When it comes to toy guns, in which camp do you belong? Do you see them as inherently evil harbingers of future aggressive behaviour? Or do you view them as a harmless and indeed normal part of childhood, especially for testosterone-fueled boys?

If you’re in the latter camp, you might be of the opinion that gun play actually builds on age-old themes of life and death and good versus evil, which are fundamental to a child’s developing morality and sense of empathy.

Early childhood development expert Dr Cathrine Neilsen-Hewett, a lecturer at Macquarie University’s Institute of Early Childhood, says there is and always has been a fascination with war play, with boys “just gravitating towards toy weaponry from a really early age”.

However, she says there has not been a single study that has linked pretend gunplay with future violent behavior. “Most experts would agree that if you ban it completely it becomes more of an issue,” she says. “And of course if a child plays only with toy guns and is exposed to violence in the home and within their neighborhood and all of their play is aggressive – then yes, they are at risk. But in isolation, where children play with toy guns yet balance it with other forms of play, it’s not an issue.”

As Dr Neilsen-Hewett – herself a mother of three, including two boys aged eight and five, points out – it’s not so much a toy gun itself that’s the issue, it’s the way in which it’s used that seems to have more of a determining effect on a child’s longer term development.

“If children are using a toy weapon as just a part of an imaginary game, then there are huge benefits in terms of promoting development,” she says. “Imaginative play is the most significant type of play for children’s development. We know that children who play a lot that
way tend to be more creative, better at problem solving, their language skills are more advanced and there are huge social and emotional benefits, not to mention the fact that it’s active play, which is really important for their physical development.”

Dr Neilsen-Hewett encourages parents to watch how their children are playing, “because play is like a window into your child’s soul”.

“Children use play for different purposes,” she says. “It’s about fun and enjoyment, yes, but they also employ play as an attempt to understand concepts or make sense of what’s happening in their world. It’s a mirror into how they perceive the world; for instance after September 11 we saw children playing coffins, and we have children in daycare playing hospitals when a parent has cancer. Play is often a reflection of what is happening in the broader culture.”

Still, there are parents who will never accept guns as an acceptable toy, or parents who once tolerated them but are now taking a stand against them, such as an Adelaide mum, who in the wake of the latest school massacre in the US, offered her two sons $5 for each toy gun they threw out.

“She adopted a classic behaviourist approach whereby you reward or punish a child to increase or limit a particular behavior,” says Dr Neilsen-Hewett. “But what we often find is that when the incentives are no longer there, the behaviour doesn’t change.”

Dr Neilsen-Hewett says adopting a strength-based approach to behavior management is best. That is: talk to your children about toy guns, give the reasons why you don’t like them, explain why you don’t want your child to have them – and then highlight other forms of play that are equally or more attractive to them.