BATTLING THE BOYS: EDUCATORS GRAPPLE WITH VIOLENT PLAY

BY WYNNE PARRY, 08/29/2010

In her 30 years as a kindergarten teacher in Illinois and Massachusetts, Jane Katch has watched graham crackers, a pretzel, celery, tree bark and fingers all become transformed into imaginary guns and other weapons. And she has learned to work with, rather than against, the violent boyhood fantasies that accompany these transformations. "When you try to ignore it, it doesn't go away. And when you try to oppress it, it comes out in sneaky ways," Katch said. Not every teacher agrees. Schools have become battlegrounds between the adults who are repelled by the play violence they see and the children — primarily boys — who are obsessed with pretending to fight, capture, rescue and kill. While some educators prohibit this behavior, other educators and researchers claim that banishing violent play from classrooms can be harmful to boys. It's a debate entangled in gender issues, since nearly all early-childhood educators are women, and they may be less comfortable than their male counterparts with boys' impulses. While this behavior has been around far longer than toy guns and superhero movies — boys appear to be hard-wired for more active and aggressive pursuits than girls — many adults see this aggressive play being fueled by the violence portrayed or reported in the media. "It is a very strange thing that is happening in our society," said Katch, who is the author of "Under Deadman's Skin: Discovering the Meaning of Children's Violent Play" (Beacon Press, 2002). "The violence in the media is more and more explicit, and at the same time culture is coming down harder and harder on little boys' own fantasies, which are actually much less violent than what is in the media."

Michael Thompson, a psychologist who co-wrote "Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys" (Ballantine Books, 2000), rejects even this characterization of boys' play. "There is no such thing as violent play," Thompson told LiveScience. "Violence and aggression are intended to hurt somebody. Play is not intended to hurt somebody. Play, rougher in its themes and rougher physically, is a feature of boyhood in every society on Earth."

Gender politics

Four-year-old boys play superhero or enact mock fights much more frequently than girls, who seem to favor house or family themes for playtime, according to a survey of 98 female teachers who worked with these kids. Meanwhile, games involving chasing, protecting and rescuing are played about as frequently by girls as by boys, according to the teachers. There is, however, a marked difference in how the teachers respond to these games. Almost half the surveyed teachers reported stopping or redirecting boys' play several times a week or every day. Meanwhile, only 29 percent of teachers reported interfering with girls' more sedate play on a weekly basis, according to the research conducted by Mary Ellin Logue, of the University of Maine, and Hattie Harvey, of the University of Denver, published in the education journal The Constructivist. Logue cited multiple reasons for female teachers' resistance to boys' aggressive play. "We don't want to condone violence, we don't want to risk it getting out of control, and we don't want to deal with parents' wrath," Logue said. When Logue and other teachers decided to allow play involving the imaginary "bad guys," the adversaries in boys' aggressive narratives, into their preschool program in Maine, one family left, some were anxious, but others were relieved, she said. According to Thompson, this reaction often arises from mothers and female teachers who did not grow up playing the way boys play. "They have a belief — call it an urban myth — that if boys play this way it will desensitize them to violence and they will grow up to be more violent. But it is a misunderstanding of what makes adults violent," Thompson said. For example, he said, how often are a convicted murderer's actions explained by too many games of "cops and robbers" on the playground? There's no link between the two, according to Thompson. Male teachers might be better attuned to boys' needs, but they are rare entrants into the worlds of preschools and kindergartens. In 2009, just 2.2 percent of pre-K and kindergarten teachers were men, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. "It is a very low-paying, low-status job, and we know who gets those jobs," Katch said. Since that is not likely to change soon, women in those positions need to cultivate an understanding of little boys' play, she said. British researcher Penny Holland, author of the book "We Don't Play With Guns Here: War Weapon and

Superhero Play in the Early Years" (Open University Press, 2003), draws a parallel between the zero-tolerance policy once prevalent in playgrounds and nurseries in England and the focus by feminists during the women's liberation movement of the 1970s and early '80s on male-instigated violence, both individual and institutional. "Perceived sexist patterns in children's play clearly presented themselves as an area in which women could take some control," she writes. England's zero-tolerance policy, which was later lifted, reflected the spirit of that earlier era, according to Holland.

