



Written by [Jack Kerwick, Ph.D.](#) on February 7, 2013

Zero Tolerance for Boys Means Zero Virtue for Men

Alex Evans is a seven-year-old second grader at Mary Blair Elementary School in Colorado. Recently, he was suspended for throwing an imaginary grenade while pretending to “rescue the world” from “pretend evil forces.”

Little Alex, it turns out, violated his school’s “absolutes” against fighting and weapons, “real or imaginary.”

So-called “zero tolerance” policies of the sort on display at Mary Blair have long been in place in public schools throughout the country. Alex’s mother said that she thought that they were “unrealistic” for kids her son’s age. She is right as far as she goes. The problem is that she doesn’t go nearly far enough.

Such policies are indeed unrealistic, yet they are unrealistic for people of all ages. Moreover, they aren’t *just* unrealistic. They are at once idiotic and *outrageous*: Rather than enable children to become responsible adults, zero tolerance policies threaten to retard this developmental process.

Boys are particularly harmed by it. Alex Evans is a case in point. Here is a seven-year-old child whose only infraction is that he possesses an imagination that is both lively and heroic. Think about it: He delights in envisioning himself as a self-sworn enemy of all that is evil, a world savior.

The kid dreams, not about harming the world, but rescuing it. He longs to be more like Superman, not Stalin.

Yet for this, the childish adults at his school punish him.

Speaking as one who was once a boy, I can assure you that the sort of play in which Alex Evans and a gazillion other boys engage in is not at all atypical. When I was a kid, my cousin Wade and I would regularly pretend to be superheroes: Superman, Batman, and Spiderman were our crime fighters of choice. We would also not infrequently imagine ourselves as characters from *Star Wars*. But Wade and I were especially creative: We would essentially play out our self-assigned roles as if we were enacting or — in the case of *Star Wars* — reenacting films.

Of course, since there were only two of us, and since no hero is complete without a nemesis, we also had to pretend to be villains. Unlike Alex Evans, however, we didn’t just hurl imaginary weapons at one another; we also really wrestled. If the rules of Mary Blair Elementary School been our family’s rules, had our family a “zero-tolerance” policy, we would have been in some serious trouble.





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The value of these imaginative exercises to a boy's intellectual and moral development is sorely underappreciated. They expand his mind's horizons, awakening him to possibilities to which his counterparts of duller sensibilities will remain oblivious. And inasmuch as it is the hero that he plays and replays, they serve as the means by which he cultivates those excellences of character that will make him into a virtuous man.

This is no new insight. Prior to our generation, it went without saying — though it was often repeated — that the key to maintaining and strengthening civilization lies in heroic men showing young boys how to become heroic men. And it was as well obvious that the virtuous would not infrequently have to deploy force against the vicious.

Those commentators who see in the case of Alex Evans but the latest battle in the so-called "War on Boys" are only partially correct. If "zero-tolerance" policies like those at Mary Blair are the proverbial shots fired in any kind of "war," it is a war against men, for in stifling the intellectual and moral growth of boys, they produce men with neither heads nor hearts.

But if it is a war on men that is being waged here, then, ultimately, it is a war on civilization.



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