

# Pellet guns and children

January 16 2012, By Tyra Damm

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Last week an eighth-grader in Brownsville was shot and killed when he refused to stand down and lower his weapon.

Turns out that his weapon was a pellet gun that looked very much like a real gun. Officers say they couldn't distinguish the difference, and force was necessary for fear that the child would shoot and kill others.

Last week in my own neighborhood, battles were brewing over pellet guns.

The guns are popular after-school playthings for many neighbor boys, even though it's against Frisco law to discharge them in the city limits.

A middle school boy was threatening younger kids by pointing the gun at close range. An elementary school boy was hit and bruised by one of the pellets.

This is all in open green space, near homes and backyards dotted with jungle gyms, space where parents are usually comfortable allowing their children to run around unsupervised.

I grew up with no exposure to guns, no interest in weapons. I don't understand the fascination that people have with shooting virtual people on video games or shooting real people with pellets or paintballs. But I recognize it exists and that it's the culture I'm raising my own children in.

In an effort to better understand gun play, this week I called on Dr. Sarah

Feuerbacher, a licensed clinical social worker supervisor and the clinic director of the Family Counseling Center at Southern Methodist University.

Feuerbacher, mom of a toddler son, specializes in family violence and healthy relationships. Here are excerpts from our conversation.

## **Why do children, especially boys, like to play with guns?**

Just like girls are socialized to typically play with Barbies and pink things, it's going to be the same thing for little boys at a very early age. It's very much a socialization thing. It's very much environmental.

Even if a child lives in a home without guns, they aren't so isolated to live only in that home. At some point that child is going to be exposed to it.

## **The pellet guns sold today are remarkably realistic interpretations of automatic weapons. Why is the market eager for such realistic weapons?**

There's a video that I show in family violence class, Tough Guise by Jason Katz. It goes through and depicts pictures of G.I. Joe from World War II up to today. It's incredible to see how the action figure's body has changed, depicting a much stronger, bulkier individual. The guns are also true to form.

The guns have changed since the cowboy days. The real guns are getting bigger.

## **If a family chooses to allow their children to play with pellet guns, what kind of rules do you suggest? What should those families talk about with their children?**

Never aim it at something living, especially a person, but even a squirrel. Teach them the difference between something with life and aiming at the ground.

Talk about what it represents and where you might see a gun for real. Ask, “How do guns make other people feel?”

Talk to them at a young age — what are the rules around real guns in the house?

They should make sure the family is protected, that there is appropriate security.

If a parent has a gun in the home and a child happens upon it, that child is going to be at a disadvantage if they haven't talked about it.

Shooting pellet guns in a safe environment at targets on a tree is very different than running around, chasing each other in the street unsupervised.

## **How can families that do allow access to these kinds of guns live peacefully with families that don't?**

I highly recommend that pellet guns be kept in a gun case or safe, locked.

When a pellet gun is used, it's with appropriate supervision, like a father taking his son to a deer lease. Go to an appropriate location. Put a target

up together. Shoot it in that capacity.

The entire system should model what a parent would do in a real gun environment.

Provided by Southern Methodist University

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