

"Bang bang! You're dead" – pondering on guns in children's play

by Pennie Brownlee



Before we start such a loaded discussion (no pun intended), I want to quote a British comedian who puts the gun debate firmly into perspective:

"And the National Rifle Association says that, 'Guns don't kill people, people do,' but I think the gun helps, you know? I think it helps. I just think just standing there going, 'Bang!' That's not going to kill too many people, is it? You'd have to be really dodgy in the heart to have that..."

Eddie Izzard (1999)

Children who engage in gun play have guns in their lives. The guns are there either in two dimensions (guns around the home, or the family resides in a war zone), or in three dimensions (film, TV and computer games). If guns are not within children's direct experience, or within their vicarious experience, guns will not – indeed cannot – be part of their play. Accordingly, gun play tells you more about the environment that the child resides in than about the child.

As a child whose father who kept shotguns for hunting, I had guns in my life in three dimensions. Dad taught us that you NEVER point a gun at anyone. Never. No Exceptions. That was the golden rule drilled into us. There were also other rules including never carrying your shotgun cocked, and that you take the ammunition out when climbing over gates, through fences and travelling. All of the rules were drilled into us as they had been for him when he was a child. As a child of eight he had his own shotgun and went hunting unaccompanied.

I also had guns in my life in two dimensions. On Saturdays we went into Thames to the pictures and saw Westerns. It was this vicarious experience which turned up in our play; my brother and I played out the plot of the stories we had seen on the screen. "Bang, bang. You're dead", being the cry resounding around the lawn, despite the golden rule having been drilled into us about not pointing guns at anyone. Ever. The question for the child now becomes how not to muddle these two different kinds of experience?

The questions for the adult are – Can the child make the differentiation between real and imaginary?

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Can we as adults set it up so that children have an easier time keeping the distinction between real and imaginary?

The way I see it, children play and integrate themselves with their world through their play. If guns are in their lives in any shape or form guns can turn up in play as the children integrate themselves with that part of their world. Adults can ban gun play - in the same way that they ban sex play - but the need to play these energies out is almost certainly going to turn up somewhere, somehow when no-one is looking, along with the deceit which accompanies such play. So how to facilitate a more healthy outlet for little gunslingers, with healthy adult guidance to maintain the distinction between real and imaginary?

Child development moves from the inability to distinguish between what adults understand to be real or imaginary, to being able to define the real and imaginary, as a 'normal' mentally healthy adult would. This process is not completed before seven years, and for some children it takes a lot longer. My own sense of it is that when children make their own guns to fulfil the role of a prop in their play, the imagination is employed. The resulting weapon is never going to be perceived as 'real', the gunsmith-of-any-age is quite clear that this is an imaginary weapon for imaginary play. Imaginary weapons and imaginary play are the absolute ideals for integrating whatever the child wants to work through. They adequately fulfil the need children express as they engage in play. Children have been doing just this since the beginning of human existence.

Unfortunately, with the exception of Steiner trained people, most adults

and all marketing people have little imagination about play and think that the more realistic the toy the better it is for the child. Quite the contrary. It is better for children to have capes and lengths of fabric to make their own costumes than recognisable Spider-Man suits and nurse outfits. It is better to have dolls without facial features so that children can 'place the expression and mood on the doll' with their imagination as suits the drama. It is better to have a gun made at the carpentry table, or with wooden pegs, than to have a 'real-as' AK-47 from The Warehouse. Children can, with their imagination, turn a cardboard box into an ambulance, a house, a helicopter, a submarine ... and that kind of play develops more of the child's potential than any other kind of play. The act of taking imagery from their minds and superimposing it onto a carton is magic; it makes hundreds of thousands of connections in the child's brain. When a piece of wood is magically 'seen' as Dad's shotgun, brain alchemy takes place.

A child can play at pointing the wooden gun they have made at someone and go "Bang bang. You're dead," and know for sure that their gun is only imaginary. It is easy for this child to distinguish real and imaginary; it is in no way confusing. Replica guns are quite different. Buying replica guns as toys is the act of an adult who is confused about children's play, and playing with replicas is confusing for children, blurring as it does the line between real and imaginary.

To further confuse children and complicate the picture, many children play at computer games where the object is to point the gun at people and to shoot them, dead. The more people you shoot

dead, the more successful you are deemed to be. These games are not products of the children's own imagination in response to playing out some of their energies. These are simulated experiences and are clearly vicarious. However, simulated experiences do set people up for the real. One example of how effective they are for this is the way flight simulators are used in the training of aircraft pilots, cosmonauts and astronauts. Simulated experiences can entrain behaviour, and if the behaviour in the game is killing there are questions to consider. Is killing for fun the kind of behaviour one would want to entrain? This is not the kind of gun play which sets children up to work through the energies they want to express from their gun experience, but it could well set them up for something less life enhancing.

My brother and I, like lots of kids our age, spent hours in imaginary play with imaginary weapons playing Cowboys and Indians - because that is what we saw in the movies. We, like every person who played likewise, knew the difference between real and imagined. We both knew that when it was the shotgun we were holding, different rules applied. The line between real and imaginary had been clearly drawn for us, and our play and our playthings kept the line distinct.

I think our role as adults is to assist any children who need/want to play with the gun as part of their experience. We make sure there are materials which they can use to make the props they need, and we can keep the line between real and imaginary as definite as is humanly possible, particularly in these times of realistic simulated gun 'games'.