

Super girls and boys

What's the difference between a superhero and a fairy godmother? It depends on who you ask. *Michael Jones* explores how adult attitudes can encourage or stifle children's imaginative play

I have to admit that I was not a great fan of superheroes and I have needed to be convinced of their importance to children and the value in their play. An early years practitioner once described me as 'old school' when I emphasised the importance of promoting fairy stories and traditional tales, and not taking too much notice of Superman, Batman and the like.

My lack of interest stemmed from regarding superheroes as TV cartoon characters that encourage a lot of 'crash bang wallop' among children, especially boys. However, I was intrigued to find out the extent to which superhero play could be a 'way in' for some children to talk together more freely and explore more complex imaginary worlds.

So, during one of my training days on outdoor play and language, I left a bag of action figures and supermen on a bench near the sand tray, hoping that the children, and adults, there would spontaneously incorporate them into the play. When I returned 20 minutes later, I found the super heroes untouched on the bench.

When I asked the practitioners (all female) why they hadn't prompted the children to play with the figures, they replied, 'We don't like them.' I didn't like them much either, but I wanted to see how the children would respond if encouraged to use the figures in their sand play. So, I made a 'cave' out of pebbles and announced, 'Superman is trapped in the cave. What can we do?'

I was astonished by the reactions, which included children talking excitedly to each other and solving problems: 'The cave has fallen down. Get some sand and water to stick the

stones together.' What excited me was the way that the children were using their imaginations. When I say 'children' I really mean 'boys'. The girls had walked away, and the practitioners were not very impressed either.

However, when I introduced a Barbie doll, the boys and the girls both incorporated her into their play: 'Look, here's his Mum. She'll save Superman.' While Barbie may be unrealistically proportioned and made of plastic, I have to accept that some children like to play with this kind of doll.

I also have to accept that to support children's communication skills, we have to talk with them about what they know and like. The children on that training day became completely absorbed in their play and talk, and by introducing Barbie, the girls felt they could join in, as did the practitioners.

CHANGED PERCEPTIONS

Next, I visited Chapel Street Nursery School in Luton, where Lisa Pepper and Sam Randall continue to lead on the Every Child a Talker programme and were keen to share with me their new ideas about stimulating children's imaginative play and language. By coincidence, they had been encouraging children's superhero play. After an afternoon with them I had completely changed my perceptions.

Ms Pepper explains the background. 'Initially, boys in particular were dressing up as superheroes, leaping around and acting out simple imaginative sequences, such as flying, crashing and chasing "baddies". We could see the potential for using this interest to develop the children's language, but we were also aware that although the girls were dressing



up as princesses, they were not getting involved in the boisterous and action-packed play.'

While it was possible that the girls just didn't want to do it, the practitioners were keen to explore if there was anything preventing them from joining in. Ms Randall said, 'During a discussion at circle time, the girls told us that they did want to join in with the excitement. However, they didn't want to be called "Superman" or "Batman", and when they put on the costumes they wanted to be "Supergirl" and "Batgirl". The girls also wondered why a princess couldn't be a superhero too.'

This is an interesting point. There are certainly clear parallels between the two. Both have heroes that undergo transformations (Spiderman, Super-



MORE INFORMATION

- Puppets by Post, www.puppetsbypost.com
- Build a Bear Workshop, www.buildabear.co.uk
- *Let's get talking! Exciting ways to help children with speech and language difficulties* by Michael Jones and Jo Belsten (Lawrence Educational)



Heroes in action at Chapel Street Nursery School in Luton

man, Batman, Cinderella, Beauty and the Beast, Sleeping Beauty) and bad-dies who need to be overcome (the Joker, the Penguin, Rumpelstiltskin, Little Red Riding Hood's wicked wolf, wicked stepmothers). So, could superhero play help children access the world of traditional tales and fairy stories?

Ms Pepper and Ms Randall have always used puppets as 'mascots', where they take a hand puppet, talk to it and encourage the children to listen to its words of wisdom; for example, explaining the need to tidy up, take turns on the bikes or not to push anyone too forcefully on the rocking horse. It seemed a logical step in the play to dress the puppets, known as Timmy and Lola, in superhero outfits.

