

The value of superhero play

By Heather Barnes

The superhero play of preschool and school age children can sometimes be confronting to child care professionals, who may wonder whether they should stop or support this type of play.

What is superhero play?

Superhero play is a form of imaginative or dramatic play in which children use figurines, costumes, or other props as accessories to imitate the superheroes that they admire.

Young children can be influenced by their exposure to the media, such as television, DVDs or computer games, and may play out what they have seen. For many children, animated superheroes play the same role as fairy tales did for past generations. They are not supposed to be true-to-life and most children understand this easily. However some children need assistance to make sense of what they have seen.

Even very young children can be attracted to the commercial figures that they have seen in the media, although their interest may be fleeting and their play doesn't generally have the same complexity as that of older children.

A two year old, when opening his birthday presents, may disregard a gift of natural wooden blocks and exclaim with delight when finding a doll that he recognises as 'Buzz' from the movie *Toy Story*. At this stage, they are often beginning



This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.1, 1.5, 2.2, 3.1, 3.4-3.7

OSHCQA Principles: 1.1-1.3, 2.2 and 2.3

QIAS Principle: 1.1-1.5, 3.3, 4.1-4.6

to engage in basic role play, even though this may be primarily solitary or parallel play, rather than socially interactive.

Three to five year old children will use noise, gestures and lots of action to chase each other around while pretending to be superheroes. They are also often beginning to engage in organised play scenarios that have structure and rules.

School age children can become obsessed with superheroes and may want to frequently focus on, play out and talk about aspects of movies they have seen.

Why do children enjoy superhero play?

Preschool age children seem to be drawn to the power, strength and special attributes of superheroes and, when engaged in this type of play, it helps them to feel in charge of their world. At this age friendships are developing with other children and cooperative play is increasing, so superhero play is often an interest that children have in common. For example, children in a park may start to play together just because they are wearing similar Spiderman tee shirts.

Children are also drawn to superhero play because it is usually very active and may involve weapons, either make believe ones or props they have made themselves. Regardless of their age, many children seem to enjoy running, jumping, wrestling, and shouting, while participating in superhero play. They engage in fleeing, chasing, capturing, rescuing and winning as they play out themes based on good and evil and saving the world.

There is often an attraction for children to the violent themes of superhero play and older children may be influenced by their peers to collect action figures and other accessories that are marketed in the media.

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Concerns that child care professionals may have about superhero play:

There are many reasons why child care professionals may feel uncomfortable about superhero play or have adopted a 'zero tolerance' approach to it. These include concerns that:

- the themes of the play often tend to promote war, violence and a focus on masculine strength, which are at odds with promoting peaceful co-operation and gender equity in a child care environment;
- the children engaged in the play may act aggressively and hurt or threaten each other;
- there may be an increased risk of accidents;
- other children not participating in the game may have their play disrupted;
- some children may be excluded because of their age, gender or lack of skills;
- the play becomes so obsessive that the children will not participate in other aspects of the program; and
- the noise level of the play becomes intrusive.

However strictly child care professionals try to enforce a ban on superhero play, some children will persist with making and using pretend weapons and enacting superhero scenarios. A great deal of intervention and energy on the part of child care professionals is needed to enforce such a ban. When challenged, children can often be very inventive at making their play more acceptable to adults, for example, "This isn't a gun, it's a laser camera."

Another way of looking at superhero play

We should see superhero play 'not as a disruption to be prevented but as another gateway to learning' (Holland, 2003).

Children use play to help them understand their experiences, whether it is their home life or what they have seen on television, on video or at the movies. Superhero play gives them a safe way to achieve a sense of power and play out the violence they may have observed. Children who are stressed may use the fantasy and physical activity of superhero play as a way of releasing their tensions. Wearing superhero capes or masks may give them a feeling of strength and courage.

Children do not necessarily need to have well developed language or social skills to become involved in superhero play as it can be easy for them to join in – they just run when everyone else does. They can experience a sense of belonging and learn new vocabulary as they listen to or participate in discussions about the play. They can also learn ways to problem solve as they examine possible solutions and negotiate with each other. Empathy is also developed as children begin to understand how other people think.

As with other forms of dramatic play, superhero play promotes creativity and children will begin to develop plots for their play that encourage them to be involved for longer periods. Art, craft, literacy, maths and science learning opportunities can also be inspired by interests in superhero play.

The high activity levels often involved in superhero play can also support children's physical development and wellbeing.

How can child care professionals support children's superhero play?

Being responsive to children's emerging interests involves listening to them, observing them and helping to facilitate their play.

Listening carefully to the themes of children's play will help child care professionals to know when to step in to keep children safe. It will also provide valuable clues for ways to support and extend the play, such as providing a clip board to draw a map to Gotham City.

