Growing Up with Play

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Born on a mountain top in Tennessee,
Greenest state in the land of the free.
Raised in the woods so's he knew every tree,
Killed him a b’ar when he was only three.
Davy, Davy Crockett
King of the Wild Frontier.
—Tom Blackburn and George Bruns, “The Ballad of Davy Crockett,”
Walt Disney Productions, 1954

My brother and I knew many of the 20 stanzas of the Davy Crockett ballad
and honed our bear hunting and tree recognition skills in the empty cement
square down the hill from our fourth-floor Boston apartment. When our
games became too loud, Mrs. Lang opened her corner basement window
a couple of inches and shouted, “Be quiet or I’ll call the police!” We took
our hopscotch chalk, wrote “Old Lady Lang is a witch!” on her bricks, and
ran fast. In those days of no air conditioning, we stayed outside until
dinnertime, when my father would open the window and whistle in his
special call that we could hear from as far away as we were allowed to go.
We would stop our game and run for home, taking the steps two at a time.
My parents had no noticeable interest in what we played as long as we
were seated with clean hands before my mother had dinner on the table.

We lived at the top of Beacon Hill, and when I went to first grade, I
could jump rope in the playground after school and walk home alone about
a quarter of a mile across the top of the hill. There were no major streets
to cross, but I was a little afraid of witches that might be hiding on the
far side of parked cars. By the time I was eight, I took a public bus to a

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school a few miles away and tested my navigational ability by getting off at different points around the bottom of the hill, finding my way home by looking for the steepest incline. I loved the feeling of being a little nervous, not sure where I was, then suddenly finding a landmark I recognized, triumphant that I could get home all by myself.

The play of childhood has traditionally been full of imaginary and occasionally real danger. In Sidney Poitier’s autobiography, The Measure of a Man, he describes growing up on a small island in the Bahamas, where “even as a small child I was free to roam anywhere. I climbed trees by myself at four and five. . . . I would get attacked by wasps, and I would go home with both eyes closed from having been stung on the face over and over. I would be crying and hollering and screaming and petrified, and my mom would take me and treat me with bush medicines from the old culture that you wouldn’t believe, and then I would venture back out and go down to the water and fish alone” (Poitier 2007, 3–4).

Poitier credits his early years exploring and testing himself on Cat Island with helping him to know who he was, all his life. He writes, “I’m always at home because I’m the same person no matter where I am. I’m the same person at some Hollywood dinner that I was when I was being hassled by the cops in Miami or sleeping in a pay toilet in New York. It’s that consistent definition of self, I’m sure, that allowed me to get through the tough times, when others were more than happy to try to define me according to their own prejudices. . . . I’ve lived a lot of places, but in every place I’ve lived, what’s basic and fundamental in me has remained the same” (Poitier 2001, 172).

If you take a moment to remember the games you played as a child, most of them were probably games of fantasy, not organized by adults, with rules that changed by the minute. Most of them began “Let’s pretend . . . .” and they didn’t end, often going on from one day to the next, with characters mostly staying the same and plots evolving, sometimes for a whole summer. There’s plenty of imaginary violence in these adventures—wars and walking the plank, “Bang, you’re dead,” and maybe a real pot full of potentially dangerous berries and roots. Yet they didn’t require adult supervision, and usually no one got an injury worse than a skinned knee. That’s because pretend violence is not the same as real violence and pretend aggression does not lead to real aggression. The rules of the game are what generally prohibit the transition from fantasy violence to real aggression. Learning to understand and follow rules is an important aspect of child development, one that helps children gain self-control as they realize that
they can voluntarily put off their own immediate wishes in order to make the game more fun for everyone. The wish to win becomes less important than the wish to be seen, by peers, as playing fairly. Play with pretend violence, like cops and robbers or Peter Pan and Captain Hook, can take place cooperatively and peacefully when the children feel the rules are being followed and the teams are fair.

In the play of our childhoods, often the older kids taught the rules to the younger ones as they became old enough to join in the games. Street play did not contain the age segregation that occurs in school or organized sports. Older kids were expected to look after their younger siblings, and the games went more smoothly if the younger kids knew how to play properly.

Play today looks quite different. Children’s lives tend to be heavily scheduled; they spend much of their free time in front of televisions, videos, and computers, and when they do engage in fantasy play, they are rarely out of the view of adults, who consider the content and context of the games to be very much their business. Parents and teachers worry not only about whether children might be lost, hurt, or mistreated but also whether the games they are playing are good for them. Might too much violence, too many superheroes, or too much conflict encourage children to be aggressive?

