

FOCUS on Early Childhood Mental Health

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SUPER HERO PLAY



Five-year-old Derek loves to watch super hero shows on TV. He dresses up as super heroes and wants super-hero-themed birthday parties. Sometimes he thinks he really is Superman, as he “flies” down the stairs in his home. When he plays with his friends, they pretend to be Power Rangers or Avengers, and

they can get very physical. His parents worry that this kind of play encourages violence.

WHY CHILDREN (ESPECIALLY BOYS) LIKE SUPER HERO PLAY:

- They can be powerful, when in real life they often feel powerless
- They can pretend to be people who can solve big problems and be successful
- Super hero play provides the physical activity young children really need

BENEFITS OF SUPER HERO PLAY:

- Assists with social/emotional development—learning about right and wrong, fairness and cooperation
- Assists with cognitive development, such as learning about a character and role-playing
- Uses imagination and encourages cooperative and group play; builds problem-solving skills
- Helps children learn to distinguish between good and evil

- Allows children to act out some of their aggressive tendencies in a socially acceptable way

CONCERNS ABOUT SUPER HERO PLAY:

- May help to promote excessively aggressive behavior and glorify violence and the use of weapons
- Is a symptom of too much exposure to violence—both real-life and fantasy—in the media
- Discourages creative and open-ended play
- May result in bullying behavior and unsafe play

SOME TIPS:

- Set rules for physical play (e.g., no kicking, no pointing weapons)
- Provide enough space for safe play
- Introduce children to real-life heroes (e.g., firefighters)
- Limit violent media
- Distinguish between normal “rough and tumble” play and real fighting
- Be alert for signs that a child’s play is intentionally hurtful

SOURCES

- “Superhero Play: What’s a Teacher to Do?” by Karen Bauer and Ernest Dettore, *Early Childhood Education Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 1997
- “From Superhero to Real-Life Hero: Encouraging Healthy Play,” by Shelley Butler and Deb Katz; <http://tinyurl.com/bpdwjxq>
- “Rough and Tumble Play 101,” by Frances Carlson, *Exchange*, July/August 2009; www.ccie.com/library/5018870.pdf



Pennsylvania Early Childhood Mental Health Advisory Committee

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