

# Research paper on superhero play

[Sociology](#), [Violence](#)



## Introduction

Every culture has its heroes and villains. Heroes are utilized to teach us important themes on good and evil and to help set the framework for acceptable behaviour in society. Children grow up learning about heroes and villains as examples of how the ideal person behaves and what happens when an individual turns ‘evil.’ Children also grow up imitating these stories as they internalize the lessons. We all have memories from our childhood where we pretended to be a good guy and captured the bad guy to prevent him from wrecking evil on the world. Modern children also engage in superhero play, a healthy form of rough and tumble imaginative play in which children pretend they are superheroes and villains. This form of play teaches morals and enhances complex thinking and social skills.

Many parents and educators believe this kind of play is essential to promote healthy moral and social development during childhood. Play based learning affords children the opportunity to develop communication skills through interactions with peers that foster natural problem-solving and higher order thinking skills. Role-play allows children to enact acceptable social norms and is vital to them learning the conventions of acceptable behaviour in society as well as building a moral structure in which to refer as they gain the ability to self regulate behaviour. Children who engage in imaginative play have greater social skills including cooperation with peers and adults and greater popularity in their social spheres. The complex cognitive skills required to engage in imaginative play are also facilitate mental and emotional development and promote abstract thinking as well as creativity. (French, Pena, 1991) In imitating popular superhero myths, children learn

that in a just world, good overcomes evil. This optimism while not realistic, instils the desire to strive towards good. As they mature, children who instilled with a strong sense of good versus evil will be more likely to pursue careers and causes geared towards helping other people. Because superheroes traditionally provide models of right and wrong that are clear and unmitigated by extenuating circumstance, children can use superheroes as figures to demonstrate proper conduct, language and social cooperation. (Bauer, Dettore, 1997)

Though some may claim superhero play promotes violence and is not healthy in moral development (Gelman, 2011), the reality is that children are naturally violent and must be taught the acceptable parameters in which violence may be channelled and expressed. Learning to channel aggressive instincts in charitable causes, sports and pursuing a career and educational goals is facilitated by the story-based play of superhero drama. Furthermore, children are learning through the parameters of enacting the positive characteristics of superheroes how to properly express anger. This makes children more comfortable with their anger, and allows them to see anger can be both healthy and useful if utilized acceptably. (Gelman, 2011) In dramatic enactments, children experience the pursuit of the goal, difficulty during the pursuit that they overcome with perseverance, and reward when they have overcome struggle.

## **Research conducted on superhero play**

Superhero play is nothing new. Each generation has its version of cowboys and Indians. Children in century's past would have played knights and infidels. Modern children enact Batman and Joker. According to some

research, this play helps children to develop or acquire key concepts of life. (Shipley, 2013). Some research claims superhero play is empowering. During pretend play, children can feel a sense of independence and freedom; they control their destinies, rather than the adults in their lives. When they are playing the characters of superheroes, the children can act out frustration they may have due to powerlessness. Superhero play prepares them for independence in teaching them to make decisions, accept consequences and shoulder responsibility for the welfare of dependents.

Researchers believe superhero play helps children resolve some of the issues they may have over power and control. The fact they are acting out a strong character or persona will help them understand the kind of people they want to be in the future. Children emulate superhero characters they watch on television and read about in comics as they save innocent people and right injustices. This teaches children to be helpful citizens in society and builds self-confidence. In television and comics, children observe the confidence of the characters they love and are eager to emulate this characteristic. Educators who use superheroes as tools to engage children in content – for instance relating Batman to the study of bats and cave ecosystems, and Superman to the study of physics and gravity – find that students are able to relate to the content and retain it longer. Socialization is a key benefit of superhero play. This type of play that involves rough and tumble chasing, kicking, mock battles and feigned attacks are consistently found to be the kind of play engaged in by groups who are friends. This play helps children, especially boys, build and maintain friendships, regulate emotion and interpret body language. (Boyd, 1997)

However, many educators and parents oppose superhero play by young children in schools and at home. Research shows that boys tend to enjoy superhero play more than girls, and are rougher in their play. (Parry, 2010) Boys do tend to re-enact mock fights more often than girls, and this is due to the inherent nature in boys towards more aggressive behaviour and interests. Although there are many good reasons for children to play these superhero characters, researchers believe there is limited empirical evidence of the benefit of superhero play when it comes to the rough and tumble play. Rough and tumble play is defined as children's play that involves fighting, chasing and wrestling between preschool children all the way to adolescent children (Pellegrini, 1987, p. 24)

The safety of children also becomes an issue because when the children fight and wrestle one another they harm each other. In watching television and movies, superheroes have superhuman abilities. The characters can fly from high buildings, or they can jump from the fifth floor to the ground without being hurt. When children see this, they believe they can also do that by themselves. At young ages, children are less able to discern reality from fantasy. There have been reports where some children have jumped from the roofs of their homes and broken their legs and some cases where the children have died. This has caused many parents and teachers to fear the play for the safety of the children. In light of recent school shootings and increased violence committed by juveniles, many parents also fear that children who enact villains in superhero play may be internalizing negative characteristics that may make them more susceptible to violent behaviour later on in their lives.

