

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Turning Toys into Weapons

Promoting the Life Skill of Perspective Taking in Preschoolers

Six Strategies that Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: My son turns all of his toys into weapons. He doesn't really hurt anyone or anything, but his child care program doesn't allow that kind of play, and I don't want him to get into trouble. Should I stop him from playing this way?

During the preschool years, children are beginning to explore ideas like what it means to be powerful and strong. They are also still learning about how their actions affect others. There are many daily opportunities for you to help support your child's play while promoting the life skill of Perspective Taking.

- 1. Decide how you feel about your child's play.** Before you can begin to promote Perspective Taking with your child in this situation, it is up to you to decide how you feel about your child's weapon play. Ask yourself questions like:
 - Is this play acceptable to you at home as long as he doesn't pretend to shoot/kill anyone?
 - When is it appropriate to play these kinds of games?

Your child will sense if you haven't made up your mind about your feelings, so make sure that you are clear about what your goal is before talking to your child or your child's teachers.

- 2. Talk with your child's teachers.** See how they handle this kind of play at school. It is important for you to get their point of view about the subject. It is also important to understand the teachers' reasons for not allowing weapon play so you can explain them to your child and help him understand the reasons behind the rules at school.
- 3. Have a discussion with your child.** Try to understand his point of view and what he might be expressing with this kind of play. Is he trying out what it feels like to be powerful or what it feels like to be the bad guy? You might say things like:
 - "Tell me what you like about playing with swords."
 - "What does it feel like when you pretend to shoot the bad people?"

Once you understand your child's perspective, then you can help him begin to understand other people's points of view.

Rebecca Saxe of MIT, using fMRI technology to measure brain activity, found that the parts of the brain children use to think about others' thoughts and feelings is emerging in the preschool years.

In order to predict what somebody else is going to do if they know different things than you do, if they believe different things than you do, or if they see different things than you do, you have to be able to step out of your own perspective and step into their perspective. Another way to say that is you have to be able to inhibit your own knowledge. If you look at [children's] ability to be able to inhibit [what they know] in order to respond based on somebody else's perspective, that's an incredibly important accomplishment, and it's developing a lot between ages two and six.

- 4. Help your child understand other people's points of view.** Because your son is still developing his understanding that others can think and feel differently than he does, he needs you to guide him. The first thing that you need him to understand is that weapon play is not allowed in his child care program. You can say things like:
 - "Your teachers don't allow children to play with weapons. What other ways do you like to play in your child care program?"

If you have spoken with your son's teachers about their reasons for not allowing weapon play, it is useful to explain these reasons to him in ways that he can understand.

Whether or not you have decided to allow your child to turn his toys into weapons at home, you can have a discussion with him about how this kind of play makes others feel:

- "Did you notice how your friend acted when you pretended to shoot things? He didn't like it, so you can't play that way when you are with him. What other things do you like to do together?"
- "Your friends seem to like weapon play, but then they started running around and acting wild and that kind of play wasn't fun for anyone. So, we are not going to play this way when you are playing with others."

If you are going to allow weapon play, you can set some rules such as letting your child pretend to shoot targets, but not people. Use everyday moments to help your child practice thinking about people's responses in other kinds of situations: "Why do you think your aunt got upset when her friend forgot her birthday?"

5. Redirect your child's focus on weapons. You can use your child's interest in weapon play as an opportunity to expand his learning and expose him to new ways of thinking. In this way, you are respecting your child's interest while redirecting him to other kinds of play. Here are some things you might try:

- Give your child a safe weapon to play with like a water gun. You can also set rules for how to use the water gun, such as no shooting at people or pets. You can set up targets for water gun play.
- Introduce your child to different heroes of the past, like knights and Vikings. You can visit the library together to look for books and movies or use the Internet to get more information.
- Encourage your child to use his imagination. He can draw pictures of his weapon ideas. Ask him what he wants to say about them and write down his words. This will also help support your child's pre-reading and writing skills.

6. Use books and television as learning opportunities. Books and television shows can be great prompts for talking to your child about other people's thoughts and feelings. Engage your child in conversations while reading or watching by asking questions like:

- "I wonder how that little boy feels?"
- "What happened to make him feel that way?"
- "Did you ever feel like that?"
- "I wonder how his friend can help him feel better?"

Be aware of what your child is exposed to through television and video games. Young children are still working on understanding what is real and what is not. Children who are exposed to a lot of violence and aggression in the media will likely imitate what they see.

These six strategies promote the life skill of Perspective Taking and work to move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Perspective Taking goes far beyond empathy. It involves figuring out what others think and feel, and forms the basis for children's understanding of the intentions of their parents, teachers and friends. Children who can understand others' perspectives are also much less likely to get involved in conflicts.

Mind in the Making (MITM), at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children's learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

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