

Superheroes

An Opportunity for Prosocial Play

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Superhero play has long been thought of as violent, aggressive, and disruptive. Some argue that aggressive play should not be allowed because it exposes children to inappropriate concepts and attitudes and sends the message that the use of aggression can achieve a desired goal (Carlsson-Paige & Levin 1995; Bauer & Dettore 1997). However, educators know that pretend play is an avenue for healthy emotional development.

Pretend play builds children's understanding of emotion, which helps them regulate their feelings (Bodrova & Leong 2003). Acting out themes and stories in pretend play lets children practice communicating their emotions and leads toward emotional regulation. Teachers can further promote children's social-emotional skills by supporting and scaffolding pretend play, expanding on children's themes and roles. Using these strategies, all types of pretend play, including superhero play, can have a positive impact.

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Early educators have grappled with banning superhero play for decades, only to discover that children are strongly drawn to it and find ways to engage in it regardless of the adult-imposed rules (Gronlund 1992; Fonville & Afflerbach 1995; Bauer & Dettore 1997; Boyd 1997; Levin 2003; Barnes 2008; Logue & Shelton 2008). The controversy surrounding superhero play, and aggressive play in general, continues. Carlsson-Paige and Levin (1995) concluded that a perfect approach to the dilemma does not exist.

Before radio, television, and other forms of media, children created superheroes based on storybook characters and their imagination. Time spent by very young children viewing television and videos has increased dramatically from just one generation ago, with 9 months the average age when young children begin to regularly watch television (Zimmerman 2008). It's time to encourage today's children to create superheroes from their own imaginative and creative play rather than from the media.

This article shares the experience of a preschool teacher, author Jacqueline Radell, who integrated prosocial superhero play in her Head Start classroom. She offers strategies for implementing prosocial superhero play. Early childhood educators can use these strategies to address all aggressive behavior, not just superhero play.

Rethinking superhero play

As a preschool teacher for over 20 years, I have repeatedly banned toy weapons and discouraged superhero play in my classroom. In my experience such play quickly develops into aggression and violence.

With a little bit of optimism and some pessimism, I decided to introduce superhero play to the preschoolers in my classroom.

My reconsideration of superhero play was the result of attending a one-day seminar for early childhood professionals at the Empire State College, State University of New York. The Strong National Museum of Play, in Rochester, New York, hosted the seminar. The topic, Superheroes and Child's Play, focused on the museum's exhibit "American Comic Book Heroes: The Battle of Good vs. Evil." Museum education staff led participants and Empire State College faculty in sessions, including hands-on experiences using the museum exhibit.

The American Comic Book Heroes exhibit at the museum included images of superheroes from the past through the present. Clearly, children have engaged in superhero play in one form or another for generations. During the seminar, participants explored the purpose of superhero play for young children, the possibilities of intentionally incorporating this type of play in the classroom, and the critical role of teachers in guiding children's pretend play themes and roles. The seminar encouraged me to think critically about the role of the teacher in creating learning opportunities.

Combining superhero play with the characteristics of kindness and caring and with negotiation and problem-solving skills—my primary focus in promoting children's social-emotional development—always seemed impossible. But although superhero play had never been acceptable in my classroom, I was willing to give it another try. With a little

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Implementing prosocial superhero play

The seminar was in April, so the children in my classroom had spent much of the school year practicing social skills and building relationships with peers and teachers before the introduction of superhero play. Timing of the introduction is an important factor—it is optimum when the children show signs of self-regulation and are ready to begin building social skills.

I pondered ways to introduce superhero play in a positive manner. Would noncommercial superheroes, like everyday people who do good deeds, encourage positive social interactions among the children? I decided not to read aloud books or show pictures of superheroes to the children when I introduced the theme. I wanted the play to be "new," without adding preconceived ideas about superheroes.

I began by asking the children informally what superheroes do. They responded that superheroes "save people," "find your pet," "clean your house," "help you," and "save cats, like firefighters do." I asked the children how a superhero could be identified. They said, "You need a cape," "We can wear hearts," "a collar," "like a firefighter," "be invisible," and "'cause we're gonna help kids." We did some problem solving together about what superheroes do and look like and discussed the possibilities for our caped crusaders.

