

War Toys/PGS Briefing Paper

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The development of values and attitudes begins in childhood and emerges through the child's construction of very many value inputs from many sources. Toys represent a salient source of value messages.

War Toys attribute a positive value to hurting killing and threatening others. Permission to have in the home toys that convey this value implies parental approval of this value. Because of the pervasiveness of war toys and war fantasies, many parents find themselves by default in the position of conveying inconsistent values about hurting, killing and threatening others.

We wish to state that war toys convey values inconsistent with values we hold to be vital to a peaceful and just world. We express our strong opposition to war toys in the home, the market place, and television advertising.

The Problem

PGS, as an organization which devotes its efforts towards the prevention of war as a means of dealing with conflict, finds itself working on, not only the technological means of waging wars (weapons of all kinds), but also the values which cause many people to assume that organized or mass violence is the best or only way of dealing with conflict. Militaristic values pervade most societies and are particularly strong in our neighboring culture, the USA. These values invade the world of our children through television, toys, video games, films and some sports.

As a group of people working towards goals which we hope will create a better future for all children, we must raise the question of the impact of war toys on the socialization of children towards a world in which conflicts are managed by nonviolent means. Does exposure to and use of these toys, (e.g. GI Joe), together with watching violent television shows promoting the toys and modeling their use contribute to greater acceptance of militaristic values and therefore later political support of particular wars in adult life? Or are war toys and war play neutral and irrelevant to the moral and political socialization of children?

As health workers interested not only in the moral development of children, but also their social and emotional development, we might also inquire whether there are short term costs or benefits of war toys. Do they help children attain inner mastery of their fears and the violence in the world around them? Do they help children discharge spontaneous aggressive impulses? Or do they, by implicitly conveying acceptance of violent strategies of behavior, increase aggressiveness of children?

A close examination of the issue raises concerns that war toys teach children that:

- war is a game, an exciting adventure.
- killing is acceptable, even fun.
- violence or the threat of violence is the only way to resolve conflicts.
- the world is divided into "goodies" and "baddies" where the bad guys are devoid of

human qualities and their destruction is desirable.

The story-line repetitively casts bad people (as aliens or robots) seeking power to control the world (or city or universe). The "good people" vanquish them with violence. The child learns that justice, reason and effective communication do not achieve success. The weapon is a tool of power over others and necessary to deal with "evil."

Toy manufacturers have appalling deficits in understanding the potential damage of inventing enemies. "Nomad, the terrorist doll" wore a burnoose and was described as devious, traitorous, and desperate and leads a savage band of cut-throats and call no country his home." U.S. and Canadian Arab Associations protested that this was an insulting stereotype of Palestinians and the doll was withdrawn. "Zartan, the enemy" was "paranoid schizophrenic with multiple personalities" and was withdrawn after protest from the Canadian Mental Health Association who saw it as a "deplorable stereotype" of people with mental illness.

The Context

The toy industry is huge and intensely competitive. It is considered important for large scale promotion to have a television series based on the toy. These shows are seen in 30 minute commercials by many - aimed at a vulnerable audience. Some commercials are very violent, cueing the child's subsequent fantasy as s/he plays with the toys. The toy industry consults closely with the military in developing toys. A Patriot missile model was on the market before the war against Iraq was over.

Most of the war toys that trouble Canadian parents come from U.S. companies and are promoted by U.S. television series. In the U.S. there is high acceptance of military means of conflict resolution and a heavy dependence of the economy on military production. Societies always begin in childhood to induce their dominant values in juvenile members. Toys and television are powerful ways of inducing acceptance of war, militarism and authority-sanctioned violence in the young.

The Evidence

What factors determine the moral development of a child who moves into adulthood valuing all human beings as equal, respecting the complexities of humans (That there is no absolute good/evil dichotomy), loving justice, valuing nonviolent conflict resolution and practiced in empathy and compassion.

The answers are not all in, but the evidence points, among other factors to having parents and teachers who model these values and attitudes; who deliberately train the child in the skills associated with them; who praise the child when s/he manifests them; who attribute qualities such as justice and compassion to the child; who exhort the child to live by these values, explaining that it will make a better world to do so, and who comment on failures to manifest these qualities. The parent training a child in the above qualities may point out contrary values in a TV show or toy, using the moment to clarify the values.

