

CALLING ALL SUPERHEROES

Supporting and Developing
Superhero Play in the
Early Years

TAMSIN GRIMMER



A David Fulton Book

Calling All Superheroes

Calling All Superheroes highlights the enormous potential of superhero play in supporting learning and development in early childhood. Using examples from practice, it provides guidance on how to effectively manage and implement superhero play and set appropriate boundaries in early years settings and schools.

Illustrated with engaging photographs and case studies, the book gives ideas about how superhero play can be used to promote positive values and teach children essential life skills. Offering practical strategies and questions for reflection designed to facilitate further development, chapters address important topics and challenges such as:

- Child development, the characteristics of effective learning and the benefits of superhero play, including making sense of right and wrong and increasing moral awareness
- How to broach difficult themes such as death, killing, weapons, aggressive play and gender-related issues
- Supporting children to recognise everyday heroes and how to find heroic abilities within themselves
- The role of the adults in managing superhero play, engaging parents and creating effective learning environments

Written by a leading expert with 20 years' experience in the early years sector, this book is an essential resource for early years teachers, practitioners and anyone with a keen interest in young children's education and learning.

Tamsin Grimmer is an experienced consultant and trainer, a director of Linden Learning and a lecturer in early years at Bath Spa University. She is based in Wiltshire, UK.



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Calling All Superheroes

Supporting and Developing Superhero Play in the Early Years

Tamsin Grimmer

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Bluecoat Nursery

Filton Avenue Nursery School

Martenscroft Nursery School and Children's Centre

Odstock Day Nursery

Our Muddy Footprints

Pebbles Childcare

Pen Green Nursery

Rosendale Primary School and Children's Centre

St Mary's Preschool

St Mary's C of E Primary School

Tick Tock Nursery

Westview Day Nursery

Widcombe Acorns Preschool

The Willows Preschool

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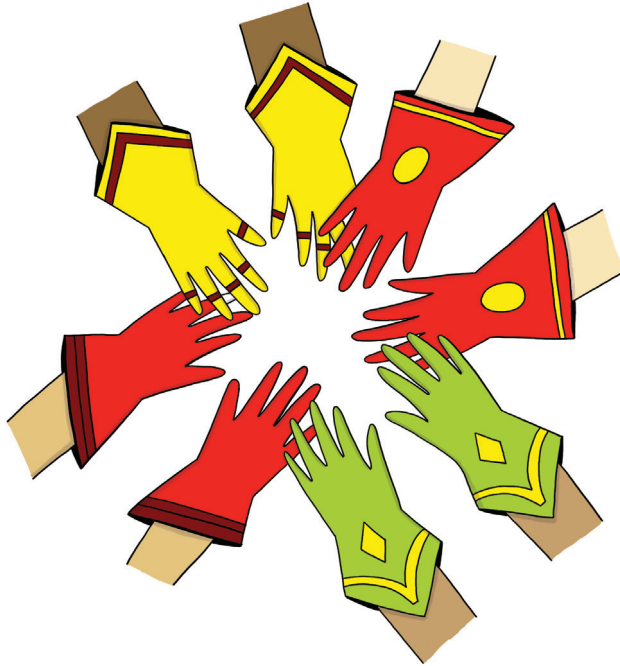
Last, to my very skilled proofreader (aka Mum) – thank you so much for your patience and suggestions, which have helped get this book into shape.

About the author

Tamsin Grimmer is an experienced and highly regarded early years consultant and trainer. She has been working within education in a variety of roles including early years teacher, advisory teacher, area SENCo, childminder and early years consultant and university lecturer. She is currently a director of Linden Learning and balances her time between consultancy work and lecturing on the Primary and Early Years PGCE at Bath Spa University. She is passionate about young children's learning and development and fascinated by how very young children think. She has a keen interest in early brain development, the different ways in which children learn and how practitioners can support them. She is excited to see new and novel ways of recording and documenting children's learning, has been inspired by the practice she saw in Reggio Emilia, and is particularly interested in play, active learning and early language development.

Tamsin believes that all children deserve practitioners who are inspiring, dynamic, reflective and passionate about their learning. When children have the very best start in their early years, they adopt positive dispositions and attitudes to learning and the primary way to assist with this is through inspiring and motivating those who teach and care for them. In this environment, children thrive and grow.

