

Superhero Play

Children, especially boys, love to transform themselves into superheroes. With the minimum of costumes and props, a young child can almost instantly change himself into Superman, Batman, or a Ninja Turtle. Sometimes two or three children will create an elaborate drama populated with a variety of superheroes and sometimes a single child will be content to assume the role alone. In their superhero play, children do what superheroes do: they fly, chase bad guys, and save the world.

Teachers of young children have been living with superhero play in the classroom for a long time and for some teachers this type of play is a troublesome issue. In some cases, teachers or schools ban superhero play in the classroom altogether. There are generally two reasons why it is a troublesome issue and why it may be forbidden. For some teachers the problem is philosophical; superhero play is often times aggressive in nature with 'good guys' chasing 'bad guys' and at times using somewhat violent means to capture and subdue the 'bad guys.' Teachers who are opposed to any kind of aggression or violence entering the classroom, even make-believe violence and aggression, might choose to ban superhero play.

Even for teachers who don't have a philosophical position on aggression may have problems with superhero play because this type of play can become loud, rambunctious, and sometimes chaotic. In addition, sometimes the child who is playing superhero imposes his play on other children who are not interested in being chased, pursued, and captured; anger and hurt feelings can result.

It turns out that even when teachers may try and enforce a ban on superhero play, children aren't always good at adhering to the ban; their aggressive and assertive make-believe play still has a way of making its way into the classroom. Why are some children so persistent and passionate about their superhero play? One reason is that superheroes embody power and to one degree or another, young children are looking for ways to feel powerful in a world that is often not under their control. A second reason for their interest in superhero play is that young children are learning about right and wrong, rules, and morality. The world of superheroes is typically a world where right and wrong, good guy and bad guy, is often crystal clear. There aren't the shades of grey that often characterize the real world.

If superhero play fulfills some needs for young children and can actually be positive for their development, can teachers find a middle-ground between the outright banning of superhero play and letting children do whatever they want? Teachers can both shape and guide superhero play by establishing some guidelines prior to the play and then monitoring and facilitating the play as it occurs.

In terms of guidelines, the following policies can be helpful:

1. Children can't be allowed to engage in activity that may be harmful to themselves or others. Superman may be able to fly but in the classroom you can't climb up on a table and jump off *as if* you are flying. Batman may pursue and capture bad guys but you can't run around the room and tackle other children.
2. Children shouldn't be allowed to force one of their classmates to play with them. If another child in the classroom does not want to be the 'target' of a child's superhero powers, then the child must respect that other child's decision.
3. In general, superhero play can't disturb the other activities that are going on in the classroom.

Teachers should communicate to children that violation of these policies will mean the ending of their superhero play.

In terms of facilitating superhero play, teachers can help children go beyond the often repetitive and stereotyped behaviors that children produce. For example, in addition to pursuing bad guys, Superman can also help people. Batman fights crime but he also has his friendship with Robin. By suggesting different tasks and challenges for the superheroes, teachers can help children expand their concepts of what these superheroes do.

Superhero play is a challenging issue for teachers. If a teacher decides that there can be value to children's superhero play, then he or she will have to find acceptable ways in which it can be part of the ongoing classroom environment.

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