

# Rough & Tumble Superhero Play: An exploration of preschool play urges

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# My Son the Superhero: An Intro

"Here's your super power toothpaste!"

"Ok Mom, this will give me the power of Venom's tentacles, Zurg's head & rocket boots, Spin's cloaking power, and Captain America's shield!"

He brushes his teeth with enthusiasm and then runs laps around the living room and kitchen (maybe there was a trace of Sonic speed?) This has been our bedtime routine every day for months. Harnessing the power of the superhero play urge. With the help of my son, his teachers, and books by early childhood experts, I have been able to fully immerse myself in the rich, complex superhero play that is prevalent in his preschool classroom. I have had the opportunity to learn about children's motivations in superhero play, the benefits of rough & tumble superhero play, and how to explore safe ways to say YES to these natural play urges.

## What motivates the urge to engage in rough, physical, superhero play?

Play is a tool for children to investigate and process the world around them and their place in it. Rough & tumble superhero play emerges from children's natural play urges. The best way to understand this play urge, is to examine children's natural motivations in play:

- **Power:** How can I feel powerful? Who has power? Who are the powerful people in my world, and what do they do?
- **Strength:** How can I show that I am big and strong? I'm growing and getting stronger, and I feel proud of that.
- **Schema:** My body feels a natural urge towards big movements and impact.
- **Cause and Effect:** How do my actions affect my peers and teachers? How will they respond when I am aggressive or exhibit big behaviors? How can I get the attention I'm seeking from adults and peers?
- **Heroes:** I've seen superheroes and other characters on tv that use physical power to help and save friends. They are interesting and cool, and I want to model their behavior.

Anger or aggression is not an appropriate motivator of rough and tumble play. Any play that is motivated by anger should be met with a compassionate approach to emotional regulation and thoughtful behavior management strategies. Research has shown that children who are supported in engaging in playful rough and tumble opportunities with

peers and caregivers actually become less aggressive in frustrating scenarios and have practice reading social cues.

## **What are the benefits of rough & tumble superhero play?**

### **Imagination and Creativity:**

Superhero play fosters a rich and imaginative world for preschoolers. Through role-playing as their favorite superheroes, children are transported into a fantasy world that they control. They construct narratives, create scenarios, and explore various possibilities, enhancing their creative thinking skills.

### **Emotional Development:**

Superhero play provides a safe space for preschoolers to explore and manage their emotions. Many superheroes possess admirable qualities like bravery, compassion, and resilience. By embodying these traits during play, children develop a sense of self-confidence, self-control, and empathy.

### **Social Interaction and Cooperation:**

Superhero play often involves multiple children, creating opportunities for social interaction and cooperation. Preschoolers engage in collaborative play, negotiating roles, sharing responsibilities, and working together to achieve common goals.

### **Physical Development:**

Superhero play is an active form of play that stimulates physical development in preschoolers. Whether they are running, jumping, climbing, or engaging in imaginative battles, their gross motor skills, balance, and coordination are challenged and improved.

### **Cognitive and Language Skills:**

As children create stories and scenarios, they engage in critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making. They develop their narrative skills, vocabulary, and expressive language by verbalizing their thoughts, dialogue, and actions during play.

In the video below, M has an idea to turn a bad guy into a good guy with a new invention. This shows a contemplation of good and evil, his capacity to share a big idea with his friend, and some hope that he could set the engine to “good mode” and change the morality of the bad guy character.



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*"I have an idea! I can break him into a million pieces, and then turn the engine on so it's 'good mode' and then bring it to my lair and then he can be my friend."*

## How can we create a safe way to say YES to these play urges?

Teachers and parents are understandably concerned about safety issues when it comes to rough and tumble superhero play. Throughout my research, experts agree that there are ways to create a safe environment for this type of play.

- **Co-creating community norms and safety rules with the children** is a powerful way to say yes AND create a safe context for play. These boundaries include asking for consent and assessing a peers interest in rough & physical play.

The video link below includes some pretty rough play, but if you listen closely, they're reminding each other of the boundaries set, and showing restraint and control.



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*"No punching!" M yells a reminder to friends as he runs and crashes into R who falls onto the ground. M stops and gives the friend space showing some restraint.*

*Another peer (L) rushes over and M stops him (maybe to protect R from getting piled on?)  
Another reminder...*

*"No punching!"*

*J approaches L and says "do you want me to push you into him?" After receiving consent, he gives him a push into R on the ground. L stops just before falling on top of R. Everyone laughs and gets back up to create a new scenario.*

- **Identify materials that are safe to use in physical play**, and environments where rough play is most appropriate. At our school we spend much of the day outside, and there is an agreement that outdoors is the safest place for big body rough play. Our teachers also started using pool noodles as an option for impact play that was more inclusive to students who were not comfortable with full body impact.
- **Provide opportunities for children to explore power and their physical strength** through lifting, building with heavy materials, climbing and racing, and other non violent physical activities. Children have very little power in their daily lives, but can

feel powerful in their play. Powerful play can also support children to face their fears by acting them out in a fantasy scenario where they control the outcome.

In the next video, preschoolers are working to move large stones from one area of the outdoor playspace and lift them up on the gazebo. This activity is an example of heavy work that allows kids to feel strong and powerful. It also inspires a bit of teamwork and cognitive problem solving!



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A bit later, while attempting to lift another large stone up onto the gazebo, M discovers an old broken brick and puts a long stick through the hole. "I made a lever! Now we can do it!"

- **The positive qualities of Superheroes** – Superhero character play is often motivated by children's desire to portray the positive qualities of heroes. As teachers we can provide opportunities for students to explore what makes superheroes and



other characters special and good beyond fighting. What are other ways to help people? What “powers” make you a good friend? Are Mommies heroes?

Each teacher and parent has their own comfort level with risk, rough and tumble play, and even dramatic character play that includes battles and play fighting. It’s my hope

that this blog includes information that helps a skeptical teacher reflect on the play urges in their classroom, and also provide options for those who are not quite ready to jump in head first. Penny Holland’s book, *We Don’t Play with Guns Here*, argues that a zero tolerance policy of physical and weapon play just doesn’t work, and it robs children of the opportunity to engage in the benefits of this play urge.

## Works Cited

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