

ABOUT
50%

of boys ages 4 to 9 say their favorite game is something aggressive, like playing soldier.

IS WAR PLAY BAD FOR KIDS?

The surprising truth: no. Learn why aggressive play helps kids become compassionate adults

BY HOLLY PEVZNER

I HAVE TWO SWEET, LOVING, SILLY BOYS who shoot each other on a regular basis—with fingers, sticks, carrots, you name it. They also battle with swords (wrapping-paper rolls) and lasers (flashlights) and are constantly escorting a bad guy (each other) to jail (the sofa). I always find it a little alarming to see my kids acting out these scenarios and often wonder if I should put a stop to their play. Could their shoot-'em-ups make them violent later on?

I'm not the only mom who's concerned. According to a study in *Pediatrics*, 67 percent of parents believe it's never OK for a child to play with toy guns. Even if it's a swelteringly hot day and that gun is neon green and squirts water. But according to the experts, that thinking is not only misguided, it may also be more damaging than toy guns—especially for boys, who are the ones most likely to use them.



PHOTOS BY GRETCHEN EASTON; WARDROBE BY HEATHER ROWE; PROP STYLING BY CARL DOVE

When you slap a negative label on aggressive play and tell boys they have to stop, “you’re telling them that their fantasies and imaginations are bad, and that’s what’s truly dangerous,” says Jane Katch, author of *Under Deadman’s Skin: Discovering the Meaning of Children’s Violent Play*. “It only invites boys to be sneaky and hide their real feelings.”

The risk just isn’t worth it. Not only has no scientific link been established between play violence in childhood and real violence in adulthood, research shows that rough-and-tumble play brings enormous benefits, like better friendships, improved social behavior, and increased confidence, says psychologist Lawrence J. Cohen, Ph.D., co-author of *The Art of Roughhousing*. And that’s just the start. We spoke to the experts to find out why it’s so important to let all kids keep playing Jedis vs. Storm Troopers.

IT FEEDS THE IMAGINATION

When kids act out themes of good and evil, they’re actually learning to bridge the gap between their raw impulses and emotions and the grown-up world of logic, language, and morality, says Dr. Cohen. In other words, playing helps them think more abstractly.

Plus, when your child successfully turns a cardboard box and a paper towel roll into an army tank, he gets the benefit of becoming more confident about his creative abilities and can-do spirit. “Your child can see that he has ideas of his own and can conquer his boredom. That’s a great feeling,” says Katch.

To help your child reap the greatest creative benefits from his play, encourage him to get inventive. Rather than stocking the playroom with toy guns, which he’ll probably

only ever use as, well, guns, let him create his own arsenal out of, say, LEGOs, which can become many things. “The goal is to have your child, not the toy, in charge of the script,” says Dr. Cohen.

IT MAKES KIDS FEEL POWERFUL

When your little guy pretends to be a ninja or zaps a few monsters, he’s not only having fun, he’s also mastering his fears (especially of death). More important, he’s figuring out how to manage his natural aggressive impulses while getting the chance to feel powerful in a world where he doesn’t usually have much control, says Cohen.

Force your kid to stop all those “Bang, bang, you’re dead!” games, and the aggression he was releasing while pretending may instead come back as *real* aggression, Dr. Cohen

WHAT’S BEHIND OUR WORRIES

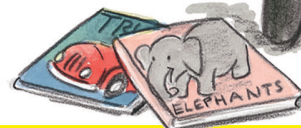
A generation ago, when kids played cops and robbers, parents didn’t bat an eyelash. But in the past 25 years, “thanks to constant reports on violence, especially school shootings, parents started scrutinizing child safety,” says Dr. Cohen. First schools (wisely) became weapons-free zones. Then toy bins did, too. “We went too far from advocating safety first to safety only. In the process, we deprived kids of something important,” he notes.

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adds. Your child's impulses don't disappear, but if he doesn't have the chance to let 'em loose when he plays, he may lose control when he's with you—or his pals.

It can help to recognize that the struggle to feel powerful is universal among kids. "It happens equally between girls and boys, it just tends to look different," says Katch. Many parents feel more uncomfortable witnessing their son hunt down an evil spy than hearing their daughter tell her friend to go to detention during a game of school.

The next time you're tempted to redirect your son's focus from pretend fighting to something gentler—say, a puzzle—refrain. Instead, reframe his activity in your head by swapping the terms "war" or "violent" play with "heroic" play, Dr. Cohen suggests.

"That's the point of these games, isn't it? When kids save the planet by killing all the 'aliens,' they don't intend to harm each other," he says. Rather, they're enjoying getting the chance to define right and wrong and be in charge in their own world.

IT BUILDS SOCIAL SKILLS

It might seem counterintuitive, but pretend violence teaches cooperation. You've likely noticed it takes kids twice as long to hammer out the details of a game than to play it. ("One tag, you're dead. You can get up after a count of three.") What experts call free play teaches kids how to speak up for themselves, negotiate, listen to others, and set rules everyone can agree to.

In the process, kids learn pretty quickly how to recognize when others aren't having fun (like when someone's been stuck in jail for too long), says Katch. This discovery leads to another positive takeaway of aggressive play: increased empathy. "Where there are good guys and bad guys, there are relationships, loyalty, and opportunities to help friends in need," Dr. Cohen says.

To make these games even more cooperative, you might suggest that your kid set up a medic tent or help plan a way to rescue a fellow good guy. In the process, you'll emphasize the heroic aspect of your son's play—and that can help you remember that that's what war games are all about.

*Additional reporting by
Sasha Emmons*



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MAKE PEACE WITH WAR PLAY

While aggressive play is healthy, games can go awry. “It’s okay to lay down some limits to ensure everyone is comfortable,” says Leonard J. Cohen, Ph.D. Some ideas for doing it right:

HELP KIDS SET BOUNDARIES

For instance, if no one wants to be the bad guy, get them to agree on an imaginary one. Make sure head locks, pushing, and pulling are off-limits. “Children will quickly learn what rules work and which ones don’t and they’ll change and adapt to become more sensitive players,” says Jane Katch, a long-time preschool teacher.

KNOW WHEN TO HIT PAUSE

“If you notice that one child is being targeted and excluded, ask, ‘Is everyone still having fun?’” suggests Cohen. To help sidestep such escalation in the first place, tell the kids you’ll be yelling “freeze” now and then. “They just have to stop for a few seconds, but this can really help regulate the game,” he notes.

OVERSEE YOUR CHILD’S MEDIA

Studies have shown that watching more than two hours of TV a day can increase a child’s chances of acting more aggressively later on. That’s partly because the longer the TV is on, the more violence your kid is apt to see. Stick to shows rated TV-Y, and visit Commonsensemedia.org to vet movies, games, and TV shows.

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