

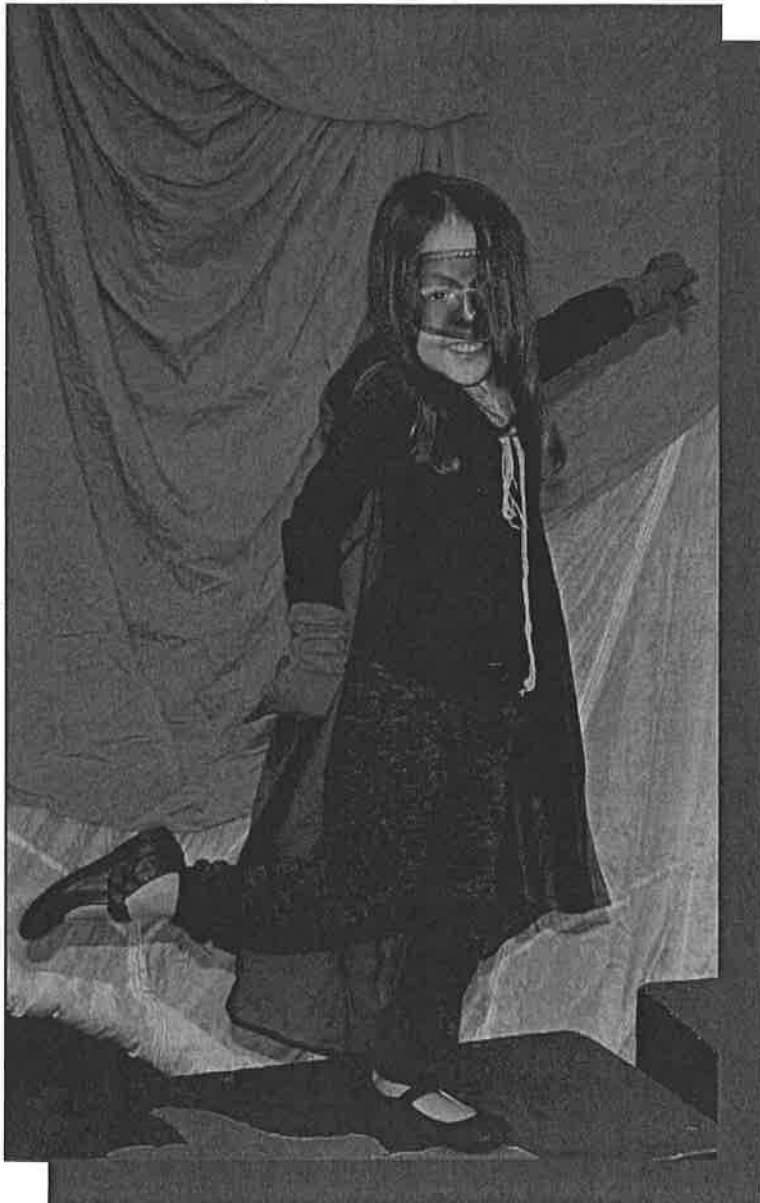
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Delving
into
Drama

The “Power” in Playing Power Rangers (and other Superhero Play)

My three children are all adults now, and my mother and I often reminisce about their early childhood days. One of my mother’s favorite memories is of my son, Adam, at three years old, wearing an old towel as a cape and rain boots and his superhero boots, shouting at the top of his lungs, “Power!” as he raced around in the house and in the yard. She thought he was adorable playing this way. As an early childhood educator, I understood that his “Power” play meant so much more to his early development and learning.

Early childhood educators know that children learn best in the context of play, and that dramatic or pretend play is one of the prime play styles in which children flourish and grow. What many teachers don’t always understand or appreciate, though, is that children’s dramatic play can and should consist of so much more than playing house, or creating a Beauty Shop or a Pizza Store. Instead, children’s dramatic play should provide opportunities for children to try out and practice a variety of roles, including roles of superheroes.

Not all superhero play is created equal, though. According to French & Pena (1991), children’s superhero play has been impacted dramatically by the advent and popularity of television. Prior to ready access to multimedia, children’s hero play and the stories they created centered around friends, siblings, and parents. Since the 1980’s, though, fantasy heroes and television characters more often are used as models for children’s dramatic play. This shift has affected the overall quality of children’s dramatic play, too, as they more often act out - and repeat - scenes and themes they have seen on television instead of creating and implementing more imaginative scenes themselves.

Because of this superhero mimicking, instead of more creative dramatizing, many teachers view children’s superhero dramatic play as “violent, aggressive, and disruptive” (De-Souza & Radell, 2011, p. 26). Their superhero play appears so inappropriate because children are often simply re-enacting scenes from cartoons and movies instead of basing new story lines on the superhero characters. When superhero dramatic play is supported and extended appropriately, though, this super power, superhero play can lead to greater prosocial development for young children. Here’s why: dramatic play generally supports the ability of young children to try on and express a range of emotions in order to better understand them.