'This introduced another level of sophistication into the children's play and language,' said Ms Pepper. 'Children come and tell us what Timmy or Lola have been doing, creating stories, instead of telling us about themselves. Boys and girls also spontaneously draw pictures of Timmy and Lola's adventures and ask the adults to help them write down their stories, or they tell us stories and we write them down.'

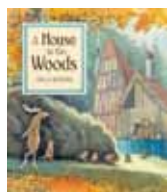
Doubtless many children involved in this type of play will be equally fascinated by stories about big bad wolves and wicked queens, but I now accept that superhero play has the potential to help children develop their language and imaginative play, as well as giving boys and girls the chance to explore imaginary worlds as equals. ■

Michael Jones is an early years trainer and writer

NURSERY WORLD SHOW 2012

Join us at the Nursery World Show 2012, where Michael Jones, along with Judith Twani, will be presenting a seminar on 'Prime area of learning: communication and language'. Other topics to be covered in our extended seminar programme and EYFS masterclass include child behaviour and the Prime and Specific areas under the revised framework. For more details of the exhibition, to be held on 17 and 18 February at the Business Design Centre, London, visit: www.nurseryworldshow.com

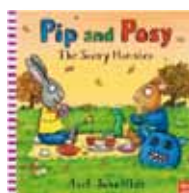
Book choice



A House in the Woods by Inga Moore
Walker Books, hardback, £12.99

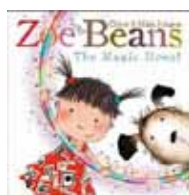
When two little pigs leave their huts one morning, two very large friends move in – Moose and Bear. It's nice having friends to stay, but not when they are so huge that they wreck your home. So, with the help of a team of eager beavers, the four friends set about building a house big enough for all of them. Was all the hard work worth it? You bet. The four shop, cook, share stories around the fire, then climb the stairs to their comfy beds and sweet dreams.

This story is a delight. There are no monsters, no nasty surprises or twists in the tale, just loveable characters, atmospheric images and wry humour, which together create a touching celebration of friendship and a story that children will love.



Pip and Posy – The Scary Monster by Axel Scheffler
Nosy Crow, hardback, £7.99

Little mouse Posy is happily baking cakes when a scary monster appears. She is terrified until she realises that it's not a monster after all, but her rabbit friend Pip dressed in a costume. A gentle story for the very young about being brave and taking turns.



Zoe and Beans – The Magic Hoop! by Chloe and Mick Inkpen
Macmillan Children's Books, paperback, £5.99

Zoe finds a hoola hoop and persuades her pet dog Beans to jump through it. But this is no ordinary hoop; this is a magic hoop that transforms Beans into

a rabbit, a mouse, a crocodile, an elephant. How will Beans get back to being Beans?



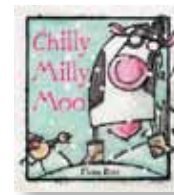
Zoe the Zebra Hurts Her Ankle! by Kes Gray and Mary McQuillan
Hodder Children's Books, hardback, £10.99

Poorly animals from all over the world come to Nurse Nibble's hospital garden to recover from their injuries, among them Zoe the Zebra. Forever anxious, she had spent her time alerting the other zebras to the dangers of lions and leopards and hyenas – only to trip over a tortoise herself.



Little Nelly's Big Book by Pippa Goodhart and Andy Rowland
Bloomsbury Books, paperback, £5.99

Mice, reads Little Nelly, the elephant, can be grey, with big ears and skinny tails. So, she concludes, she must be a mouse, and moves in with the family of mice living behind the skirting board. The mice are very kind to her, but she still feels different – and very hungry. Then grandma mouse has an idea about how to resolve Nelly's identity crisis as well as her hunger pangs. This book is a real giggle, and it demonstrates why we should not take everything we read too literally.



Chilly Milly Moo by Fiona Ross
Walker Books, hardback, £11.99

Milly Moo is feeling too hot to produce lots of lovely milk. The other cows make fun of her and the farmer is losing patience. Then the temperature drops, leaving the other cows shivering and Milly Moo able to deliver an icy surprise.