

TEXAS Parenting News

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOR PARENTS EVERYWHERE

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When children play "bad guys": What you can do

Q. Why are children fascinated by "bad guy" and weapon play? Why do they engage in aggressive behavior?

A. They are trying to feel powerful. Young children have little power in their lives. Adults tell them when they can eat, what they can wear, where they go to school, and whom they can play with.

Powerless children are attracted to powerful characters ("bad guys" in stories, strong cartoon characters, soldiers, and superheroes). By taking on the role of a powerful character, children are able to cope with their fears. In their aggressive and violent pretend play, children try to work through frightening subjects. They can feel powerful in the process of combating these fears.

Q. What about the influence of the media?

A. We can't blame the media for all of children's "bad guy" and weapon play. All children engage in play that makes them feel more powerful. But we also can't totally take the media out of the equation. Experts believe that higher levels of viewing violence on television are correlated with increased aggressive behavior.

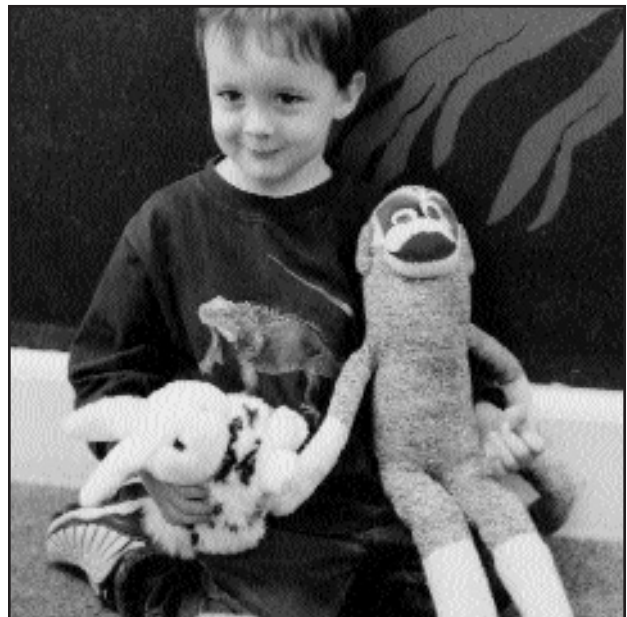
After the deregulation of children's television in 1984, many children's television programs became 30-minute commercials to sell action figures, toys, and other products to children. "Half of the toys sold in 1994 were linked to movies or TV programs (up from 10 percent in 1984)," according to author Diane Levin. "Children's cartoon and action programs average more than 20 acts of violence per hour, compared with five acts of violence per hour during prime-time television."

Many children's television programs, videos, video games, and computer games contain violent content. The American Psychological Association in a 1993 report stated: "Most experts agree that media violence has harmful effects on children's development and behavior."

Even children who don't have direct contact with the media learn this imitative play from their peers who do have direct access. With laptops, portable televisions, video players in vehicles, and hand-held video-game devices, children can be bombarded with media violence no matter where they are.

Q. What can you say to children who are playing "bad guys"?

A. Encourage children to think of the person as a human being. Some examples: "What about the 'bad guy's' mother?" "What do you think



the 'bad guy' eats for lunch?" "If I make a mistake, will I become a 'bad guy'?" "If Ali plays the 'bad guy', will that make him bad?"

Remind children that all people can be good. All people make mistakes, sometimes big mistakes, but that doesn't make us bad.

- Q.** How can you intervene in "bad guy" and weapon play?
- A.** Consider these suggestions:
- Set rules for play at your house. For example, you might allow children to play any character, but the character must not use weapons or behave aggressively.
 - Teach children to solve problems by using words instead of fighting. Ask questions such

From the child's point of view

Preschool children, ages 2 to 7 years, see things differently than adults. Some examples:

- They focus on one thing at a time. Darth Vader uses a light saber. It is difficult for children to consider Darth Vader doing anything else.
- They are self-centered and limited to their own point of view. There can be only one Red Power Ranger and "I am the Red Power Ranger!"
- They think in black-and-white terms. You're either a good guy or a bad guy. You're either an enemy or a friend.
- They focus on concrete and visible aspects of situations, experiences, and ideas. The concept of war brings to mind its concrete, visible aspects (bombs), but the concept of peace is much more abstract so it is harder to understand. Resolving conflicts in violent, nonverbal ways (hitting, shooting) is much more concrete than resolving conflicts in nonviolent, verbal ways (talking, negotiating), which is more abstract and complex.
- They fail to make logical connections between cause and effect. It is easy for young children to focus on the action and excitement of violence. It is difficult for them to focus on the effects of violence (pain and suffering).
- They are unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality. They don't use logical thinking to separate pretend violence from real violence.

as: "If the good guys lost their weapons and couldn't fight, how could they still win?"

