



Big Kid

When Your Kid Likes to 'Kill'

Posted by [April Peveteaux](#) on December 14, 2010 at 7:45 PM

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Video games and super hero costumes may be the first item on your child's wish list this holiday season, but you might want to pay attention to how she's playing. If your kid kicks back with a game where the goal is to **blow pixel people's heads right off**, what is that doing to him? What if your child knows it's not real, and you all have talked about why killing is wrong? Then is it okay to let him open the latest version of *Call of Duty* on Christmas morning?

It's a struggle to distinguish between play and real and I admit to panicking after one particularly disturbing "I'm going to kill her!" declaration from my very sweet 4.5-year-old during a play date that seemed to be going well. The intellectual side of me told the peace-loving emotional side of me to chill, but I wanted to [talk to an expert](#) before I let my little super hero killer completely off the hook.

Turns out, sometimes you do need to panic about **kids and violence**.

Dr. Charlotte Reznick, [child educational psychologist](#) and author of *The Power of Your Child's Imagination* spoke with me about what it means when kids get excited by violent words and play: When it's okay and when you need to stop the madness.

Breaking down the "kill" factor by age, Dr. Reznick explained that, "If your ten-year-old is saying 'I like to kill things' I would take it more seriously than a four-year-old."

What does a pre-schooler believe about death and killing?

Preschoolers generally don't think of death as permanent. They think it's transitory. Between three years and seven years old they don't have that concept yet, but it depends on the child.

I've seen kids at five when they first realize something about death; they think they're going to die. Or they start thinking maybe it's my fault if a grandmother dies: "I was mean to her, maybe that's why she died." They might generalize and think since Grandmother died in a hospital, I'd better not go to a hospital.

Even in cartoons they see the animals come bouncing back in the next scene. It's a way of processing. If you kill off your brother and then he comes back to life, he's learned his lesson and it's fine.

What about us nervous moms who panic when we hear the word "kill"?

Moms that take guns away from boys, then have boys that are making guns with their finger. It's how we're built. But a real toy gun is not the same as a finger, it doesn't approximate the gun as much. Kids want to be super heroes and powerful, so I don't get too upset by that. But you don't want to add to it with violent TV and video games.

When do kids start to understand what death and killing really are?

By age eight or nine they're really clear about it. But I would check out what they think of killing as part of a game. Does he think when someone dies, that's it? Or does he think they can come back to life? Often kids realize the difference between real life and video games. Ask them what they think. If they haven't developed that concept yet, you want to help clarify that.

What about older kids who enjoy killing people while playing video games?

It's more common that a boy that's seven or eight years old will say he wants to kill while playing video games. It's a concern because at an early age they're being trained to be army soldiers and you get de-sensitized. Violence in the media has a big effect on kids. They become more violent, and they become de-sensitized to real violence. Even girls after watching *The Power Rangers*, their play is more violent.

Kids get more violent if they continue to get more exposure. As a parent, it's important to limit that exposure. It's hard to do away with it; even if you don't have them they'll encounter them at a friend's houses. Plus, the nature of the video game is addictive. Kids get really hooked and it's hard to stop. It gives them power and that's very appealing. But you have to think about what values you're trying to impart upon your children.

Does this negative effect change as kids get older?

Everyone is affected by violence in the media. They might beat up on their little sister or brother a little more easily. In one way it gets worse when kids get older because the exposure has built up. They've seen more violence.

It doesn't mean they're going to go out and kill someone or stab someone, but it's not a good thing. There's nothing positive about exposing your child to violence in entertainment.

Do you let your kids play with violent video games?

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