

Weapon Play at SYC

Many parents wonder why we let children play with toy weapons at SYC. Every year there are certain children who want--and seem to need--this kind of play. Sometimes weapon play becomes part of the peer culture of a class, much like Pretty Ponies, Care Bears, Barbies and others.

I can remember my own children playing cowboys and cowgirls. I questioned letting my children play at "war". But the day I looked out into our back yard and saw Mike using our toilet plunger as a gun so he could play with his friend who had a toy gun, I began to question what I was doing by not allowing weapon play in our home. I began to see that Mike had a very different view of toy guns than I did of guns in general. I began to look at weapon play in a child developmental way instead of in my adult socio-political way.

Over the years all the popular superhero characters have shown up at SYC. We have seen Superman, Batman, Catwoman, Spiderman, the Hulk, He Man and Sheba, Ghostbusters, Ninja Turtles and the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers. Sometimes the play is called "Good Guy Bad Guy" with no assigned superheroes. And some classes do more of this play than others.

Throughout this play, children are working on developmental issues including a sense of good and evil, a sense of power and protection, and a *beginning* sense of life and death. Development is most likely to happen when children are allowed to select their own play themes. Parents usually don't like these play themes and worry that children will become violent and aggressive because of this play. Our teachers are carefully trained in dealing with children who are playing with toy weapons. From the beginning of the year, children are told, "people are not for hurting" and hurting others is not allowed. Of course they are just beginning to learn, and children do occasionally get hurt. The incident of the hurting becomes a lesson to all children in the class as we discuss what happened. We do not let children hit each other with swords or other weapons. If a child will not stop hitting, we take the weapon away until the child tells us she will not hit again. Children can do amazing things with their fine motor skills to keep from hitting others so they can continue using weapons!

Some children are frightened by weapon play and don't want to participate. In some cases it even scares them to watch this play. If this is the case, we limit weapon play to the running room, so the frightened child has the choice of two other rooms in which to play. Sometimes children don't know how they feel about this kind of play. Teachers use a divider and label it the "safety corner" where children can go to feel safe, but yet be able to watch the play. Sometimes after a period of observing the weapon play, a child will want to join in. Children who continue to be frightened sometimes feel better if teachers support them while they ask the weapon-playing children if they're going to hurt them. Once they are assured that we enforce the rule that people are not for hurting, they will often join in, or go on with other kinds of activities.

Some children cling to weapons at the beginning of the year as a security object. When the weapons disappear from their hands, then we know they are feeling comfortable. We have not seen more aggression in our classes because of this play. In fact, we see less. During "war" play, conflicts arise which provide us with one of the most important opportunities for learning at SYC, where we can help children learn to resolve their own disputes. We clearly state our people-aren't-for-hurting policy and

then encourage the children to talk about the problem, expressing their wants and feelings until some resolution is reached.

Our 4-year-olds put politicians to shame with their conflict resolution skills.

...Jan Waters, Director Emeritus