

Bang, Bang! Gun play, and why children need it.

By Diane Rich

I am observing children on a primary school playground. Three reception class children are huddled together, then they disperse, intent on their negotiated mission. They look up, then down. They crouch and peek under bushes, inside and under rubbish bins. They slither around playground benches and loiter near other groups of children, as if spying. One comes near me and lets me in on the mission. "We are busy. We are searching." He goes off ... searching. I follow, and he talks as he plays. "We can't find them. We can't find them." He slashes a bush with a stick. I ask, "What are you searching for?"

"The weapons, the weapons of mass destruction."

"Oh. And what will you do when you find them?"

"We will go to war. But we can't find them."

"So what will you do if you can't find them?"

"Well ... I think we'll go to war."

The bell rings and they walk in, looking round as they re-enter their classroom world.

Will this world house any weapons of mass destruction? And will their search for weapons and their plan to go to war be well received in the classroom?

The experiences on which these children based their weapon-related play almost certainly came through the media, which now plays a significant role in influencing children's thoughts, actions and play. They regularly see images on the TV screen, in newspapers and magazines, which inform their understanding of the world and what lies within it. They hear football commentators say that "England's secret weapon is on the reserve bench" or refer to their team making a "great attack" on the opposition's goal. Newspaper headlines roar, "Tony Blair sticks to his guns", and both tabloids and broadsheets feature stories involving weapons in many areas of life: in war scenarios, as pop-star fashion accessories, in drug-

related street crimes, scenes of domestic violence and many more. The world of video, TV and computer games promotes gun-related play – one James Bond Gameboy game can't even begin until James Bond (the player) shoots a security guard. Children access the more unsavoury world of gun-users regularly, and from many sources. Strange, then, that sometimes the very people they trust to help them learn about the world refuse to even acknowledge that guns exist.

For many years I have worked with practitioners across the UK to develop their approach to children's play and responses to chosen play themes, whatever these may be. The themes that children choose to play do not all involve nurses, mums and dads, princes and princesses. There are nasty things too: monsters, ghosts, baddies and, inevitably, weapons of all sorts. Practitioners' responses to these vary. Some work in settings which have zero tolerance towards any weapon-related play, where guns are never mentioned. My own introduction to the world of children's learning found me at such a setting. I worked for a short time as a supply teacher and, as many readers who have taken on such a role will appreciate, this sometimes involves stepping into pre-set activities and adopting the principles of each unique setting. On arrival into my appointed class of five and six year olds, I was greeted by Vasos and his bright green *Breakthrough to literacy* wordbook, opened already on 'Gg'.

"Gun," he demanded.

"Well ... Vasos" (his name was on the front of his book). "You've already found the right page. What do you think I should write?" And he told me. "Gun. Please write it." So I did. Whereupon he grabbed the book and held it up triumphantly to the universal sing-song cry of "Huu-uu-u-u-ummm, she's written guu-un!" Cries of horror went up. It was an ambush and I was

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This article first appeared in *Early Education*, Summer 2003

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the victim. At playtime, on the request of the head teacher, I had to copy out the wordbook, omitting the offending word. As with some schools and nurseries today, a policy of zero tolerance had been devised and executed. But what effect does this approach have on children, and how did it come about?

Those practitioners I have worked with from zero-tolerance settings give a variety of reasons for adopting such an approach:

- “Guns are wrong. Guns kill. It’s wrong to kill people.”
- “It is morally wrong to promote using anything that can harm others.”
- “Guns mean violence and aggression. If we allow children to play with guns they will become more aggressive.”
- “Parents don’t like it.”
- “Other children get upset.”

The list is practically endless, although the comments usually end with, “But they do it anyway.”

When I ask how these zero-tolerance settings respond to children who play with guns on site, they say the children play at guns but pretend they’re not when challenged. Lego gun-like structures become mobile phones, walkie-talkies and fire fighters’ hoses; sandwich crusts, which can be skilfully nibbled to form a Smith & Wesson, get eaten; and bananas (so handy for the home holster) are surrendered to the fruit salad bowl. The moral issue of condoning violence or killing is thus replaced with the moral issue of accepting, and indeed promoting, creative lying.

Nature of gun play

When practitioners reflect on the nature of children’s play, they generally conclude that children play around the following basic themes:

- what they have experienced

- what they know about (to the limits of their knowledge)
- what they are interested in
- what they want to know more about
- what they want to understand
- what they are anxious, concerned or worried about
- what they feel
- their many possible future roles.

Some children will have had more gun-user related experiences than others. For some it will be a part of their everyday lives. Children living in farming or rural communities, for example, will regularly see shooting parties accompanied by a brace of pheasants or a rabbit. They will hear sounds replicating gunshots as bird scarers are set to guard the crops, and this will be part of their cultural heritage, a feature of their world. Some will have experienced at close hand the sight of men in white coats shooting farm animals during the foot and mouth epidemic in 2001. Others may have relatives or family friends in the armed services or working as an armed security guard. Children who live in war-torn countries, or have lived in areas patrolled by UN peacekeepers have particular and very real experiences of weapons and guns – and many with these experiences now live in the UK, as they seek or are granted asylum. Some children will have experienced armed gunmen in their streets, outside their schools, or homes. Some will know gun owners and users who may be involved in illegal operations. Some will have taken part in weapon games themselves in the adult world, when they attend laser and paint-balling adrenaline war games. And during the war in Iraq, all children in the UK are likely to have had a daily diet of many images of Britain at war.