Tamsin's other books include *Observing and Developing Schematic Behaviour* and *School Readiness and the Characteristics of Effective Learning*. She has just graduated with a Masters' Degree in Early Childhood Education (University of Chester) and her dissertation explored love within an early childhood setting. In her time as a teacher, and later as a childminder, she underwent three very positive Ofsted inspections and demonstrated that she was an excellent and outstanding practitioner. Tamsin also put theory into practice with her three children, who keep her feet firmly on the ground.



Introduction

Superheroes are a huge part of popular culture. They are instantly recognisable and whatever our view about them, they find their way into our early childhood settings. They are written about in books and are regularly featured in comics, magazines and films or TV programmes and games. In the same way that children can read the “M” for McDonald’s before they can read, they can recognise the “S” for Superman or “W” for Wonder Woman. Our children arrive in our settings wearing Batman t-shirts, holding Tree Fu Tom shields or making superhero poses.

Children will develop their play over time and different types of play will go in and out of fashion depending on the latest craze or movie released. At the time of writing, Batman versus Superman, Justice League and Wonder Woman film merchandise is still widely available. Shops are full of film-related dressing-up clothes, toys and books and children can be observed incorporating these characters into their play. In order to understand the children with these interests, it may help practitioners to understand the plots and storylines that accompany them.



This superhero craze is not restricted to children, either. Most recent superhero films (not cartoons) are rated as PG-13 or rated as suitable for children aged over 12 and, in some cases, 15. Many adults also love the whole concept of superheroes and as I write there is a big comic convention in London, which has seen many grown-ups donning a cape or superhero costume. Superheroes are regularly used to advertise products on television, as inspirational characters and as fund-raising mascots. One social enterprise aims to turn the tide on autism by thinking about super-skills instead of autism and thus has adopted superheroes as its publicity device. With literally thousands of superheroes to choose from, you could say that superheroes are super-icons of modern society.

Children regularly engage in play that involves heroes and villains and, within our settings, superheroes come in all sorts of guises and disguises – literally! From Batman to Wonder Woman and from Tree Fu Tom and Go Jettlers to doctors and firefighters. Play themes observed frequently include “goodies and baddies”, “killing” or “death” and this type of play can often attract boys more than it does girls. Early childhood educators sometimes feel in conflict about whether to embrace this play or to ban it.

This book offers educators an opportunity to explore several issues that rarely get exposure within early childhood settings. We seldom talk about death, killing, gender or fantasy and reality with children. I propose that engaging in superhero play offers us a way into tackling these and other difficult themes. I have drawn on theories of how children learn and researched different play types when writing and appreciate that there are many different perspectives on these themes. As I weave together these different ideas, I hope that those reading this book will draw their own conclusions about how best to support the children they care for within their own setting.

Defining superheroes

Peter Coogan, Director of the Institute for Comic Studies, defines a superhero as: “A heroic character with a selfless, pro-social mission; with superpowers – extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero)” (Coogan, 2006, p. 30). In addition to this detailed and fantastical definition, the Cambridge Dictionary has a dual definition of a superhero as both, “a character in a film or story who has special strength and uses it to do good things and help other people” and “someone who has done something very brave to help someone else” (2018).

I have considered themes that broadly relate to superheroes, therefore, for the purposes of this book, I am defining superheroes not only as the fictional characters who might rescue the human race from impending peril, but also as people whose actions exceed our expectations, who do good things and help other people. I am also including superheroines within my definition of superheroes so I am intending the term to be gender inclusive. In addition to superheroes, this book also touches on rescuers or characters who are heroic in their mission to save the world and engage in a heroic narrative, e.g. Octonauts and Thunderbirds.

The hero’s journey, also known as the monomyth, is the idea, popularised by Campbell (1949), that there is a general pattern that emerges in most superhero stories; the hero goes on a journey, wins a battle and comes back having achieved victory for the good of humankind. Or in Campbell’s own words: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man” (1949, p. 23). We see this monomyth relived again and again within children’s superhero play and it could be part of the attraction of engaging in this play.

The benefits of superhero play

What makes superheroes so popular? It is my belief that it is partly the idea that most superheroes are ordinary people, just like us, but with added powers or superhuman abilities. Some became superheroes overnight, by chance or through an accident, which again, may make us feel that, we too, could become heroes. We can imagine how it would feel to have these powers and put ourselves in their shoes, or rather, cape! Superheroes may also be popular because of the predictable monomyth mentioned above and general theme running through the narrative of good overcoming evil, offering children a sense of power in their mostly adult-dominated lives (Rubin and Livesay, 2006).



