

A teacher's perspective:

# "Bad guys" and weapon play at school

by P.D. Jolley

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- 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. Because children are so powerless, they are attracted to powerful characters ("bad guys" in stories, strong cartoon characters, soldiers, and superheroes). What's more fun than pretending to be a carnivorous dinosaur that would eat your teacher? Through their aggressive and violent pretend play, children try to work through frightening subjects. By taking on the role of a powerful character, children are able to feel strong and more able to cope with their fears.
- "When your child acts out good and bad roles, he is actually trying on power from both perspectives: the frightening negative aspects of the "bad guy" and the heartening positive aspects of the good guy. He can actively gain

control over the things that frighten him by experiencing both sides of the power play equation” (Church 2003).

Trying on these roles is a natural part of a child’s social and moral growth—necessary in the process of learning the difference between right and wrong.

**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 can’t totally take the media out of the equation either. There is “absolutely no doubt that higher levels of viewing violence on television are correlated with increased acceptance of aggressive attitudes and increased aggressive behavior” (Marion 2002).

After the deregulation of children’s television in 1984, many children’s television programs became 30-minute commercials for action figures, toys, and other products designed to appeal to child consumers. “Half of the toys sold in 1994 were linked to movies or TV programs (up from 10 percent in 1984). 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” (Levin 1998).

Many children’s television programs, videos, video games, and computer games contain violent content. “Most experts agree that media violence has harmful effects on children’s development and behavior” (American Psychological Association 1993).

**Q.** How does this relate to what you see in the classroom?

**A.** I’ve been teaching young children since 1985, and I have seen children’s play become much less creative and much more imitative during that time. They imitate what they see and hear in the media. 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 are the developmental issues behind this play?

**A.** Preschool children (ages 2 to 7 years) are in the “preoperational stage” of cognitive development,



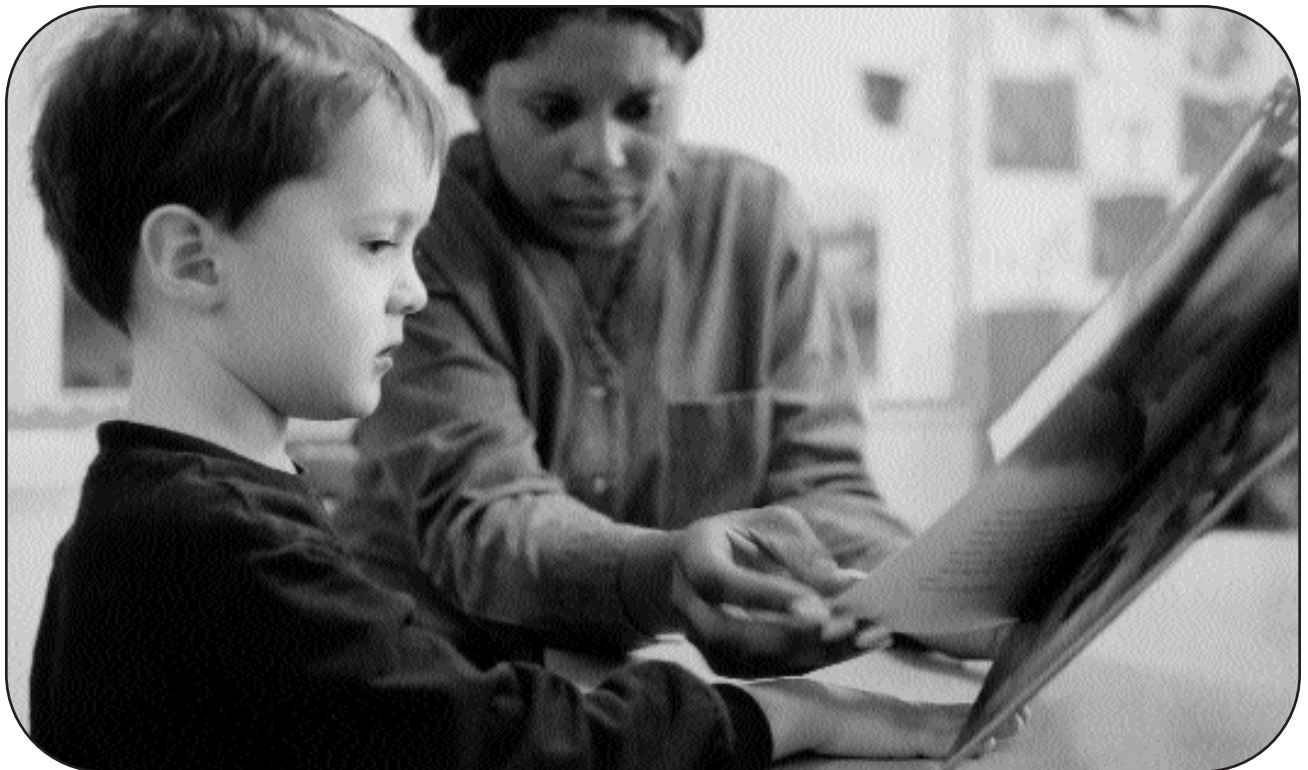
according to psychologist and cognitive theorist Jean Piaget. From Piaget's work we learn that preoperational children think in the following ways:

