

## Guns, Mental Health and Play

Doris Bergen

Distinguished Professor of Educational Psychology Emerita Miami University

**\*Corresponding author**

Doris Bergen, Distinguished Professor of Educational Psychology Emerita Miami University. E-Mail: bergend@miamioh.edu

**Received:** June 06, 2022; **Accepted:** June 24, 2022; **Published:** June 27, 2022

As a parent, I still remember my shock when my four-year-old daughter told me that she wanted to have a gun (toy of course) and when I probed into the reason for this request, she said it was because the other neighborhood children had been “shooting her.” So I did agree to buy her a gun (a little silver-colored one) and she then went out to see her playmates and she “shot” every one of them. I don’t think she ever played with the gun again, but her pretend ‘playful’ response had served its purpose! (She did not grow up to be a criminal but rather a newspaper reporter, travel writer, and now a florist!) As a developmental psychologist, however, I have often pondered what the possession of toy guns has signaled to children in our society and, of course, I am still trying to understand the motives of those young (and sometimes older) adults who take real guns and randomly shoot people in a store, school, office, or airport! Do they have a motive similar to the one my daughter had? That is, do they feel that the people in their environment might try to kill them (at least psychologically)? Do they feel the world is so dangerous to them that they must show they are able to be the actors of violence rather than the recipients of violence? Or do they think it is all pretend, as my daughter and her playmates did?

When I was growing up in a small town with only a few sources of world news and with permission to roam and explore the environment without concern, I do not ever recall feeling the need to protect myself by having a gun. However, as more and

more states have put in gun carrying permissive legislation, I do now wonder whether the person sitting next to me in the theater or walking down the aisle near me in the supermarket could suddenly pull out a gun. It seems the pretend play environment of childhood has now encroached on the real environment of adulthood!

As a psychologist who spent her lifework studying and teaching about lifespan human development, I often ponder how or why we researchers and teachers have not been able to suggest policies that would prevent such tragedies related to guns from occurring. I have concluded that because the answer to this question is so complex and the reasons for gun violence are so varied that this problem will be with us for a long time as long as guns are so accessible. I do think that the reason my daughter had for “shooting” her friends is still a viable one, however. Unfortunately, many people in our society (especially young people) do not feel valued or listened to and because access to guns is so easy, this response to their perceived hurts may seem reasonable.

As I am not a psychiatrist, I do not know whether the concern for gun violence has been a major topic of research in that field. If it has not, however, I would urge that these professionals focus more resources on investigating this issue and on recommending effective practice that could address this present pervasive cultural phenomenon. Unfortunately, we cannot “pretend” away these horrific actions.

**Copyright:** ©2022 Doris Bergen. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.