

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

What Can We Do about “Bad Guys”?

MAGICIAN “MR. JOSEPH” SCHNEIDER cuts opens a lime. Inside, a folded playing card confounds the audience of amazed preschoolers in celebration of Founders Day. More objects go away and pop somewhere else, then a four-year-old has an idea and waves his hand excitedly. “Can you make bad guys disappear?” he asks. How smart is that? Bye, bye, prisons, hello, magicians! Better yet, a group of Room 3 preschoolers created their own dramatic play scenario about turning bad people into good people.

Children often attempt to work through threatening images through play. Did you ever play cops-and-robbers as a child? Psychologists reassure us that this type of dramatic play reduces children’s fears in much the same way that adults often process anxieties by talking about them. However, today, when most children are exposed to exponentially more disturbing images through the media than generations in the past, the traditional good-guy–bad-guy scenarios can get muddled and take on intensity.

Author and educator Jane Katch documented a game created by her kindergartners and first graders involving handing each other pretend grenades. Katch initially prohibited the game, only to discover children were playing it secretly. She attributes children’s compulsion to keep playing it to the violent images they assimilate through sources like the news, adult conversations, and billboard advertising.

Redirecting play that involves disturbing images is only part of the problem. Children’s games reflect their inner preoccupations. The real question has become “How can we help children feel safe in the world?”

Imagine the images you want to stay in your child’s mind. What are the images that provide refuge for young people? Protective parents? Angels? Our “Unicorn Song” is only one of the melodies created to awaken children to the many positive forces that exist in the world.

Create alternative characters for dramatic play. Teachers help children channel excitement in playing protective roles like rescue worker, firefighter, safety officer, rocket ship designer.

Ignore your child’s claims that he loves scary programs. Advances in neuroscience teach us that our brains crave stimulation, but they are also programmed to retain negative imagery longer than positive—a mechanism of survival.

Reassure your child that she is safe. If your child brings up an upsetting topic from the news, ask what she has heard about it and address her feelings. “It seems like you’re worried. We don’t have tornadoes where we live.”

Calm your own fears. Our communities are far safer than the media would have us believe. We want children to develop an inner protector, a part of their own personalities that guides them. Too often our own hyper-vigilance about everything from kidnappers to bullies causes them to live in a state of unconscious apprehension. Turn off the broadcasts that promote fear, and tune into the peaceful, positive aspects of our breathtaking world.

March 7, 2012