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Putting pacifism into play

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On our visit to Durham's West End on Thursday, my sons brought a handgun, a ninja sword and a black-handled scythe.

They weren't expecting trouble. They were only being polite.

They were participating in the fourth annual Peace Toys for War Toys Exchange at the Lyon Park community center. So they dropped their weaponry into a large gray trash bin already nearly filled with grenades, pistols, the Incredible Hulk and a menacing AK-47.

In exchange for their violent toys, the kids later were allowed to chose from an assortment of peaceful toys donated by the groups that sponsored the event: Calvary Ministries, Durham Project Safe Neighborhoods and North Carolinians Against Gun Violence.

Gail Neely, assistant director of NCGV, told me earlier in the day that the event is aimed at conveying to children that playtime is no time for violence.

"We want them to learn that there are other ways to resolve conflict than with violence," she said.

If you believe, as I do, that parents, not toys, teach kids how to resolve conflict, you're probably rolling your eyes.

But the real audience here was the parents. And the real message, from Mayor Bill Bell on down, was building a community that does not tolerate guns.

In a pitched battle against drugs and gangs, that is nothing to roll one's eyes at.

Neely told me that every year, a few of the toy guns surrendered at the exchange are so realistic looking that they are culled by the Durham Police for demonstration purposes.

The rest used to be fashioned into an anti-gun sculpture. But there's only so much you can do with a bunch of beat-up plastic toys. So now, at the end of the trade, the gray trash bin is simply rolled to the Dumpster.

No great loss, I suppose.

At our house, we neither encourage weapons nor ban them.

As a result, my sons seldom play with the weapons at our house.

In fact, it's easy to tell the kids who visit from homes where such toys are banned. They're the ones who go wild for every foam nunchucks, laser gun and marshmallow shooter they find in the toy box.

So while my younger two sons happily picked out a ball and a wooden mind-bender puzzle to replace their surrendered toys, they also know that there's plenty left in the arsenal at home.

The longer I parent, the more convinced I've become that instilling our kids with core values is far more important than self-righteously banning them from TV, candy and yes, toy guns.

There's nothing so sweet as the forbidden fruit.

Still, in the West End and other nearby communities, the issue of guns -- real guns -- is far more than philosophical.

So getting parents' attention, even through the ruse of a toy swap, is worth a shot.

Unfortunately, as the organizers of this event well know, violent toys are not the biggest problem in homes where parents are not involved, and in neighborhoods where gangs give kids a sense of belonging.

Worse yet, kids in all sorts of neighborhoods experience violence, not in their play, but at the hands of the people who are supposed to love them most.

If only there were a place to trade in a violent childhood for a peaceful one.

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