



## Capes of Power

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*Wearing superhero capes and masks can give children a sense of strength and courage*  
(Barnes, 2008, p.19).

**Abstract:** Superhero play is classed as a type of imaginative and/or dramatic play (Barnes, 2008). Superhero play is a form of play and expression for children in early childhood contexts. Many adults have criticised the value and necessity of superhero play for young children. Often superhero play is seen to bring about aggression, violent tendencies and disruptive behaviour. This research investigates the controversy by asking: In what ways do children benefit from engaging in superhero play? Using a case study approach, the research delves into the world of superhero play and investigates the perspectives and opinions that people hold on superhero play. The research was conducted in the young children's (ages 3–5) room of a privately owned childcare centre. Teachers, parents and children were all participants in this research. Information was gathered through questionnaires and observations of children engaging in superhero play. Analysed findings suggest that the most repeated benefits of superhero play were enhancement of imagination, development of confidence, language, and social and moral skills and physical development. While the focus of this research is on benefits, there is always going to be conflicting ideas that emerge due to the controversy that superhero play brings. Even so, current and future teachers should realise the value of superhero play in young children's lives and engage it in their practice.

**Key words:** Superhero play, positive guidance, fantasy play, young children

### Introduction

In a world full of fantasy characters portrayed to young children through the media, it is undeniable that these ideas and behaviours will emerge in children's play. This case study research report investigates the phenomenon that is superhero play in the early childhood sector. Coming from a drama-based background, superhero play is very close to my heart.

As a teacher of preschool-age children, I saw that the young children were strongly interested in superhero play and often superhero characters and themes emerged in their play. In my two years' working and volunteering, I noticed that many teachers seemed unsure of how to handle superhero play and they often discouraged it. Boyd (1997) suggests superhero play can be a powerful opportunity to teach children about values, respect and safety. Many researchers have exposed the rich benefits that children can gain from superhero play (Barnes, 2008; O'Brien, 2004.) Teachers in the early childhood field should reflect on their teaching and ponder. Is superhero play beneficial to children? What are they learning from it? What are teacher's beliefs around superhero play and are teachers denying the benefits that

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superhero play can give to young children? This research intends to answer some of these questions.

An ultimate superhero environment would be one where teachers foster superhero play and engage in children's play. My research has discovered that when teachers foster superhero play and encourage children to express their superhero fantasies, then collaborative learning is encouraged.

An early childhood teacher does not have to agree with superhero play or the themes that are associated with it. They do, however, need to realise that superhero play will be a part of the young children's lives not matter what area or home life the children come from. If teachers open their eyes to the world of superhero play, they will be amazed at the educational opportunities and rich learning benefits that superhero play can give to children. Maybe if "donned the mask and cape themselves, teachers will find their superhero within and can assist children in constructing knowledge of the real and imagined world" (O'Brien, 2004, p.14).

### **A "Superhero" Case Study**

The case study stemmed from a research project undertaken during my degree studies in early childhood teaching at Manukau Institute of Technology. The research had two main goals: first, to identify the benefits that superhero play can provide to young children; and second, to find out teachers' and parents' opinions about superhero play and their reasons for their beliefs.

