

BANG! BANG! GUN PLAY, AND WHY CHILDREN NEED IT

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!' Gasps of horror went up. It was an ambush and I was 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.'
- 'At our school/nursery/playgroup children should be in a haven of safety protected from the evils of the world.'
- 'It is hard to manage.'

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;