ENCYCLOPEDIA
on Early Childhood
Development

Young Children's Play Fighting and Use of War Toys

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June 2013

Introduction

Adults often perceive young children's play fighting and use of war toys as violent or aggressive behaviour rather than beneficial to their development. Movies (e.g., Star Wars), books (e.g., Harry Potter), national figures (e.g. military forces), community helpers (e.g., police officers), professional sports (e.g., rugby) and commercial toys (e.g., Nerf guns) influence young children's desire to engage in such play. In spite of that, educational programs often either discourage or ban this controversial form of play resulting in contrasting societal messaging for young children related to the appropriateness of play fighting and war toys. For example, fencing, an international sport, where those who excel are awarded medals, features three types of bladed weapons maneuvered in actions representative of fighting. Further, police officers use stun guns, firearms, and tear gas, yet are often recognized as instrumental for any society seeking to protect citizens. A closer look at the characteristics of children's play fighting and use of war toys will indicate that the behaviour is voluntary, choreographed, enjoyable and usually proceeds with caution and care.

Subject

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Parents and educators struggle with the appropriateness of young children's play fighting,[1] and interest in war toys (e.g., guns, swords, bombs, light sabers and blasters) in home and school settings. Play fighting with symbolic weapons or war toys is a form of socio-dramatic play predominantly observed amongst boys ages three to six years. Play fighting is defined as verbally and physically cooperative play behaviour involving at least two children, where all participants enjoyably and voluntarily engage in reciprocal role-playing that includes aggressive make-believe themes, actions, and words; yet lacks intent to harm either emotionally or physically. Play fighting encompasses superhero play,[2] "bad guy" play,[3] active pretend play,[4] physically active and imaginative play,[5] rough-and-tumble play,[6,7,8] and war play.

Problems

Educators are pressured to disregard the benefits of aggressive socio-dramatic play resulting in prohibition of various forms of the play, particularly play fighting[4,9] and engagement with war toys. However, the elimination of play fighting and war toys by parents and educators may have a significant impact on young children's development. Research suggests that the optimal education and development of young children, particularly boys, is not being met when playful aggressive tendencies are forbidden.[4,6,7,10] Further, educational programs that restrict play types may foster play deficits, which inadvertently will leave children unprepared for future experiences.[11] While educators are often uncomfortable with play fighting and with war toys, it can be argued that the omission of these forms of play in early childhood programs limits opportunities for development of social, emotional, physical, cognitive and communicative abilities in young children.

Research Context

Play fighting generates central social learning experiences which support children as they practice controlled and motivated competitive and cooperative behaviour among peers.[6] Understandably, this form of play is controversial. Carlsson-Paige suggest that war play is detrimental to child development due to its imitative nature rather than the creation of novel play experiences.[12] Nevertheless, research supports dramatic and sociodramtic play as important to child development[2,5] with two key elements of sociodramatic play being imitation and make-believe.[1]

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Professional organizations have influenced early childhood practice when considering exposure to fighting and war toys. For example, developmentally appropriate practice, the initiative by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), supports and encourages the presence of certain forms of uniforms and images in the classroom, yet bans weapons and actions symbolic of, or believed to glorify, violence. Educator training and development often does not delineate playful aggression from serious aggression perpetuated by the aspiration to decrease violence in all forms[13] and promote legislative efforts for the standardization of manufacturing physically and psychologically safe commercial toys.[14] For example, Watson and Peng[15] suggest that toy gun play is not associated with many positive behaviours, while Fry[16] noted that play fighting and serious fighting can be categorized into separate types of behaviour in young children. Hellendoorn and Harinck[17] differentiated play fighting as make-believe-aggression and rough-and-tumble since playful aggression should not be considered real aggression. Educators may discourage or ban play fighting and war toys because they perceive the play fighting as detrimental to child development rather than beneficial[3,4,8] and the war toys as symbols of violence.

