

Parents & A

Sally Goddard Blythe, Clare Healy Walls and Wendy Fidler answer your questions on the essential ingredients for a happy childhood, gun play and Down Syndrome

Q I was dismayed to read recently that children in Britain are worse off than their European counterparts. How can we improve our children's quality of life and ensure they have a happy childhood?

There is no recipe for a happy childhood but there are essential ingredients which when combined in the right way can provide a happy childhood anywhere.

These ingredients include: a stable home which provides plenty of opportunity for physical and social interaction, conversation, humour, directed and free play and a consistent approach to discipline – discipline in its true sense of “pupil-age” or one who is taught by taking responsibility for the consequences of behaviour.

It is adults not children who think that material things and activities are necessary for happiness. The most important ingredients of childhood are free – fresh air, space, friends, family, reliability, time spent together and trust. Even a small dose of boredom every day can act as the mother of imagination and creativity.

Parental desire to keep children occupied all day through extra-curricula activities is often parental avoidance of direct interaction. When my children were small they always asked me what I was going to wear each morning and hoped that it would be jeans, because they knew this heralded a day outside when I was not distracted by other things.

While for short periods though it can entertain, electronic media is no substitute for human involvement because it does not teach the subtleties of non-verbal language, which are learned through modelling and mirroring and make up 90% of effective communication. Social skills

including sympathy and altruism are learned in the milieu of real physical relationships not in a virtual world.

Q I don't allow my 5 year old son to play with guns at home since I want him to grow up peacefully in a non-violent environment especially as there is a lot of violence on television. However if he finds a gun in his cousin's house it is the only toy he wants. I also observed him playing with his friends using sticks as guns. What do you suggest?

Maria Montessori believed strongly that peace in society comes about through the child. First and foremost the child needs to find inner peace. That comes about through purposeful freely chosen activity. In your home this will include activities that hold his attention and allow him to concentrate, for example cooking, painting, puzzles and books. The next important thing to remember is that children imitate our attitudes and what we do. If you are peaceful and non-violent, your son will be like that too.

We all played games as children that involved pretend killing in some way – cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers. We did not learn to be violent from those games if we knew they were fantasy. Dr Montessori suggested avoiding such games for young children under 4 or 5 years as she said they were unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality. However when children reach about 5 years and enter the phase of social group development, they naturally form gangs and play healthy games of rivalry. Montessori stressed that such rivalry was the way in which children learned to identify with a social group. When those games involve guns in a pretend play context they will not be harmful if adults don't interfere and make the

children unnaturally competitive with each other.

I would not advise giving children toy guns but do not make too big a fuss about it if your son finds one. Even before 5 years children have been watching other children playing real games and electronic games that involve “bang bang” in some way. If you interfere too much you may make the guns very desired because they are forbidden. Be clear and strict about the basic code of real social interaction – for example they are not permitted to hit others with the gun. Keep referring to the “pretend” gun if the child is still less than 4 or 5 years, helping him to clarify the difference between reality and fantasy. Focus on a peaceful attitude in real living and allow fantasy games to exist if the children are clear they are fantasy.

Children may be exposed to guns and violence in their everyday life. In some cases they live in a war zone where there is ongoing conflict. Other children may be very proud of a father who is in the army where a gun is part of his normal dress when on duty. Children should learn a healthy respect for guns. The message can be that guns are occasionally necessary in life but should always be treated in a very controlled way. They also need to learn to distinguish between real guns and fantasy play. Parents can help children to do both by having clear limits and by allowing natural games to take place in a healthy way.

Editors Note

The book, ‘We don't play with guns here’ by Penny Holland is a fascinating and insightful contribution to this area.

Q I am an occupational therapist, and my fourth child who is 14 months has



Down syndrome. I am interested in Montessori for him. Do you have any resources to point me towards?

A good question, and one that I am asked often. Firstly, with regard to finding a Montessori school that accepts special needs children, you need to find a ‘progressive’ school with an adaptive approach. Dr Maria Montessori guided us to be scientific pedagogues, by observing individual children and adjusting the learning environment to suit them. That's what's meant by the ‘prepared learning environment’ in Montessori schools.

You mention that you are an occupational therapist and so I think you will understand the benefit of the Montessori practical life and sensorial activities. Your son will be able to choose, use, repeat and practice activities with visually-attractive, hands-on learning materials until he has fully absorbed the underlying concepts. The Montessori emphasis on ‘social graces’ will give him plenty of opportunity to practice skills, such as social interactions and communication.

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