



FRONT PORCH SERIES BROADCAST CALLS

The Importance of Peer Interaction and Social Pretend Play

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Q: What is your advice when play turns a little violent? When the blocks turn into guns, how do we understand where our children are coming from?

A: There are two kinds of violent. This is the first, where blocks are turned into guns via the imagination of the children. I had a no-guns policy in my home—we checked air guns at the door. If there was a block that became a gun I reminded them that we had a no-guns policy and the guns needed to go back.

I think it's important for teachers to reflect on their own beliefs and their own practices, and what makes them feel comfortable. If blocks becoming guns makes you so uncomfortable that you spend all of your time banning the guns, perhaps you should rethink this. There's another line of thought that says: children play with guns, and they're going to play with guns, and they're going to make the blocks into guns if they don't have guns, and I can live with that in my classroom. I know of no good research on the topic of blocks that become guns, and I think that this is one of the times when you really have to think about who you are, what makes you most comfortable—in order to free you to form those good relationships with children, keep them safe, and enjoy the peer play that's happening.

If you talk about violent peer play that turns aggressive, and there's biting and clawing and hair pulling, then I think you need to step in. That's when it's wonderful if you have enough adults in the classroom so that each one of the perpetrators can be held by an adult while we talk this through, because children's emotions are very high at that point. They're scared, they're sad, they're hurt. The one who bit is hurting and the one who was bitten is, of course, hurting. So I think avoiding shaming, talking through the conflict, talking about what the basic rules are for how we engage with children in this classroom—that we don't hurt each other. The same thing goes if the blocks, instead of becoming guns, become projectiles and fly through the air.

Q: How do you encourage parents to bring their children to play groups and to give their children opportunities to interact with their peers?

A: Well, I think that has something to do with home culture. For example, with the children that I have most recently been studying, I've been following some of the very earliest Early Head Start children for a really good, long time. We have data on them all the way through fifth grade. Those parents were not interested in coming to play groups, they were working several jobs, they were really stressed. But those children, when

we went into the homes, were playing. There were massive numbers of cousins, older children, aunts, extended families, and the children were playing at home, even if they weren't playing in play groups. So first of all, you have to know what's going on at home with the children.

I am, myself, a big fan of play groups. I think in particular that children who are isolated at home and not with other children need to come to play groups. The key, of course, is to get enough parents there so the parents become completely interested in talking with each other, and the children can go out and play. The worst kind of a situation is when you have two adults and one child, and the child wants the adults' attention, and that turns into not such a pleasant interaction. I do know that, as with everything we understand in Early Head Start, it's very important to know the families and to know what's going on at home, what the parents' beliefs are, and then to compromise, and work with, and find some common ground.



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