

early years are learning years

When children imitate superheroes

Remember back when you had to look up to all the “big” people, and tasks like tying your shoe were still a challenge? How much fun it was to imagine yourself as a superhero, and take on the powers you wished for in everyday life.

Children naturally imitate fearless superheroes who can overcome any obstacle in their path. When children begin leaping and tumbling about, however, adults worry that accidents will happen. Sometimes adults discourage superhero play for fear that it will become too disruptive, or that children will engage in it at inappropriate times.

Keep in mind that this type of play gives children the chance to face their fears and show off physical feats. When supervised by adults, “superhero play” can help children improve their language skills and teach them to work together to solve problems—not to mention how it encourages creativity. When children begin pretending they are superheroes, adults can help them make the most of it. Here are some tips:

1 Show children that superheroes are not special just because they are physically powerful. Point out when superheroes show kindness and helpfulness to others, and praise children when they do the same.

2 Talk about real heroes and heroines with children. Introduce them to people like Helen Keller and Martin Luther King, Jr., and discuss how everyday people can demonstrate acts of courage and goodness.

3 Point out the difference between movies, TV and real life. When you see actors pretend to leap out of windows or jump over speeding cars, explain to children why they shouldn’t “try this at home.”

4 Make the rules about when and where superhero play is allowed. You may limit this sometimes rough-and-tumble play to outdoors, or during recess time. Be consistent—if “flying” indoors is not allowed on Monday, it shouldn’t be allowed on Tuesday.

5 Help children build on their interests through superhero play. Watching *Star Wars* may lead to learning about space travel. A Spiderman comic book may lead to exploring the world of insects. Always keep your eyes open to learning opportunities for children.

6 Be on the lookout for overly aggressive play. Get involved if you see a child become frightened or angry. When the laughter stops, and threats or complaints begin, help children

get back on track—or end their play. Show them you are there to help, and offer options. Maybe it’s time to take a break, or to find out why the frustration occurred. In any case, make it clear that physical or verbal aggression are not acceptable.

7 Give children the chance to make choices and take on responsibilities. Children become bored when activities are not challenging, and frustrated when they are too advanced. Keep a close eye on children so that you know when they are ready to take on new challenges, like helping with a recipe or dressing themselves.

8 Praise children when they accomplish real “feats”—like putting together puzzles, or learning to spell their own names. Children may still imitate superheroes, but they’ll have more confidence both during play and in everyday living.

Additional Resources:

Kostelnik, M.J., A.P. Whiren & L.C. Stein. 1987. Living with He-man: Managing superhero fantasy play. *Young Children* 41 (4):3–9.

Rogers, C.S. & J.K. Sawyers. 1988. *Play in the lives of children*. Washington, DC: NAEYC. Order #301/\$6.00.