



gretchen's
house

So you want to know more about...

Superhero Play

The Need for Speed

Superhero play shows up between 3-5 years of age. Both girls and boys do it, though boys tend to do it more frequently and persist longer. What's it all about? **Power.**

Children often feel they have very little power, so games with names like Power Rangers and Wonder Woman are very attractive. Even if your child doesn't hear about these avengers at home, chances are they will pick them up from somewhere. It can be shocking to see your generally pacifistic child practice karate kicks against imaginary bad guys.

Superhero play does have benefits, however. It offers a

chance to talk about good and bad behavior and develops problem solving skills in battling "evil." It also provides a safe venue for kids to express their fears and "use" their strengths. So what's wrong with superhero play? It *can* lead to more aggressive play. That power can be addictive, and young children:

- Can't appropriately limit their own behavior.
- Don't fully understand the consequences of their actions, especially if they have been desensitized to violence on TV.

The fact that superhero play can be difficult to manage doesn't mean it should be banned

altogether. A moratorium is impractical and doesn't take advantage of all the teaching opportunities inherent in this kind of play. We recommend involved supervision, with firm limits. Adults can zero in on the critical issues in each situation and then lead children to more productive resolutions.

One way to empower children is to encourage them to emulate real-life heroes in their imaginative play:

- Teachers
- Doctors and Nurses
- Environmentalists
- Police officers
- Fire Fighters
- Scientists
- Farmers

Gun Play

Despite the intentions of many parents, most children pretend to play with guns sometime. Even if you forbid toy guns, those built with Legos, and those chewed out of a piece of toast, children still have their finger and thumb. Bang, you're dead. **Or not.** Why not use these moments to talk about other kinds of power? Physical strength, mental prowess, and resourcefulness come to mind: challenge children to find better solutions.

It isn't helpful to go into lengthy moral discussions about how guns kill people because children this age can't really comprehend the concept of death. It is more effective to give them alternative means of power and help them vocalize the emotions that can lead to this kind of play. More power to you!

Further reading

- *Captain Pajamas*, by Bruce Whatley
- *The Barefoot Book of Heroic Children*, by Rebecca Hazell
- *Captain Underpants Series*, by Dav Pilkey

GH Strategies for Managing Superhero Play

- Help children recognize the human side of superheroes: their weaknesses, their compassion.
- Discuss acting vs. reality.
- Point out natural consequences for poor choices.
- Set limits for play and enforce them consistently. For example: no physical contact, no weapons, only play with children who want to participate.
- Stay involved and suggest alternative solutions to problems.
- Use prop boxes with capes and costumes; provide tools like magnifying glasses, special boots, etc. in place of weapons.
- Give children scripts for declining to play or letting others know when it gets to be too much: “I am finished, I am taking a break.”
- Introduce children to larger-than-life heroes like Paul Bunyan or John Henry. Encourage them to tell or write their own tall tales.
- Redirect by getting involved: do your own pretending to help them shift gears.
- Set up other dramatic play scenarios in which kids can be powerful: firefighting, etc.
- Discourage children from bringing action figures to the center.

Avoiding Aggressive Play

When superhero play begins to disintegrate, you will hear and see cues that call for intervention. The laughing stops, complaints start, and you’ll see expressions of fear, anger, and distress. Adults need to stay tuned to these cues and step in before children leave the scene with bad feelings. You can:

- Offer assistance.
- Offer information about what you observe or which may otherwise be helpful.

- Break the problem into manageable steps that involve everyone’s participation. Help all children be responsible for the resolution of the problem.
- If necessary, build in “breaks” that allow children to regain their composure before rejoining play.

The most effective intervention happens when adults facilitate solutions rather than direct them. Children feel powerful and learn skills for future use.

Frequently Asked Questions

My child tells me other kids pick on him when they play superheroes. Sometimes children don’t tell their parents the whole story. If you’ve been vocal about nonviolent play, they may be reluctant to admit they have tried it. We don’t allow children to intimidate each other in any activity. If you are concerned we may be missing something, let us know and we’ll do more official observing. We will let you know what we see as well as our plans to address it.

Why is it a good idea to give kids props for superhero play? Doesn’t that encourage it? Children will find a way to do superhero games with or without our permission. Providing props allows us to set the parameters and offers new ideas for power, resourcefulness, etc. It also helps us keep an eye on group dynamics and address the other issues that may be leading to this kind of play.

Why don’t you allow children to bring war toys from home if you think this play is okay? We don’t think *war play* is okay and can’t “police” toys on a case-by-case basis. In addition, teachers can’t keep track of toys from home. Because we allow superhero play as described above, and provide our own props for it, we can be sure that children get consistent messages about appropriate play.

I hate to hear my child playing games in which people “kill” each other. Remember that a young child’s concept of death is very vague. Kids don’t really comprehend that death is permanent until they are 6-8 years old. Younger children use killing as a metaphor for having power to control their world. You can talk about what the injuries they’re pretending to inflict would feel like in real life. Try brainstorming with your child to think up non-violent solutions in his imaginary conflicts. You can also make a rule that no one “dies” in the game, if you feel strongly.