

Like everyone else, I'm scrutinizing the media coverage of the tragedy at Virginia Tech trying to figure out just what in Cho Seung's short sad life lead him to Monday's monstrous rampage. Maybe from the videotapes and letters he sent to NBC, it's become clear: he was a young man caught in the jaws of mental illness. But as I pour over the news reports from around the country, I'm sensing a gathering storm: editorials are calling for beefed up security on campuses. Others say we need to keep a closer eye on kids in order to weed out those who may have a propensity for violence. We need to become more wary about kids who seem a little "off." It could be that we're about to have another zero-tolerance-for-violence moment in our country. Before we get too far down this road, I just want to wave a small yellow flag of caution.

We've been here before. It was in April of 1999, shortly after Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold shot and killed twelve classmates and a teacher, wounded twenty-four others and killed themselves at Columbine High School in Colorado. It was another unthinkable tragedy -- most of the victims and the two shooters were under 18 years old. It sent a shock wave through our nation. Teachers and parents responded. This is what they did: they began to clamp down on the behavior of kids in a way that many child-rearing experts believe didn't turn out to be very healthy at all.

Preschool teachers tell me that post-Columbine, imaginative play began to get monitored. Kids began to be actively discouraged from playing games like Cowboys & Indians, and Cops & Robbers. Shooting guns should never be considered fun, the teachers reasoned. Besides, they worried, the children might not know pretend violence from real violence.

In elementary schools, talking and writing about violence or making pictures with violent themes became cause for alarm. As

part of the research for the book I'm writing on boys and school, I was speaking to a parent of a third grader who attends public school in an affluent section of Southern California. If this boy isn't talking about Star Wars and light sabers, then he's swashbuckling through his living room Johnny Depp-style. Not long ago, the school called the parents in for an emergency teacher conference. The child's offense: he had written and energetically illustrated a story. So far, so good. His topic? A George Lucas style duel between good and evil, complete with arrows and a decapitation. Now he was in trouble at school. "She wanted my son to express himself in writing so he did," the father shrugged. "The teacher just didn't seem to understand that this is what some boys' fantasy lives are like."

Post-Columbine, pushing and shoving in class became much more serious offenses because pushing and shoving could lead to violence. Reasonable enough. In some place, though aggressive play during recess got outlawed, too. Contact sports like soccer and touch football were forbidden at an elementary school in Cheyenne, Wyoming. In Broward County, Florida, schools, running on the playground was banned. In elementary schools like Beaverton, Oregon and downtown Los Angeles, tag became a no no. The reason: "It brings out the aggression in kids," the L.A. district superintendent told a reporter. There's no exception made for public playgrounds, either. About two years ago, I watched my husband take an imaginary bullet from my son's imaginary gun on a hill near the swings. I looked on happily as they both fell down laughing. But one of the mothers I was with was not amused. "We don't do guns," she told me. Just the other day, I read a news account of an eight year old school boy from Arkansas who was punished for pointing a cooked chicken finger at another student and saying "pow. pow."

Experts say when we push that kind of zero tolerance for violence on children we are getting it exactly wrong. Children, and

particularly boys, are acutely sensitive to the violence around them. They play out violent themes to help relieve themselves of the natural fear and confusion they feel. Jane Katch, a longtime kindergarten teacher and author of *Under Dead Men's Skin: Discovering the Meaning of Children's Violent Play*, says these outlets are vital. "Thinking about violence and playing about violence is not the same thing as being violent. When we tell them not to pretend to shoot things, we don't teach them not to do it, we teach them to lie." Fed up, one teacher recently told me recently that she'd develop her own, Post Columbine code: as long as everyone is laughing, then pretend shooting is O.K.

I wonder if she's already had to change her tune.

I'd like to propose some alternatives. Instead of clamping down on the fantasy life of kids, let's do something that will really help prevent any future Cho Seungs. Let's beef up the mental health services in our communities so truly troubled children and adolescents can get the help they need. Let's launch a public service campaign to remove the stigma around getting help. Let's review our gun laws, too. And let's not demonize little boys with their forefingers and thumbs outstretched. That is play. Not just harmless but necessary. What happened on the Virginia Tech campus was all too deadly and all too real.

Peg Tyre is a senior writer. Her book *The Trouble With Boys* will be published by Crown in Sept. 2008.