- They focus on one thing at a time. Example: Darth Vader uses a light saber. When children think of Darth Vader it is difficult for children to consider Darth Vader doing anything other than fighting with a light saber.
- They are egocentric and are limited to their own point of view. Example: There is only one Red Power Ranger on TV. There can be only one Red Power Ranger and "I am the Red Power Ranger!" They don't consider the fact that their friends all want to be the Red Power Ranger too.
- They think in rigid and dichotomous categories (black-and-white thinking). Example: You're either a good guy or a "bad guy". You're either an enemy or a friend. There is no in-between, no gray area.
- They focus on concrete and visible aspects of situations, experiences, and ideas. Example: The concept of war brings to mind its concrete, visible aspects (bombs), but the concept of peace is much more abstract. It is harder to conjure up a concrete, visible image of peace and thus more difficult to understand. Resolving conflicts in

### 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 materials.
- **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. Examples: board games, card games, and dominoes.

—Adapted from TRUCE [www.truceteachers.org](http://www.truceteachers.org)



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. Example: 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). TV and movie violence is edited, making it much cleaner and neater than real life violence, which is very messy and unattractive. Young children who find and play with real weapons are surprised and horrified at the results of accidental shootings, which they could not conceive or predict.
- They are unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality. They don't use logical thinking to separate pretend violence from real violence (American Psychological Association 1993). Refusing to play a bad character may indicate that a child doesn't fully comprehend that the play is "just pretend" (Levin 2003). Example: A child was involved in an aggressive, chase game with pretend weapons. He ran up to me and said: "Tell them this isn't real!"

**Q.** Why do you have a no-weapon-play policy in your classroom?

**A.** Weapon play leads to aggressive behavior and particularly to instrumental aggression. "Instrumental aggression is behavior that is aimed at obtaining or getting back some object, territory or privilege" (Levin 1998). I remember a child playing "guns" with a peer. He shot his friend, but his friend didn't "die" (fall down on the playground). So he walked over and pushed him down, "You're dead!"

Weapon play leads to imitative and violent play. Instead of rich, constructive, creative play, children feel limited and tend to imitate action they've seen and scripts they've heard. I hear them tell each other that they can't play some child's idea because it didn't happen in the television show or movie that they are trying to recreate. This violent and imitative play has little value to the children developmentally, and it can cause havoc in a group setting with children being shoved, kicked and hit (Levin 2003).

Weapon and "bad guy" play is almost always sexist. After reading a first draft of this article, a

colleague asked: "What about good girls?" That provocation made me think back and realize that I have never heard children play "bad girls." My goal is to encourage play that is "anti-bias" and works to dispel all stereotypes and "isms." "Bad guy" play doesn't fit in with my anti-bias curriculum.

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(American Psychological Association 1993)  
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- Q.** What can you say to children who are playing "bad guys"?
- A.** I try to get 4- and 5-year-olds to focus on the humanity of all people. There are many more similarities among us than there are differences. I model and encourage empathy. I make observations and comments that start children in the process of going beyond their black-and-white

### 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.

—Adapted from TRUCE [www.truceteachers.org](http://www.truceteachers.org)

thinking. I ask them to start thinking about the gray area.