I used circle time to formally introduce superhero play. For three or four days, the children discussed different superhero traits during circle time and focused on words like *kind*, *caring*, and *helpful*. The children responded with ideas such as "We can help our friends," "clean up toys," and "give someone a hug when they are sad." Maybe because we had gone through many similar guided conversations away from violence and aggression, the children didn't suggest any negative traits. They brainstormed unique names for their superheroes and thought about insignias. I made lists of their ideas: "We can be hearts," "a bird saver," "a superhero baby saver," and more.

During a follow-up small group activity, the children created their individual superhero insignias. I explained that insignias are a sort of symbol or badge. At first, they referred to commercial superhero characters like Batman



and to the stereotypical imagery of the battles against extreme evil. Using statements such as “We are going to make our own superheroes” and “Let’s think up some new names,” they were easily guided and encouraged to create new themes and roles. The children imaginatively decorated paper plates with items from the art shelf. They created their own symbols, using letters from their name and shapes and numbers that had personal meaning for them. This task helped them establish the characteristics of their superhero persona, transforming them into Cat Saver, Super Allison, Green Eyed, Smiley, and Heart Girl, among others.

During circle times we talked about safety as well. We referred to the classroom rules established and posted earlier in the school year: “Hands to our own bodies,” “Walking feet,” and “Inside voices.” I reminded the children that the classroom was a weapons-free zone, and we reviewed their ideas about kind, caring, and helpful superheroes.

Providing open-ended props allowed all the children to participate simultaneously. With inexpensive, shiny fabric in every color available, I quickly and easily fashioned seven superhero capes. I placed a prop box with the capes and other materials on the floor near the dramatic play area, so that it was visible to the children. The box contained equipment intended for both genders, including toy cell phones, flashlights, sunglasses, goggles, maps, magnifying glasses, pencils, pens, notebooks, stickers, binoculars, compasses, crowns, and visors. I introduced the props after the children had created their insignias and understood the safety guidelines. The children engaged in superhero play throughout free play times and in learning centers beyond the dramatic play area, including the block and computer centers.

Children’s and teacher’s responses to superhero play

The children were all very excited about the new classroom props. They embraced the ideas about helping, caring, and being kind they had come up with, and their play was creative, cooperative, and organized. Both boys and girls actively participated and were aware of each other’s needs. They shared capes and compromised on cape colors. They negotiated the use of the big wooden building blocks, which were particularly in demand for building houses and castles in which the superheroes would reside. The children worked together lining up chairs to create cars, snowmobiles, motorcycles, buses, and helicopters for transportation. They used the play plates from the family area as steering wheels. When they encountered difficulty with the design of a vehicle, they pulled in blankets and pillows and emptied toys out of crates and boxes to make extra seating to accommodate more children.

The children reprised their usual dramatic play themes in their superhero roles. They incorporated the beauty parlor, doctor’s office, post office, coffee shop, and wood-working bench in their superhero play. The integrated roles and play themes allowed the children to recreate daily life experiences, role-play, and build ideas about the world by seeing it through a different lens.

The classroom dynamics changed. For example, Megan exclaimed, “That’s my house; you are wrecking my house!” Angry retorts flew back and forth between Megan and Lydia. Then Lydia suggested, “Let’s build it back just the way it was, okay?” Tommy said, “I wanna help, ’cause I’m a good fixer.” Jack came by carrying a toy hammer to help rebuild the house. The level of cooperative play increased, and children problem solved without adult intervention. This surprised me; it was exactly the opposite of what I had anticipated.

I joined in the children’s superhero play daily and was repeatedly rescued and saved from terrible catastrophes! It is important for teachers to support children while maintaining a balance between encouraging cooperative play and refraining from interfering unless necessary. I helped the children rephrase their complaints, drawing attention to their feelings and distress (“You look upset because you want the phone right now; do you have an idea for how we can fix this?”), offered ideas for redirection (“Maybe you could use the other phone to call for help”), and reinforced turn taking (“You really want the phone right now; let’s ask Megan if you can play with it when she is finished”). My role felt no different during superhero play than during any other classroom play activity.

Allowing the play to proceed in a controlled and nonaggressive environment set the tone for the classroom. The children required very little assistance to orchestrate different scenarios. Some dressed up and participated in other classroom activities—using the computer, exploring the sensory table, or creating with play dough—while wearing their superhero attire.

Every day, the children resumed their play where they had left off the day before. Creative superhero play schemes evolved throughout the week. The children created games that included rescuing kittens, flying around the room, and jumping off big blocks (one block high). A small group devised a game where they swooped up their capes and became invisible. The play in the classroom was not aggressive or combative. One of the girls, Bird Saver, thought out loud, “It’s kinda weird when someone who is a superhero is being mean.” The images of superheroes the children created were nonaggressive and kind.