Acknowledging their interests while having clear guidelines about appropriate behaviour is important to supporting children to participate in superhero play in positive ways. Ensuring that children know that aggressive behaviour is unacceptable will help them to understand that their play is valued, but that everyone needs to feel safe. It needs to be made clear to children that any play that harms or excludes others is not acceptable. Using proactive approaches, such as discussing conflict resolution skills and suggesting strategies to ensure everyone has a turn at being the 'good' superhero, may help to minimise conflict.



Child care professionals can help children to make sense of what they see on television and in films in a number of ways.

For example,

- Talk with children about how action films are made and how stunt men and women are used to create action scenes.
- Check the children's sense of reality by asking questions such as "Do you think people can really fly?"
- Encourage children to focus on the positive themes of what they have seen, such as helping people, rather than on the physical attributes of superheroes.

- Talk about real life heroes and encourage the children to think about ways that they too can be real life heroes and help others.

Providing open ended materials, such as fabric that can be used as capes and collage materials that can be used to make accessories, will support the children's creativity and imaginative expression of their interest in superhero play. Seeking ways to incorporate their interest into other areas of the program will help to prevent their play from becoming fixed in a repetitive pattern.

It is also important for child care professionals to learn about the characters that children are interested in by watching the programs, films or DVDs that the children are talking about. This will assist them to further facilitate children's play, and increase opportunities for them to engage in meaningful discussions with children about their play and interests.

Conclusion

Superhero play can be seen as a legitimate part of the program and equally important as any other interest expressed by children. Child care professionals need to be continuously aware of keeping children safe while also acknowledging that the children's interest in superheroes is meaningful. As is the case for all children's interests, child care professionals can guide and support children's superhero play and support it to develop in more complex ways ■

References and further reading

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- Irvine, J. (2005). Superheroes or superbullies? *Childcare Australasia*. 1(4), 18-19.
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- Paley, V. (1984). *Boys and Girls: Superheroes in the Doll Corner*. Chicago: University of Chicago

Useful Websites

- Young Media Australia: www.youngmedia.org.au
- Child and Youth Health: www.cyh.com

Case study: How one service positively supports children's superhero play

A small group of children in the kindergarten room were gathered around the collage table. They were assisting each other to put tape across their foreheads and to create 'gloves' from paper and sticky tape. They concentrated hard, assisted each other with equipment and were discussing what they were going to do when they were 'Power Rangers' outside. Superhero play has been a continuing interest of these children for some time.

In the past, the child care professionals at The University of Melbourne Queensberry Children's Centre would perhaps have redirected this play or reminded the children that superhero play was not acceptable. However, for several years now, the service has allowed and supported the children's interests in this type of play. It is an integral part of the service's philosophy to respect children's interests and to use these to promote their learning and development.

The service's Assistant Director, Liz O'Brien, says that accepting and working with the children's interests in superhero play offers many opportunities to allow children's imaginations and creativity to flourish. Staff also use the children's interest to foster discussions about issues such as 'good and bad', what superheroes stand for, and who might be identified as real superheroes in the community. Liz also feels that through respecting and responding to children's interests, many opportunities are created where child care professionals in the service can engage in meaningful conversations with children, and the relationships between them are strengthened.

However, accepting and supporting the children's ongoing interest in superhero play has required careful consideration, as well as genuine collaboration between the service, families and children. For example, some of the children would be happy to wear commercially made superhero costumes every day, which concerned some families. Liz also found that often when wearing bought superhero costumes, the children's play became more aggressive and less constructive. As a result, the service introduced special 'dress up days' where children can wear whatever dress up clothes they like. Liz believes that this has

made the act of wearing the superhero costumes special, and that it allows children to share their special interests with their peers and child care professional, without promoting the negative aspects of superhero play.

On non-dress up days, children are provided with access to open ended materials and dress up resources such as clothes and pieces of fabric that can be used in many different ways, and a variety of art/craft and collage materials. Children's play is documented in their individual journals to keep track of their interests and experiences.

The service works closely with families to ensure that their priorities for their children are being addressed well through individualised programs. For example, Liz worked with a family who was concerned that their child would only engage in play related to their favourite superhero. Subsequently, child care professionals at the service worked with the family and the child to redirect the child to non-superhero activities for part of the day.

Staff at the service are very aware of supervising and monitoring children's superhero play to keep them safe and to ensure that no one is excluded or bullied. Liz says that this has also led to opportunities to foster children's skills in negotiating with peers, resolving conflicts and developing empathy for others. Staff listen to children's discussions and interactions so that, where appropriate, they can extend children's understanding and provide them with other ways of looking at situations.

Liz says the service believes that it is important to "listen to children's voices" and to use this as a basis for supporting their learning and development in meaningful ways. While she agrees that there can be challenges in accepting and working constructively with children's interest in superheroes and the associated dramatic role play, Liz has found that by child care professionals adopting an individualised approach to planning for children, positive outcomes can be reached for the service, families, and, most importantly, for children ■