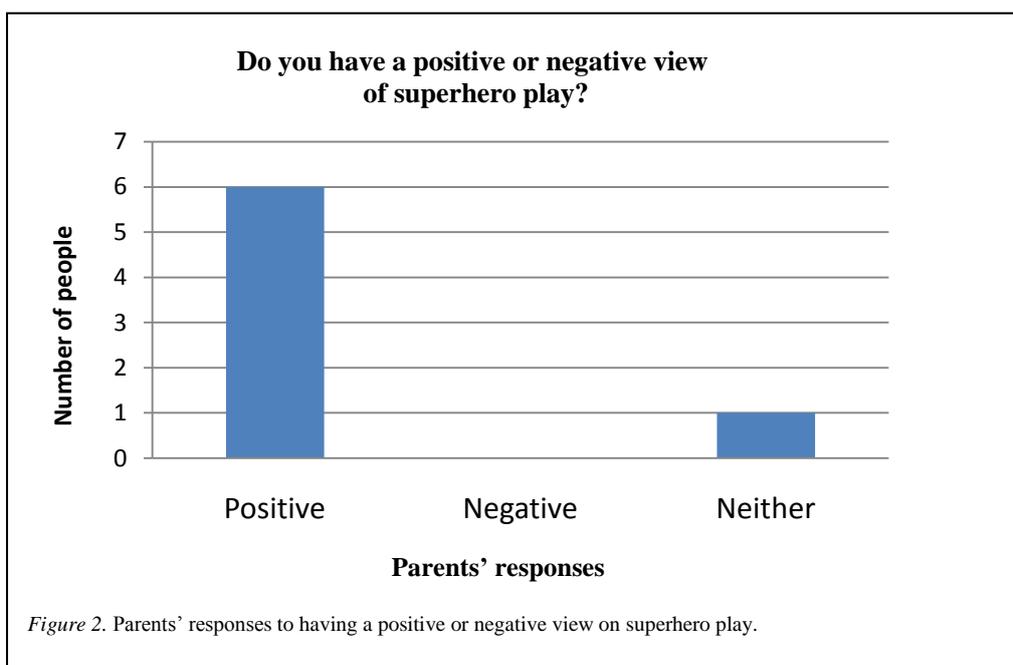
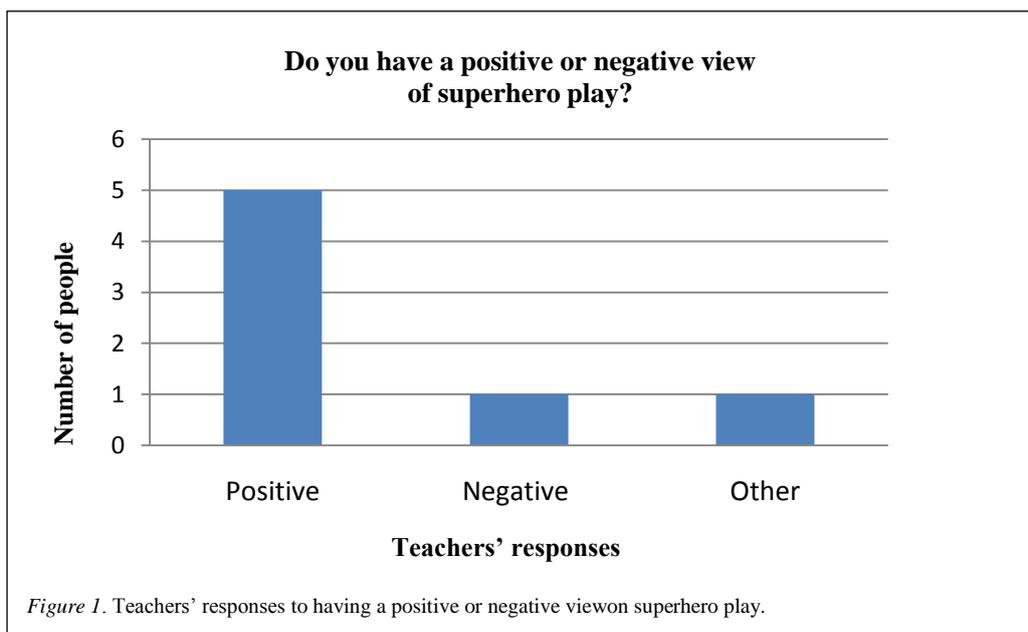
#### **Methodology.**

Before the research started, information about the project was given to every participant and informed consent gained from them. The case study research was conducted in a privately owned centre in Pakuranga. The children who participated were aged from three to five years. Families and staff came from New Zealand, England, Samoa, China and Sri Lanka. The research involved seven teachers, seven parents and six children. The children were observed, and the parents and teachers asked to complete questionnaires. The teachers who were selected were all of the teachers at the centre; they work with children aged from 0 to 5 years. By including both parents and teachers in the research, I was able to gain the perspectives of a range of adults.

#### **Findings.**

Initial findings from the questionnaire suggested that the majority of the parents and teachers had a mainly positive view of superhero play (see Figures 1 and 2). This affirmed Holland's (2003) view that superhero play can provide possible learning opportunities and should not be seen as a disturbance. The response from the parents and teachers was contrary to most literature, though, and to my own beliefs that superhero play is perceived negatively by most adults.





However, when the teachers were asked “Are you an advocate of superhero play?” their responses were split. Four out of the seven teachers were advocates of superhero play. They gave reasons for supporting superhero playsuch as “Superhero play is so prominent in children’s lives, we need to understand it so we can extend on learning” and “through engaging in superhero play, children can see what ideas work and don’t work; through this they can investigate the concepts of right and wrong.” These teachers saw superhero play as aiding children in making sense of their world and in creating new ideas. One teacher did not support superhero play, stating:“Superhero play is not my belief”. The other teacher had



neither view on superhero play stating, “I would only observe superhero play; would not engage or play with children.”