When the child is acting out a greater variety of roles - parents, animals, and superheroes - the potential for developing emotional regulation and expression

development are greater than when children only act out limited roles of the people and events in their lives. This more complex play leads to greater cognitive development, and more impulse control than when their dramatic play scenarios revolve only around actual people (French & Pena, 1991). Actually, if the child only acted out the role of the real people, his or her emotional development could lag as the full range of emotional experience would not be as opportune as when acting out this range of roles, including the roles of fantasy characters.

Many educators question why this superhero play is so appealing to young children. With superhero play, children are trying on roles of power. Young children rarely have any real power in their lives, and so playing dramatically in the superhero role allows children to “understand their own place in the hierarchy of power” (French & Pena, 1991, p. 81). According to Bauer & Dettore (1997), “While they (children) have limited control in many areas of their real lives, assuming the role of a superhero provides an opportunity to be strong, powerful, and able to control any situation” (p. 17). Other researchers believe children are drawn to superhero play because superheroes are able to control hostile environments, something children are rarely - if ever - able to do (Sousa & Schneiderman, 1986).

Superheroes also appeal to young children because these characters allow children to try out different roles and assume different personas than they see exhibited by the people in their real lives. Superheroes never make mistakes, always conquer evil, save lives - whole cities, sometimes - and are always strong. Young children often feel helpless, powerless, and are reminded by adults of their mistakes on a regular basis. Being able to try on the role of someone who is everything you - as a young child - are not is very appealing (Bauer & Dettore, 1997).

Superhero dramatic play also benefits children in other ways. Because superheroes often leap, jump, run, shout, wrestle, and chase, young children experience myriad opportunities for much needed big body play when they dramatize this way (Carlson, 2011). Superheroes are quite active, and so when children mimic their activity levels, they are provided more moderate to intense physical exercise than would be available through more sedate “house-keeping” types of dramatic play.

So, what are early childhood educators to do to support and help extend this play style? We now know that children’s superhero dramatic play can be more rich and complex than

The “Power” in Playing Power Rangers (and other Superhero Play) *cont’d*

when they are dramatizing more typical family and neighborhood play themes. Yet, we know that often when children are basing their pretend play on superhero characters, they are simply re-enacting a “single theme for months on end with little variation” (Bodrova, Germeroth, & Leong, 2013, p. 117). To engage children in their preferred hero fantasy play and extend it for maximum developmental benefits, early childhood educators can implement many strategies.

One strategy is to encourage children to create their own superhero instead of just imitating the ones they are already familiar with. Provide materials for children to create the superhero’s emblem or insignia and costume/disguise. Give the children many opportunities to name their superheroes and describe the positive characteristics their characters possess. Talk about and plan what types of costumes they will need to wear to accomplish the goals their new superheroes have. Make these new superheroes part of your classroom culture. Educators can also use superheroes to motivate children. For example, you could ask the children to “clean up the classroom as fast as Superman” or “be as brave as Batman.” By calling attention to the superheroes’ positive qualities, we remind children why they are drawn to these characters in the first place.

Another strategy is to extend the scenarios by prompting the children to go beyond their pre-recorded scripts and add additional information to their characters’ roles. For example, if two children are simply spinning around and jabbing at each other like Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, ask them, “What happens next?” or “What will you do after you finish this scene?” Provide rich, open-ended props to help them extend their play, too. One preschool teacher suggests the following: Shiny fabric for capes, toy cell phones, flashlights, sunglasses, goggles, maps, magnifying glasses, pencils, notebooks, stickers, compasses, crowns, visors, and binoculars (De-Souza, & Radell, 2011).

Educators can also extend children’s superhero dramatic play into other areas of the classroom. Encourage them to paint or draw characterizations of their favorite superhero. Provide clay or modelling dough for children to sculpt their superheroes. Use research tools, like books, articles, and the internet, to research the origins of the superheroes in order to learn more about them and, in some cases, to identify the real people some superheroes may be modelled after. Bauer and Dettore (1997) tell this story:

After announcing she was Michaelangelo, Karla began her usual ritual of posturing herself in martial arts positions. Unfortunately, her superhero play was generally stereotypical and repetitive. To redirect her behavior, the teacher asked if she had ever heard of the real Michaelangelo. When told that Michaelangelo did a very difficult thing – he painted on his back, Karla was hooked. The staff taped large pieces of paper under tables and encouraged her to draw with markers or crayons. Other children joined in the project (p. 19).

Children can then incorporate this new, additional information into their play themes, as Karla did in the story above.

As early childhood educators, our job is to understand child development, and to then plan environments and materials, as well as support child-led experiences that support their growth and development. By understanding the role that superhero dramatic play satisfies in a young child’s life, as well as the benefits this type of play can offer, we are better able to support and extend it in many rich, beneficial ways. Children, then, are able to develop optimal social, physical, and language skills, as well as rich imaginations which, in turn, lead to greater problem-solving abilities for the rest of their lives.

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