

Many practitioners are divided over whether to let children play with guns or ban it. Some see it as a moral dilemma; others focus on the management of behaviour. **Diane Rich** explains why it's so important to allow it.

When children play with guns

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I visited a friend this summer with young twin boys. As I arrived they were engrossed in their new video, the latest James Bond film. They watched it, calling through to their mum, 'He's got the bad man, mum.' 'It's all right, he's got the gadget from Q, he'll get away.' 'Wow, pow! That was a good bit.'

Both boys chose their outfits the next day. One wore dark trousers, white shirt, navy blazer, tie and gun in inside jacket pocket, clearly Bond. James Bond. The other was Bond too, but Bond in self defence mode, wearing body armour. He doubled up as a baddie when necessary and his brother, with the simple addition of sunglasses, switched from 'Bond' to 'Men in Black'. Play commenced with the boys reversing roles as they rough and tumbled, chased, laughed, grimaced, pausing for planning and perfecting scenes from the film, adding their own ideas for plot and action strategies. They moved from room to room, using either upstairs or downstairs and going between indoors and outdoors.

Many parents, home-based childcare workers and early years educators find play involving guns challenging for a variety of reasons. They say:

- "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."
- "The play looks such a mess"
- "Other children get upset."

The list goes on, and comments usually end, 'But they do it anyway.' The twins' mum said, 'I used to stop them, but it's what they love to do. Sometimes I join in and it is good fun! Their storylines are ingenious – better than James Bond plots! Yes, they do argue and get into scrapes, but they sort it out as they play and if I intervene they tell me, "It's okay

Mum, we're just playing." They generally work out how far they can go for their own safety and how far they can go with me around. Sometimes they might go a bit far, but that's learning, isn't it?"

In play children can demonstrate expertise, knowledge or experiences which may sometimes shock adults. Some adults will disapprove of the twins playing Bond but, with their recent new knowledge of Bond's world, it is not at all surprising that they wanted to. In their playing, children give signals about what they know, how much they know and what they need to know in order to make more sense of their worlds and their place in it. Children use play as a tool for thinking, and settings which do not allow gun-user play will be suppressing children's thinking and their starting points for learning and investigating the world through play. The twins needed to consolidate their experience and make sense of the new things they had seen.

What's the attraction?

The twins are children for whom gun play has always been attractive. This is not the case for all children - some barely investigate it at all, while others virtually discard it once they have played through their understanding of guns to their satisfaction. But a considerable number remain so interested that gun-user themes persist in their play for some time. Weapon and gun related play has an irresistible lure for some children. Most often, but not always, these children are boys who are attracted helplessly to this play for four 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.

From birth, children have had positive responses to the tasks they

achieve. It isn't long before the similarity between a pointed finger, and a gun is made. 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, children can create a weapon.

Adults react in different ways depending on whether they approve or disapprove. Their responses link to the child's intriguing world of communication. They enable children to test out consistency: 'If I point my stick and pretend it's a gun I get this reaction from Uncle Douglas, that reaction from Mum, this other reaction from my best friend David, and a fabulous reaction from Joan at nursery, but Grandma says, "We don't play with guns." The give-and-take process in this play 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 serious issues, commonly including death, loss, loneliness, fear, abandonment and being cared for or nursed. Weapon play provides opportunities for these themes to be explored and also involves the dominant theme in children's play, namely power, and being in control or controlled by others.

Children mimic adult roles in their play as they try out what it is like to be in control as a mummy or daddy, teacher, nurse or shop worker. Some of these roles will inevitably be influenced by television and so when children know about James Bond it is very likely that Bond and his associated baddies will appear in their play. From messages they pick up about the world, through television, videos, computers and books, children know that people who have ultimate power are those with the best gadgets, the biggest and most powerful weapons. They

know that big weapons – weapons of mass destruction – wield enormous control, influencing and controlling the behaviour not only of individuals but also of nations.

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 how they can stay safe with gun-users in their world. Their play includes all the following explorations.

- What if I had a weapon? How would that be?
- Who would I be if I had a weapon? Who uses guns and weapons?
- What if I didn't have one?
- 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?
- How can I keep myself safe?

Children play at what concerns and worries them. Understandably most children will be anxious about the idea of particular types of gun-users in their world, and need to play at keeping safe and solving the problems, weighing up the decision-making opportunities and human relationship challenges that gun use throws up. That's why they play through potential solutions and story-line options.

Many children, and often boys, prefer to move and play freely in outdoor spaces. People with guns pursue and chase, they run and flee often noisily and boisterously. Children enjoy the freedom of outdoor spaces to mimic these actions. (You may want to designate an area for more boisterous play, an area inside with mats or a specific outdoor space.)

Not only had the twins recently had a diet of James Bond, but they also knew about other television, video and comic characters with guns - light sabres in *Star Wars*, swords and shields in *Lord of the Rings*, phaser guns in *Star Trek* and much more. They know about guns in their everyday world, a rural community where rabbits or pheasants are shot as farm pests or to eat, and vets shoot animals for humane.

Like everyone else with access to television and media they have heard about the military forces in Iraq and other parts of the world, and weapons not only used by suicide bombers, terrorists or criminals, but also by legitimate gun-users such as security guards, soldiers, police and secret intelligence agents.