The seventh teacher was more ambivalent about the value of superhero play, responding with: “Superhero play should not be actively encouraged but it can be used as teachable moments when interest occurs.”

The teachers’ mixed responses reflect the controversy that is present with superhero play. However, the majority of teachers are advocates and believe that superhero play can provide children with many learning opportunities and that it should not be banned from centres.

## **What does Superhero Play Provide for Children?**

### **Socialisation.**

Superhero play is a very social form of play. I observed children banding together to “save the world” and children collaboratively creating their play as they expanded their ideas by working together. The laughter and joy on children’s faces when they got the baddies and were “flying” was amazing. Children’s socialisation blossomed as they had the common interest of superhero play. One parent summed up the essence of socialisation through superhero play by stating, “Superhero play can provide great opportunities for group play, which encourages working together.”

### **Language development.**

Language development through superhero play was observed repeatedly during the research. Parents and teachers expressed that language was strongly enhanced through superhero play. Children were creating plots and acting out their superhero ideas through the use of language. Children also engaged in story writing around their superheroes, which further enhanced their language. Several times reserved and uncommunicative children were observed developing confidence in language through superhero play.

Table 1 gives examples of children’s language and ideas that were developed through superhero play. These examples support the statement that superhero play can encourage language development.

**Table 1**

*Examples of language spoken by children during engagement in superhero play*

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“I shoot bat ropes and they have hooks on them.” – JA

“I am a superhero lion; hear me ROAR.” – J

“IS and me are baby bats.” – JA

“She’s grabbing baddies with her super tangled hair.” – I



JA's superhero powers: "super speed", "super run", "webs", "super shape ribbon power"

"I am Batboy." – JA

"Superhero girl L on the case; Whoosh!" – L

"I am Superdog." – IS

"We squirk dogs out our backs." – I

"I squirk goo out of my mouth." – JA

"I have lasers that shoot from my eyes and that helps me see. Superheroes can see good because they eat carrots." – JA

"Superhero lift because I am super strong." – J

"Look at my super jump – it's super high and when I come down I can get the baddies." – JK

"I have shoes with springs on them so I can jump up high and see everything." – I

JA's voice on his favourite superheroes:

"I like to be lots of different superheroes. When I am Batboy I fly around and eat fruit. I only squirt webs when I am spider boy and I get my web catcher and shoot webs."

J stated that: "policeman and fireman are superheroes too and they stop the baddies."

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### **Imagination and creativity.**

Imagination was expressed through children's language and storytelling. Children were assuming completely different roles (such as Spiderboy, Batboy, Superdog and Superlion). These characters had vastly different personalities and displayed new and exciting powers. "Superhero scenarios can provide the seeds for imaginative development" (Holland, 2003, p. 35). Children's imagination was free and they were able to assume whatever role they wanted. This freedom encouraged the development of imagination, and ideas were further elaborated upon through collaboration with peers.

### **Confidence.**

Parents and teachers talked of witnessing the children's confidence growing when they assumed the roles of superheroes – the children's personalities changed and they suddenly had "superhero confidence". This new found confidence was exemplified in the way children asserted their ideas and directed the play they were involved in. The superhero persona provided children with a mindset that they were powerful. One child stated, "I am a superhero; I can do anything." This mindset was also expressed through confronting peers (see Table 2).

**Table 2**



*J's story demonstrates his emerging confidence*

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J's story: (field notes)

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J does not often confront his peers and voice his opinion. Today J and his peers were being superheroes. J's peers decided that I (Nicola) was a baddie and I needed to go to jail. The children proceeded to take me to "jail". When J saw this, he said, "NO NONO! Nicola is not a baddie; she doesn't need to go to jail, and she is good!" J then said, "Don't worry, Nicola, Superhero J will save you!" and J pulled me out of jail. This demonstrates J's confidence developing through assuming the role of a superhero. It also shows his understanding of good versus evil, and he was able to relay this knowledge to his peers.

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### **Physical development.**

Observations and discussions with the parents and teachers highlighted that physical development is another significant benefit of superhero play. The children were observed engaging and gaining confidence in physical play, such as running with their "super feet", jumping because of "springs in their feet", and balancing to "get across the bridge and save the princess from the baddie."

### **Moral development.**

Moral development was another benefit of superhero play that was observed repeatedly during the research. The children involved all expressed their understanding of moral development through constantly stating "baddies go to jail and superheroes are good."

