

ASK VIOLET

Q: When a child is in the middle of a bitter, hostile parental relationship, are you frank with the parents about how they are damaging their child?

A: How I convey this message to the parents is very important. I don't want to attack the parents since they definitely will not return. I need to be gentle and choose my words carefully. Sometimes I use statistics to move it away from being too direct, "You know, research shows that when parents argue a lot and are angry with each other, children blame themselves for what is going on. They begin to have the kind of symptoms that bring them into therapy. I think this is what is happening to your child. What do you think?"

Most parents want the best for their children and do attempt to change their behavior when they stop to realize how they are hurting the child.

Q: I have received many questions about the use of toy guns in therapy. Here are some of my thoughts about the use of toy guns.

A: I have used toy guns, though I do not use ones that look real. I usually use red, yellow and blue dart guns. I did have a boy ask me, "Don't you have any real looking guns?" I have a strong bias against using real looking guns, and I convey this to any child who might bring it up. I notice that it is rare for a girl to play with guns. (If women ran the world!?) Small children who may not have access to toy guns will use their fingers to represent a gun. I have had little boys pick up a long block and pretend it was gun and delight in "shooting" me. How do they know about guns in the first place? One of my grandsons used to visit my office occasionally. At age 3 his very favorite toy was the basket of miniature army men. He called them "hunters" and loved imagining them shooting various things, people, and animals. His family did not own a TV set. He did go to pre-school; maybe he picked up the idea from other children.

Dart guns have been especially valuable. We can shoot darts at each other and at a picture of someone they are mad at that we have hung on the wall. A nine-year old girl was brought into therapy because of her continued rudeness to her mother's fiancé. (Her father had died many years before.) At some point I asked her to draw a picture of him and we taped it on the wall. She gleefully, with my encouragement, shot the drawing of him with a dart gun. The paper was pretty thin, and the darts actually began to tear the picture to pieces. At previous sessions we dealt with the Dad she never knew, a new person coming into the family, and so forth. Her Mom and her Mom's fiancé came into a session with her and I had them play the game, "One thing I like about you, and one thing that I don't like." She had a lot of feelings about a new father interfering with the relationship she had with her Mom. It was illuminating to her that she could actually tell him things that bugged her. After the dart gun session and the "one thing I like, one thing I don't like" session, her mother called to say that her daughter was a changed person: loving and accepting. Unexpressed anger pushes down good feelings; when the anger is expressed, the good feelings are able to flourish.