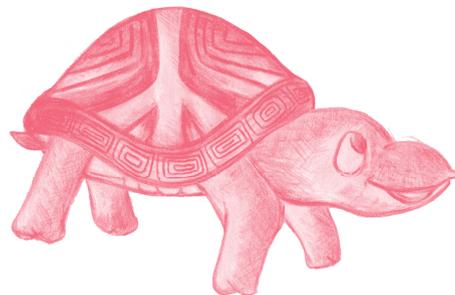


Children and War Toys: Encouraging Peaceful Play



Peaceful Childhoods Series

Toys and Violent Behaviour

Toys carry important messages about values, and can affect a child's development. "War toys" are toys used to act out fantasies of killing or wounding. They include toy weapons (machine guns, laser guns); dolls and action figures that "come alive" through weapons and violence; vehicles equipped with weapons; and games (video, board or fantasy) based on killing, hurting or threatening. Toys, games and play that target individuals or groups based on race, religion, culture, sex or other characteristics can have the same effect.

Letting children have military toys suggests to them that parents approve of violent play. War toys suggest to children that:

- War is a game, an exciting adventure.
- Killing is okay, even fun.
- Violence or threats are the only ways to resolve conflicts.
- The world is divided into "good guys" and "bad guys".
- The "bad guys" are not really human.
- Destroying "bad guys" is good.

In violent play, the "bad people" (or aliens or robots) seek to control the world (or city or universe). The "good people" defeat them through violence. The child learns that justice, reason and words don't work, and that weapons are needed to deal with "evil". This sort of play teaches violence as a way of relating to others; it also teaches children to see the world in terms of "good guys" and "bad guys".

The Toy Industry

Some toy manufacturers ignore the potential damage of invented enemies. "Nomad, the terrorist doll" wore a burnoose and was described as "devious, traitorous and desperate..." He led "a savage band of cut-throats" and called "no country his home". The doll was withdrawn only when U.S. and Canadian Arab Associations protested that it was an insulting stereotype of Arabs.

The American toy industry consults closely with the military in developing toys, and is all too ready to profit from real-life conflicts. New weapons used in war will soon be sold as new battle toys. In 2003

as the war on Iraq approached near Easter, several large North American chains, including Kmart and Walgreens, sold chocolate bunnies and marshmallow eggs nestled in Easter baskets with toy grenades, a machine gun and a camouflaged soldier sporting an American flag.

Values

We teach our children about right and wrong from the time they are toddlers. This is one of the most important aspects of being a parent. We need to think deeply about what we teach and what children learn from the world around them. Toys, television and video games are powerful teaching tools, and it is a parent's job to monitor what is being taught.

How do we encourage respect and compassion?

We want our children to become adults who value all human beings as equal, accepting that there is good in everyone. We want them to care for others, and be able to solve problems without turning to violence.

A child learns these values from parents and teachers who:

- model the values of justice, empathy and compassion;
- teach the child the skills needed to act on these values;
- praise the child when s/he models these skills and values;
- believe that the child is capable of justice and compassion;
- encourage the child to live by these values; and
- comment gently on failures to show these qualities, and offer other approaches.

Teaching ourselves and our children to value peace and do no harm to others takes a lifetime. It demands that we talk about the issues raised by popular culture or the news and provide alternatives.



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emerging design

One gift of a toy gun or an occasional violent video game will not undo years of discussion and positive role modelling. It is important for children to learn to deal with the world in all of its differences and complexities.

Gender is relevant to any discussion of war toys. Violent toys and games are often considered boys' turf. Girls generally show less interest in war play. It is likely that war toys are one of the ways in which we condition boys to see coercion and violence as part of the male role.

How War Toys Affect Children's Play

Controlled studies have shown significant increases of aggressive and anti-social behaviour when children play with war toys. Children can see war toys as cues to act out aggressive fantasies or impulses. The myth that war play reduces aggression by "getting it out of their system" is not true. Studies show that the aggression continues even after the violent toys are removed. We can conclude that:

- War toys are very likely to increase aggressive behaviour in children, at least in the short term.
- The giving or allowing of war toys by adult role models will likely interfere with fostering the child's values and skills of nonviolence.

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an occasional violent video game
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and positive role modelling.*



What Can Parents Do?

Within the family:

- Do not give your child war toys.
- Recognise that, from an early age, your child will be exposed to the idea that weapons are powerful and desirable. When children make guns out of Lego or a piece of toast, let them know that guns are for killing and you do not like creatures being killed. Leave it at that.
- Explain your views on war toys to friends and relatives and ask them not to buy them as gifts.

- If a child longs for a war toy, consider the merits of letting him/her have one. But be clear about your own discomfort with the toy's connection with killing and hurting.
- If a child is role-playing a war toy scenario, talk it through and help him/her evaluate the fantasy.
- Limit total "tube time" (TV or video games) to one hour per day.
- Teach your child about television advertising and the fact that it is designed to make people buy things.

Beyond the family:

- Ask merchants not to stock war toys, particularly at peak shopping times like Christmas. If a store chooses not to carry war toys, reward it by encouraging others to shop there.
- Demonstrate your concern by erecting a sign and handing out pamphlets outside stores selling war toys.
- Host a toy exchange at a community event by offering a safe and creative toy for every war toy handed in.
- Write to companies advertising war toys on TV. Tell them why you disapprove of war toys and violent television and that you will not buy their products.

Further Reading

Canadians Concerned about
Entertainment Violence
(C-CAVE)

P.O. Box 72537

Greenwin Square Postal Outlet

345 Bloor Street East,

Toronto, Ontario M4W 3S9

www.communityradio.org/C-CAVE.htm

Christian Peacemaker Teams

<http://www.prairienet.org/cpt/toys98.php>

The Lion and Lamb Project

www.lionlamb.org

The Parent Coaching Institute

www.thepci.com