Superhero play holds many benefits to children. Children need to be superheroes and explore their confidence, relationships, language, socialisation and moral development. If we as teachers have a fear of superhero play, then we may need to jump into the child's world and "don the cape and mask ourselves to assist children in constructing knowledge of the real and imagined world (O'Brien, 2004, p.14).

### **Superheroes Learn Lots; Will We Let Them Fly Free?**

Our children are superheroes. Superhero play aids children's development and learning as well as helping children to understand the nature of their society (Levin, 2003). Furthermore, Boyd (1997) suggests that superhero play is critical to young children's healthy emotional development. The observations made during this case study showed that superhero play was very evident at the centre and, moreover, enjoyed by the young children. The research also found many benefits apparent in superhero play, reiterating the importance of allowing children to engage in this form of role-play.

One of the key benefits that arose from their superhero play was moral development. Literature suggests that superhero play can help children resolve issues of power and powerless (Porter, 2008) and because superhero play encompasses themes of good and evil,



enables children to develop concepts of right and wrong (Greenberg, 1995, as cited in Bauer & Dettore, 1997, p.19).

The children at the centre in the study had freedom to assume different roles and delve into an entirely different world; they were encouraged to develop stories and plots to extend their play. Superhero play enhanced their imagination and allowed them to control the direction their play took, and this helped the children to develop their confidence.

Observations during the case study showed that superhero play also encouraged physical development, language development and socialisation – superhero play does indeed have benefits for children’s learning and development.

While I am not specifically focusing on gender issues, I feel it is important to note that girls were equally interested in being superheroes (see Figure 3). Holland (2003, as cited in Browne, 2004) states: “Who are the children who engage in play fighting and superhero play? In the vast majority of cases they are boys” (p.81). However, the observations made during this research do not support Holland’s statement: in the centre that was the focus of the case study, superhero play was not limited to solely boys. Realising this, as teachers we need to also encompass girl superheroes.

There was a general consensus from teachers and parents that superhero play provides opportunities for aiding children’s learning and development. I feel it is important to realise and appreciate the value that superhero play has in young children’s lives. Teachers have the responsibility to create a challenging environment that encourages and supports children’s interest in superhero play.

Superhero play has been viewed by many as meaningless, bizarre, aggressive and frightening (Bauer & Dettore, 1997). Observations of children in this case study highlight that superhero play is relevant to many areas of the curriculum, such as language and literacy, social sciences, physical skills and the arts. However, without teachers passion, encouragement and involvement, the benefits of superhero play are likely to fade. Holland (2003) states: “We [teachers] have the choice, to insist that children leave such material [superhero play] at the door, therefore withholding support for superhero play, or we can work with children to help them process and transform their superhero play” (p.33). Ultimately, the exposure children have to superhero play is in the hands of their teachers.

Children’s love of superhero play is apparent and teachers are aware of the importance it holds. Superhero play does not need to be seen as violent, disruptive or meaningless. Through banning superhero play, teachers may be relieving themselves of a powerful opportunity to teach children about values, respect and safety (Boyd, 1997). My own involvement in “being a superhero” has allowed children to reap the benefits that superhero play offers and has created opportunities for “superheroes to survive”.

### **What does this Mean for the Superheroes of the Future?**

A case study requires recommendations to improve future practice. Teachers at my centre have differing perspectives on superhero play and how to manage it. The introduction of a superhero play policy or procedure could ensure all teachers’ views are reflected and the



steps to manage superhero play are known by all team members. Four out of the seven teachers questioned felt a superhero policy should be implemented because staff would then have the confidence to teach and engage in superhero play as they would be familiar with the centre's procedures.

It is important teachers address children's interest in superhero play as learning can be nurtured across many curriculum areas. Teachers should undergo professional development to aid them in using superhero play as a tool that can help to teach children across the curriculum. (Holland, 2003; Butler &Kratz, 2008).

Further research could be conducted to investigate male perspectives around benefits of



superhero play. Comparisons can be made around similarities and differences in male and female perspectives. Ideas and strategies for managing superhero play and weaponry play could be another point of interest for further research.

## Conclusion

This article has shown the benefits that can occur for children from superhero play. It is apparent that children will continue to be superheroes and act out superhero scenes. I have shown how superhero play can provide children with learning and development in many areas of the curriculum and how it can foster their understanding of themselves and their world. The article has also highlighted that it is of utmost importance that teachers foster

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children's superhero play. We need to let the children be superheroes; if we don't, then how else will they fly?

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