For example, I may ask: "What about the 'bad guy's' mother?" "If I make a mistake, will I become a 'bad guy'?" "If Ali plays the 'bad guy,' will that make him bad?" Stripping individuals of their humanity makes it much easier to justify violence directed at those individuals. I encourage children to think of each person's or each character's human qualities.

I don't want any child to feel like a bad person, so I tell children that all people are good. Even when children don't make the best choices or follow all the rules, they are still good people. I add that all people make mistakes, sometimes big mistakes, but that doesn't make any of us bad people.

Some teachers have a policy that all children must play good guys and that "bad guys" are only imaginary. I want children to feel powerful and have the right to name themselves (any character that they want) while playing at school. So Power Rangers, He-Man, Buzz Lightyear and others are welcome in my classroom but they must check their weapons at the door. No matter what character they are pretending to be that individual must conform to established classroom practices—cooperating, sharing, and problem solving, for example.

I talk about my feelings and potential consequences of the play. "I'm feeling worried. I see fingers pointed like guns and I saw some pushing. I'm afraid that someone is going to get hurt. Let's talk about this problem."

- Q.** How can you intervene in "bad guy" and weapon play?
- A.** Consider these suggestions:
  - Set rules for "bad guy" and weapon play. In my class, children may choose to play any character, but the character must not use weapons or behave aggressively while at school. Our primary aim is to keep all the children safe and make sure all the children *feel* safe while at school. We don't allow weapon play at school because we promote solving problems verbally and nonviolently.
  - Model and teach nonviolent, verbal problem solving. We teach children to solve problems by using words instead of fighting or shooting. Ellen Church (2003) recommends asking ques-

tions: "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 scripts, actions, and solutions. Your influence can also add a new, creative element to the play. I remember a group of girls who were upset that there were no female Ninja Turtles. I explained that the Ninja Turtles were named after famous male artists. We did some research on female artists and then created two new turtles. Frida (Kahlo) and Georgia (O'Keefe). We even wrote a letter sharing our creative solution to the Ninja Turtle creators but they never answered the letter.

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**Help children learn the  
difference between fantasy and  
reality by talking about how  
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videos are created.**

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- Encourage children to talk about their feelings. "Take a quiet moment (not during play) to talk about what you observed in his play and invite him to share his feelings. You might say, 'When I see you make an explosion with your toys, I wonder what you are feeling. It's okay to have angry or frustrated feelings and it helps to talk about them'" (Church 2003).
- Find a positive theme in the negative play. One year we made a lot of pizzas and studied artists (Leonardo, Raphael, for example) when the Ninja Turtles were showing up at school on a daily basis. We even had a dramatic play pizza delivery service on the playground after I asked the children how the Ninja Turtles got the money to buy all those pizzas.
- Redirect play to safer, more constructive themes. See the TRUCE (Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment) web site for their ideas: [www.truceteachers.org](http://www.truceteachers.org).

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

**A.** For your own classroom, consider the following:

- Listen to children and ask what they think about weapons and “bad guys.” “I think weapons are the strongest things” is a child’s quote from one of the books I read to prepare for this article. If we find out what children think, then we have a better idea how to make them feel safe and to redirect their interests and their play to more positive themes. This year we did a web and asked children to tell what they liked about their play. The most popular answer was pretending to be the powerful characters. After reading *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*, my talented practice teacher followed up by reading many other variations on this theme (*The Big Bad Wolf Is Good*, *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig*, *The Fourth Little Pig*) and talking about how all the characters had different ideas and different feelings.
- Read books that help children talk about feelings and conflict resolution. I like the “Selection of Children’s Books for the Peaceable Classroom” from Diane Levin (2003).

**Q.** How do you help parents deal with violent play at home?

**A.** Beyond the classroom, it’s important to get support from parents and the community.




- Encourage parents to rethink exposure to media violence. Suggest ways to set limits on which programs children watch and reconsider how much time children spend viewing TV and movies with violent content. Mention the potential problems from exposing children to the violence of TV and radio news programs.
- Explain to parents the value of watching TV with their children and discussing what the children see and hear. Help children learn the difference between fantasy and reality by talking about how television shows, cartoons, and videos are created.
- Suggest that parents look for powerful, nonviolent main characters when selecting TV programs, videos, and books.
- Suggest that parents turn off the TV or video game and do something active with their children: reading a book, tossing a ball, dancing to music, going for a walk, dramatizing a favorite story, or playing dinosaurs.



