

SUPERHERO AND

IS IT TIME FOR A

Stephanie Mathivet, Curriculum and Standards Manager at the National Centre, talks to Diane Rich, a freelance consultant in early-years and primary education, about developing imaginative role-play, particularly in the area of superhero and weapon play. Diane has worked with many settings and has written articles on this topic.

Stephanie's interview with Diane explores some new thinking about certain areas of play and Under Five hopes that, whatever approach you have taken or how you respond to this play within your particular setting, you will find it an interesting read.

Question: Stephanie Mathivet (SM)

Many practitioners have felt that they should discourage children's war, weapon and superhero play, because it is media influenced and is thought to have negative effects on children especially in the development of positive male self-image and the behaviour in boys.

Answer: Diane Rich (DR)

My experience tells me that not allowing children to play at their preferred and chosen play themes can lower their self-esteem and result in damaging later attitudes to learning and involvement in education. Children's play themes come from what they know and have experienced first hand and as they encounter television, videos, computer games, comics and books. When children get implied messages that their knowledge about a certain subject is not valued or allowed at pre-school, it can have negative effects on their feelings about themselves and their self-image.

Question: (SM)

Many of us have believed that this kind of play is anti-social, rather than pro-social as it is seen to be disruptive to the group, intimidating to quieter children and that it limits language, imagination and cognitive development in both boys and girls. Can you explain the way in which recent research is challenging this view?

Answer: (DR)

The value placed on play can determine how disruptive it is.

Children will engage in the play until they find out exactly what the staff want them to stop doing. Children need to be able to say, 'OK, we get her point. We have been stopped because we were too jumpy/kicky/noisy.'

But, causing disruption can be part of the monster/superhero/weapon-user's role. By taking on these roles, children are mimicking, to the limits of their knowledge, authentic behaviour. They use play to make sense of the characters they know, including monsters, superheroes and weapon users.

Children use play to solve searching questions, such as:

- Who has and uses guns and weapons?
- Why do they?
- What happens when they are used?
- How can people be safe from guns and weapons?

Staff can help children solve these problems by joining in rather than prohibiting such play themes. This participation should not focus on the 'baddie' as the only gun user.

Some children will come from homes and communities where legitimate gun use is part of daily life:

- Rural communities where country pursuits such as pheasant and rabbit shooting games are commonplace
- Families with members in the armed forces

These children suffer a lot of confusion when pre-schools frown on gunplay.

Gun-user and superhero play can be pro-social by helping children to consider the needs and wishes of others.

For example:

Simon and Megan want to play at Storm Troopers in the space where Sarah and Giorgio want to look quietly at books. Here genuine negotiation is needed. Becoming skilled negotiators empowers children, as they learn to be tolerant of and empathise with others, and express their own views. Through participating in children's play, practitioners can model HOW to negotiate and encourage children to do so. Therefore, helping children, whatever their play choice, to feel valued.

Gun and superhero play can support language, imagination and cognitive development. *Using one object to represent another is a starting point for learning to read. Using a banana or stickle brick to be a gun will help children, at a later stage, to understand that the symbols 'g-u-n' can also represent a gun.*

Also, as part of their gunplay, children use sound effects instead of sentences and obvious action clues.

Such play strategies make it harder for adults to tune into the play. The children are deeply involved in their playing and will be communicating with one another. They will probably be following a complicated plot. There will be a scene set for the play – possibly a desert in Iraq, Batman's cave, or even a live volcano about to erupt and characters with relationships emerging between them. The play will develop a plot, sometimes from a known story or it will be a child's own invention. The children are

WEAPONS PLAY

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Through playing a story children build the skills to tell a story and then later, to write a story.

To develop these skills young children need all their preferred play themes to be valued, including superheroes and gunplay. It is generally, but not always, boys who engage in superhero and gunplay. Telling children that their play is not welcome will stop their story making and development of language and literacy. Curtailing young children's starting points for play can prevent them from achieving their potential – this statement must link to boys' sliding achievements in our schools.

Question: (SM)

Children may have experienced or witnessed violent behaviour in their homes. Many children see images of war on the TV; other children have arrived, as refugees, from countries where they have personally experienced the horrors of war. They may be 'acting out' in pre-school. Should we not help these children to learn more acceptable behaviour, based on an understanding that violence and war are wrong? Doesn't encouraging weapon play teach children that violence is right?

Answer: (DR)

Of course both violence and war are wrong, but it is unfortunately part of what children see either first-hand in their homes or communities or second-hand through the media. And sometimes, very important people are saying that in some circumstances it is right – an American president or a British prime minister for example. This is confusing enough for adults, but children find it hard to understand too. In their play children try out future adult roles. Recent images include soldiers, armed security guards, terrorists and even suicide bombers. What happens if they grow up to be one of these? Some options might not be very probable,

but they are nevertheless possible and may seem even more so to children. Some children need to work these roles out in play. It is in feeling these roles children can really understand for themselves that violence may be wrong.

For some children too, this playing acts as a kind of therapy, and in some cases you mentioned it may be necessary to involve a play therapist where there has been real trauma.

Question: (SM)

If policies were to be relaxed, parents may become worried, particularly about bullying. How can they be reassured that aggressive play is not being ignored?

Answer: (DR)

A pre-school's play, safety and behaviour policies can include weapon and world issue play. Pre-schools can involve parents in creating and adopting these policies and in the process share the rationale for what is included. This can be derived from the growing literature on weapon play.

Question: (SM)

What if relaxing the rules result in this play increasing and children's behaviour worsening?

Answer: (DR)

I have found that relaxing the rule changes the play and who plays. More girls tend to join in, taking on different roles. Whilst boys might play more, this soon settles down and the quality of the play rises. Ground rules for the play are important. Practitioners can help children to set these and must listen to the children as they are after all the experts in playing at these things. The overarching rule is keeping children safe, both physically and emotionally. Children can understand and develop good ideas for achieving this.

Question: (SM)

How can 'zero tolerance' rules be relaxed in ways that make sure all children benefit from being able to explore weapon or superhero play? How can we be sure we are doing the right thing?

Answer: (DR)

The ultimate question is 'Why do we do what we do in our pre-school?' I hope my previous answers give some reasons for allowing this play. All children have a right for doors to be opened to them and although this area of play raises many moral issues, it can certainly open up doors to learning ■

It would be great to hear your views on this topic – please send your observations, ideas and comments through to *Under Five*.

We look forward to hearing from you.

For more information:

We don't play with guns here.
Penny Holland (Open University Press)

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