What are modern superheroes doing to our children?

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Superhero movies and comic books are a staple of today's popular media, but do we know their effect on developing adolescents? A study of 240 children and their parents, lasting over a year, shows that those who consume more superhero-related content have more aggressive behaviors. Stan Lee defines a superhero to be "a person who does heroic deeds and has the ability to do them in a way that a normal person couldn't" (Lee, 2013). Unrealistic idolization may cause children to form ideas of doing things that aren't possible, and gain unrealistic expectations. Overall, superhero content consumed at an early age causes more aggressive and negative behaviors and thought processes as they grow up. While superhero content can offer positive role models and life lessons when consumed in moderation, overconsumption at an early age is linked to aggressive behaviors, negative thought processes like escapism, self-esteem issues, and unrealistic expectations.

With superhero movies, there comes a cost. This is often seen in self-esteem and insecurity issues. Barbara Plotz expresses the extent to which superheroes emphasize their athletic body type by stating "[The superhero] genre relies to a large extent on the malebody signifying a hegemonic masculinity" (2023). From superhero movies, children might come to learn that there is exactly one way to look, which is a primary cause of insecurity. A parent help site emphasizes this, stating that "constantly comparing yourself to others and feeling like you don't measure up can lead to lower self-esteem and self-worth" (*Social comparison and body image in children,* 2024). Especially among boys, this might be signified by the vast amount of athletic bodies in superhero films, which foster unrealistic expectations for what they should be, lowering self-esteem and causing self-esteem issues at a young age.

Along with this, insecurities may develop as different body types are treated with humor and dismissal. This humorous and dismissive approach "develops out of the incongruence

between these expectations of the superhero and Parallel Peter's cynical disinterest and selfishness." Children's inability to live up to superhero body types and behaviors is expressed through "habits stereotypically associated with fatness." These traits are often seen in the forms of physical laziness and unhealthy eating. From these stereotypes, "male fatness is constructed as the anti-thesis of normative masculinity, specifically within the context of the superhero genre" (Plotz 2023). This antithesis, paired with the habits associated with it, being physical laziness and unhealthy eating, form a negative view of this body shape. Children will see this comparison and create their own views that a certain body shape is bad.

Beyond shaping perceptions of body image, superhero media also affects children's behavior, particularly when with aggression and violence. Superhero media has been shown to promote violent behaviors in young children. A study done by Sarah Coyne explains how "engagement with superheroes will be associated with higher levels of physical, relational, and verbal aggression" (2017). Throughout the course of a year, Coyne studied the behaviors and interactions of 240 children and their parents. At the start of the experiment, "many parents thought that the superhero culture would help their kids defend others and be nicer to their peers." However, results proved that the children with more superhero exposure had shown "the exact opposite. Kids pick up on the aggressive themes and not the defending ones" (*BYU News,* 2017). This is likely due to the high level of action and violence portrayed in superhero movies. To parents and to adults, superhero movies might represent a larger moral lesson of doing good for more than personal gain, but to a growing child, they might struggle to connect the different points and piece together the overall moral story that is being portrayed. This is in part due to superhero movies not being intended for children. Because of this, children only pick up on the

most salient parts of the movie, that being the action and the violence, and then mimic them themselves.

This is also enforced when it was "found that exposure to prosocial aggression (where aggression is enacted to help others) tended to have the strongest effects on aggressive behavior" (Mares & Woodard as cited in Coyne et al., 2017). This shows that, while the prosocial and positive behaviors do come through in the consumption of superhero media, aggression behavior is most primarily picked up on. Children also had more extreme reactions when they identified with superheroes. Santos explains that "when participants identified with the superhero, even his use of violence seemed justified by the ultimate goal" (2024). When children identify with superheroes, they will more actively copy their actions, creating stronger effects on aggressive behaviors.

Along with heightened aggression, children that consume a lot of superhero media may develop escapism as a coping mechanism. Escapism is defined as "when a person routinely uses an activity or behavior to escape life's realities" (Olivine & Grier, 2023). In our case, escapism is using the fantastical worlds of superheroes as escapes from reality. In a world filled with terrorism, children can turn to superhero fantasies to find comfort and escape from harsh realities. Alyssa Rosenburg explains how "in the real world, the idea that a small group of fanatically committed terrorists could bring down a pair of iconic buildings and seriously damage the Pentagon armed with nothing more than boxcutters and suicidal determination was a shock" (2021). Living in a world like this, it can be easy to imagine a child searching for an escape, and one place that seems to attract children is the world of superheroes. While finding a safe place to escape to during hard times can sometimes be healthy, when a young child learns this behavior, it can lead to overuse as a coping mechanism and "suppression [of] emotions

instead of processing or feeling them" (Olivine & Grier, 2023). As this behavior continues for long amounts of time, it leads to outbursts of emotions and has highly negative side-effects on the child and those around them.

A common theme that might show up in superhero movies is the relation to gods and goddesses. Jeremy Azevedo explains this relationship in detail, talking about how every god serves a role, and the relationship with the DC universe. He states the relationship is like their "own pantheon of god-like heroes, with Superman obviously serving as their Zeus, Wonder Woman as Hera, Batman as Hades, Aquaman as Poseidon, [and] the Flash as Hermes" (Azevedo 2019). With this sort of relationship, it can seem easy for children to grow unrealistic expectations and role models from god-like superheroes that might persist through life. When children grow an identity with a superhero, they might try to act very similar. Azevedo explains how "there are not usually any meaningful repercussions for Superman being involved with something or not." Imitating similar behavior could lead to a generation that doesn't believe in consequences or duty. It is known that if a "child gets away with no consequences at an early age, their behavior only worsens with time," and while following the behavior of superheroes without consequences, this behavior could worsen (Kim, 2016).

Even though these negative outcomes are packaged with superhero media, children can obtain positive role models and life lessons from superhero movies as well when consumed in moderation. Silvia Santos explains how "experimental studies indicate that superhero priming, images, and games, led to higher prosocial behavior" (Santos, 2024). Spiderman might represent helping those who can't help themselves, while Superman might exemplify traits such as perseverance and resilience. Specifically, "attractive characters whom children admire will be most likely to be learned and adopted by viewers" (Coyne, 2017). Each superhero represents

different traits we might want our children to pick up, and "identification with superheroes can generate engagement with behaviors expected from these characters that are available in the current situation" (2024). As we watch the superhero media our children watch, we can see the positive role models being presented. If our children are unable to see the whole picture this brings about, we might be able to explain to them why certain things occur. This could help the child from over-focusing on violence and see the moral story as a whole.

In general, superhero content in mediation can be a positive aspect of childhood. This is seen as it provides role models and life lessons for the children. However, overconsumption, over-reliance, and identification by it can have harmful effects on a child's development. This harmful behavior can be seen in the development of self-esteem issues and insecurities from the stereotypes and expectations within superhero media, and from the over-representation of a specific body type; higher levels of physically aggressive behavior and actions, especially when identification with superheroes is present; unhealthy coping mechanisms in the form of escapism and suppression of emotions, and also to create unrealistic expectations in children as they grow. We can see how important it is to find a balance between reality and the world of superheroes for our children.

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