

Children's Play and Military Toys Today

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Why do we all play war – let's play peace!
Hans Fleury, Swiss play-therapist

The subject of war (or force) toys in the context of children's play as the dominant activity is considered from different view point in the paper. Their place in the market of toy products and among children's play materials is described. The author examines the reasons for the popularity of this type of toys and their role in child's life. The different roles of force toys in the children's subculture and in the play, in particular, are discussed in the context of research results. The typology of military toys is given. The results of research from the Institute for Peace Education (Tübingen, Germany) experts are presented, revealing the diversity of meanings and values of military toys in children's lives. The author presents his views on the relationship between aggressive communication model and the play with force toys. The view of the "Spiel gut" experts on the issue of assessment of military toys is presented, the evaluation criteria and the conditions, under which they can be recommended for child play, are discussed. In conclusion, the author draws attention to the importance of a healthy family atmosphere and encourages adults to engage more closely and to organize the life context of their children, to create rich space for independent, diverse and creative play.

Keywords: toys, military toys and games, media-reality, masculine values and behavior models, quality label "Spiel gut"

The nature of children's play

Every child normally will play nearly 15 000 hours until his/her 6th birthday – if you let them do so – doesn't matter where they live in the world. That are almost 7 hours a day in the average (that's not quite true, because during the first year children sleep 18 hours but from the 2nd year on they play even more than 7 hours a day) – and it continues (with reduced hours) until the senior years.

What means "playing"? Johan Huizinga says "...it's every activity, which is done for itself and which is joyful".

So playing is always

- spontaneous and active,
- together with mobility,
- with "material", even this "material" at the first time is the own body,
- social learning (in later development),
- joyful,
- undirected.

Children are always playing at every time and they play very intensive – at every age! At their 1st year they employ their own body and they organize their perception, in the following years they turn to outside – first to other children in the neighbourhood, later also to other children (for example at school) and on the social space. Very early materials are extraordinary important – especially with a useful mass and strong colours.

Things to play becoming toys. All things being used and are getting re-interpreted. Here the toy industry recognizes the chance – here is the target group – here the industry hurries to create and fulfill the needs of the children. So (often) children rooms becoming fully equipped, with reduced different kinds of toy (systems). The quantity raises up, but the quality in variety decreases. Therefore playing is the only child-faired occupation and processing their environment. At playing adultive kinded situations and experiences are sequenced, re-experienced and re-feeled. Deciderable is always, what is important for the adults ! Which aspects of life being ignored from the adults, reduced, forbidden – or are so unpleasant so I can't talk about. During the children's play they can decide themselves, they are independent from parents' defaults.

But every play must show some tension moments – especially the role play. Here the aim is to experience the meaning and to master special themes, which will be understand in later process of matures, (for example the themes of fairy tales).

Unfortunately forbidden things are high interesting for children – and they are fascinated by military-like materials.

Why toys in military looks are so fascinating for kids?

To answer this question, please, follow me and separate children's experience into 3 different levels:

1) Children often **feel powerless, weakly and tiny** – everybody tells them what to do and to let. Their needs are felt threatened – and by using war toys they create a reconciliation themselves.

2) They try to **process hurting and threatening situations** and experiences – especially

force experiences will be compensated by playing in aggressive ways against things and objects of identification¹.

3) **The reality of multimedia.** Today's children permanently are filled with huge loads of medial pictures and information (by TV, internet, newspaper, mobile phone, cinema and so on) about military equipment and they often become confronted with forced toys. At films and entertainment-scenes they are been supervised with human roles, they want to copy by playing. Weapons seem to be an integrated and important part of social reality and seem to be a basic equipment of a "tough" man. But the important difference is – children are only **playing** war and fighting and conflicts and attacks, they're only **spacing** and **imitating** the adult world, to compensate their fear, which is connected within the situations.

These (growing) kind of toys meanwhile in international context called as "**Military Toys**". We can see different kinds of **Military Toys**:

A) **Military toys and war equipment** (since the eighties they're often same-called as "force toys"). Here we can see toys with war themes, like war diadramas, militaria and weapons, also miniature figures of war equipment and soldiers, toy-pistols (also carnival- and water-pistols) and – guns. Often it was reproached that there will be promoted a glorification of force and aggressive behavior, but this thesis could never been proved in social environment. Children are able to differentiate between play and reality. Military toys always transport the role of a tough man, who ist strong and protects us against enemy-attacks.



Pict. 1. LEGO very small copies of weapons

B) **Action-Toys.** These are all artificial created figures and equipment, which you can use only in **one** pre-defined way and action-theme. Often they are based on fairy tales and are compressed tot he basic conflict "good

against evil". For to solve this conflict it is only proposed to fight with weapons. During the last years we can see that these characters are becoming more and more complex and developed. And they are highly effective promoted as benches or labels (accompanying to the character you also can buy music, DVDs, downloads, mp3-streams, comics, clothes, and so on.) Many action figures reflecting a copy of childlike reality. The hero fights against all the "bad", fearing things, on behalf.

