

# IS SUPERHERO PLAY GOOD FOR KIDS?

## What is SUPERHERO play?

Superhero play is a form of creative or pretend play in which children imitate action heroes that they admire. In a child's social and moral development, 'good guy versus bad guy' play is normal and important.

There are basically two types of superhero play: one involves children playing with commercial figures or dolls of superheroes, and the other is dramatic play where children use props and dress up in clothes.

Figurine play can be limiting and the toys are predictable and often dull a child's own imagination. Therefore it's believed that dramatic play should be encouraged more.

In the dramatic form, children organize a drama and use their imagination and skills to create a play/game.

Preschool-aged children enjoy superhero play, with the most intense interest shown by four to five-year-olds. Preschoolers are not in control of their lives. The rules are set for them and adults make decisions for them. Superhero play, where they imitate heroes who overcome any obstacles they face, helps children to establish their own identity. They are beginning to understand the difference between good and evil, and they are keen to identify with the 'good' characters as they struggle to stop themselves from doing 'naughty' things. Sometimes parents and care-takers become concerned that superhero play, by its dramatic nature, can become too aggressive or disruptive. If properly supervised, however, superhero play can be a great stimulus of imagination and allow children to use up energy.



## Benefits of superhero play

### Key concepts:

- This form of dramatic play, centering on themes of good and bad, friends and enemies, and power and vulnerability, helps children to learn the difference between these concepts, understand rules and control their naughty impulses;

### Empowerment:

- Preschoolers feel relatively powerless as they are expected to follow rules and listen to adults. They can 'try on' power from both sides: the frightening negative side of the 'bad guy' and the warm positive side of the 'good guy'. They gain control over fears by experiencing both sides of power play. Superhero play allows children to feel more in control and face their fears such as bedwetting, monsters, animals, going to childcare, or parents divorcing.
- Pretending to be a brave superhero can help children imagine what frightening experiences are like and be more comfortable trying new things. It gives them courage and strength. For example, children may insist on wearing a Superman costume to make them feel safe and in control.

### Confidence:

- Young children can use superhero play to help make sense of confusing experiences and understand their place in the world. It helps children establish their own individuality.

### Problem-Solving :

- Superhero play helps children develop problem-solving skills as they examine lots of possible solutions to a problem.
- Children learn about cooperation and team work as they sequence a story together, negotiate how play will proceed, and solve problems as a group.

### Language:

- As with other forms of pretend play, superhero play helps children use and develop language skills. Their vocabulary is expanded as they interact with other children and supervising adults.

### Social Behaviour:

- Superhero play assists children's socialization. Experts state that children who are involved in managed superhero play interact better with adults, and feel a sense of belonging in a group.
- By pretending to be someone else, children imagine how others feel and become aware of the needs of others and the reasons why people behave as they do. Superhero play gives children first-hand experience in empathy.

### Creativity:

- Creativity is encouraged through superhero play. Children play at imaginary games for longer and develop more involved plots and scenarios.

### Physical Development :

- Superhero play assists physical development as children jump, run and actively imitate the superhuman traits of their heroes. Physical confidence grows as children show off their physical feats.

## Managing superhero play

To enable children to gain the most from superhero play, and to keep it controlled and avoid chaos, parents and care-takers can follow these guidelines:

**Set reasonable limits and rules:** Make it clear that aggressive behavior is not acceptable, and let your child know when and where superhero play is allowed. Outside is best and remind your child that safety comes first, so talk about what actions may be unsafe, such as jumping off the fence.

**Be involved in the play:** In this way you can intervene when things become aggressive or dangerous, or when children become scared or angry. You can become part of



the game, offer new options and experience play from the child's own viewpoint.

**Encourage open communication:** Talk about the game (after it has finished) and ask your child to share his or her feelings. Also, explain why you don't like it when he or she pretends to hurt or kill someone and help him or her to find alternatives to problem solving and conflict resolution.

**Limit watching aggressive TV shows:** Monitor the television children watch. Watch these shows with children and talk about what is happening and how the shows are made. By limiting passive television watching, children also have more time for creative and interactive play in a supportive environment.

**Provide other environments:** for your child to express herself. Use clay to pound out anger, or dance to burn excess energy. These are other ways that children can be powerful and control the game. Help children to be active and develop new plots that allow for action without fighting. Creating costumes, props and settings can be a very important part of the play.

**Talk about real heroes:** Use newspaper stories, television news and other media to discuss that real heroes are brave, helpful and caring. Help children to become heroes themselves - raise money with a for a charity; arrange toy collections for an orphanage etc..

**Give children choices and power in their lives:** Let children feel responsibility and autonomy in making decisions, such as choosing what colour shirt to wear or which playground to visit.

**Stress peaceful problem-solving:** Talk about conflict resolution skills and practice these skills with children. Discuss how these skills can be applied to situations depicted in superhero shows.

**Don't give in and buy every new superhero toy:** Show children how to play with characters they already have in different ways, such as involving the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys' in a rescue mission together), and choose toys that allow children to use them in a number of ways, such as Lego or Mobilo.

**Develop a child's sense of self-worth** and affirm his or her own power. Praise children when they accomplish real achievements, such as completing a puzzle or learning how to tie shoe laces. Also recognize their strength and physical abilities in the same way.

**Talk about what it means to be a friend:** Highlight the importance of accepting differences in others and help children to rotate roles in superhero play so that everyone has a turn at being the 'good guy' and the 'bad guy'.



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