Alongside all these first-hand experiences which influence children’s play, is the impact from the range

of input from TV, news items and newspaper images, videos, computer games, the world of books and toys.

Practitioners and parents may feel unhappy about this, but it is an inescapable fact that children know about guns and weapons. Children may demonstrate expertise, knowledge or experiences in their play which may sometimes shock adults, but they will only be able to play to the limits of their knowledge and experience. In their playing children give signals to practitioners and parents about what they know, how much they know, and what they need to know in order to make more sense of their world and their place in it. Children use play as a necessary tool for thinking, and some children will want to think much more about gun-related issues than others.

Why weapon play is attractive

Of course, not all children are interested in gun play. Some barely investigate it at all, while others virtually discard it once they have played through their understanding of guns to their satisfaction. Some also tune in very quickly to its undesirable status and consequently when they need gun-users in their play, they involve them very discreetly. I observed such an episode in a nursery class. A girl in hospital role-play acting as mum brings her baby into the hospital. She notices there is a police dog player who is guarding a patient robber. Carefully, she takes a pen out of her hand bag, glances round to see who notices and when she sees that it's safe, uses it as a gun to point at the dog and shoot it. No one but the mum player, and me, the play observer, knows of the crime, not even the 'dog'. She states afterwards, 'Yes, I shot the dog. It's unhygienic to have a dog in the hospital you know.'

Not all children can be self controlled or discreet in their involvement of guns in play and a considerable

number remain so interested that gun-user themes persist in their play for some time. My work with children and practitioners leads me to believe that weapon and gun-related play has an irresistible lure for children. Most often, but not always, these children are boys who are attracted helplessly to this play for **five* key reasons:

- making guns is an achievable task
- weapon play relates to early communications skills
- major themes of children's play are represented in weapon-related playing
- running in big spaces, outside is a preferred play style
- **it is a universal language.*

From birth, children have had positive responses to **the tasks they achieve**. A smile generates laughter from those who see it, early sounds are encouraged affectionately, and the first attempts at walking or reaching for a toy are greeted with celebration. Children generally receive positive praise for what they can do. Once children can identify certain objects they skilfully point these out. For example, a one year old in a buggy encountering a tree-lined road points with delicate precision to each and every tree, pronouncing "tree" to each one passed. It won't be long before this child recognises the similarity between that pointed finger, so easily made, and a gun. Similarly blocks, sticks and long balloons are easily used as guns, swords, light sabres and rocket-attack launchers. Without much effort, and often without intention, a child has created weapons.

Even better than the achievement of making something, these new creations generate a whole raft of different responses from adults. They may put their hands up in horror and surrender, hurtle to the floor clutching their body and making bloodcurdling cries of pain or wag a finger and say, "We don't do that". All

these responses link to the child's world of **communication**, language and literacy. The consistency or flexibility of responses to the child's use of weapons in play adds to their knowledge about communication, in the same way that early peek-a-boo games enable children to predict reactions and test out consistency. Similarly, such play exploration allows children to access the conventions of communication, and to see how different individuals respond to the same action: "If I point my stick and pretend it's a gun, I get *this* reaction from Uncle Paul, *that* reaction from Mum, this *other* reaction from my best friend Darren, and *fabulous* reaction from Jackie at nursery." There is a give-and-take process in this play, which mirrors the give-and-take conventions of speech or body language. Testing out these conventions may be as irresistible as demanding yet another play at 'Round and round the garden like a teddy bear'.

Children's play themes involve big and serious issues which commonly include death, loss, loneliness, abandonment and being cared for or nursed. Weapon play certainly provides opportunities for these themes to be explored and also involves the common dominant theme in children's play – namely power, and being in control or controlled by others. Children are regularly seen to mimic adult roles in their play as they try out for themselves what it is like to be in control as a mummy or daddy, teacher, nurse or shop worker.

From messages children pick up about the world, through reported actions of world leaders and terrorist, from their TV, video, computer and book worlds, they know that people who have ultimate power are those with the biggest and most powerful weapons. They know that big weapons – weapons of mass

destruction – wield enormous control, influencing the behaviour not only of individuals but also of nations.

In order to make sense of this big and important issue in their play, children are testing out theories and ideas. They ask many 'what if', questions as they try to make sense of gun-users in their world and how they can stay safe. Their play includes all the following explorations.