The whole book is designed to share the benefits of superhero play within different contexts. This type of play is widely seen within early childhood settings and sometimes frowned upon and misunderstood. Occasionally it can be viewed as a type of play that mainly boys engage with and one that is without purpose or intent. Although I have noticed this trend, I have also observed both boys and girls playing superhero-themed games and believe that this play can, indeed, be purposeful and engaging for all.

Each chapter shares ideas about the benefits of superhero play and these are summarised here. Superhero play:

- Offers a great context for imaginative play, fantasy and creativity.
- Provides opportunities for children to develop detailed storylines and narratives.

- Engages even very shy children in exciting storylines.
- Presents children with opportunities to problem solve and resolve conflict.
- Provides opportunities to practise self-regulation and develop emotional intelligence.
- Helps children to explore the triumph of good over evil.
- Offers opportunities to discuss sensitive issues such as death, killing and gender stereotyping with children.
- Opens up conversations with children about everyday superpowers that we can all foster, e.g. resilience, friendship, listening skills.
- Provides plenty of opportunities for gross and fine motor skills, developing proprioception and is usually very physical and active.
- Presents engaging and imaginative contexts which educators can use to develop children's cognitive skills.

Outline of book

This book is divided into different chapters, each of which picks up on a theme that I have linked to superhero play. I have included a few case studies and photographs to further illustrate and bring the themes covered to life. Each chapter concludes with some questions designed to enable you to reflect on your practice in the light of what you have read. These questions should facilitate you to explore the issues raised in each chapter and further develop your practice.

Chapter 1 explores fantasy play in relation to child development. It considers the notion of fantasy versus reality and real and pretend while highlighting the importance of this type of play for children. The chapter briefly discusses fantasy characters including superheroes and villains and considers the value in this play for young children.

Chapter 2 draws on various pieces of research that have looked into aggressive behaviour in young children. It discusses rough and tumble and weapon play and the benefits and concerns relating to these types of play.

Chapter 3 considers the difficult subject of death and killing. It builds on Chapter 2 and considers examples of how practitioners can respond when they encounter children "killing" others or referring to death in their play. It will draw on evidence from research that explores young children's perceptions of death and dying and considers some practical strategies of how to best approach this sensitive topic and support very young children.

Chapter 4 explores gender in relation to young children and how children begin to understand the concept of gender permanence. It discusses the benefits of engaging boys and girls in superhero play, encouraging collaboration between genders and the importance of ensuring a balance between competent, strong girl superheroes as well as the damsel in distress and male superheroes as well as a boy needing to be rescued ... In addition it considers how superhero play can help to reduce the gender gap observed regarding boys achievement in early years settings.

Chapter 5 has been written by my good friend and colleague, Kay Mathieson. She focuses on how we can use superhero play to promote the Prevent duty and British values and considers what they mean for us as an early years community.

Chapter 6 explores in more detail the broad definition of a superhero as someone who achieves greatness when it considers heroes in real life and how we can introduce these to young children. Drawing on true stories of heroism within our society this chapter explores how we can teach children about enabling our actions, big and small, to be heroic.

Chapters 7, 8 and 9 focus more on practice, with Chapter 7 looking at how we can create a learning environment that supports superhero play and Chapter 8 sharing some stories of how early childhood educators have successfully implemented superhero play into their settings. Chapter 9 highlights the importance of a supportive home learning environment (HLE) and considers how to engage effectively with parents and carers.

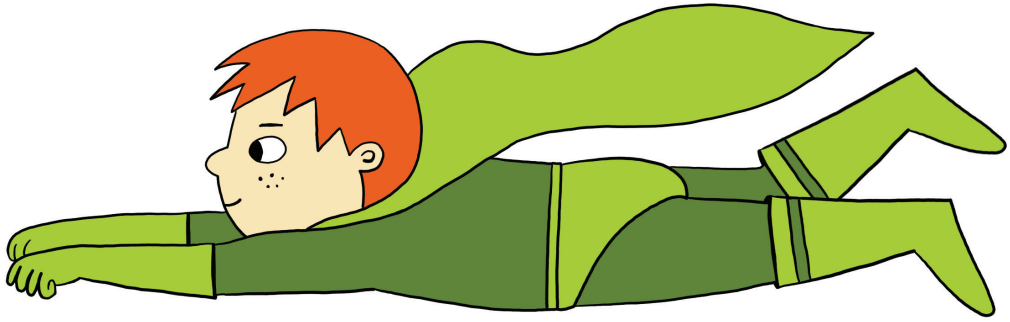
The final chapter in this book will consider the overall benefits of engaging in superhero play in the early years and how we can encourage children to find their own “superpowers”. It summarises the main points of the book and offers suggestions of how to successfully implement superhero play in your setting.