- Remember that consumers of children’s products have influence. I have helped many children write letters to the authors of children’s books and creators of children’s television shows. You and parents can send an email message or a letter to the managers of local TV stations. You can also contact the writers or creators of a favorite show and ask about special effects or individual characters. See sample letters on the TRUCE web site.
- Look for resources that share your point of view. Educate yourself so you can educate other parents and community leaders. One resource is the Lion & Lamb Project, whose objective is to stop the marketing of violence to children. See [www.lionlamb.org](http://www.lionlamb.org). Another resource is Leah Yarrow’s article, “Should children play with guns?” in *Parents* magazine, January 1983, pages 95-96, available in library back issue files.

- Q. What else can I do to help reduce “bad guy” and gun play?
- A. Try some of the following suggestions—for the sake of children and families everywhere.
  - Offer a parenting workshop on the topic.
  - Organize a Violent Toy Trade-In, nonviolent toy fair, or Peaceable Play Day.

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### Books for the Peaceable Classroom

Consider including these books in your library center. Read and discuss them with the children.

- Aardema, V. 1999. *Who’s in Rabbit’s House?*
- Aliko. 1984. *Feelings*.
- Bang, Mollie. 1999. *When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really, Angry*.
- Blos, J. and Stephen Gammell. 1990. *Old Henry*.
- Cannon, J. 1993. *Stellaluna*.
- DePaola, T. 1991. *Now One Foot, Now the Other*.
- English, K. 2000. *Speak Up for Us, Marisol!*
- Havill, J. 1996. *Jamaica and Brianna*.
- Heine, H. 1997. *Friends*.
- Hoffman, M. 1991. *Amazing Grace*.
- Isadora, R. 1979. *Ben’s Trumpet*.
- Kalmanm, M. 2002. *Fireboat: The Heroic Adventures of the John J. Harvey*.
- MacDonald, M. 1992. *Peace Tales: World Folktales to Talk About*.
- Sieszka, J. 1999. *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs*.
- Steptoe, S. 1999. *Stevie*.
- Udry, J.M. 1988. *Let’s Be Enemies*.
- Wood, A. 1992. *Heckedy Peg*.
- Zolotow, C. 1969. *The Hating Book*.

—Selected from Levin 2003.

- Develop an annual children’s program focusing on different traditions of nonviolence. Tell the children about the lives and actions of nonviolent heroes and heroines. (Many children now think that a “hero” is a violent creature who goes out and kills people, like popular cartoon characters.)
- Help children plant a Peace Garden or a peace Pole as a visual reminder of their desire for peace. See “Teaching children about peace,” *Texas Child Care*, Fall 2002.
- Create an art project that focuses on nonviolence and can later be displayed in your school, such as a peace quilt, mural, or sculpture.
- Make it a policy not to accept violent toys and games if you are involved in a toy collection for less fortunate children.

—Adapted from “What you can do,”  
[www.lionlamb.org/school.htm](http://www.lionlamb.org/school.htm).



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- Church, E.B., and J. David. n.d. "When good kids play the "bad guy": How power play helps kids feel in control of their world." *Parent and Child Magazine*, Retrieved October 19, 2003, from [www.scholastic.com/earlylearner/age4/social/goodkidsbadguy.htm](http://www.scholastic.com/earlylearner/age4/social/goodkidsbadguy.htm).
- Derman-Sparks, Louise and the A.B.C. Task Force. 1989. *The Anti-Bias Curriculum: Tools for Empowering Young Children*. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Levin, D.E. 1998. *Remote Control Childhood? Combating the Hazards of Media Culture*. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Levin, D.E. 2003. *Teaching Young Children in Violent Times: Building a Peaceable Classroom*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Educators for Social Responsibility.

- Marion, M. 2002. *Guidance of Young Children*. 6th ed. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall.
- Salaby, Ronald; Wendy Rodell; Diana Arezzo; and Kate Hendrix. 1995. *Early Violence Prevention: Tools for Teachers of Young Children*. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

## About the author

P.D. Jolley has been teaching young children since 1985 and college classes since 1988. Currently she is a master teacher working with 4- and 5-year-olds at the University of Texas Priscilla Pond Flawn Child and Family Laboratory and an adjunct faculty member at Austin Community College.