C) **Historical diadramas and play-worlds.** Besides there also exist historical rebuilt playing-scenes and situations and figures for playing historic life and conflicts (for example knights, pirates, vikings, indians and other native people-sceneries). These playing systems compare actual playing behavior with the behaviour of former times centuries. There war toys often were the **only one and the main toys** for children (most oft hem for boys) for preparation and learning later skills at the army.



Pict. 2. Historical diadramas

D) **Table-Tops. Table-Top-Games** are a sub-chapter, which are a mixture between historical facts and fantasy scenes and – characters and there are played war conflicts in historical sights (WW I and II battles, napoleonic war battles and fantasy battles, like "Warhammer", "Blood Bowl", "Morthem", "Monsterapocalypse", or "Lord Of The Ring" serials. Other miniatures (like tin-soldiers and their very complex diadramas) mostly are in interest only for hobby collectors and so they're no toys.

Basically we can say that by playing with war toys (Guenter Gugel) children always process their psychologically loaded, unpleasantly experiences. Often these experiences are violent or abusing experiences and they are compressed in playing an aggressive way – most of the time with both aspects – the position of the victim and the position of the retaliation /revenge.

What´s the reason for children to play with war toys?

The German pedagogue Guenter Gugel (*Institute For Peaceful Pedagogic Research, Tuebingen*) asked more than two hundred educators about reasons of playing with war toys and they found out the following bookmarks:

- To possess war toys gets new "friends".
- With weapons (even – imitations) you have got power to others.
- Weapons are a – apparently – self-protection.
- The "peer group" acceptance is raising.
- Experiences of violence in the family becoming compensated.
- Processing situations of fear and controversy and anger at the family and the social environment.
- Realizing self-experienced violence.
- Leak skills in verbal expressions (restricted code).
- Processing self-watched films on DVD, cinema or TV.
- Playing with weapons is funny, joyful and "loud".
- Playing with war toys is adventurously and exiting.
- Cathartic reaction and Rave.
- Fascination on technical things and weapons.
- High attraction of forbidden things.
- Imitation of "heroes" and re-playing of sequels from the medias.
- Reducing aggression.
- Such toys promise very easy and simple solutions for solving conflicts.
- Leak skills in alternative creative playing.
- Seduction with a huge offer of war toys.

What children could learn by playing with war toys?

- Most children are able to see the difference between reality and playing situation (although many adults don´t think so)!
- However, permanent handling of war toys supports determined attitudes of conflicts. Alternative strategies of conflict-solving are reduced up to physically-aggressive possibilities.
- Traditional sex-specific roles in the society and stereotype behaviour are learned again. „Male“ values are transported again, although they actually overcame.

- Determined historical and world conceptions and views are learned. Long time before children are able to understand and differ complex circumstances and facts, they are mediated with “half-knowledge” in a reduced kind and so the transition of reality and fiction could be blurred.

- Negative or violent experiences becoming confirmed, getting supplemented with new negative experiences (for example school failure) and consolidate to generally aggressive tendencies.

What about recommendation of War Toys?

Spiel gut created the following attitudes as principles:

- Weapons at scenarios with official guardians (e.g. police, national guard) are acceptable, if they are not performing shooting or killing. E.g. Playmobil in past time had to recognize some specialized experiences with violent scenarios – sets including poachers and soldiers – american civil war – they apparently were associated with “The Bad” children didn’t want to buy it and play with it.



Pict. 3. Police station Playmobil

- Kits of war equipment are part of model construction and no toys (in actual definition), because after finishing construction they are never been played (only issued at exhibitions). Covering clothes (e.g. for carnaval) are used only for imitation and are associated with joy and fun – so they are no toys.

- Historical playing systems (e.g. knights castles including figures, pirate’s ship and island) can be accepted, if there are no weapons in performing situations in the foreground and as the main purpose.



Pict. 4. Historical playing systems

I feel very reassuring that children, who live and grow up in a safe family atmosphere, learning how to resolve conflicts in a constructive way, show interest in war toys or war medias for a short time indeed, but they have left no negative consequences later.

So I’m convinced that general prohibition of war toys would not succeed – and would be foolish, too – because thus neither would reducing real weapons, nor real violence in the society. (One important exception in Germany exists: the prohibition of using nazi-symbols).

Parents are demanded to show interest to their children and the living environment and to be patiently. Of course, we should not only buy them weapons “just for fun”, but explain them the private opinion of weapons and to talk about fears in using them.



Pict. 5. Parents should not only buy weapons for children „just for fun“, but talk about fears in using them

Another possibility is to give attractive alternatives in playing worlds. And – last but not least –, I think the most important idea: to provide children with more space (time and opportunity) to play in a independent and creative way. Everything serving the development of a matured personality.



Pict. 6. „Children could be cruel – but they must have learned it before“ (author unknown)