I have also included three appendices, which I hope you will find useful. Appendix 1 is an example of a superhero and aggressive play policy. It is my intention that this would be personalised and tweaked to suit individual settings and contexts. Appendix 2 is a chart summarising the mainstream superheroes you may come across in popular culture. It would be nigh on impossible to create an exhaustive list and superhero fans or comic gurus may criticise the simplistic nature of this chart. However, I hope that it sheds some light onto the context and back story of a few of the most popular characters with whom your children may engage. Appendix 3 is another chart that includes a few of the heroic characters currently depicted by children’s television and media. Again, this is not intended to be a fully inclusive list – once you start, where do you stop? Nevertheless, I have attempted to include the more popular characters and those whom your children may come across more readily.

So pop an eye mask on and get ready to explore the world of superheroes and what our children can learn through it.

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“I can fly like Superman!”

The importance of fantasy play in child development

Introduction

When you have a good imagination you are never alone! You can be transported to a world of make-believe where none of your worries exist. You can conjure up friends in any guise and be as good or as naughty as you like! My youngest daughter often goes to an imaginary land, when I asked her what she loved about it she replied: “Vegetables are unhealthy and sweets are healthy!” So, in your imagination, you can eat whatever you like too!

The Oxford Dictionary defines fantasy as: “The faculty or activity of imagining impossible or improbable things” (2019a). This is opposed to the definition of reality which is: “A thing that exists in fact, having previously only existed in one’s mind” (2019b). Fantasy play is when children use their imagination and play out scenarios that are impossible or improbable, for example, having superpowers as a superhero. When children pretend about real-life scenarios, for example, pretending they are in a doctor’s surgery, this would be called “sociodramatic” play and it is explored in Chapter 6. However, for the purposes of this chapter, I am including all pretence and imaginative play within a broader definition of fantasy play.

Children are excellent players and do not distinguish between fantasy and reality play. They move easily between the two. When one of my daughters was nearly three, I asked her how she hurt her hand and she said: “I went into a deep dark wood with my

mummy and I saw a bear and he hurt my hand." I asked if he was a friendly bear and she replied: "Yes, he was friendly, he hurt my hand in accident!" The hurt on her hand was real, the fantasy was used by my daughter to explain how she became hurt and all of this was relayed as fact. Imaginings within the fantasy realm also invoke real feelings, so if we feel good during this play, we will have a positive emotion that outlives the fantasy (Bettleheim, 1975). A child who exclaims "I can fly like Superman!" feels powerful and strong and these are real feelings, albeit ones that stem from fantasy.

Keeping it real, yet encouraging pretence!

Within early childhood education (ECE) we are mindful of the importance of starting with concrete, hands-on, real experiences when working with young children. When we relate concepts and themes to children's own interests we start with the premise that children are competent and knowledgeable and we can build on their prior knowledge and experience. Sometimes we may want to introduce a concept or theme that is totally new to our children and this is when it is vital that we begin with hands-on, real-life examples for the children to explore with their senses.

Yet, while keeping it real, we must also encourage pretence and fantasy play. This type of play feeds children's creativity and helps them to use their imagination. It is a natural way for children to play and we must engage in this with young children. Within our homes, there is often a mixture of real and pretend as many cultures celebrate characters such as Father Christmas and the tooth fairy. These figures are validated by real events and tangible evidence in the form of presents, money or sweets. Many educators naturally incorporate elements of pretence into their settings, which also keeps magic alive. I have tried to do this within my own practice and been inspired by great authors such as Vivian Gussin-Paley (1984, 2010) and Jenny Tyrrell (2001).

Case study – Westview

Peter really enjoyed engaging in fantasy play. He had a particular interest in knights and dragons and his key person tapped into this interest. She suggested that they create a castle in the corner of the room and she found a few props such as swords, shields, dragon's costumes, royal clothes, crowns and silver goblets. She ensured that these props



were available and waited to see what the children, particularly Peter, would make of these resources. What followed were hours of fantasy play with strong narratives where Peter or his friends were brave knights and princesses, rescuing one another from the fierce dragon. The adults mostly observed this play, occasionally role modelling how to "fight" a dragon or helping the children to develop more props.



