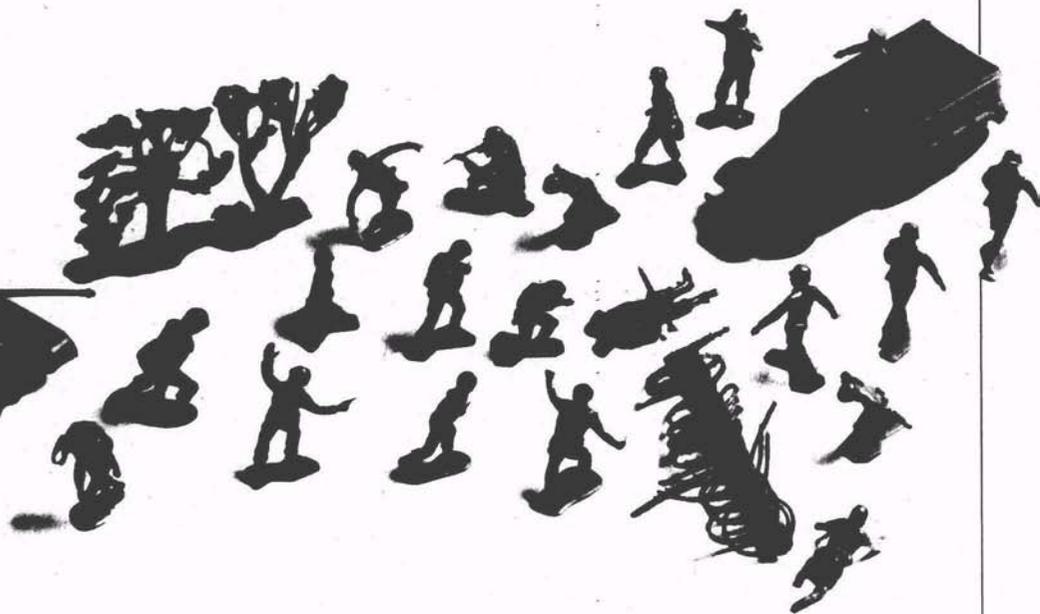


Children and Violence

Young Children and War Play



In the classroom, teachers can use children's war play as an opportunity for instruction, but on a larger scale, children's television programming must become a matter of government policy.

For a long time, children have played at war, and adults have wondered what this kind of play means to children: what needs it might be meeting, what learning might result from it, and whether or not it should be allowed. Recently, war play has been discussed and debated with increasing frequency by educators, parents, and the media. Why has a topic of perennial interest become an issue for intense debate?

To investigate, we questioned almost 100 parents and 50 early childhood professionals. Many of them expressed concerns about the prevalence of war play in children's lives today. They often described children's imitation of characters from television shows such as "He-Man" and "G.I. Joe." Further, they reported an increase in the amount of violence in children's play and characterized the play as repetitive in nature. Teachers and parents alike described a spillover of violent images and behaviors into children's lives beyond their war play; for example, making everything into a weapon. They mentioned children's insatiable desire for and obsession with the toys that accompany violent television shows.

Finally, many parents and teachers expressed a sense of powerlessness, even outrage, about current societal influences on children's lives. Why is this happening, they asked, and what can we do? What is best for children?

Deregulation of Children's Television

During the Reagan administration, gradual deregulation of children's television by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has enabled the television and the toy industries to collaborate in ways heretofore prohibited (Carlsson-Paige and Levin 1987). In the past six years, the FCC has nullified most of the regulations that once tried to assure quality in children's television programming (Thomas 1987).

One of the most important sets of rulings has to do with the relationship of products to programs. In 1969, the FCC had banned product-based pro-

grams, stating that programming should not be subordinated to sales (Boyer 1986). Also, the number of advertising minutes per hour was regulated until 1984.

However, in 1984 the FCC ruled that television stations could air as many commercial minutes in a given time period as they chose (Engelhardt 1986). Television programmers and toy companies quickly began working together to develop product-based children's television programs, often called "program-length commercials." Then, in 1985, the FCC ruled directly on this issue, stating that commercial tie-ins on children's television were acceptable, thereby approving toy-based programming (Boyer 1986).

These decisions reflect the FCC's philosophy that the marketplace, not government regulation, is the best guide to what constitutes the public interest. Television programmers and toy manufacturers, in turn, maintain that their only responsibilities are to produce popular products and to respond to demand.

The Program-Length Commercial in Effect

The impact of deregulation was immediate (Boyer 1986, Owen 1986). New cartoon programs began to appear on television, commonly financed by toy companies that simultaneously marketed toys that children could use in their play to reproduce what they were watching. By December 1985, the ten best-selling toys had a regularly scheduled or "special" television program associated with them (Denison 1985).

Furthermore, among the changes was a vast increase in the time devoted to violent cartoons: from one and a half hours per week to 43 hours per week in five years (Thomas 1987). Not surprisingly, 11 of the top 20 toys in December 1986 were based on cartoons of a violent nature (National Coalition on Television Violence 1986).

The sale of war-related toys has increased astonishingly during the same period. While it is difficult to calculate the exact figure because of

the way the toy industry classifies its toys, the figures most often quoted range between a 500 and a 700 percent increase from 1982 to 1986. Beyond the sale of toys, there is a proliferation of licensing, which results in the appearance of television characters on clothes, party napkins, toothbrushes, and the like.

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Thus, the programs children watch, the images they see, and the toys they play with have changed dramatically in the past six years. We began to investigate the effects of these changes on children's play and development, turning our attention to theories of child development and political socialization.