The Russian developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky wrote: “Play creates a zone of proximal development of the child. In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself” (Vygotsky 1978).

Vygotsky describes the sweet play of childhood—two sisters playing a game in which they pretend to be sisters or a child picking up a stick and pretending it is a horse. Vygotsky does not raise the question of what we should do about the play that makes adults uncomfortable. This play, usually containing images of violence, has been around for a very long time, but two things have changed, creating a tension between children and adults around play that did not previously exist: children see increasingly violent images in the media, while at the same time adults have less tolerance for these same images when the children incorporate them into their play.

In my childhood Disney version of Davy Crockett, there was no apparent blood as the Mexicans tumbled down from the walls of the Alamo and Davy was never seen when he was killed. This way of picturing death fits with the “Bang, you’re dead” of play, where the child pretending to be shot counts to 10 and then gets up to continue the game. My parents, if
they noticed the song we were singing, were not worried that my brother and I would want to die at the Alamo or become kings of the wild frontier.

Now, children see *Anaconda*, with its huge snake devouring its victim, seen from inside the snake’s mouth. They also see the televised news, with its fast images and vivid footage. After 9/11, some children thought that every time they saw the news, more planes were flying into the twin towers.

Parents and teachers are puzzled about how to respond to play that reflects these themes. A parent I spoke with after the Columbine shootings was understandably concerned that her child was playing a “Columbine shooting game” in which he and his friend took turns pretending to shoot each other and fall down. Children have always played out what worries them as well as what they love and want and used this play to gain mastery over their fears and desires.

There is an alternative to either prohibiting this play, interfering with the natural way children deal with important issues in their lives, or just ignoring it, trusting that all will be well in the end. By being curious about children’s play, by asking them questions and listening to their answers, we can help them make rules about the aspects of their behavior that worry us and about the parts that worry them. In doing this, we help them to gain the tools they need to listen to each other, to compromise, and to keep their own play safe as well as fun.

At the small independent school where I teach kindergarten, a group of 10- and 11-year-old boys became intensely involved with play about World War II. At recess, they would reenact battles, while the little boys, the four- and five-year-olds, watched in fascination and the recess teachers observed with concern. Yes, the boys were carefully following the recess rules that said there was no actual touching when pretending to fight—only a kind of shadowboxing was allowed in which children must remain at least two-arms’ lengths apart. They never hurt each other and rarely argued about the rules. But was it good for the little boys to be hearing their talk about bombs and killing? Wasn’t there something better that these children could think about?

At our faculty meeting, we debated the points. If we tried to change the nature of their game, would we succeed, or would their interest in war just become more secretive? I had tried to transform such play in the past and found that the tone of aggression often remained while the overt content went underground (Katch 2001).

Was there any way we could broaden their interests? Teachers had insisted
that these boys write about more varied subjects in class but were not sure they should dictate the content of their recess play.

Some teachers wanted to prohibit any games that included pretending to shoot the opponent, while others, remembering the cap guns and war play of their own childhoods, felt reluctant to censor the content of fantasy play as long as the rules were being followed. Not able to come to agreement, we decided to watch the game carefully to see if we could observe any specific problems, either with the players or in the younger observers of the game. We agreed that we would talk with the older boys about our concerns. The boys agreed to be more aware of the younger children playing near them and to make sure that their play was not too scary for the little ones.

It is important to keep in mind that the play that makes adults nervous is not necessarily the same as the play that worries children. One year I had a little boy who loved pirate stories but had trouble connecting with other children. I happened to see some small, plastic pirate figures in a toy store and bought them, thinking that if the other children liked them, he might find it easier to join their play. But as I emptied the figures into the box that contained our other small characters—farmers, animals, and pioneers, I noticed the pirates’ tiny weapons. “We have a school rule,” I said to the children who were watching as I paused, “that we can’t bring toy weapons to school because some people feel scared if they see a toy gun pointed at them. It might remind them of a real gun. But these are very small, and I’m not sure if it’s the same problem. What do you think?”

“If we don’t shoot them at somebody, they wouldn’t be scary,” Kenny said.

“You should just point them at the other little figures,” Linda said, “because they aren’t really alive.”

This is an important distinction that had not occurred to me. There is a difference between a toy weapon pointed at a real person and one pointed at a little figure the person is holding.

“Well, sometimes the weapons could hurt you,” Cal said. “Some Bionical weapons are sharp.” Bionicals are little Lego figures that are beloved by the five- and six-year-old boys. I appreciated the idea that Cal wanted to know if the weapons are actually dangerous before making a decision.

