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Introduction: Summer 1957

I'm seven years old, and I'm dressed for play: red cowboy hat, red bandana, real leather boots, fake leather holsters, and two new silver six-shooter cap guns. It's summer 1957, in the suburbs of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I head outside without saying good-bye and cross the street to Frankie's yard.

Everybody's there: Sam, Rick, Larry, the two Lindas, Annie, and more. Frankie's little brother, Ron, wants to play, too, and his mom says we have to let him. Some days we play kick-the-can or freeze tag, but today it's cowboys and Indians. We choose up good guys and bad guys and decide who gets saved. Ron wants to be a cowboy, but Frankie tells him babies can't be cowboys. The Indians don't want him either, so they pretend to tie him to a stake.

Usually, it's a girl that gets rescued. They take turns, all except for Annie. She's a tomboy. I like Annie, even though she held me down once and spit in my face and laughed.

The cowboys gather behind the hedge. The Indians run to the rock wall and rub dirt on their faces. Ron sits in the middle of the lawn. I practice twirling my guns while we plan the attack. Larry gets tired of talking, so he takes the first shot. Bullets and arrows fly everywhere, and people die, two or three times each. Sam doesn't like dying, but we tell him he has to. Everybody has to take a turn, even scaredy-cats.

I love dying. I can go limp at full speed, bounce off the ground, flip a couple of times, and end up in a heap. I like to make the grown-ups gasp. Today, I'm going to try to kick off my boots on the final spin. I wait until most everybody else is down so I'll have an audience. I make my break into the open lawn. Rick sends an arrow through my chest, and I go out with glory. Maybe I'll be an Indian tomorrow and die falling off a horse, right over the rock wall. Everybody will cheer for that!

All the Indians are dead. Larry is the only cowboy left standing, so he unties Ron. All the cowboys miraculously revive and let out a victory cheer. The Indians lie still, defeated again.

We play five rounds before dinner. The Indians win one, which happens sometimes when Larry is chief. Then the Indians get to whoop and dance, and somebody has to burn. Today, it's Ron.

Forty-plus years later, I'm wondering what I learned in Frankie's yard. Cooperation, negotiation, imagination, how I could be a leader and a follower, how far I could push my body, and how I compared to my peers. I got to think about death without getting too scared, the way I sometimes did at night, and I got to try out being powerful in a very big and confusing world. These are valuable lessons for a growing child.

But I learned some other lessons as well, ones that I've had to work hard to unlearn: that Native Americans are bloodthirsty monsters who scalp people and dance around like monkeys; that bad guys have dark faces; that big boys are always the leaders, and girls and little kids the victims; that TV is the best place to get ideas for play; and that guns and violence solve problems. This same misinformation is still part of the world our children enter. In fact, some of these messages have gotten stronger in the last forty years. Are these the lessons I want to pass on to the children in my care?

When I first started working with young children in the early seventies, my mentors emphasized a golden rule: trust children's play. Play is the concrete expression of children's wonder. It allows children to explore ideas and share them with friends. It wraps each child's questions and answers into one natural learning process, a process that works best when undisturbed. A good teacher observes, facilitates, and intervenes to keep everything safe, but always honors the play.

With the rise of the anti-bias approach to teaching, the teacher's role has become more complex. While play is still considered central in early childhood education, the cultural context of that play cannot be ignored. Our responsibility for keeping children safe has expanded beyond taking care of children's immediate physical and emotional needs. We must now be aware of the ways a child's long-term identity can be damaged by racism, sexism, and other forms of bias, and how play can reinforce these misconceptions and lies. Our job is to find effective ways to intervene and challenge the bias without destroying the play. How do we balance children's developmental need for uninterrupted play with our desire to work against prejudice and violence?

Superhero play is one of the places where this dilemma becomes real. While many children love it, many adults worry about the lessons children might be learning from it, such as these:

- ★ Differences are threatening
- ★ Conflicts must always be "won"
- ★ Dominance and aggression are appropriate ways to win and maintain power
- ★ Weapons are the magic keys to power and victory
- ★ Toys are the magic keys to happiness

I want to keep children from being exposed to this vision of the world, as would most of the parents and teachers I talk to. A huge part of the solution would be to keep the images and stories that reinforce these beliefs away from children's eyes, ears, and minds. We don't have that power.

So what are adults supposed to do? Some give up and ignore the play, hoping for the best. Some ban it. But there is another alternative, one that guides the play and uses it to introduce positive values while respecting the needs and concerns of all involved.

This approach can show children how to use power wisely, understand the difference between real violence and pretend violence, settle conflicts without hurting anyone, and act with compassion when others need help. It's not always easy to achieve, and it takes more time than restricting the play. It can only happen if you take children's points of view seriously, and incorporate their issues into your daily curriculum.

