatic power and excitement. These toys channel children into replicating the violent stories they see on screen. Some children, like Jules, get "stuck" imitating media-linked violence instead of developing creative, imaginative, and beneficial play.

Teachers' concerns about war play

There are many reasons why teachers are concerned about war play and why they seek help figuring out how to deal with it.

Lack of safety in the classroom. Play with violence tends to end up with children out of control, scared, and hurt. Managing aggressive play and keeping everyone safe can feel like a never-ending struggle and a major diversion from the positive lessons we want children to learn.

Old approaches not working. Many veteran teachers say that the bans they used to impose on war play no longer work. Children have a hard time accepting limits or controlling their intense desire or need to engage in the play. And children find ways to circumvent the ban—they deny that

play is really war play (that is, they learn to lie) or sneak around conducting guerilla wars the teacher does not detect (they learn to deceive).

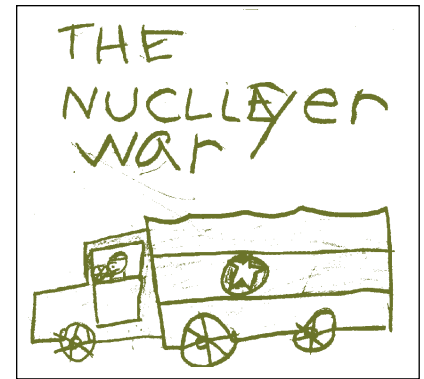
Worries about the limited nature of the play.

Like Jules, some children engage in the same play with violence day after day and bring in few new or creative ideas of their own. Piaget called this kind of behavior imitation, not play (Carlsson-Paige & Levin 1987). These children are less likely to work out their needs regarding the violence they bring to their play or benefit from more sustained and elaborated play.

Concerns about lessons learned from the play.

When children pretend to hurt others, it is the opposite of what we hope they will learn about how to treat each other and solve problems. Children *learn* as they play—and what they play affects what they learn. When children are exposed to large amounts of violence, they learn harmful lessons about violence, whether they are allowed to play it in the classroom or not.

At the same time, children do not think about the violence they bring into their play in the same way adults do. Jules focuses on one thing at a time; he sees the bad guy as one dimensional without thinking about what makes him bad. He thinks good guys can do whatever hurtful things they want because they are good. Except when he gets carried away and hurts another child, Jules probably does know that at some level his play is different from the real violence he is imitating.



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Reconciling children's needs and adults' concerns

In our society children are exposed to huge amounts of pretend and real violence. There are no simple or perfect solutions that simultaneously address children's needs and adults' concerns (Carlsson-Paige & Levin 1987). However, there is much teachers can do working with and outside of the play to make it better for everyone (see "Approaches to Working with Violent Play" and "Approaches to Working Outside Violent Play").

More important now than ever

There is no perfect approach for dealing with children's play with violence in these times. The best strategy is to vastly reduce the amount of violence children see. This would require adults to create a more peaceful world and limit children's exposure to media violence and toys marketed with media violence.

Given the state of the world, including the war against Iraq, children now more than ever need to find ways to work out the violence they see. For many, play helps them do so. We have a vital role in helping meet their needs through play. We must create an approach that addresses the unique needs of children growing up in the midst of violence as well as concerns of adults about how play with violence contributes to the harmful lessons children learn.

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Approaches to Working with Children's Violent Play

• **Address children's needs while trying to reduce play with violence.** Banning play rarely works, and it denies children the opportunity to work out violence issues through play or to feel that their interests and concerns are important.



Trying to ban media-controlled imitative play, or even just contain it, can be an appropriate stop-gap measure when problems become overwhelming. However, a total ban on this kind of play may leave children to work things out on their own without the guidance of adults.

• **Ensure the safety of all children.** Involve children in developing rules for indoor and outdoor play that ensure safety. Help children understand the safety issues and what they can do to prevent injuries (physical and psychological) to themselves and others. Encourage children to paint, tell stories, and write (as they get older) to deal with issues of violence in ways that are safe and easier to control than play.

• **Promote development of imaginative and creative play (rather than imitative play).** To work through deep issues and needs in a meaningful way, most children require direct help from adults. How you help depends on the nature of children's play (Levin 1998b). Take time to observe the play and learn what children are working on and how. Use this information to help children move beyond narrowly scripted play that focuses on violent actions. Help children gain skills to work out the violent content they bring to their play, learn the lessons you aim to teach, and move on to new issues.

Approaches to Working Outside Violent Play

• **Encourage children to talk with adults about media violence.** As children struggle to feel safe and make sense of violence—regardless of the source—they need to know that we are there to help them with this process (Levin 2003). Start by trying to learn what they know, the unique meanings they have made, and what confuses and scares them.



When a child raises an issue, it is helpful to start by using an open-ended question like “What have you heard about that?” Respond based on what you learn about their ideas, questions, and needs.

Keep in mind that

children do not understand violence in or out of play as adults do. Try to correct misconceptions (“The planes that go over our school do not carry bombs”), help sort out fantasy and reality (“In real life people can’t change back and forth like the Power Rangers do”), and provide reassurance about safety (“I can’t let you play like that because it’s my job to make sure everyone is safe”).

• **Try to reduce the impact of antisocial lessons that children learn both in and out of play.** It can be helpful to encourage children to move from imitative to creative play so they can transform violence into positive behavior. Then talk with them about what has happened in their play (“I see Spiderman did a lot of fighting today. What was the problem?”). Help children to connect their own firsthand positive experiences about

how people treat each other to the violence they have seen (“I’m glad that in real life you could solve your problem with Mary by . . .”). These connections can help defuse some of the harmful lessons children learn about violence.

Talking with children about violence is rarely easy, but it is one of our most powerful tools. It is hard to predict the directions in which children might take the conversations, and teachers often find it challenging to show respect for the differing ways families try to deal with these issues.

• **Work closely with families.** Reducing children’s exposure to violence is one essential way to reduce their need to bring violence into their play. Most of young children’s exposure to violence occurs in the home, so family involvement is vital. Through

parent workshops and family newsletters that include resource materials such as those listed here, teachers can help families learn more about how to protect children from violence, help children deal with the violence that still gets in, and promote play with open-ended toys and nonviolent play themes (Levin 1998a, 2003). In addition, families

can learn about how to resist the advertising for toys linked to violence in ways that keep the peace in the family (Levin 1998a; Levin & Linn in press).