“So do you want to touch these and see how they feel?” I asked. They did, and we all sat down at the rug to try them out.

Cal picked up the minute sword and poked it hard on the palm of his hand. “It could hurt you a tiny bit,” he said.
“I’ll pass them around and let you feel them,” I said. For a few minutes there was much poking of weapons against hands, comparisons of the edges of miniature spears and rifles. The children talked with each other as they passed the toys:

“That’s not sharp.”

“This one is, a little.”

“The swords are the ones that hurt,” Sammy said. He doesn’t usually enter these conversations, and I was delighted to hear him speak up, immediately justifying my purchase. “And this longish rifle thing is a little sharp,” he added.

Kathy pointed to a small rough bump on top of a pistol. “This part hurts,” she said.

“Yeah, but you’re not gonna play with that part,” Kenny said.

“I’ve seen a real one of those,” Cal said.

“If it was a real one, it would definitely be dangerous, and we would never, never play with it,” I said. “It’s my job to make sure you’re safe, and I would not bring something into school that I thought could really hurt you.”

“My dad has five guns that are real,” Linda said.

“And I’m sure he doesn’t let you play with them,” I said. She agreed. “How many people think the swords are too sharp?” I asked. Most children raised their hands. “What about the pistols?” I asked. Kathy, who had objected to the rough spot on the top, raised her hand.

“What about the rifle?” I asked. Sammy and Kathy and a few others thought it was too pointy. “I’m thinking about our low-temperature glue guns,” I said. “Anyone who thinks they’re too hot can choose not to use them, but people who feel comfortable with them can use them as long as they follow our glue gun rules: you can’t pretend they’re weapons, point them at anyone, or fight over them. Could we have rules about these toy weapons so that people who follow the rules can use them?”

“I think that the sword that looks like it’s wooden is really, really sharp,” Sammy said. Other children agreed. “And the other swords, too,” many said.

“We’ll put the swords away then,” I said. “Now if Kelly’s playing with the little figures and she doesn’t want to play with the weapons, can someone point one at her figure?” “No!” everyone agreed.

We settled on two rules—first, you can’t point the toy weapons at people, only at their figures. And second, you can’t point them at someone’s figure.
if they don’t want you to. I put the swords away, and we decided to talk about the pirates in a few days to see how the rules were working out.

They worked with hardly a hitch. One boy pointed his rifle at a person instead of a figure, was firmly reminded of the rule by his friend, and stopped immediately. A few days later, I asked how the pirate play was going.

Jeannie said, “Well, me, Rachel and Eva, we were playing with them, and we were pretending pirates were destroying the village, so we just used the weapons to protect us ’cause we didn’t want the pirates to attack us.”

“Who was the bad guys?” Linda asked.

“The pirates,” Jeannie said. “Everybody got to be one pirate.”

“The only problem is I came in late and I didn’t get much things,” Linda said, “but then eventually they started giving me things, and I just got them.”

The children wanted to be sure they wouldn’t actually be hurt by the tiny weapons, and they wanted to know that the rules for fairness would be followed by everyone. But they were not concerned that the weapons symbolized potential danger.

A *New York Times Magazine* recent article, “Taking Play Seriously,” referred to “play’s dark side” and asked, “Why is it that something so joyous, something children yearn for so forcefully, can be so troubling too?” (Henig 2008, 10). Yet we must remember that, in this play, children can learn much about themselves, their strengths and their limits, about which children are true friends and which ones are not to be trusted, when to work problems out and when to run home.

Most parents and teachers today do not have the confidence our parents had that we could play whatever we wanted and explore our surroundings with little or no supervision. We are afraid that, if they are left unsupervised, children might tease, hurt, or bully each other. They might be lost, frightened, or kidnapped. Boys’ play, with its noise, shooting, and rough and tumble exploits, makes parents, especially mothers, worry that their boys may grow up to be violent men, even though there is no evidence that this is true.

It is true that we must set firm limits about aggressive behavior. But we do not have to act as though pretend aggression is the same as adults’ real aggression. Most boys have a lot of excitement in their fantasies. They’re full of images of bad versus good, struggles for power. This does not make those boys aggressive people. They can play about these fantasies while they are cooperative, kind, and considerate of their friends. They can do it while
seeing themselves as good—ridding the world of evil and protecting those who are weaker than themselves.