It is important to recognize that play fighting and play with war toys lack intent to harm. Participants may sustain injuries, but such injuries are due to the nature of play, and not the purpose. This is an important distinction when identifying serious aggression, where the manifestation of behaviour holds the purpose of explicitly intending to injure or destroy and such behaviour is directed towards another with the intent to harm.[18,19] However, children who exhibit significantly higher rates of antisocial behaviour and negative emotion display more violent actions during pretend play and engage in more frequent antisocial behaviour outside the context of their play.[20] Additional support is needed for young children who lack age-appropriate prosocial skills and emotional regulation.

Key Research Questions

Smilansky[21] suggests socio-dramatic play involves the cooperative interaction of at least two children, who act out roles both verbally and physically, with two key elements: imitation and make-believe. The acceptance or suppression of socio-dramatic play is determined by the knowledge and perceptions of early childhood educators. For greater understanding researchers should consider to what extent play fighting and war toys are accepted in the home and educational settings along with the contextual components that influence acceptance or suppression.

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Recent Research Results

Parents and educators often misinterpret or are uncomfortable with play fighting due to its resemblance to serious aggression and difficulty recognizing subtle differences between the two.[3,7] Playful aggression is a common component in socio-dramatic play — typically among boys.[6,10,22,23] If playful aggression is supported, it is highly beneficial to child development.[3] The act of pretending to be aggressive is not equivalent to being aggressive.[3] Role reversal, cooperation, voluntary engagement, chasing and fleeing, restrained physical contact, smiling and laughing are common characteristics of playful aggression.[16] Within this framework of understanding, play fighting and war toys can be considered components of socio-dramatic play.[3] This suggests that early childhood educators need opportunities to enhance their understanding of the benefits of pretend play, including aggressive dramatic play themes such as fighting and war, in order to more effectively support play.

Research Gaps

Although there is abundant literature supporting forms of socio-dramatic play commonly perceived as appropriate (i.e., house keeping, community helpers), little is known of how to support aggressive socio-dramatic play such as play fighting[1] and the use of war toys in the classroom. Research is needed to develop a cohesive terminology that clearly identifies various types of aggressive socio-dramatic play, targets the developmental benefits of each type, and distinguishes various toys and actions characteristic of aggressively representative play. Research findings to date have supported the inclusion of aggressive socio-dramatic play in early childhood education, yet minimal practical guidance for educators is offered to aid in the development of strategies and clear tactics for supervising play fighting and war toy play.

Conclusion

Research demonstrates distinct differences between serious aggressive behaviour and playful aggressive behaviour, with intent to harm being the major factor of serious aggression. Research further demonstrates playful aggressive behaviour as a neglected, yet important element of socio-dramatic play, especially for young boys. Children who engage in play fighting are simply pretending to be aggressive as they develop a fighting theme that commonly involves symbolic weapons or war toys. They frequently exchange roles, collaboratively develop storylines, and repeat sequences in an effort to perfect their physical movements and the social dynamics of

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their play. Participants enjoyably and voluntarily engage in reciprocal role-playing that includes aggressive make-believe themes, actions, words and weapons; yet lacks intent to harm either emotionally or physically. However, educators must be cognizant of supervision, a key component for supporting play fighting. As with learning to cut with scissors, writing with a sharp pencil, and climbing on playground equipment, young children need the establishment of clear guidelines and reinforcement or redirection from educators to ensure their safety is assured within developmentally appropriate play.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

Without a full understanding of the distinct difference between serious and symbolic aggression educators may react with conflicting messages to young children regarding the appropriateness of engaging in socio-dramatic play involving play fighting and war toys. This confusion often results in educators who are pressured to disregard the benefits of aggressive socio-dramatic play by banning play fighting[4,9] and war toys.

Inconsistent rules and guidelines relating to the role of play fighting and war toys in early childhood education contribute to the struggle to recognize benefits and support children's engagement. Educators who hold a foundation of understanding will be better able to communicate the importance of not only allowing playful aggression but also supporting it with the inclusion of war toys in early childhood programs.

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