



National Day Nurseries Association

★Brighter thinking
for early years

Factsheet



Gun & Superhero Play

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Gun play is a contentious issue with 79% of nursery practitioners saying in a survey in 2018 that there was a zero-tolerance approach to this in their setting. Both gun play and superhero play can create loud noisy scenarios which can seemingly disturb other children in their learning. This factsheet weighs up the impact of a zero-tolerance approach, looks at the benefits of this type of play and recommends some practical ways gun play can be incorporated into your setting underpinned by the principles in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Framework 2021.

Approaches to gun and superhero play

Does this sound familiar?

“Children are not allowed to bring toy weapons into settings, are not allowed to construct or represent them with found materials and are not allowed to enact war play or superhero scenarios.”

Penny Holland, ‘We Don’t Play With Guns Here’ (2003)

Author of ‘We Don’t Play with Guns Here’ (2003), Penny Holland used to be a believer in "zero-tolerance" to violent play until she started her research for London Metropolitan University. She and her nursery co-workers slowly began to work with the children in their games and found really positive effects:

- Greater social integration
- Children’s imaginative and construction skills developed
- As the games evolved they were less focused on weapon play.

Embedding a zero-tolerance approach does not stop gun or superhero play and sometimes children will just disguise what they are doing. Alistair Bryce-Clegg identifies weapon play as having a positive impact on children’s development as it gives them an opportunity to explore their interpretations of what they see going on in the world around them. Play is so crucial to a child’s personal, social and emotional development that it is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Early years pioneer Susan Isaacs believed that children’s play is a form of self-expression that enables them to release their real feelings safely and rehearse ways of dealing with a range of emotions. Isaacs believed children’s play was to be respected and left free to evolve on their own terms because “play has the greatest value for the young child when it is really free and their own.”

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Article 31

“Every child has the right to relax, play and to join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities.”

Reflecting on this statement can help when considering your own approach to gun and superhero play and valuing and respecting children’s right to follow their own interests in their play. Consider the community your setting serves; if you are based in a military town or an area that has a high proportion of violent crime, children could be using this type of play to explore difficult concepts and their feelings about it in a safe and controlled environment.

Benefits of gun and superhero play

Birth to Five Matters (2021) identifies that a broad range of play opportunities including “role play, risky play and rough and tumble play,” (p.11) have a key role in supporting children’s learning and development in different ways and the provision should ensure that opportunities for all types of play are available.

The benefits of supporting gun and superhero play are:

- Supporting children to follow their interests
- Developing imagination
- Resolving conflicts
- Building self-esteem
- Language development
- Supporting emotional development
- Developing physical skills
- Making sense of their experiences.

Children should be free to follow their play in a safe environment with adults who can positively support their play so they can develop across the **prime areas** of learning.

Practical ways to introduce gun and superhero play

- **Staff team** – meet as a team to discuss the role of gun play/superhero play in children’s development and the benefits it can bring. Use research to help reluctant staff understand the importance of enabling children to get involved in this type of play. You may decide to nominate a member of staff as the lead, who can review progress, speak to parents etc.
- **Expectations** – agree a set of expectations for children taking part in gun play/superhero play in the setting e.g. staying in your own space
- **Environment** – review your environment and resources to assess the opportunities children have for engaging in gun play/superhero play

- **Parents** – as partners with parents it is essential that you are able to explain your ethos around gun play/superhero play. Prepare some information for parents that sets out the benefits of this type of play and the research findings that show there is no correlation between gun play in early years and violence in later life.

Supporting gun play and superhero play

- Ensure that all practitioners engage with children
- Sit with children and agree rules for gun play/superhero play so everybody can play safely
- Allocate an agreed zone for this type of play so children who do not want to get involved can play undisturbed
- Use superheroes to tell stories
- Look at real-life heroes who help the children. Talk about what makes somebody a hero. Create your own display of heroes in the children's lives
- Include action figures in your continuous provision
- Provide capes (squares of material) in your role play
- Talk about conflict resolution (age and stage appropriate) and different solutions for solving conflicts
- Be sensitive to the needs of children and families who may have experienced trauma, and seek the support of external professionals if needed.

References, further reading and support

- Holland, P (2003) 'We Don't Play With Guns Here' OUP: UK
- Isaacs, S. (1951 edition) 'Social Development in Young Children' Routledge: London
- Daynurseries.co.uk report: Saying toy guns "encourage violence" is as absurd as saying "dolls increase teenage pregnancy." <https://bit.ly/3hHiZy4> Bryce-Clegg, A. (2014)
- Outdoor and Risky Play – NDNA face-to-face training. <https://bit.ly/3LWxXNq>



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