

An awfully big adventure

Do the children you care for like playing with weapons. Do their fingers become guns at the first opportunity? Is it wrong and should you stop it? **Diane Rich** explains that it is all part of growing up in our world.

Daniel, a four year old, enjoyed hearing the story Peter Pan, read to him by his parents, child minder and nursery staff. He played at Peter Pan endlessly and used the story to enrich his play. He acted out scenes from the book, including: Tootles shooting Wendy with his catapult, Peter Pan fighting Hook with swords and a dagger, Hook's pirates plotting and battling with Pan's lost boys firing off cannons and pistols, with crocodiles and many other missions of rescue, daring and caring. He played at these scenes on his own with toys and any items at hand to represent whatever he needed. He also played at them with other children too; his brothers and sisters at home, with his friends at the child minders and his friends at nursery.

Daniel was lucky that his play was valued. Many parents, home-based childcare workers and practitioners in education and care settings find play involving these action and weapon related themes challenging for a variety of reasons and don't allow it.

They say:

"Weapons in play are wrong. These things kill. It's wrong to kill people."

"The play gets boisterous. Someone might get hurt. Things might get broken."

"It is morally wrong to promote using anything that can harm others."

"Guns mean violence and aggression. If we allow children to play with guns they will become more aggressive."

"The play looks such a mess"

"Other children get upset."

The list of objections is practically endless, and comments from parents and practitioners usually end with, *"But they do it anyway."*

Making sense

Daniel's childminder acknowledges this but says, *"It's obvious Daniel is getting a lot out of playing Peter Pan. He loves the story and he's ingenious with how he weaves it into almost anything. Sometimes dinosaurs pop up in Neverland. Sometimes sharks appear in the mermaid lagoon. But when Peter Pan arrives all is well, eventually. Of course there's weapons. It's what Peter Pan and the pirates sometimes use! I used to stop him, but it's what he loves to do."*

When Daniel is engaged in the important task of playing at Peter Pan and incorporating weapon related themes in his play, he is making sense of:

- what he has experienced – either first or second hand through books, computer and TV and DVD*
- what he knows about (to the limits of his knowledge)
- what he is interested in
- what he wants to know more about
- what he wants to understand
- what he is anxious, concerned or worried about
- what he feels
- the many possible future adult roles he sees might be available to him.

When they play children can show expertise, knowledge or experiences which may sometimes alarm grown-ups. Some grown-ups will disapprove of Daniel playing at dagger or pistol related pirate themes when there is so much shocking knife crime and gun crime reported in daily news bulletins and when news stories on wars and violence around the world are frequent. It is not surprising that Daniel wanted the Peter Pan story read to him as it includes many of

the themes he hears of almost daily. He has gathered new Neverland resources for thinking as he plays. Rather than using the material from news reports, he is using a fiction to test out theories about friends and enemies, responsibilities for others, risk, danger, keeping safe in the world and much more.

Daniel is a child for whom weapon related play has always been attractive. This is not so for all children, some barely investigate it at all, while others virtually discard it once they have played through their understanding of guns, or pirate swords to their satisfaction. But many remain so interested that weapon related themes continue in their play for some time because it has an irresistible lure for some children. Often, but not always, these children are boys who are attracted helplessly to this play for five key reasons:

- Making guns is an achievable task: you can make one out of anything, even your finger.
- It offers a universal language: anyone can play and understand the plot, regardless of home language or verbal competency.
- Weapon play relates to early communications skills: it requires a minimum of one other person from whom you can usually guarantee some sort of response.
- Major themes of children's play are represented in weapon-related playing: keeping safe, being powerful, caring for sick and injured, friends and enemies, death to name but a few.
- Being boisterous, running in big spaces, outside is a preferred and necessary play style for children.

So why should practitioners allow children to play at weapon related themes?

The answer is simple. **All children have a right to play.**

All children need to know that their play is valued. This is necessary for their future cognitive capacity to be realised and for a high sense of self-esteem. The different experiences of children, their level of knowledge, interests, concerns, anxieties, feelings and preferred play styles will determine what they play at. This means that children sometimes play at alarming and shocking themes, including those that involve shooting even their best friends, favourite teachers or, if in Neverland, a Wendy bird or pirate. Where such play is not permitted, children get a strong sense that what they have experienced, what they know about, what they are anxious about, what they want to know more about, what they are interested in and how they feel is not valued. When children get this message, their self-esteem is likely to drop. Daniel's child minder tries to overcome this problem. She says,

"Sometimes I join in too and it IS good fun! Joining in means that we can use short broom handles for swords and I get to know he can do it safely. It's amazing how careful the children really are - of course, you can use spongy tubes if you feel better. They soon learn to keep each other safe if they know you trust them and especially if you have played with them. They seem to set the limits for safety themselves and they're great at making up their own rules. Of course, they just imagine what they need anyway."

Valuing children's play involves allowing it to happen by helping children manage the resources they use in their chosen play themes. So, it appears that if such play is not to get out of hand it is important that practitioners regularly involve children in establishing safety boundaries which aim to enable, rather than restrict playing. No parent or practitioner wants children to be hurt either physically or emotionally and children are usually very sensitive to this in their play. They frequently tell adults, *"But we*

are only playing," to find that all players agree.

When play is regularly suppressed because it gets out of hand, children lose out on developing skills as an indoor and outdoor player. When this happens, they lose a whole range of routes to learning and to exploring their world through play and developing skills including gross motor skills and personal, social and emotional development. Their cognitive capacity is reduced, and so is their commitment to learning as these negative messages are likely to affect their engagement in the world of education where their interests may have been marginalised right from the off.

Where starting points for play are curtailed at an early age children may not achieve their potential because they do not feel positive about themselves as learners – and there must be some relation between this statement and the sliding achievement of boys in schools. So, I celebrate the freedom and support Daniel had for his awfully big adventures.

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**The author would like to make it clear that she does not in any way support children accessing violent TV, video, DVD, or computer game material that is aimed beyond the age of the child.*

Want to know more? For further reading try

- Barrie, J.M. (2004) *Peter Pan (100th anniversary edition)*, Dorking: Templar Publishing
 Bruce, T. (1991) *Time to play in early childhood education*, London: Hodder & Stoughton
 Bruce, T. (2001) *Learning Through Play: babies, toddlers and the foundation years*, London: Hodder & Stoughton
 Holland P. (2003) *We don't play with guns here: war, weapon and superhero play in the early years*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press
 Jenkinson, S. (2001) *The Genius of Play*, Bath: Hawthorn Press
 Lindon J. (2001) *Understanding Children's Play* Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes
 Paley, V. G. (1986) *Boys and girls: superheroes in the doll corner*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
 Paley, V. G. (1991) *Bad guys don't have birthdays: fantasy play at four*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
 Rich, D. M. (2002) *Catching children's stories*, Early Education journal, no. 36, p. 6.
 Rich, D.M. (2003) *Bang! Bang! Gun Play and why children need it*, Early Education journal, no. 40, in depth feature
 Rich, D.M. (2003) *When children play with guns*, Practical Pre-School issue 42