

Playing at War

by Carol Masters, W A M M

From Target's toy catalog "Gifts that inspire good behavior... toys for boys": Nerf-n-Strike Vulcan Blaster (semi-automatic dart gun with ammo belt); Lazer Tag Battle System and Spider Man Web Blaster (also semi-automatic simulations that shoot some sort of projectiles); Star Wars Clone Commander Blaster; G.I. Joe Accelerator Duke Figure, over 2 feet tall in metallic body armor and brandishing a semi-automatic in each hand, says over 50 phrases, for age 5 and up; GI Joe Pit Mobile headquarters – a live-in tank simulation, fully loaded, so to speak, holds up to 84 figures (including their weapons). This one is pricey, \$99.99, but includes 3 free figures; age 4 and up. You get the idea.

A couple of decades ago (Really! Time speeds up when you're raising children– or working for peace), WAMM's Parents for Peaceful Play Committee was worried about the proliferation of war toys, action figures that glorified combat, and images of violence on television and in video games.

The images were seductive, even to young children who were not permitted the adult prime time viewing: increasingly, cartoons branded toys modeled on heroic figures, including soldiers, and the brands were marketed to children. Parents and consumer groups protested the marketing of violent simulations to children; peace groups like Parents for Peaceful Play sponsored advocacy and actions at big box toy stores, like Target.

Psychologists began to study and write about the 'dilemma' of war play – should young children, especially young boys, play at war games to develop mastery and impulse control? Parents and teachers were divided on the issue. Many parents, including myself, were distressed at the violent images bombarding our children and at the increasing levels of violence in schools. Some didn't want their children playing with weapons simulations of any kind. Yet they saw their children ardently attracted to such toys and to war play. Teachers, too, were aware of societal messages playing out in their classrooms and on the playground; they knew that children learn through play and mimicking conflict has often been part of play, but something new had entered classrooms.

An often referenced book, *The War Play Dilemma: Balancing Needs and Values in the Early Childhood Classroom*, by Nancy Carlsson-Paige and Diane Levin (Teachers College Press, 1987, updated 2005), points to the deregulation of the broadcasting industry in 1984, which allowed TV-linked toys and products to be marketed to kids, around a single, often violent theme. The Children's Television Act of 1990 tempered the deregulation, limiting ads during programs (to 10-12 minutes per hour), but marketing to children and tie-ins to products remain an industry standard.

As we raised our boys and girls through the 1980s and 90s, other peace issues came to the forefront and the Parents for Peaceful Play Committee dwindled, although we celebrated small victories when television and corporation decision-makers acknowledged our efforts.

I don't think the problem has gone away: the U.S. culture of violence impinges on family life in so many ways. War toys and video games depicting violence are burgeoning.

Carlsson-Paige and Levin offer guidelines for teachers who allow war play, arguing that for some children it can be developmentally helpful, but it must be supervised and alternatives offered for violent or repetitive play ("Where does the bad guy go when he's not fighting with you?"). These writers and other psychologists and teachers do discourage using commercial war toys. "Realistic," militarized toys encourage limited, imitative play. The simulated weapons have only one function – destruction, killing. Their marketing calls on children to be consumers and collectors rather than children playing, with imagination. Creativity and development of an idea in play can hardly enter in.

As for video games, evidence has been mounting that the increased availability, use, and violent content is affecting children's health. According to a policy statement of the American Academy of Pediatrics (Pediatrics, Volume 124, Number 5, November 2009), "exposure to violence in media, including television, movies, music, and video games, represents a significant risk to the health of children and adolescents," including aggressive behavior, desensitization to violence, nightmares, and fear of being harmed.

More than half of all video games are rated as containing violence, including more than 90% of games rated as appropriate for children 10 years or older. These games "provide an ideal environment in which to learn violence and use many of the strategies that are most effective for learning." The player is in the role of the aggressor and is rewarded for successful violent behavior. The games encourage repetitive and long playing to improve scores and advance to higher levels, and in some children and adolescents, promote addiction and an acceptance of violence as an appropriate means of solving problems and achieving goals.

Other articles cited in the Pediatrics statement focus on brain function and its relation to media violence; several "studies have linked media-violence exposure to decreases in prefrontal cortex activity associated with executive control over impulsive behavior." (Carnagey NL, et al. Media violence and social neuroscience: new questions and new opportunities. *Curr Dir Psychol Sci.* 2007;16(4):178–182)

Measurement of brain function is a relatively new science, but the similarities between video games and high-tech, remotely controlled drones killing from afar scare me. Are we retraining the brains of the next generation?

Time to get involved? Resources that you may find helpful: Granny Peace Brigade (New York) held holiday actions, "War is not a game," in December www.grannypeacebrigade.org ; Code Pink held actions, has downloadable stickers <http://www.codepink4peace.org>; TRUCE (Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment), a national organization of educators concerned about the impact of media and commercial culture on children, provides a list of toys and trends online at www.truceteachers.org; Peace Education Foundation www.peaceeducation.com; Canada's Physicians for Global Society, nonviolent conflict resolution www.pgs.ca.

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