

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SUPERHERO PLAY

Young children want to feel powerful. They want to express their fears and wishes. They question the concepts of goodness, badness, fairness, and death. Young children often use superhero play as a representational way to examine these questions.

What is superhero play?

Superhero play is a type of pretend play in which young children imitate action heroes they like. They focus greatly on the simple sorting of “good guy” versus “bad guy.” Children create powerful situations for themselves where they can make up the rules for their play. They create problems and trials to conquer. They create their own identities throughout the play. Some adults can become concerned and may choose to ban this sort of play because there is a worry that children will become too aggressive, disruptive, or violent. However, with adult help, superhero play can help children develop their language, cognitive, physical, social and emotional skills.

Why is superhero play beneficial for young children?

During the best superhero play, children develop language skills by creating sequential stories and acting them out. They participate in wide-ranging conversations with their friends. Children develop cognitive skills through cooperation. They use a variety of ways to solve the problems that arise in the pretend play. During superhero play, children develop physical skills when they run, jump, tumble, and climb to act out their story. Children develop emotional skills when they gain power over their own fears. They also explore “good” and “bad” as they come to realize that a hero is one who works to help another person.

When should I be concerned?

Observe your child in superhero play. Is your child creating stories to wrap around the play or do you just see repetitive karate chops, kicks and spins with no purpose or ending in sight? If you only see movements without stories, it may be a sign that your child needs you to join in and help develop his or her imagination skills.

How can superhero play be managed successfully?

- Choose a safe place (outdoors works well) for superhero play.
- Get involved in the play. Be creative and make costumes, props and settings. Make up story plots that have action, but avoid excessive fighting.
- Set the rule, before the play starts, that aggressive behavior is not allowed. Step in before play becomes too aggressive.
- Limit the amount of violent or aggressive images that your children sees.
- Talk about real-life heroes in their lives.
- Highlight peaceful ways to deal with conflicts.
- Give children power and choices in their lives. For example, have them pick out the outfit they want to wear.
- Show children new ways of playing with the superhero toys they already have. For example, the toys could be used in an animal saving mission.
- Help children find other ways to express power - by dancing to get out excess energy or by pounding a pillow when they are angry.

Young children use superhero play to understand the world they live in. When superhero play is banned, children may not have ample opportunity to explore and get the answers they need. Adults can use the play as opportunities to help children understand the difference between fantasy and reality as well as to talk about helpful and hurtful behaviors.