

Focus on childhood: turning aliens into best mates

Children like making friends but they are also fascinated by enemies –an area of play that is challenging, but valuable, writes **Diane Rich**

As Stephen Spielberg's film adaptation of HG Wells story *War of the Worlds* reaches summer box offices, many children will see earthlings battling bloodthirsty aliens to save the planet. They will see posters, computer games and other merchandise based on this theme. Children may well wonder, "What if... aliens really did land on earth?"

While H.G. Wells sought to answer this question in one way, an earlier Spielberg film, *ET: The Extra-Terrestrial* offers an alternative vision. answer in his movie 'ET'. Here, Spielberg explores the idea of aliens not as murderous enemies but rather as those to whom children extend the friendship.

The them of "Aliens as friends of children" was picked up one summer by children living near me. Influenced by *ET*, they became determined to find an alien in their own garden and, like Eliot in the film, become its friend.

From their bedrooms and outdoor camps, the children watched the skies nightly for signs of a UFO. Each morning they searched their gardens for evidence of fallen stars, rocket ships and alien life forms. Finding nothing, they set about making their own alien. When finished they sat watching it. 'If we watch it for long enough, it will come alive,' they proclaimed.

From under their beds, an area they decreed 'a place safe from all danger aliens,' they watched in silence, determined to breathe life into the creature. But as they waited, their dilemma began to dawn. Would this alien be a friend or a foe?

Dealing with a "friend alien" would be easy. Children make friends all the time. They are expected to. Many attend pre-school to be with other children to socialise, to share. As children move into school being with friends really matters to children.

Away from the gaze of teachers, summers can involve meeting new

children and having to get on, at home, in strangers' houses, on summer play schemes, with their families on campsites or at theme parks, if abroad, in new languages.

Staying friends is sometimes difficult as young alien-maker, Katie found out.

"Libby is my best friend, but sometimes we don't like each other. She's in my class. We always play together at playtime. She comes to my house for sleep overs and I go to hers.

"But yesterday she was my worst friend and I'm not playing with her anymore... She just kept talking about her new puppy. On and on. It made me so cross. I said, 'Stop talking about your new puppy and play with me making the alien.' But she kept on trying to bring a puppy into the game. She made me cry and I made her cry. Now she's not my friend and I am sad and lonely."

Katie, who longed to have a puppy herself, confused the unpleasant and overwhelming emotion of jealousy for that of dislike and hate. Not for the first time in their friendship, she rejected Libby. Both girls became upset but were unable to resolve their conflict. Katie's mother talked things over with them and helped them understand what was happening.

Such support can help children to identify and label emotions correctly and respond in more appropriate ways to their powerful feelings. Katie was able to resume her rollercoaster friendship with Libby.

Children become distressed when they upset others. The distinguished researcher Vivian Gussin Paley observes: 'I've been watching children most of my life and they are more often kind to each other than unkind. The early instinct to help someone is powerful.'

Paley writes about children's "ready acceptance of another

child's interest" as they explore what it means to be a friend

For the children whose summer was filled with sky- watching, their natural inclusivity meant being kind to each other and to aliens too. Having an alien friend come to stay would pose interesting but surmountable challenges for them.

For Eliot in the film and his siblings in *ET*, the task was to keep their visitor from adults and ensure his safe return to the space ship. As friends together, children overcame the hostility of adults and saved ET, their young alien, abandoned by his family and community, in need of shelter and care and rescue.

Such themes, irresistible to children, are dominant in their play as they explore what it is to be a friend of others and to have friends.

In such play, children test out the ways in which friends care for each other, provide for each other, have fun together, keep each other safe and resolve conflict. They base this play on experience of people in their own lives, on stories they know and the TV, film and media images they encounter.

Together children explore and test a variety of questions about friends. What is it like to be a friend? What is it like to have a friend? Is a friend is always a friend? Are all friends good to have? Is it okay to be cross with a friend? How does it feel to lose a friend or find a lost friend? Can a friend ever be an enemy?

Playing at being friends with others not only helps to build an understanding of friendship itself, but also develops friendships through the play. What is often overlooked is that of course, these friendships can also develop when playing at enemy themes.

Dealing with these themes leads to different explorations and questions: What would it be like to meet an enemy? Who in the world gets to meet enemies? What is it like to be someone who gets to meet an enemy? How do such

people behave? Are these people good or bad? Will I ever meet an enemy? Are enemies always enemies? Can you be friends with an enemy? Do you always have to hate or fight an enemy? How can you be safe from enemies?

These issues stood before the summer alien-seeking children as they watched for signs of alien life. They feared, and perhaps hoped for, the worst: an enemy alien in their midst. In their play, children try to establish who their enemies might be.

Apart from aliens, dinosaurs frequently feature, especially Tyrannosaurus Rex. As four year old Alex plays with his treasured dinosaurs he comments, "You can't be friends with T.Rex. He has no friends. He is the enemy of *all* the dinosaurs. He is the enemy of you. *You cannot be his friend.* Except... He might have a friend who is another T. Rex - Maybe."

Such play scenarios can raise complex moral issues which some adults find challenging. When enemies appear in their various guises in classrooms and playgrounds, they can be threatening, frightening, upsetting, noisy and boisterous.

The play touches on difficult ideas such as destruction, loss, sadness, danger and death. Teachers may want to discourage themes which challenge the emotional and physical safety of children.

But in this play children strive to be certain that they are safe from danger and that those around able to keep them safe.

The children then, who bravely take on the role of enemies themselves as they play scary monsters who roar, are not only exploring such questions as, "What does it feel like to be an enemy? How do people react to enemies? Can I be an enemy? What is my relationship to others, if I am an enemy? They also ask the important question, "Can this adult keep me safe?"

Children want to know that their educators are equipped to deal with any roaring monster or enemy alien that may come along. They know that a quick wag of the finger and shake of the head is not enough to perturb a ferocious beast.

The solution for some children is to bring on the superheroes, or those with special powers; the

only ones from the children's knowledge of the world who can genuinely save them.

Another solution might be for educators to show that they have their own strategies for dealing with enemies in children's play; holding a special something that makes you invisible, jumping on a carpet square to twist through hyperspace to safety, having an imaginary phone line to emergency services and playing rescue scenarios, trying out ways of talking with monsters to find out what they want and how to reach a compromise or solution, having a powerful monster alarm to alert the rest of the school.

Or perhaps simply saying, "You are being such a scary monster, I am really terrified. What shall we do?"

Following this up by working with children to solve the dilemmas posed, educators offer children opportunities to deal with enemies in play, learning to listen attentively and sympathetically to others' points of view, learning to reason and negotiate.

**The author would like to make it clear that she does not support the use of T.V., film, computer games and any other merchandise for children below the age recommended on the product.*

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The theme of enemies is explored in '*First hand experience: what matters to children*' by Diane Rich, Denise Casanova, Annabelle Dixon, Mary Jane Drummond, Andrea Durrant and Cathy Myer, published 2005 by Rich learning Opportunities.

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