The development of fantasy play

Young children begin pretend play from around 18 months of age and this develops into more refined role play, real or fictional at about three years old (German and Leslie, 2001). However, by around six years, most children have still not fully grasped the difference between knowing something and believing it. Thus early childhood educators are working with children who are learning to distinguish between fantasy and reality, pretend and real. There will be times when these lines are very blurred. You only need to have observed children playing a make-believe game to know that they are fully engrossed in this play, they *are* that character at that moment, in their minds they are not pretending. I was reminded of this recently when I asked my youngest daughter if she was pretending to be the doctor: "No", she replied, "I *am* a doctor!" That certainly put me in my place and I was left in no doubt about how seriously fantasy and make-believe play is taken by children.

Kitson (2010) suggests that, after approximately seven years, if fantasy play is not actively encouraged it slowly diminishes. One way that we can keep the magic of fantasy play alive is through pretence and superhero play. These themes continue to engage older children, teenagers and adults alike, as demonstrated by the amount of media attention dedicated to superheroes. Pretence is the ability to play with an object as if it were something else or take on a role as another person. There are considerable overlaps with fantasy play, which is linked with the improbable and impossible; however, pretending can be more closely linked to reality. Children rarely distinguish between the two and that's OK. Let's think about what this looks like for children.



Bea, 18 months, picks up the teapot in one hand and a jug in the other hand. She imagines she is pouring tea from the teapot into a cup on the tray. Bea offers the teapot to her Grandad who is sitting nearby. She tips her hand holding the teapot to pour tea into his hand which holds an imaginary cup. Bea is incredibly knowledgeable about how to engage with this play, imitating her sisters and the adults around her.

Bea is pretending to pour the tea from the teapot into the cup, so she needs to imagine that there is a liquid in the teapot and needs the fine motor control to “pour” the tea. She is using her imagination and is able to pretend that the tea is in the pot and then the cup ... She is also capable of imagining and engaging with an invisible cup when she pours tea for her Grandad. Children are readily able to move between fantasy, reality and pretence within their play, thus they can move from imagining the possible to imagining the improbable in a more fantastical way as seen in the observation of Aiden and Simon.

Case study – Widcombe Acorns

Aiden regularly incorporates elements of fantasy into his play. This often inspires others to also fantasise and Aiden and his friends are regularly overheard discussing their elaborate play themes and planning who is who. He has a keen interest in superheroes and other fantasy characters.

Aiden: "I'm a werewolf that breathes fire." (Breathes out loudly to demonstrate)

Simon repeats Aiden's phrase: "I'm a werewolf that breathes fire!" He huffs loudly, too. His key person was nearby and asked Aiden, "Are you a goodie or a baddie?"

Aiden: "Goodie. I'm going to make a nice campfire for you. You could roast some marshmallows to eat and share them with your friends."

Aiden "breathes fire" on the floor in front of them and the adult pretends to toast marshmallows on a stick, offering the stick to a child: "Would you like a marshmallow?"

Aiden takes a pretend marshmallow: "Yum, yum, yum in my tum, tum, tum!"

The adult offers one to Simon. Simon takes a pretend marshmallow and says "Yummy."

Adult: "Careful, they're hot – blow on them!"

Aiden replies, "But I've got fire!" He breathes out fire again to demonstrate.

Adult: "You've got fire so you don't need to worry about getting your mouth burned?"

Aiden: "No 'coz we've got fire."

Aiden and Simon move easily between the fantasy of being werewolves and breathing fire to the pretence of toasting marshmallows on the fire and the notions of reality in potentially burning their mouths on the hot marshmallows. Ultimately, it doesn't matter whether children are engaging in play that is grounded in reality or play that stems from fantasy, the important thing for educators to remember is to value this play as an important part of child development. Research has suggested that children who play more fantasy games and engage in a greater number of pretence games are less likely to confuse real and pretend (Sharon and Woolley, 2004). This links with the Piagetian view that children engaging in imaginative and fantasy play add to their understanding and knowledge about the real world.

Children have the ability to easily engage in magical thinking and play with possible and impossible concepts. Many great inventions and theorists who have changed our society began with imaginative or fanciful ideas. These imaginings when developed have turned the impossible into the possible. Einstein held fantasy and imagination in very high regard and suggested that they are more important than knowledge: "Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world" (1929). Thus fantastical thinking is an important attribute and should be actively encouraged within our settings.