

## CLASSROOM HINTS

## Supporting Children's Pretend-Play Scenarios

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Children must act out and play with concepts and ideas in order to make sense of their world. Children also seek ways to feel powerful. Power and control are important themes in children's play, and engaging in gun and superhero play is just one way children act out these themes. Adults can use the following strategies to support, extend, encourage, and work with children to feel successful, safe, and powerful during these playful investigations.

### Support Strategies

- Observe children's play over time and document your observations of gun and superhero play so you can evaluate what is happening in the play as it unfolds. Watch for particular actions and details that seem important to young children. Observe how the play changes or develops over time. What variations occur with the characters, the story, or the materials? For example, my coteacher noticed that one child's plan was to be a Transformer® every day, which often resulted in him running from the house area to the stairs but with no real story line. During planning time, my coteacher asked him what materials he would need to become a Transformer and he said, "The tinker toys." This helped support his play and helped him think of a new way to incorporate materials into the play.

- To encourage more complex play, add a variety of related materials. Be flexible in how and where these materials can be used. During work time, my coteacher and I noticed that children were making superhero capes out of the baby blankets. We decided to go to our local fabric store and buy a yard of material to have in the classroom to see what children would do with it. Over time, we ended up with eight one-yard pieces of fabric that supported the children's superhero play. Next we included sequined gloves in various colors. The white ones turned into "ice" power, and the red ones turned into "fire" power. We also included recycled materials in the art area, such as paper towel tubes and toilet paper rolls, old pop bottles, and scraps of materials. What we noticed is that the children started to use these items to support their play. The paper towel tubes became swords that could be used to defeat the aliens. The pop bottles were used as oxygen tanks that the children taped together and placed on their backs. And the scrap materials became superhero capes and table coverings for their "spy" hideouts.
- Participate as a respectful partner in pretend play, taking cues from the children. When coplaying with children, remember these guidelines:
  - Follow the theme and content set by the players.
  - Offer suggestions within the pretend situation.
  - Respect children's responses to your ideas.

To give an example, as a way of entering children's play, I got a block and imitated children's actions of shooting at the targets on the wall. I watched and listened and made the same sounds the children were making. This allowed me to enter into their play without being intrusive.
- Add to the complexity of play by offering ideas for extensions. If you find that children's gun play is becoming "stuck," you may want to try extending it. Staying within your role as a player, try posing a problem to extend children's thinking. When making suggestions for play extensions, remember to respect children's responses to your ideas. For example,



when one child was running from one end of the classroom to the other and pretending to shoot things, we asked him who he was shooting at. He replied, “The bad guy.” I asked him where the bad guy’s hideout was so I could track him down. This posed a new question and extended the child’s thinking beyond shooting as we started to investigate where the “bad guy’s hideout” would be.

- When children are making plans for superhero or gun play, encourage them to think about what they will need, whom they will play with, how the story will work, and other details that will extend their thought process. Accept their play themes, even if you would prefer they choose other ones.
- Look for natural openings in the play and join children in their play. As you do so, be sure to join in on children’s physical and developmental levels and respond to children’s conversational leads. For example, when Sarah was sitting in the block area playing on the floor with the blocks, I sat down beside her, started playing with blocks that I had brought over, and began imitating what she was doing. She then asked me if I would like to build with her. This allowed me to join her play in a way that was not disruptive.
- Relate suggestions and questions directly to what the child is doing or saying (for example, “You’re spinning the stick around — I wonder what happens when you do that?”).
- Be honest and direct about roles you are not comfortable with and actions that you feel are harmful (for example, “I know you want me to shoot the bad guy, but I don’t like to shoot things or people, even in pretend. What else can I do to help you save the good guy?”).
- Whenever possible, link feelings to actions (for example, “So, you are trying to get the bad guys. They must have done something that made you feel upset or angry”).
- When children recall what they did in their play, listen and encourage them to elaborate on details of the play and to talk about their emotions by commenting and asking questions, as described in the previous strategy.
- Use the six steps in conflict resolution consistently:
  1. Approach calmly, stopping any hurtful actions.
  2. Acknowledge children’s feelings.
  3. Gather information.
  4. Restate the problem.
  5. Ask for ideas for solutions and choose one together.
  6. Be prepared to give follow-up support.

Through this process, children learn to express their own feelings, ideas, and needs. They also start becoming sensitive to the feelings, interests, and needs of others. They learn the real power of expressing their needs and having others respond. They also experience the feelings of control and competence that come from contributing to the resolution of a problem.

- Interact with children as they become involved in aggressive superhero or weapon play, and help children transform imitative play into imaginative play; that is, find ways to help them build on their play, such as pointing out materials they might use.
- As children play with the concepts of power, danger, rescue, strength, and overcoming various obstacles, acknowledge their power within the play. You can do this by commenting on children’s pretend-play scenarios. For example, you might say, “Steven, I heard you say that you saved the day — you must be very strong to save all the people from the bad guy.”
- In addition to providing stimulating materials, adults can encourage the development of play by taking part themselves in the pretend-play scenarios children create. When entering a play situation, be mindful of the need to allow children to retain control of their play.

Using these tips and support strategies will help children learn valuable social skills and also meet their needs for power and control — the same needs they are expressing through gun and superhero play.