It is hard to imagine a parent engaged in these kinds of interactions with a child when presenting a gift wrapped machine gun or model Desert Storm toys.

The point is that socialization of the child in these qualities comprises a myriad of small interactions over years. It is unlikely that the arrival on the scene of a toy tank from an aunt will

disrupt this socialization. But deliberate choice or acceptance of toys or fantasized killing or wounding would be likely to weaken and confuse it, giving the child conflicting messages.

Another point to be made here is that war toys are given to boys. Girls evince less interest in war play. It is highly likely that war toys are one of the vehicles by which we socialize boys to assume that the male role involves coercion and violence. This is seen increasingly as a serious social problem.

Because of the complexity and subtlety of moral socialization, it is difficult to extract one element of it - i.e. the toys presented to a child - and look at socialization outcomes. In fact this has never been done.

What has been done is to look at the immediate or short term impact of war toys on aggressive and anti social elements in children's play. A number of controlled studies with children with and without war toys showed significant increases of aggressive and anti-social behavior in the presence of war toys. None showed no effect of war toys. The children evidently experienced the availability of toys associated with violence as stimuli to act out aggressive fantasies or permission to act on aggressive impulses. The effect is the opposite of the supposition that war play reduces aggression by catharsis, as the increased aggression can be seen to continue into a play setting subsequent to the war toy exposure.

Conclusions

1. War toys are very likely to increase aggressive behavior in children, at least in the short term.
2. Provision of or acceptance of war toys by adults socializing children is likely to interfere with inducing values and skills of nonviolent conflict resolution, empathy, compassion and a complex view of the equality and diversity of humankind and the worth of all living things.

Recommendations for Action

WITHIN THE FAMILY

What are parents to do? It is not easy to swim against the tide of advertising or peer pressure. Here are some suggestions:

1. Do not provide war toys for your child.
2. Realize that your child must live within the culture and from an early age will be exposed to the idea that weapons confer power and are desirable. When children make guns out of Lego or a piece of toast, simply let them know that guns are for killing and you do not like creatures being killed. Leave it at that.
3. Begin early to teach your child awareness of the blandishments of television advertising and that it is designed to make people buy things.
4. Explain to relatives that your ideas on war toys and ask them not to buy them for gifts.
5. On invitations for birthday parties, add a note to say that if a gift is given, you would appreciate its not being a war toy.
6. If a child longs for a war toy, you might consider the merits of letting him or her have it, while at the same time clarifying your own discomfort with killing and hurting.
7. If a child is enacting a war type scenario, begin a dialogue that might expand understanding of social strategies, and the help the child evaluate the fantasy. "It

seems the Turtles always get what they want by fighting. Is there any other way they could solve their problems?"

BEYOND THE FAMILY

1. Join Canadians Concerned About Violence in Entertainment. For information contact: Carole Collier, 74 Collin Avenue, Toronto, ON M5P 2B9.
2. Consider meeting with store personnel to present and explain requests that they do not stock war toys, particularly at Christmas. Project Ploughshares has done this with some success, as have other groups. If a store eschews war toys, do what you can to reward it by encouraging others to shop there.
3. You might consider a more active demonstration of these values by erecting a sign and handing out pamphlets outside stores selling war toys at Christmas. You might wish to sell as a fund raiser a very pleasant children's music tape about how Santa and his elves dealt with the dilemma of having children ask for war toys. This cassette, called HO HO HUM was produced by Charly Chiarelli and David Hurley. It is available through: Physicians for Global Survival (Canada), #208, 145 Spruce Street, Ottawa, ON K1R 6P1.
4. Some communities run a toy exchange: for example at a Hiroshima/Nagasaki Day lantern ceremony or peace fair. A child brings in a war toy and receives a yo-yo or Frisbee in exchange. Several PGS chapters have done this.
5. Write to companies advertising on the television animations of war toys, telling them why you disapprove of war toys and violent television and why you will not buy their products.

International Legislation on War Toys

Sweden and Norway have successful voluntary restriction of the sale of war toys; Malta prohibits their import; Greece bans television advertising; Australia places some restrictions on imports. The European Parliament recommended that its member states ban advertising of war toys and reduce their sale. With the Free Trade Agreement in Canada, it is unclear whether anything could be attempted with legislation.

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