

Calling all Superheroes!



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Superheroes are a huge part of popular culture, they are instantly recognisable and children regularly engage in play that involves heroes and villains. Superheroes also make it into our settings too – we hear cries of, 'You're the baddie, I'm the goodie' or 'I'm gonna shoot you!' From Spider-Man and 'Supertato' to doctors and firefighters they literally come in all sorts of guises and disguises! Play themes observed frequently include 'goodies' and 'baddies' and 'killing' or 'death' which can make some early childhood educators feel in conflict about whether to embrace this type of play or to ban it.



In my view, superhero play offers an opportunity for children to be creative and imaginative, whilst tackling tricky issues and storylines in their play such as, killing, death and gender stereotypes. Superhero play generally focuses on the triumph of good over evil, so it offers children a chance to think about good and kind actions - the sorts of things a superhero would do. We can help children to find their own superpowers as superhero play can instil qualities such as self-efficacy, kindness, peace-keeping, self-regulation, curiosity, friendliness and fairness.

Superhero play tends to be very physical too and it provides plenty of opportunities to develop fine and gross motor skills as well as opportunities to play socially with others. In addition, situations

naturally arise in the play presenting children with the chance to problem solve and resolve conflict amicably.

The great thing about superhero play is that you don't need to invest in expensive equipment or special costumes. There are plenty of superhero resources available to buy if you choose to, however this doesn't always enhance their play. Providing children with loose parts and open-ended resources will



allow them to create their own superhero environments. For example, you could follow up on a child's interest in Batman and create a bat cave by draping a large piece of dark material over a table. Add a few UV pens and torches and it becomes incredibly inviting! Children can then draw their own logos or we can print images to decorate the cave... Sticking a bat shape to a torch makes a great bat signal and a Batman utility belt can easily be created if you provide children with long pieces of yellow or gold card or material. Children will come up with their own ideas and all we need to do is ensure that there are accessible materials available.

Top tips for supporting our superheroes!

Here are my top tips for embracing superhero play and supporting our superheroes:

- Allow children to lead the play and try not to take over their play and storylines – it's their play and as Julie Fisher advises, we should be interacting not interfering (Fisher, 2016).
- Ensure all staff are consistent in responding to this play – discuss your response as a team.
- Find out about the characters that our children are most interested in and do your research – read their back story as context (our children may not know this – but it might be helpful).
- Support the children as they set the scene and help them to make any props that might be useful.
- Talk about who the goodies (and baddies) are and what they do.

- Problem-solve and use conflict resolution techniques when difficulties arise.
- See this play as an opportunity to openly talk about more difficult issues like killing, death, good, bad, power etc.
- Keep an eye on the time so that the children can find a resolution in their game before the next transition, e.g. tidy-up time or lunch time.
- Join in with the children's play, role-modelling how to be respectful, kind, powerful and resilient and find your own superpowers to resolve conflicts without judgement and how to bounce back after difficulties.

"I believe that all children are competent learners and have within them the necessary skills and abilities to become heroes and potentially change the world!" (Grimmer, 2019). So pop your cape on and join your superheroes – together we can make a difference!

References and links

Fisher, J. (2016) *Interacting or Interfering? Improving interactions in the early years*.

Grimmer, T. (2019) *Calling all superheroes: supporting and developing superhero play in the early years*. Routledge, Abingdon.

Superheroes on CBeebies <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p053v06c>

Articles about superhero play - <https://www.tamsinggrimmer.com/parenta-superheroplay>