

Boys Will Be Boys: Boys and Violent Play

by Carrie Silver, Ph.D.

On Facebook, a friend's status told an interesting story about her 3-year-old son: "Today, my son put on a tiara and princess outfit, carrying around a sword pretending to destroy everyone. There's no question about it, my son is one bad a#@ princess!"

A proud mom? Sure. But what would the story have read should the sword been absent from her son's dress up game? Or possibly worse, what if the sword were the only toy he played with, running around the house, "killing" all in sight? In a tiara, the boy may be deemed a sissy, weak, or doomed for teasing; with the sword, violent, aggressive, and impossible to control. Without a doubt, the world of a young boy is a confusing one, often caught in between parents' and teachers' desires to raise children who are healthy, kind, and empathic, yet tough, stoic, and undoubtedly masculine.

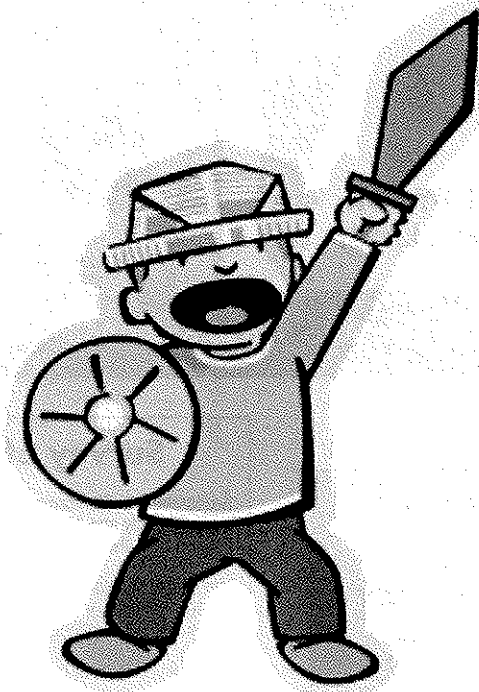
It would be hard to argue that the emotional and behavioral worlds of young boys are identical to those of girls. One day in a preschool classroom would easily highlight boys as more active, competitive, and physical in their play. They crash trains into buildings, chase each other in playgrounds, and fire pretend guns at anyone in their way. It must be biological, right? Testosterone must be getting in the way of playing with dolls calmly on the floor. The research says otherwise. In fact, when aggression first emerges in infancy and early toddlerhood, sex differences appear to be absent. Dan Klinton, Ph.D. and Michael Thompson, Ph.D., authors of *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*, further highlight that while boys may be more active than girls, testosterone is present equally between boys and girls until around the age of ten.

As with most nature versus nurture debates, nature loses as the omnipotent force in explaining gender differences. Consider the media, a socialization tool long blamed for increases in societal violence. How many male superheroes can you name that cry when zapped by their archenemy? Most of these role models remain strong, violent and powerful. Violence and high levels of competition in video games have also become increasingly influential on young boys whose developing minds are accessing information from every source available.

Parents and teachers alike have countless opportunities to help socialize children. Still, Klinton and Thompson point out that parents tend to speak with their daughters about sadness and distress, while reserving talk about anger for their sons. It is not surprising then, that preschool boys tend to have more difficulty understanding the range of emotions, and are more likely to use violence rather than words when confronted with conflict in the playground.

The question then remains, how can the adults in young boys lives help to build on their strengths, while encouraging healthy emotional development? Here are some ideas to try:

1. Help put a label to your child's emotion expression. If crying, say: "You look sad," or "mad," or "frustrated."
2. Try not to react negatively to boys' displays of aggression/violence. Instead, help him understand how these actions affect you and/or his friends. Instead of saying, "that's not nice," let him know that it made you feel sad, or that his friend feels scared.
3. If you allow television watching, encourage your son to watch educational programming rather than more violent/action-oriented entertainment shows. Always be aware of what your child is watching. If it turns violent, talk with your child to help put it into context.
4. Join in play with your child. Your pretend play will help him to differentiate fantasy from reality. If he is on a mission to destroy the "bad guys," you can join in the mission to make the world a "safer" place.



It is clear that boys, much more than girls, find pleasure in violent and aggressively themed play. This is not necessarily a reason to panic. For most boys, the "aggressive" nature of play decreases with age and is perhaps better labeled as fantasy play as typically there is no intent to harm. If, however, the behavior seems reckless, uncontrollable, with intent to manipulate and/or harm, it may make sense to contact a professional to help understand if these behaviors are signs of more significant underlying psychological difficulties. In the meantime, know that your little princes and princesses, with or without swords, are eager to learn, have fun, and grow, and yet, need your guidance to help them understand an increasingly complex world.

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