The children’s play was intense yet very prosocial. They used words to negotiate their play mostly without the assistance of adults. A group of four children acted out the following play scenario:



Explore possibilities that are in your comfort zone. Discuss your ideas with your coteachers so that implementing the play is a team effort.



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children? What are your preconceived ideas about superhero play? To incorporate superhero play into your classroom, explore possibilities that are in your comfort zone. Discuss your ideas with your coteachers so that implementing the play is a team effort.

Be prepared. Preparation and organization are extremely important. Identify the children's current interests and play scenarios. Prepare superhero prop boxes with a variety of materials that build on children's interests, such as flashlights, magnifying glasses, toy cell phones, watches, binoculars, cameras, colored capes, and hats. Define the teacher's role in superhero play. Allow yourself time to gather props and to reflect before implementing it.

Introduce the new play activity with a positive approach. Use group times like circle time to introduce the theme. Identify superheroes the children are familiar with. Be prepared for the children to mention violent superheroes. Use this as an opportunity to discuss positive attributes of nonviolent superheroes. Have the children make lists about what superheroes do, and post them around the classroom. Provide art materials for children to draw representations of their superhero. Unveil the prop boxes during group time, and discuss the creation of new, caring, helpful superheroes.



- Ryan:** I'm almost set up.
- Brian:** I found the oil.
- Ryan:** Look, I am riding the motorcycle.
- Brian:** Yeah, me too.
- Tommy:** I saw you, but I got flipped over—*aaahhhhh!*
- Ryan:** We're superhero life savers.
- Luke:** Who's with me? Teamwork!
- Brian:** I am the right guy; I'm your fairy godparent.

Reflections and tips for prosocial superhero play

The following are some key strategies for implementing prosocial superhero play that limits aggressive behavior:

Set goals. Where do you want this activity to lead? What are the expected learning outcomes for you and/or the

The teacher's positive approach is paramount. Children can sense the teacher's confidence in how well this play will work, setting the tone for the classroom environment. Hyson (2004) notes that "one of the reasons that children learn through play may be that play generally occurs in such a positive emotional climate, fostering attention, memory, and creative problem solving" (113).

Establish clear boundaries. Build on the existing classroom rules that reflect safety and respect for others, like "Hands to your own body" and "Walking feet." Through classroom conversations at circle time, encourage the children to establish boundaries that will make them feel safe. Identify and discuss acceptable versus unacceptable parameters for play. Write down ideas the discussion generates and post them in the classroom. This allows children to take ownership of the play and feel a sense of power and control. After all, this is what superhero play is all about.

Allow for exploration. Now it is time to allow the children to explore the new type of play. Join in the play and take on a role that allows them the opportunity to "rescue" you. Listen closely to their choice of words and pay attention to their body language as they act out a play scenario. What messages are they sending, and how can you expand on the messages through your role in the play? Effective teachers allow opportunities for uninterrupted play and act as facilitator, participant, and guide during playtime. Hyson (2004) says, "The emotion-centered teacher knows that classroom play can help children learn to monitor, heighten, dampen, redirect, and otherwise regulate their expressive behavior. Many of the best activities allow children to represent their experiences, encouraging feelings of efficacy or control" (91).

Avoid stereotypes. Superhero play does not have to follow the stereotype of aggressive play with weapons. Introduce props and story lines (if the children need your assistance) that are gender neutral and promote cooperative play. Use children's literature—for example, the Ladybug Girl series, by Jacky Davis and David Soman. Watch for releases like *The Amazing Adventures of Bumblebee Boy*, based on a character in the Ladybug Girl books. Display pictures and books around the classroom of boys and girls engaged in gender-neutral pretend play.



With guidance and freedom of exploration, children create their own play and devise imaginative prosocial characters, as I saw for myself.

Conclusions

As a child, I watched the superheroes Batman and Robin on television in black and white. I tied my mother's tea towels around my shoulders and swooped around the yard performing imaginary feats of heroism. Although the superheroes of today are depicted in very different ways, with vivid special effects that seem all too real, imaginative play remains an essential part of a child's development.

Dramatic play areas are often too structured and may be preplanned to fit the theme of the curriculum rather than children's interests and needs (Hyson 2004). Hyson notes that "these efforts often result in play that, while pleasing to adults and easy to manage, is emotionally flat, allowing few opportunities for children to express, experience,

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