Social development

By age 4, most children have developed complex play incorporating multiple character roles and symbolic props, according to Deborah Leong, a professor of psychology at Metropolitan State College of Denver, and Elena Bodrova, principal researcher with Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning. Studies have linked play to both social and cognitive development. Through sophisticated play (including games like cops and robbers), children learn to delay gratification, prioritize, consider the perspectives of others, represent things symbolically, and control impulses, Leong and Bodrova wrote in the magazine Early Childhood Today in 2005. Although it is difficult to make a direct connection between academics and play, there is also concern about a new gender gap as boys lag behind girls in many aspects of school all the way up to college enrollment. Evidence suggests this gap begins as soon as children enter classrooms. 2005 study by Walter Gilliam of the Yale University Child Study Center found that preschool boys were expelled more than 4.5 times as frequently as girls. The study suggests that challenging behavior is responsible, but does not offer additional insight.

But where does the urge to play fight and play shoot come from?

Diane Levin, an author and professor of education at Wheelock College in Massachusetts, became interested in what she describes as "war play" in the mid-1980s, when she began hearing from teachers that violent play had escalated within classrooms, and that bans no longer held back children clearly obsessed with playing war, police, superhero, or any other game involving violence. From their research, Levin and her colleague Nancy Carlsson-Paige eventually linked the change with the Federal Communications Commission's 1984 decision to roll back policies limiting advertising on children's television. The decision opened the floodgates for programming designed to sell products to children, marketing violence to boys and prettiness to girls, Levin said. (Revisions to the decision during the Clinton administration did little to negate the problems created by deregulation, according to Levin.) Perhaps magnifying the problem, psychologists think children can't recognize persuasive intent behind advertising until they reach about 7 or 8 years old. Levin and Carlsson-Paige's research is detailed in "The War Play Dilemma: What Every Parent and Teacher Needs to Know" (Teacher's College Press, Second Edition, 2005). Thompson sees the media playing a much less influential role. He cites superheroes, a common theme in boy play, as an example. "The media has provided boys with particular superheroes to believe in and to attach their fantasies to, but the impulse to be a superhero is innate," Thompson said. "Boys are innately wired for dominance and that is going to affect the kinds of stories they like and the kind of games they play." The heroic themes of boy play have been around for a while, "at least since Homer," Thompson said. "So I just see boy play as mythic battling."

Co-opting the bad guys

Levin, meanwhile, finds the rise of play drawing on shows like "He-Man" or "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" alarming, because by simply mimicking the violence on these shows, children could learn harmful lessons. The dilemma with violent play is how to transfer it into something less harmful that still meets kids' needs, she said. Other educators have reached a similar conclusion. For Katch, this meant working with students to establish rules – like no chopping off of body parts – to transform a killing game the children had invented, called Suicide, into something that gave kids a chance to listen to each other, express their own opinions, create compromises that would work for everyone and talk about controlling real aggression. At the University of Maine's Katherine M. Durst Child Development Learning Center in Orono, Logue and her colleagues launched a program in which they incorporated activities that involved imaginary "bad guys."

"Day after day, the bad guys appeared. We redirected the play and it would always temporarily subside, but soon to reappear having been transformed into a new theme or new character names," Logue and her colleagues wrote in a 2008 article published in the journal The Constructivist. But after conversations and a letter-writing exercise intended to permanently banish these fictitious bad guys, the teachers reconsidered. "We decided that having banished the bad guys diminished the running and noise level but, also, the pretend play and energy within the classroom. No more extravagant stories were being told and the group of boys who so passionately desired the bad guys were having more difficulty sustaining long periods of play," they wrote. So, the teachers decided to have students resume writing letters daily to these imaginary figures. Then teachers noticed something else: When the children's play allowed for demonstrations of courage, power and high levels of activity, the children did not enact narratives involving fighting the imaginary bad guys**.**

The bad guys serve a purpose for the children, Logue said.

"They are also working on impulse control, they are trying really hard to be good, but it's really hard to be good," she said. "These bad guys give them a way to externalize that part of them that they are trying to conquer."