



Revenge on the Superheros

All children enjoy pretend play. Then why are some parents and early childhood practitioners concerned about aggressive superhero fantasy play?

According to a child's definition, superheros embody the best of human nature. Superheros are unquestionably the good guys, yet they never have anyone telling them what to do. They are always smart enough, strong enough, fast enough and sometimes funny too! Their mystique combined with their abilities to disguise and transform themselves from ordinary into superhuman adds a magical element that is attractive to children. They have total control of every situation they end up in; they never have self-doubts. They receive the glory and the applause; everyone wants to be their friend. When watching superhero cartoons and movies, children are guaranteed consistency in plot and characterization.

Disadvantages to children include aggressive, limited role models. Superheros generally do not negotiate, compromise, problem solve or talk things through. Their first response to conflict is more likely to be violence glamorized through special effects and superpowers. Superheros do not tend to use past experiences or to adjust to the ideas of others. There is little sense of discovery.

What strategies can adults use to lessen the aggression inherent in superhero play, while recognizing the very real developmental needs it meets?

- Help children recognize the humane characteristics of superheros by pointing out children's own behaviour. "You helped your friend just like ...". Ask questions during quiet times that expand the two-dimensional picture children have of superheros. "I wonder who takes care of ... when s/he has a tummy ache?"
- Discuss real life heroes and heroines. Hold a Terry Fox run at your child care centre or in your neighbourhood. Let children raise money to fight cancer and present it to the Canadian Cancer Society. Everyone can be a hero.



- Use teachable moments, like children's discomfort wearing halloween costumes, to talk about the actors who wear heavy costumes for hours while playing superhero roles. Let children put on a play and videotape it. Watch it together afterwards, with popcorn and juice, and discuss making movies.
- Limit the time and place for superhero play – outdoors, in the gym, only during afternoon free play time. If children know they will be allowed to play superheros even for a short time, there will be much less spillover into other areas of play throughout the day.
- Set a rule that aggression is unacceptable and that even superheros have to use words to solve their problems. Step in to de-escalate play before it becomes too aggressive. Have a safe spot; a comfy arm chair or a certain tree that is a retreat when play gets to be too much for an anxious child.
- Give children choices and power in real life, even if it is simply which playground to walk to or what to make for supper.
- Limit watching of superhero shows on television. Watch these shows with your child so you are aware of what the concern is all about. Resist pleas for every new superhero product that comes out. Choose non-violent toys that stimulate creativity and problem solving skills. Set realistic limits for your child and help her/him build self-control.