Sometimes it's difficult to hold on to a positive vision of the future when we're worried about our children, but we have to keep it in mind. Young children use our vision as a guide when they create their own dreams for the future. They are building a picture of how the world works, of how people relate to each other and to our planet. They are learning what people do to feel powerful and how people who have power use it. They are exploring how to handle their fears and desires. While we can shield them for a short time from those who abuse their authority, sooner or later they will confront violence, racism, and other corruptions of power, both in the media and in the real world. Superhero play is a way children say to us, "I want to know more about these things. I want to know what I should do about them. What can you teach me?" When we ignore their play, we are telling them that we have no worthwhile answers to their questions, and that the answers they get from the TV and the toy store are the best ones around. When we ban the play, we are telling them that their questions scare us, and that the best thing to do when you're afraid of a question is to stop the person from asking it. Neither of these choices provides a good model for young children to carry as they become teenagers and young adults.

This book documents what I and other teachers have learned as we have looked for a path that respects children's needs while providing a way for adults to express their concerns and keep children safe. First, we'll look at what superhero play is and what draws children to it. Next we'll look at the many reasons adults find this play troublesome. The rest of the book documents classroom strategies and curriculum that can help you transform superhero play into a welcome part of your curriculum. I hope these ideas will give you the seeds to develop your own positive approach to superhero play.

Understanding Superhero Play



“I like to be Superman because he’s a big guy, and big guys have the power. They can do lots of things, and they never die.”

—Eddie, age three

WHY ARE CHILDREN like Eddie so fascinated with superhero play? Why do some children insist on sleeping in their superhero costumes, with pretend weapons by their sides? Why are they willing to defy restrictions on their play by biting crackers into gun shapes when we're not looking? For answers, we'll look at several questions that will help us understand superhero play:

- ★ How is superhero play different from other forms of dramatic play? How is it the same?
- ★ How does gender influence superhero play?
- ★ Why do children get involved in superhero play?

What Is Superhero Play?

Anyone who has spent time with preschoolers has witnessed scenes like the ones in the following list. Which would you call superhero play?

- ★ Monsters baring their claws and teeth as they lurch across the lawn
- ★ Two Batmans, a Pokemon, one Superwoman, and various robots—all wearing capes and shooting rolled-up paper guns
- ★ Space aliens digging on the moon for treasure
- ★ Two forest fairies and a witch preparing magic spells and poison potions to make their friends disappear
- ★ Army action figures on a search-and-destroy mission
- ★ Knights in armor swinging swords at fire-breathing dragons
- ★ Martial arts experts twirling and kicking on top of the climbing structure
- ★ Princes and princesses issuing orders to everyone around them
- ★ “Good guys” and “bad guys” fighting each other with every kind of high-tech and low-tech weapon imaginable

For the purposes of this book, all of these are considered superhero play. They all involve play that centers on children's fantasies of danger, bravery, good and evil, and above all, power. In superhero play, children don't just mimic adult activities, they become larger-than-life characters that help them explore their fears, hopes, and passions. They use imaginative stories and props that symbolize these feelings.

Superhero play is one type of dramatic play (some teachers refer to dramatic play as make-believe play). Other kinds include family and home play (for example, cooking or baby care), occupational play (for example, post office or grocery store), and nature play (for example, butterflies or kittens). Most children participate in some form of dramatic play in their preschool years, but not all preschoolers get involved in superhero play. While signs of dramatic play can be seen even among one-year-olds,

sustained play based on fantasy characters and stories usually appears when children are in preschool. It's a sign that their brains have developed enough to think about the past and the future, and to picture what it's like to be someone or somewhere else. These abilities are beyond the grasp of infants. As their mental abilities grow, dramatic play becomes a way children can let their imaginations flourish and share exciting new ideas with friends.

How Is Superhero Play Different from Other Forms of Dramatic Play?

In all varieties of dramatic play, children take on new identities, becoming a crying baby, a busy parent, a pony galloping with its herd, or an airplane pilot. These roles may be inspired by children's observations, stories in books, TV shows, or movies, or they may be completely made-up. Characters can even be based on inanimate objects, since what is alive and not alive is one of the questions children are exploring at this age.

Look at me, I'm a blender

—Megan, age four, while twirling and spinning a scarf above her head

The roles children take during dramatic play may be realistic, such as babies, truck drivers, and teachers, or they may be imaginary. Most of the roles in superhero play come from fantasy images, like dragons, monsters, and fairies, or from heroic or mythic characters, like firefighters, kings, and queens. This role playing provides a way for children to "think out loud" and gain a deeper understanding of what they have observed or imagined. They get to practice adult skills, explore feelings, try out new ways to connect with friends, discover how their bodies move, and try to make sense of the large, and sometimes baffling, world around them.