We are not going to change their thoughts by prohibiting boys’ play. They will still bite their graham crackers into guns and their celery stalks into swords. If we prohibit talk of weapons and war, we run the risk of giving boys the message that they are actually dangerous—that thinking such things might make them come true. We teach them to lie when we ask what they are playing. It’s a fire hose, they tell us, caught in the act of pointing a finger at another boy. Instead it is possible to acknowledge the boys’ fantasies while helping them learn to listen to other people, consider their feelings, and meet them halfway.

The children in our after-school program get to play for as long as three hours each day after school. A mixed age group of children between the ages of four and 14 can choose from a variety of activities that include outdoor play, block-building, cooking projects, crafts, and time to do homework. When the weather is too unpleasant to make outdoor play attractive, the older boys spend their time playing complex card and board games. Card games like Magic and Yu-Gi-Oh come and go. Chess remains constant, as does Risk, played on a board depicting a Napoleonic-era political map of the earth. Players control armies and capture territories from other players as they attempt to “conquer the world.”

The younger boys, building an office out of large, wooden blocks in one end of the room, often take time out to watch what the big boys are doing. The older boys answer their questions as long as they don’t interrupt too much. When the big boys aren’t around, the younger ones use the little soldiers from Risk, in six different colors, to guard their block structures. Gradually, they give up their pretend in order to play the game by the rules, and they become the next generation of older boys.

This is the way that little boys have traditionally learned about becoming big boys and men. In pretend play, they imagine what it would be like to be big and powerful—police catching robbers, armies vanquishing the enemy. Then, in more structured games, they begin to follow agreed-upon rules, where being a good sport is almost as important as winning.

But most boys today do not have the opportunity to learn about becoming a big boy or a man in this way. Big boys are not available—they are doing schoolwork or organized sports instead of playing ball on corner lots where mixed age groups used to spend as much time in valuable arguments about teams and rules as in play.

One day after school I walked into the common room, which is both
the entrance into the building and the space used by the after-school program. I love the hum of children engaged in play, so I surveyed the scene as I walked through the room on my way toward the front door. Abruptly, I stopped at the sight of a five-foot-high structure built of large, hollow wooden blocks topped with smaller blocks as decorations. On the top was a large swastika. A small group of eight-, nine-, and 10-year-old boys were putting on the finishing touches.

My first thought was to make the boys take it down. I had most of them as five-year-olds and have no trouble telling them what to do. I could just say such a symbol was not appropriate for the common room, where visitors and parents enter the school. But something stopped me, and instead I went over to talk with them. I told them that in the Jewish tradition, a child is named after a relative who has died. My middle name came from my grandfather’s sister, Tema, who died in a concentration camp. I said that, when I went to my grandparents’ house for the holidays, my grandfather would look at me and say, “Tema, Tema,” and get tears in his eyes. I felt like part of her lived in me, and when I walked in to the common room and saw the swastika, I felt like someone in that room wanted me to be dead.

The boys were stunned. They had no idea that their play could have that effect. My lecture, it seemed, was effective, and I was feeling pleased with myself. But then the boys explained to me that actually they were studying World War II and the scene they had built was a village in Germany on the day the Allies invaded and took over the town. As soon as the Allied forces arrived, they were planning to take down the swastika and replace it with a flag representing the Allies.

I had assumed, walking through the room, that their activity was an act of rebellion and negativity from a group of troublesome boys. Their plan had nothing to do with my preconceived notions. I asked if there was a way that they could continue the project that would not make people walking in the door think that they supported Nazi values. They thought for a minute and then told me that there was a different symbol they could use—a Maltese Cross—that was a symbol of national pride in Germany but that might not make people upset the way the swastika did. They could also put up a flag symbolizing the Allied victory. I left as they were discussing what that flag should be.

Today we will not go back to a time when children were allowed to explore their world unsupervised, investigating the woods or the city all summer long, testing their increasing skill and strength far from the view of worried
adults. But we can encourage them to develop the resilience that I felt navigating my neighborhood in Boston and the confidence that Poitier describes testing his strength on Cat Island. We don’t need to be afraid of play and shut it down. We can watch it, listen to it, and when we are worried, we can try to figure out what the children are doing and talk with them about it. We can look for opportunities to encourage multiage play so that younger children can learn what it’s like to be bigger from the older children themselves, while the older ones learn important lessons about empathy and compassion.

From this play, children learn that, if they persevere, they can figure out how to solve problems. They learn that talking about conflicts can lead to solutions that work for everyone. They learn that the adults in their lives trust them to figure out what they want to do and how they want to do it. They discover what they care about most and who they are, so that, like Sidney Poitier, they can have that consistent definition of self that will allow them to get through the tough times.

References