Their summer holiday in France involved time at Heathrow airport where there are armed guards and in France they saw armed police. Children have a variety of first- and second-hand experiences of gun-users which provides material on which to base their play.

When you accept weapon-related play as a starting point for children's learning you offer children the chance to play at what they need to investigate to make sense of the world and their place in it. You 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.

Managing gun play

A common objection to gun-related play in educational settings is 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 of cowboys, a gang of armed robbers or a group of vets arriving to shoot sheep - but there are several that can be adopted to make such play more tolerable.

Having a policy and valuing play is key. Settings with play policies show that play is valued, which is very important. Valuing gun-user play sometimes poses problems for practitioners who do not think of this a quality play. Tina Bruce offers 12 indicators for considering the quality of children's play. She suggests more than half need to be present for quality play to be taking place.

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.)

To get a sense of the quality of children's play you need to get involved either as player yourself or as an observer. As a player, it is important that children are the play leaders. As an observer, catching the stories children play is very helpful. Some played stories might be very short. 'There was a robber/a mummy/a tiger.' Some are much longer and can have complicated plots. But if these played stories are captured through observation or involvement, they can be retold to the solo-player, players or school group. Some settings turn the stories into books or wall display and proudly record, 'This story was played by.....' Sometimes story-boxes and mini-worlds are set up which enable the story to be replayed by the players or other children. It is important that stories are caught and retold when characters are robbers, soldiers and bad guys in the same way that stories involving princesses and nurses might be captured. Children and parents then get the message that all play is valued. When play is perceived to be highly valued, the quality of the play improves.

But guns are bad ...

It seems natural to want to promote the moral message that 'Guns are bad – they kill people and animals' and it may be difficult to resist saying so, especially when you hold strong beliefs about gun use, or when horrific gun-related events hit the headlines. But gun use, in different forms, is part of many children's home and community worlds. Making judgemental statements influences how children feel about their worlds and themselves. So instead of saying, 'Guns are wrong', it is better to

have an approach which is more open - 'I feel afraid because you seem to have a gun' or 'Please be careful with that gun, I don't want to get shot ...or injured ... or killed.' This shows children that guns are frightening and that it is quite acceptable to be afraid of them.

You might model reasons for not wanting to join in with gun play, such as, 'I can't join the farmers on the rabbit shoot today, because I am vegetarian,' or 'I haven't got my gun licence yet.' You might join in the play and offer solutions to children's gun-related fears, such as, 'I see there's an armed robber in the building, quick everyone, under the table while Aiden uses the mobile phone to call the police'. This offers children a real solution to a real problem and shows commitment from staff that their play is being taken seriously.

I have also seen skilful practitioners take children onto magic carpets or follow children as they dive through a 'hyperspace hoop' to safety. Children need to have escape routes from danger which come from the real world and which sometimes come from the media world. Adults need to model that these needs don't go away. When five-year-old James Bond aimed his toy gun at me I said: 'James, you're really scaring me.' He answered, 'It's okay, Diane. I know all the safety gadgets. It won't shoot and anyway, you are not a baddie.'

There are huge moral issues at play here. Children's play deals with big and important issues, in the same way that adult talk and debate does. Children's play gives you the

chance to join in as a player, modelling honest reactions to situations, solutions to problems and sharing ideas about the worlds explored in play.

You need a policy

As well as ensuring that there is consensus for a strong sense of value for play, it is advisable to adopt a policy that is linked to a wider play policy including a behaviour policy and a safety policy as this can help in the organisation and management of gun-users in play.

A policy might also be an extension of an overarching policy statement, such as, 'We value every child's cultural heritage.' Children who come from homes and communities where guns are used have a right to have this aspect of their cultural heritage recognised.

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?"

The answer is simple. 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.

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 that involve shooting even their best friends or favourite teachers. 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 get 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 start.

Where starting points for play are curtailed at an early age children 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 schools. So, I celebrate the freedom the twins had to play at their chosen theme in their home, the support given by mum with time, space and resources, and respect for their ideas. I hope that play in their school is equally highly valued.

Girls and guns

Although girls do play with guns, it is often much more discreetly than boys. I have seen girls get small guns from a handbag to shoot an annoying dog who has turned up in hospital play, or a persistent robber who will not be a good baby. But girls are less likely to use sound effects or grand animated actions so they are less likely to be noticed at this play and less likely to be or told 'not to'.

It is easier for practitioners to see exactly what girls are playing at, to follow a story line, to join in and catch the story played and retell it to a group. Interventions with girls at play therefore tend to be positive, encouraging and promote a positive self-image. This is less so for boys where story lines may be hard to follow, the action fast and often seeming violent. It is easier to intervene to stop such action. Anticipation certainly might be necessary at times, but generally when children know their play is valued and when they understand that keeping them safe is your overriding aim, they may appear to be playing violently but when stopped seem bemused and claim, 'But its just playing. Don't worry, we're okay.'

Diane Rich leads keynote presentations on this theme and runs inset days, seminars and workshops, and works with staff groups to develop this area of play and policy.