Some researchers have shown that when the children act out the superhero characters they sometimes take the role too seriously. This causes them to forget their identity. The loss of identity is the cause of concern for parents as well as the educators. Some children decide not to refer to their parents as their parents. This is the reason most people are encouraged to educate their children in order for them to be able to know the difference between the superhero fiction and reality.

The answer to this is to properly supervise children and to ensure they understand the difference between reality and fantasy. The ideal situation is for parents to sit with children as they watch television and help them to think critically about what they are watching, so they understand the moral implications of the story lines and are able to put the stories into proper context. Children will always play roughly, and there are numerous ways children can hurt themselves while exploring and engaging in day-to-day activities. Vilifying superhero play is not a remedy for irresponsible parenting or inexperienced teaching in the classroom. Furthermore, children who engage in sports such as football and skateboarding are just as likely to engage in rough behaviour and suffer various injuries. There has been no suggestion, however, that football should be banned or that it is the cause of juvenile violence.

### **What implications does this information have for your role as an Early Childhood Educator?**

It is the responsibility of early childhood educators to oversee the welfare of children during school. There seem to be both advantages and disadvantages to allowing superhero play in the classroom. Some educators

have decided to allow this form of play. They allow this kind of play under teacher supervision because they believe it fosters healthy development. (Boyd, 1997). I believe it is my job to remain vigilant in the classroom to ensure children do not become overly aggressive and can keep their play in an appropriate context. One solution is to ask male colleagues to deal with my male students during times when superhero play is allowed. Female teachers tend to be more hesitant to allow this type of play because of their lack of understanding of the nature of boys, and memories from how they grew up and the kinds of games they played. However, boys do not play like girls, and male teachers would be better equipped to guide boys as they engage in rough play without becoming alarmed that they were unnaturally violent. (Parry, 2010)

As a teacher, I should endeavour to weave learning opportunities into superhero play. (Shipley, 2013). For instance, Batman could teach children that anyone can be a hero. Batman is an example of an ordinary person who did extraordinary things. The Hulk teaches children that one has to control their anger. Spiderman teaches responsibility and accepting the consequences of one's actions. Superman had enormous power and was careful how he used it; he only utilized his great abilities for good, never to benefit himself. This teaches that one person can make a difference in the world. Utilization of popular figures such as the Power Rangers to teach science could also be beneficial. One teacher taught on the subject of dinosaurs after introducing the lesson using Power Rangers who turned into characters called dinozords. Because the children could relate to this, their interests in the topic increased and they were able to expand their

knowledge more fully than if the teacher had introduced the topic without first linking it to the personal interests of the children. (Bauer, Dettore, 1997)

Many educators who do not believe in superhero play have banned it from classrooms. Teachers may be concerned how children use their hands to imitate guns. (Boyd, 1997) For educators, guns or any other form of weapon is not something to be admired by children. However, children should be taught the proper place and use for guns. Activities such as hunting for food, defending against enemies in a time of war, and use of firearms by police officers are all instances in which the use of guns is appropriate. By teaching children that guns are tools for adults to use, and not toys or instruments of revenge, children learn to place them in their proper context. It is foolish to try to deny that there is violence in the world, and in the nature of human beings. The responsible thing is to raise children to respect themselves, others and law. Playing cops and robbers, or pretend shooting does not cause violence. Poor choices, lack of proper education and parental negligence causes violence. Pretending to be a superhero will not make a child want to shoot other children. While boys can become overly excited and aggressive during their play and accidentally hurt someone, those instances are also opportunities for teaching the consequences of negative actions and a lack of self-control. (Parry, 2010)

In conclusion, superhero play serves an important role in the wider world of imaginative play based learning for children. It allows children to place themselves into roles of adults so they can better define acceptable moral norms, develop a sense of responsibility, and learn about cause and effect.



Superhero play promotes increased social interaction, problem-solving skill and creative thinking that develops complex higher order thinking skills. Children who engage in this kind of play can learn how to deal with strong emotions such as anger and aggression in a healthy, socially acceptable manner. Boys tend to be more aggressive than girls, and are in more need of these types of physical outlets in order to control their tension and learn about how they can redirect their natural aggression properly. Instead of banning superhero play, teachers and parents need to understand the function it serves and place it in its proper context. By supervising children and actively teaching them moral values, any misunderstandings they have due to the nature of the superhero stories they encounter in television and books can be mitigated and redirected. Superhero play is healthy, normal and a fun activity for children to engage in, and when utilized correctly, is a valuable learning tool.

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