- Get involved in the play. Take on a role and have your character extend the play by modeling powerful, but nonviolent play actions and solutions.
- Encourage children to talk about their feelings. Take a quiet moment (not during play) to talk about what you observed in the child's play: "When I see you make an explosion with your toys, I wonder what you are feeling. It's OK to have angry or frustrated feelings but not act them out. It helps to talk about them."
- Redirect play to safer, more constructive themes. "Let's pretend it's a forest fire started by lightning. We have to work fast to put out the fire and get people to safety. Who will drive the fire truck?"

Q. What else can you do to prevent or decrease violent play?

A. Consider the following:

- Read books that help children talk about feelings and conflict resolution.
- Set limits on which programs children watch and how much time they spend viewing TV and movies. Remember news programs also contain violence.
- Watch TV with your children and discuss what you see. Help children learn the difference between fantasy and reality by talking about how television shows, cartoons, and videos are created.
- Look for powerful, nonviolent main characters when selecting TV programs, videos, and books.
- Turn off the TV or video game and do something active with your children. Tossing a ball, dancing to music, or making muffins together can be fun as well as educational.
- Remember that you have influence as consumers of children's products. Consider sending an email or a letter to the managers of local TV stations. Contact the writers or creators of a favorite show and ask about special effects or individual characters.

Resources

Levin, Diane. 2003. *Teaching Young Children in Violent Times: Building a Peaceable Classroom*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Educators for Social Responsibility.

The Lion and the Lamb Project, which works to stop the marketing of violence to children.
www.lionlamb.org

TRUCE (Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment). www.truceteachers.org.

Adapted from an article by P.D. Jolley in the Winter 2003 issue of *Texas Child Care*.

Choosing toys of value

Toys have enhanced play value when they:

- can be used in many ways.
- allow children to determine the play.
- appeal to children at more than one age or level of development.
- are not linked to video games, TV, or movies.
- can be used with other toys for new and more complex play.
- will stand the test of time and continue to be part of play as children develop new interests and skills.
- promote respectful, non-stereotyped, non-violent interactions among children.
- help children develop skills important for further learning and a sense of mastery.

Choose toys that promote:

- **dramatic play**—to help children work out their own ideas about their experiences. Examples: toy animals, toy vehicles, dolls, puppets, and props to recreate real-world places such as a store and restaurant.
- **manipulative play with small play objects**—to develop small-muscle control and eye-hand coordination. Examples: construction sets, puzzles, and pegboards.
- **creative arts**—to encourage self-expression, fine-motor skills, and the use of symbols (vital for literacy and problem solving). Examples: paint, paper, glue, recycled materials, clay, and weaving.
- **physical play**—to promote healthy body awareness and coordination and help let off steam. Examples: wheel toys, balls, jump ropes, and climbing structures.
- **game playing**—to learn about taking turns, planning strategy, rules, and cooperation. Example: board games, cards, and dominoes.

Adapted from TRUCE www.truceteachers.org.

Telling family stories

Many parents read stories to their children at bedtime. But it can be just as much fun and even more powerful to tell stories.