One of the hallmarks of all forms of dramatic play is the use of costumes and props. Materials can range from a few pebbles to elaborately arranged furniture and scenery. Children don't need mountains of toys and costumes for dramatic play to succeed. In fact, make-believe works best when children are required to use their creativity and communication skills to keep the game alive. A few sticks, a blanket, a box, and a time and place to use them are all that some children need to stay engaged in dramatic play for hours. While most dramatic play props allow children to practice real-life skills like feeding a dog, talking on a phone, or fixing a car, superhero props support exploration of other, more complex aspects of growing up: adult power, independence, and control.

Superheroes use capes, power bracelets, wings, masks, magic wands, costumes that exaggerate human or animal features, and the ultimate power symbols—guns and other weapons.

Dramatic play becomes more complex and organized as children get older. Two-year-olds' dramatic play is usually based on imitation, and is done alone or in loosely organized small groups, with few rules:

Four toddlers cook with sand together. Two are making birthday cakes and blowing out candles, one is cooking soup, while the other is making tortillas to feed the teacher.

Four-year-olds like to play in larger groups, with more inventive materials, roles, and rules. Some still do their dramatic play alone, while others create imaginary friends. Discussing what the game looks like can take as much time as playing the game itself, and the play can change quickly:

Five preschoolers build a structure out of boxes while arguing about whether it's a ship or a doghouse. Two of them end up as babies under blankets, while their "mother" and two "brothers" cook poison stew inside an old tire. They invite a friend in to be a kitten on a leash, while telling another child who wants to be the father to go away. Fifteen minutes later, the rejected child has joined the group, driving into the woods to look for lost puppies.

School-age games can stick to the same fantasy theme for hours and take over an entire playground.

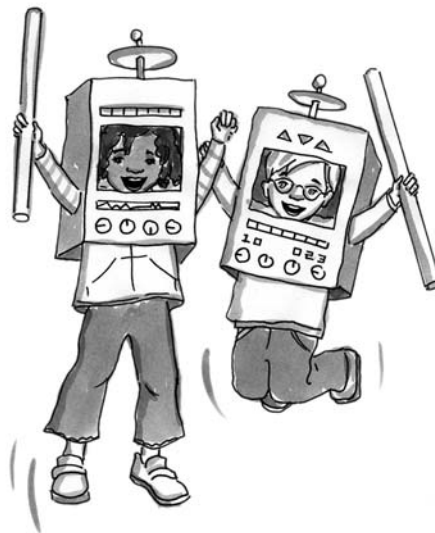
A team of seven-year-old adventurers go sailing in their boats. They fish for tuna, squid, and sharks; go diving for pearls, sunken treasure, and shark teeth; get attacked by sharks; fight the pirates who are trying to steal their gold . . . and feed them to the sharks.

Like other dramatic play, superhero play gets more intricate as children get older and their imaginations expand:

A two-year-old points her shovel at a bird and shouts, "Bang!" Three others join her, all walking in different directions, shooting at trees, chairs, and friends.

Six four-year-olds play a chase game. Each is a caped superhero from a different TV show or movie. Two of them decide the others are bad guys. They catch one and lead him to jail under the climbing structure. He starts to cry—that's not what he thought was supposed to happen in this game.

A group of seven- and eight-year-olds play space fighters. Some have made "laser razors" out of cardboard tubes and space helmets out of paper bags. One is the commander, and he orders an attack on the painted cardboard box that has become the alien spaceship. The aliens protest; they thought they were flying to find treasure on Mars. The game stops while the teams argue about it, until the commander convinces the space fighters and aliens to join forces, travel back in time, and blow up a wormhole being used by raiders from another galaxy. Their victory is short-lived; photon rays have set their energy transformers on fire!



At circle time I asked a group of four-year-olds, "What makes someone a superhero?" We made a list, which I posted on a bulletin board. Several children added pictures to illustrate their ideas:

What Makes Someone a Superhero?

- They fight bad guys.
- They kill bad guys.
- They kill monsters.
- They fight trouble.
- They shoot the evil.
- They jump over buildings, even the whole school.
- They can break the whole school if they want to, but they don't.
- They're so strong, they could pick up the whole school and throw it across the ocean, and it would crash, but we would still be inside and we wouldn't get hurt.
- Sometimes they can be girls, right?
- They help people when criminals and robbers get them.
- They don't hurt people.
- They don't hurt animals.
- They save all the people and all the animals.
- Good guys save the planet.
- Good guys save the Earth.
- Good guys save the whole Earth and all the people and all the animals and all the trees and all the animals.
- They can't die, but if they die, they can be alive again.
- They have treasure in their hearts that makes them good.
- They find treasure, they know where it is because God tells them.
- God tells them to be good.
- They don't get afraid.
- When something scary happens, like a monster, they just say, "Huh!"
- They're the good guys.