Developmental and Sociopolitical Interpretations

Traditionally, the various opinions of adults about war play have fallen within two broad points of view: the developmental and the sociopolitical (Carlson-Paige and Levin 1987).

Those holding the developmental view argue that play is a primary vehicle of young children's social, emotional, and intellectual growth. Children use their play to construct meaning from experience and to work on the key issues of their stage of development.

Since children show us through their play what they need to work on, if they engage in war play, it must meet certain of their needs. For instance, it can help children meet their needs for power, control, and mastery; sort out fantasy and reality, good from bad, right from wrong; and express anger and aggression at a time when they are being asked in real life to gain control of them. War play may be especially suited for helping children work on these needs because its concrete props and dramatic images are well matched to the way they think. (This match can also help explain its immediate appeal to many children.)

In addition, in the developmental view, war play is "pretend" and not connected to "real world" violence; it should be viewed in terms of what it means to children, which is different from what it means to adults, who bring to it their knowledge of violence in the world. In conclusion, because war play seems to interest and benefit children, developmentalists believe that children should be allowed to play this way.

However, if we take the developmental view one step further, the potential benefits depend upon the nature of their play. Theorists such as

Piaget (1951) make a crucial distinction between *imitation* and *play*. In play children take charge of what occurs; they transform what they have seen in ways that match their own levels of understanding and the specific nature of their needs. In imitation children primarily reproduce what they have seen with little of the elaboration or variation of their own making that characterize play.

For example, a child who runs around with He-Man and Skeletor dolls, making shooting noises and say-

ing He-Man is killing Skeletor, is primarily imitating what he or she has seen and heard. But if a child uses blocks to build homes where they can go when they are tired of shooting or builds weapons that can shoot glue and cement to keep the figures from getting away, then the child has moved beyond simple imitation and has begun to engage in active play.

The adults we questioned commented frequently that children seem to be merely imitating and repeating what they see on television. If children





are not actively making the content of the play their own, they are less likely to be meeting their developmental needs or to be making sense of their experiences. Current observations about children's war play data suggest a real basis for concern from a developmental point of view.

Those who look at war play from the sociopolitical perspective believe young children use play to develop social and political concepts and values about the world. They reason that war play, by its very focus on killing and enemies, teaches children lessons about violence as an acceptable solution to problems, violent relationships

among people, authoritarian power relationships, sex-role stereotyping, weapons as a source of power and strength, and war as attractive. Adherents of this view generally do not want to teach these ideas to children; consequently, they advocate banning war play and war toys.

Using this perspective to view the present situation raises further cause for concern. Although children's political ideas only gradually take on meaning connected to the real world, the foundations of political thought develop in the early years (Connell 1971, Hess and Torney 1969). And the political content of television and toys is pervasive and potent: enemies look

different, have foreign voices, and are completely uni-dimensional in their evilness; the good guys (often Americans) and the world are constantly under threat of being blown up and must have weapons to protect themselves; and conflicts can be resolved only by means of violence in which the good guys rarely get hurt and no one seems to feel pain.

In the past, as children engaged in war play of their own design such as cops and robbers, with a limited range of toys as props, they may or may not have been learning militaristic concepts. If they worked out relationships with playmates, decided on how toys should be used, and invented conflicts and the ways to resolve them, then they were probably learning lessons that went far beyond the militaristic and violent parts of the play.

But now, children take direction from television as to the uses of the toys, the roles to take, and the behaviors to adopt in play. Children are not

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constructing their own war play, their own concepts, their own political ideas; instead, they seem to be manipulated into replicating the violent content they have seen on television. Under these circumstances, children are more likely to form narrow militaristic political concepts in their play because imitation does not contain the possibility for variation and the individually constructed meaning that results when children themselves take charge of concept formation.

What Is Best for Children?

In the current climate, it is not easy to decide how to respond to children's war play. What are our options?

We can try to ban war play. When we do, of course, we may actually be teaching children to deceive us, as they engage in the play behind our backs, as well as making children feel guilty about what they want to play. At the same time, we are leaving to chance whether or not children can meet their needs in play, whether they are actively constructing new understandings or merely imitating what they have seen. Perhaps most important, if we leave political socialization to the television and toy industries, we are giving up the possibility of influencing children's development.

Second, we can allow war play but look the other way unless a problem arises. With this laissez-faire approach children do not feel the guilt or adopt the devious behaviors that can result from banning, but the quality of their play is left to chance. And their political socialization is still left to influences outside the classroom.

A third option is to allow war play and to intervene actively in it to affect the learning that can result from it. This does not mean giving carte blanche to all kinds of warfare and weapons; ground rules and limits are necessary. But it does mean changing the culture of television and toys into the classroom and allowing the play when it arises. Only then is it possible to figure out what children are working on in their play and how to influence the play so that we expand what the children are doing and saying. Only then can we help children make

the play their own and influence the resulting political ideas (Carlsson-Paige and Levin 1987). This proactive response is our best option for handling the war play dilemma.

In the Nuclear Shadow

War play as an occasion for teaching may well answer the immediate question of how to handle the matter at home and at school. But what about the social and political climate that has brought about the dramatic increase in war play?

"To begin to remedy the present situation in the United States, we must accept the premise that children's television programming is a legitimate focus of government policy."

Teachers and parents alone cannot provide healthy environments for children. In an age of nuclear weapons and nuclear threat, all adult society shares this responsibility. Other countries, including Sweden, Finland, and West Germany, and the European parliament, are working to establish guidelines and prohibitions to regulate children's television programming and the advertising and sale of war toys. To begin to remedy the present situation in the United States, we must accept the premise that children's television programming is a legitimate focus of government policy and endeavor to regulate the influence of violence upon our children. □

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