

Good Guys and Bad Guys What is our responsibility?

Kim Atkinson

In my line of work I meet a lot of bad guys. They carry guns, swords, sabres and fantastical weapons full of levers with complicated capabilities. These bad guys go by many names and have powers to fly, transform and disappear and reappear at will. They are all very mean.

I meet good guys as well. The good guys seem to have a comparable arsenal of weaponry and powers with the added skill of trap making to catch the bad guys, which is often their sole occupation. Often the good guys appear just as mean as the bad guys.

As Early Childhood Educators (ECE) many of us work among the good guys and bad guys every day. The names change according to current trends or the imagination of the players, but the themes never change. There is fighting, sneaking, stealing, capture and rescue. Barricades are built, hideouts are constructed, roles are determined. There is killing, though no one seems to die. Identities shift seamlessly as batman morphs into the joker, who becomes the captain. Witches and princesses rub shoulders with darth vader and spiderman. Ferocious monsters growl at equally ferocious kittens. I stand in their midst, wondering why. Consider this dialogue among a group of 4 year olds:

"This is a gun. You guys sit here"

" Shoot the teacher"

"Put them here. Hide them quick you guys. "

"My bullet can shoot through a window."

"If someone's talking you say 'Yes Sir' (saluting) and you walk 'Huh Huh Huh!' (marching)

"I'll do the rest" "Yes Sir!"

"What power does your gun shoot?"

"168 meters"

"Mine shoots fire"

"Mine shoots pistols"

ECE's are often unsure how to respond. I have spent hours discussing weapon play and bad guys with colleagues and this much we agree on: it's there in every group of preschool age children and we can never really make it go away. We can insist on "no weapons" all we want, but the children are too clever for us and make things that are "really not guns at all, just things that look like guns and shoot goo and slime". We all know toast can be chewed into a gun.

We are conflicted, we don't really like the play, but we know we are in a losing battle to change it. We know parents don't like the play much either, and are looking to us to see how we deal with it.

A colleague puts it this way: "I have never completely bought into the "no weapons" rule. Yet I still use those words more then I care for and its almost automatic. Who am I using those words for? The children? The parents? Or the on lookers? Lots to think about. "

The fact that this kind of play elicits such strong emotions and uncertainty among adults is not surprising. Our image of childhood is that it is a time of innocence, that children have purity

that we can protect. We want to shield them from violence, aggression and evil. To see 'nice' children pretend to be evil is troubling. It seems wrong to allow them to act out such violence, violence we would protect them from in real life.

We also might be fearful of where this kind of play will lead. Will a child who talks of "shooting the teacher" become a violent teenager? Are we raising unfeeling, uncaring children? Will pretend violence lead to real violence? And why exactly do children engage in aggressive play?

As I sit among the bad guys voicing my objections to being shot, I watch and listen carefully. I don't see unfeeling children, I see a complex drama with powerful characters. I see heroic deeds and negotiation. I see identities explored within the themes of good and evil.

Brian Edmiston calls this kind of play 'mythic play' in his book 'Forming Ethical Identities in Early Childhood Play'. Edmiston writes of his personal experience observing and playing with his son Michael between the ages of eighteen months to 7 years. Micheal pretends to be dinosaurs, monsters, vampires, dracula and more, all of whom kill and perform violent acts. As a parent this aggressive behaviour troubles Edmiston, but nonetheless he enters into the pretend worlds and engages in the play. As a result he reconceptualizes the play as 'mythic' and demonstrates the ways children are exploring their ethical identities. He looks at the play through different theoretical lenses and demonstrates how play allows children to experience and confront topics we do not talk with them about, fear and good and evil and love and hate.

"By projecting into the viewpoints and actions of the heroes, monsters, and people in whatever narratives engage them, children inquire about those aspects of life that are difficult to examine in the every day world. How do you experience and contemplate the power to kill, the power to to heal, or the power to love? How do you discover what might happen if you really hurt someone without actually hurting? How do you know how to respond to violence without being in danger?....Mythic play allowed Micheal to experience and author understanding about, how people could act in the world."

P. 75

Edmiston asserts that within mythic play children are involved in complex ethical situations, taking on the perspective of other identities, evaluating them, and by doing so begin 'authoring' their own identities.

As the children continue to shoot one another, I ask them some questions about guns: Guns shoot bullets, you press this handle and then bullets come out. You pretend to shoot, and do light sabing pretend.

The real ones are in the Star War movies. The ones we use are fake, some light up some don't. Luke (Skywalker) gets to use a light sabre and a gun and Hans Solo has a light sabre and a gun. He has real ones.

Kids have pop guns, marshmallow guns, light ones, you press the button and a light comes on.

Kim: Do kids ever have real guns?

Yes, pop guns are real guns.

Kids don't have real ones.

Kim: Who has real guns?

Not me. In movies.

Pop guns are real, but still quite different than the real guns of movies. And those real guns

are not available to kids. Seems very clear. So what about the bad guys?

Kim: What is a bad guy?

Robbers and be rude and steal stuff.

Be really bad. They kiss girls!

Good guys kill bad guys

in a movie.

Kim: Are bad guys bad all the time?

Yes, bad guys are bad all the time.

Can be both.

Bad guys can be good.

They kind of do bad stuff like hurt people.

They really hurt people. Really hurt. I know, I play it.

Kim: Is it pretend or real?

Pretend game.

The children are clear that bad guy behaviour involves hurting others, robbing and being rude, the lines between good and bad behaviour are clear. But they also seem to understand the complexities of bad, that a bad guy can be good. Different dramatic scenarios might induce a bad guy into good behaviour.

All the children are in full agreement that this is a pretend game. The bad guys "really hurt people" and this boy knows it because he "plays" it. Really hurting in pretend play....the children are not confused by this finessing of real and pretend. I think it is we adults who are confused by it.

When we are alarmed by the aggression and violence of bad guy play, maybe we are missing something. Maybe we are failing to give credit to children for their understanding of "pretend". We see the intensity of the play and conclude that we are seeing aggression and violence. What we are more likely seeing is pretend aggression and violence. How does that make a difference? It makes a huge difference to the children playing it. They know they are acting out roles, trying out characters. They know they can 'really hurt people' but in play.

The other thing we are missing is the opportunity to use this kind of play as a starting point for discussion. A colleague put it well when she notes: "I think if we are in relationships with children we want to encourage dialogue—even dialogue about difficult issues. It is through dialogue we learn and we can think aloud. "

A difficult issue indeed. But by allowing children to explore a vast array of possible worlds filled with emotions and behaviours ranging from monstrous to heroic they are able to explore what constitutes good and bad, right and wrong, moral and ethical.

The adult role, Edmiston says, is to create dialogue about the issues of good and evil, caring, empathy and power. He writes: "When we tell children what they should do without discussion or thoughtful processes we are not having a dialogue, it is a monologue. When there is no room for negotiation then it is a monologue. "

By listening carefully we may learn something about what children learn and experience. And we can share what we know and have experienced.

Bad guys still roam freely in my preschool and I still don't like being shot at. I sometimes have an emotional reaction to what I see and hear and sometimes I wish it would just go away.

But I am also asking questions, asking for explanations, asking for stories and drawings and trying to really listen. And I am making space for the play even when it's hard to because, as teacher and author Vivian Gussin Paley puts it:

When play is curtailed, how are children to confront their fantasy villains?

References

Edmiston, B. (2008) *Forming Ethical Identities in Early Childhood Play* . New York: Routledge

Gussin Paley, V. (1988) *Bad Guys don't Have Birthdays*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press