



CANADA'S CENTRE
FOR DIGITAL AND
MEDIA LITERACY

Managing Superhero Play

Most young children enjoy pretend play and love to imitate action heroes. But many teachers, parents and child care workers say the influence of children's superhero TV shows or movies can result in havoc when little fans get together.

The challenge is to control the aggression that may arise in such play, while recognizing the important role that this kind of "creative drama" plays in the healthy development of children. Properly supervised, superhero play can be a great outlet for energy and a wonderful stimulus for the imagination.

- Choose the time and place (outdoors is best) for superhero play. If children know that there's a time when superhero play will be allowed, even if it's for a short time, it will be less likely to spill over into other times of the day.
- Emphasise the creative aspects of superhero play. Make the creation of the costumes, props and the setting as important as the play itself. Develop story plots that allow for action without serious fighting.
- Set a rule that aggressive behaviour is unacceptable. Step in before play becomes too aggressive, and designate a safe spot – a comfy chair or a certain tree – as a retreat if the play gets to be too much for a child.
- When possible, watch superhero shows with your kids. Point out the non-violent ways that the characters in them are heroic (rescuing people, helping people who are afraid, and so on).
- Talk about the kinds of TV superheroes and heroines kids like to watch. What qualities do superheroes and heroines have that make them special? Ask children who they admire in real life (for example: a teacher, Scout or Guide leader, grandparent). What qualities make those people a hero in the child's eyes?
- Show children how everyone can be a hero. Involve the family in raising money for a charity – for example, participating in the annual Terry Fox run to raise money for cancer research. Point out individuals who are featured in the newspaper for their contributions to the community.
- Discuss the ways that conflicts are solved on superhero shows. When children are accustomed to seeing superheroes using violence as a solution to problems, appropriate responses must be constantly reinforced. Talk about conflict resolution skills and how they could be applied to situations that superheroes and heroines find themselves in.



- Give children choices and power in real life: Let kids feel the responsibility and autonomy that comes from making real life decisions. The decisions can be as simple as what to have for lunch or which playground to visit.
- Help children recognize the humane characteristics of television characters. Emphasis the positive, non-violent behaviours of superheroes and heroines. Point out children's own helpful behaviour.
- Resist pleas for every new spin-off product. Show children alternatives to superhero toys and paraphernalia. Go to a quality toy store, and see all the wonderful, creative toys that are not advertised on Saturday morning cartoons.
- Be aware that superhero shows aimed at small children often tie-in with superhero movies aimed at teens. Don't assume that it's appropriate for your children just because it has the same characters.
- Show them new ways of playing with the action toys they already have. The toys could be involved in a rescue mission on a mountain; or the "good" guys and the "bad" guys might work together on something. Do the "bad" guys have a home to go to at night? Do they have children?
- Kids can explore superhero characters in lots of ways. Drawing pictures, telling stories and making videos are all fun activities that don't encourage aggression.
- Talk about the programming formula of superhero shows. Kids' action shows follow a predictable pattern of action and stereotypical characters. Pointing out these consistencies in plot and characters can lessen some of the power these shows hold for children.
- Use kids' love of superheroes as an opportunity for reading. Most libraries have healthy collections of comics and graphic novels: find those that feature your children's favourite characters and are age-appropriate (don't assume that all comics, even superhero comics, are appropriate for kids). Check out Toon Books' [How to Read Comics With Kids](#) for advice on how to have fun "acting them out" with character voices and sound effects.

