
Book Reviews

Calling All Superheroes: Supporting and Developing Superhero Play in the Early Years

Tasmin Grimmer

New York: Routledge: 2019. Contents, acknowledgments, about the author, appendices, index, and color illustrations. 195 pp. \$24.95 paper. ISBN: 9781138556973

Calling All Superheroes: Supporting Superhero Play in the Early Years brings a comprehensive examination of superhero play and related themes, including death, weapons, rough-and-tumble play, and zero tolerance policies and the banning of such play and themes. Throughout the book's ten chapters and three appendices, author Tasmin Grimmer illuminates the significance and complexity of superhero play with connections to relevant research and theories together with practical application for teachers and care givers. While situated in the United Kingdom (UK), the book's themes, topics, and related research are relevant beyond the UK. The three appendices support practitioners by providing an example of a superhero play

policy and two appendices with detailed descriptions of traditional and current superheroes for educators.

Grimmer supports each chapter with rich color photographs and related scenarios (case studies) to illustrate the author's points with real-life examples. Within each chapter, Grimmer connects superhero play to associated topics in early childhood such as fantasy play, developmental understandings of death, problem solving, and family engagement and communication. Thus, the book provides readers with an in-depth overview of not just superhero play but also essential early childhood development and learning topics.

The first three chapters focus on children's play connected to three related superhero play topics: fantasy play, ideas of aggressive play, and themes of death and killing in children's play. In chapter 1, Grimmer highlights the research supporting fantasy play as an essential type of play for young children and examines related topics of technology influencing children's fantasy play, children's developmental understandings of fantasy and reality, and imaginary friends. In chapter 2, she delves into the primary concern with

superhero play, aggressive play, through an appropriate title, “I’m Going to Make a Gun!’: Exploring Aggression and Violent Play.” With a thorough review of related research, Grimmer accurately disputes concerns connecting superhero and weapon play to violent and aggressive behavior. She illustrates children’s interests in this play and provides valuable advice for managing this play in practice. Chapter 3 concludes this section, focusing on themes of death and killing in children’s play. While undoubtedly controversial, this chapter beautifully shares why children may be interested in these topics. Grimmer presents a strong argument for not avoiding discussions about the “inevitability of death” (p. 41) with children and helping them understand the irreversibility of death and bereavement in developmentally appropriate ways.

In chapter 4, Grimmer highlights important concepts of gender development and stereotypes about gender and play. Chapter 5, written by Dr. Kay Mathieson, connects superhero play with the British educational standards in the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework (EYFS) and demonstrates how superhero play aligns with this framework and with other British values connected to morality and child development. While situated in British values, any educator will appreciate the clear example of how to make a case for supporting this play and meeting the educational expectations or mandates. Chapter 6 focuses on expanding the idea of superheroes to other heroes and situates superhero play in connection to sociodramatic play and the EYFS. This chapter emphasizes teacher observation of play and how to support this play in the

classroom which is addressed more fully in the following chapters.

In the next three chapters, readers will gain valuable insights from Grimmer to apply in their own practice. In chapter 7, the author shares how to develop an environment that supports children’s learning across all curricular areas, such as a focus on literacy. Chapter 8 delves into the topic of managing fantasy play with ideas about establishing rules and policies about superhero play. Appendix 1, “Example of Superhero and Weapon Play Policy,” supports chapters 8 and 9 with an example of how to share your superhero play policy with families. The specific details about managing typical situations with this play, such as how-to guidelines if children do not want to play and how to manage rough-and-tumble play, together with case study examples and the policy framework in appendix 1, are handy tools for teachers to support their abilities to manage superhero play in the classroom. This chapter also includes a detailed description to help children solve problems, which is beneficial for superhero play and many regular daily interactions. Chapter 9 concludes this section with guidance on how to communicate with families. This section focuses on family engagement in general and how to engage families with children’s interest in superheroes, including at home.

The book concludes with a chapter focusing on children and concluding remarks. Chapter 10, “To Infinity and Beyond!: Encouraging All Children to Find Their Superpowers!” discusses how to support children to be positive citizens and support the development of their self-concept. Chapter 11 concludes with a general summary and statement advo-

cating for the inclusion of superhero play in early childhood contexts. The concluding chapters would be a good place in the book to summarize and support more strongly how and why children should have the right to engage in this type of play. While the author references children's emotional development connected to superhero play within the book, these chapters would be an excellent place to emphasize the importance of this type of play for children's emotional development and mental health.

Given the current concerns about mass shootings in the United States, a war in Ukraine, and a global pandemic, it is essential to note that allowing children's superhero, power play, and play with themes of death and killing is probably even more important now to support their social-emotional development and processing of the world. *Calling All Superheroes: Supporting and Developing Superhero Play in the Early Years* is a timely and valuable resource for educators worldwide to consider and reflect on superhero play and all the related controversial play themes.

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Playful Visions: Optical Toys and the Emergence of Children's Media Culture

Meredith A. Bak

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What makes children so impressionable? In *Playful Visions: Optical Toys and the Emergence of Children's Media Culture*, Meredith Bak reframes this loaded question by tracing how such anxieties arose from a nineteenth-century culture in which visions of childhood emerged from engagement with optical play. For instance, the image of the impressionable child arose from optical theories on persistence of vision that posit vision as literally leaving impressions through “an inscriptive, percussive process in which the eye's surface is struck or marked” (p. 10). Through this and other cultural notions of visuality, Bak argues that nineteenth-century optical play served as “a key component in the formation of modern middle-class childhood” (p. 26). Childhood, it turns out, is literally a matter of optics. Yet, as Bak demonstrates, the cultural optics that frame and construct playful visions of childhood do not constitute a singular vision. Instead, each newly invented optical toy rekindled cultural debates through which recurring paradoxes were continually reimaged. Thus, Bak takes particular care in tracing how discursive constellations coalesced around different optical toys with “distinct material features that invite different forms of interactivity, manipulation, and social and individual play” (p. 19).

To this end, *Playful Visions* is organized as a series of case studies in which each chapter traces how one such constellation orbits a different kind of optical play. After contextualizing her project with two introductory chapters that situate optical toys within childhood and media culture, Bak begins her case studies by exploring how the visual and verbal play mediated