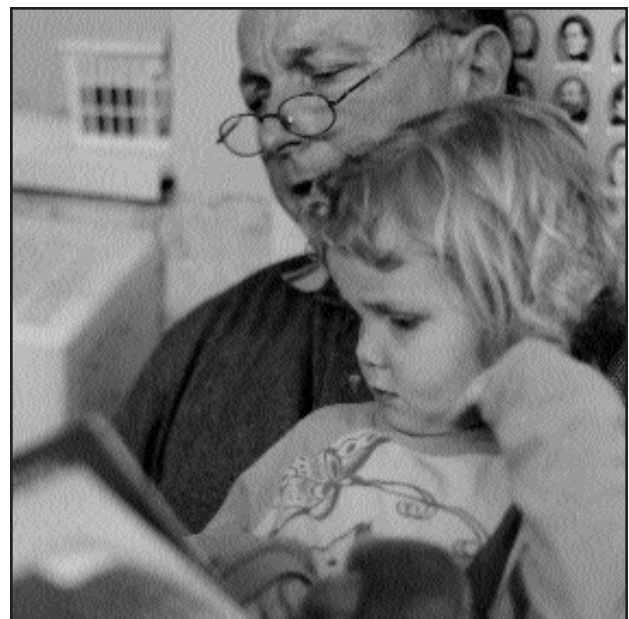
You can make up stories, or you can tell real stories about your family. Real stories help children understand who they are and where they came from. They help develop a sense of family history and culture and build self-esteem.

Selecting stories to tell

Match the story to your child's level of understanding. For toddlers and 2-year-olds, keep stories short and talk about familiar things, such as pets, clothing, and food. Plots are not important. You can simply describe something, like the apron Grandma always wore.

For children 3 to 5 years old, you can tell stories about a broader range of family members, animals, houses, and holidays. Stories about your child's babyhood can be especially appealing. Pull out old baby clothes and photos to show how much your child has grown.

For school-age children, tell the favorite stories that are told and retold at family gatherings. For example, you might tell how Great-Grandpa, as a child, nearly burned down the barn while trying to smoke out a rabbit.



Some of the most interesting stories fall into these categories:

- **childhood misadventures.** Tell how Mom whacked her mother's favorite rose bush while trying out the garden shears, or how Uncle John fell out of the tree and broke his arm. Knowing that grown-ups sometimes misbehaved can help children feel more human and less worried about their own accidents and mistakes.
- **courting.** Describe how Mom and Dad first met, or how Uncle Tim proposed to Aunt Alice at the top of a Ferris wheel. Hearing such tales helps children learn about changing times and gain insight into love and friendship.
- **eccentrics.** Every family has members who seem a little odd, like Aunt Bee who married her sixth husband at age 84. These stories add adventure and humor to otherwise ordinary lives. They also help build appreciation for differences.
- **misfortune.** Stories about how the family house was flooded when a river overran its banks or how Uncle Benito was wounded in Viet Nam can help children prepare for the difficulties they will encounter in life.
- **strange events.** Some happenings defy explanation. Hearing about how Cousin Rashad avoided a plane that crashed or the pet that mysteriously showed up at the door can fill children with wonder and awe.

Collecting family stories

If you need help remembering stories, talk to other family members. Ask older ones to tell you their life stories. Go through family albums, scrapbooks, and letters. Ask for the stories behind antiques and heirlooms.

Return to the house where you grew up. Seeing the old garage or oak tree may trigger memories. Drive by the schools you attended and the houses of childhood friends. Take photos and write notes.

When talking to family members or recalling your own memories, use your senses. Remember smells, tastes, sounds, textures, temperatures, and scenes. The topics below may help you recall stories:

- **people.** Draw your family tree as far back as you can. Write down memories or stories you have heard about each person.

- **places.** Think about houses, schools, churches, and vacation spots. Visualize going to sleep in your bedroom or picnicking at the cemetery.
- **objects.** Recall favorite toys, musical instruments, dishes, cars, and clothing from your childhood.
- **events.** Holidays, birthdays, weddings, funerals, and other occasions provide ample material for stories.

Telling stories

When telling a story, speak naturally as if you were talking about something that happened yesterday. Use gestures and facial expressions for emphasis.

Bedtime is a traditional time for telling stories, but you can also tell them at other times. Take a few minutes at mealtime or while driving to and from school. Tell a story while waiting in line at the grocery store (it will help distract children from the candy and toys). At the next family gathering or birthday, tell a story you remember or ask another family member to share.

You may find that children will ask you to tell a story over and over again. This means they enjoy it. Don't be surprised if you tell it a slightly different way every time, or if your version differs from another family member's. Stories change with telling and vary by point of view.

Family stories are not just entertaining. They help us learn about ourselves and give meaning to our lives.

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