- What if I had a weapon? How would that be?
- What if I didn't have one?
- What if someone else had one?
- Who uses guns and weapons?
- Why do they use guns and weapons?
- What if there was someone with a gun in my world? How would that be?
- What is the best relationship to have with that person?
- What does it feel like to have a gun?
- What does it feel like to be a victim?
- **Am I with an adult that will keep me safe? Do they take my explorations seriously?*

Children play at what concerns and worries them. They play at what causes them anxiety. Quite understandably most children will be anxious about the idea of particular types of gun-users in their world, and consequently need to play at keeping safe and solving the problems that gun-use throws up. From their own experiences and the influence from the media, they know that it is *possible* for someone with a gun to come into their nursery, school or home. As far as they are able to judge, this eventuality is also *probable*. While adults also know that such an intrusion is possible, their experience of the world enables them to better judge how probable this might be. When adults feel that it is unsafe to engage in air travel or visit particular cities, they can opt out. Adults have more control of their lives than children and have

a better understanding of the likelihood of events. Children, however, are still learning about the balance between the possible and the probable. For children, it is not only possible that an unauthorised gun-user may arrive in their world, but also much more probable than it is for adults. Thus children play through potential solutions and story-line options.

Many children, and often boys, prefer to move and **play freely in outdoor spaces**, where their need to develop gross motor skills can be best met. People with guns pursue and chase, they run and flee often noisily and boisterously. Children enjoy the freedom of outdoor spaces to engage in this play.

**Children can play together at weapon related themes with little or no common language and often no verbal communication at all, except perhaps the occasional explosive sound effect which is understood by all children. This universal theme can be a starting point for playing together, because no-one is excluded. It can be the place for establishing friendships and getting to know each other.*

Valuing and managing gun play

A common objection to tolerating gun-related play in educational settings, whether outdoor or indoor, is one of concern for its organisation and management, hand-in-hand with the safety of children. It can be a management challenge for practitioners to organise a posse, fleets of Starfleet commandos, armed robbers or vets arriving to shoot sheep – but it can be enjoyable and rewarding too. There are several strategies that can be adopted to make such play more tolerable. Two key influences are having a *policy* and *sense of value*.

A setting which allows weapon and gun-user play to take place will almost certainly have this approach as part of its policy. Such a policy might be an

extension of an overarching policy statement, such as, “We value every child’s cultural heritage.”

Childminders will have similar philosophies. Whatever the reason for allowing gun user play in educational settings, it is advisable to adopt a policy that is linked to a wider play policy, a behaviour policy and a safety policy as this can help in the organisation and management of this play. Having a policy also gives a sense of value to the play, which is very important. However, devising the gun-play policy may not be an easy task and staff may disagree along the way. The first major question to address is: “Why should we allow children to play at weapon-related themes here?”

My response to this question is always the same. All children have a right to play. In order for their future cognitive capacity to be realised and for children to have a high sense of self-esteem, they need to see that their play is valued. As we have seen, the different experiences of children, their level of knowledge, interests, concerns, anxieties, feelings and preferred play styles will determine what they play at. This inevitably means that children sometimes play at alarming and shocking themes, including those which involve shooting even their best friends or favourite teachers. The world in which children live and their need to make sense of it is responsible for this play. Where such play is not permitted, children get a strong sense that what they have experienced, what they know about, what they are anxious about, what they want to know more about, what they are interested in and how they feel is not valued. When children receive this message, their self-esteem is likely to drop. When their play is not permitted, they lose out on developing skills as a player – and when this happens, they lose a whole range of routes to learning, to exploring their world through play and

developing all the skills that play enables. Their cognitive capacity is reduced, and so is their commitment to learning as these negative messages are likely to affect their engagement in the world of education where their interests have been marginalised right from the off. Children who have their starting points for play curtailed at an early age may not achieve their potential because they do not feel positive about themselves as learners – and there must be some relation between this statement and the sliding achievement of boys in our schools.

Valuing gun-user play sometimes poses problems for practitioners who do not consider this to be quality play. Tina Bruce offers 12 indicators for considering the quality of children’s play (see box). When these are applied to the play of gun-users it is easy to see that many indicators can be present during the play. Bruce suggests that more than half need to be present for quality play to be taking place.

When practitioners accept weapon-related play as a starting point for children’s learning they offer children the chance to play at what they need to investigate, in order to make sense of the world and their place in it. Practitioners will be opening up avenues to learning and, importantly, will enable children to develop the most powerful weaponry of all: the power of communication, the ability to tolerate

others, to negotiate, listen and empathise, to work and function with others, to think things through and consider the effect of possible actions. All of these are learned in children’s play – and all children need to be armed with these essential life and future world skills.

The 12 indicators of play

The following indicators are adapted from two books on play published by Tina Bruce (1991, 1996):

- 1 using first-hand experiences
- 2 making up rules
- 3 making props
- 4 choosing to play
- 5 rehearsing the future
- 6 pretending
- 7 playing alone
- 8 playing together
- 9 having a personal agenda
- 10 being deeply involved
- 11 trying out recent learning
- 12 coordinating ideas, feelings and relationships for free-flow play.

Further reading from the Bruce publications is recommended before adopting these indicators for evaluating children’s play.

**This point was added in 2005*

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