



## **Scripted Play**

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If you have children who are old enough to be verbal, you may have noticed a certain kind of play that is often referred to as "scripted play". In this type of play, children primarily "parrot" dialogue and action that they have witnessed on television. There is no creativity, no problem solving and often the play is violent.

### **In scripted play:**

1. **Toys are used as props** to replicate as closely as possible a scene witnessed on a TV show or commercial, or in some rare instances a story in a book.
2. **The toys are most often merchandise** associated with a particular TV show or movie. These toys are less likely to inspire creative play than they are to inspire a desire for buying more and more and more stuff.
3. **Imitation is the goal of the play.** The most intense of this play does not allow for any deviation from the script. The play can inhibit or explicitly prevent creative social exchange between children. Often, children who cannot or will not follow the script are cut out of the play. The attitude can be: "If you don't play it 'right', you can't play!"
4. **It's often violent:** Because preschool and school age children are at a developmental stage in which they are struggling with issues of mastery, control, and power--it is natural that they are attracted to violent, aggressive TV. It should come as no surprise, then, that scripted play often has a violent television show as its source. Children's play often matches what they watch--whether or not they are developmentally capable of understanding the issues they saw on TV. The play rarely extends or evolves beyond the violent elements. They just repeat it over and over again.

### **In creative play:**

1. **Toys are used as helpers to facilitate story telling** and are rarely tied in to TV shows. If they are, the toys do not follow their TV roles and can be used as a variety of characters unrelated to the show that they are from. For example, a toy from one TV show can be used as a character in a game children are playing about a different story or show.
2. **The play itself is imaginative** and does not follow a set script. The play is flexible, and the child engaging in the play can and will incorporate new concepts and elements as the play progresses.
3. **T.V. is springboard:** Even if the play incorporates themes or characters from a TV show or story at its onset, it is just a springboard. The play evolves into telling the child's own, inner story.
4. **This type of play enhances language development and creativity.** Creative play also allows communication between the children. This contributes to building social competence.

5. **The play may also be aggressive.** However, although there will be themes of power and control, those themes will come from a child's current developmental level of understanding. If they create their own conflict situations and then work them out with their friends while engaging in the play—deciding on how toys should be used as part of a play relationship rather than a script—then they are moving beyond simple violence and imitation and truly engaging in developmentally appropriate play.

### **So how do you promote creative play?**

#### **What doesn't work?**

Banning scripted play doesn't work. When we ban scripted play we are primarily speaking to our own discomfort with the play. We don't like it, so we make a rule that it's not allowed. But that is not an effective strategy, as children simply find ways to hide their play from us. All our time will be spent engaging in a policing role, wasting valuable teaching moments in imposing consequences.

**So what can you do?** You can limit, facilitate and guide.

- **Limit the play.** It is fine to place limits on scripted, violent play. For example:
  - No toys from TV shows: You can say something like, *"I get concerned when I see children playing only from TV shows. I want to try and encourage more creativity our family.*
  - Invoke safety. If the children are playing aggressively (often comes from pretending to be a certain TV character) and you are worried about safety, you can use the "knees and bottom" rule. You don't ban the play, you just make it a lot less interesting by saying that if they choose to play games that involve weapons and/or fighting they have to play sitting on their bottoms or on their knees.
- **Facilitate creativity:**

Make it yourself. If your child wants to play a game that involves guns and shooting (remember, it may make you uncomfortable but it is a natural developmental stage to play with issues of power) insist that they make their own weapons. They can't just play with a toy gun or sword that was purchased at a store, or simply pick up a stick and pretend it's a gun or sword. They must make or build the weapon themselves. You can say something like, *"In this family, if you want to play with a weapon you must make it with your art supplies or build it out of blocks"*. Your child may become so engaged in the art or building that they forget all about the scripted, violent play.

Ask questions that inspire thought outside the script. If your child is being a particular TV character who uses a certain weapon, ask questions about what else the weapon can do, or what would your child like it to do. Encourage thought, creativity and silliness. You can say something like, *"Sure, that gun can shoot bullets, but what would happen if it could shoot glue? Or Jello?"* OR *"What would happen if it was also an invisibility gun or a time-travel gun?"*
- **Guide play:** occasionally engage in directed play. Help move your children's play from where the world is a threatening place filled with good guy vs. bad guy to a place where there is safety and security. Encourage empathy; ask your child--"What does it feel like to be the big dinosaur? Now, what does it feel like to be the small dinosaur?" If you are playing with your child and they want you to be the small dinosaur--ask to switch at a certain point in the play.