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Children, Superpowers, and Good vs. Evil

"I'm the black Power Ranger. He's <u>strong</u>!" Michael, age 4

"This Pokemon card is my favorite. It has the best <u>power</u>. The other Pokemon can attack him but he doesn't die." Brent, age 6

"I'm a witch, but I'm a <u>good</u> witch. I'm nice--unless someone is mean to me--then I can turn him into a frog!" Jackie, age 5

Most of us who have been around children have heard them say things like this. Each of these examples has something in common: the child is expressing a need for <u>power</u>. But instead of saying "I want power" he or she <u>pretends</u> to be someone who has power: someone with "superpowers" or "magic."

Children <u>need</u> to feel this power. In fact, power and control are basic human needs. Yet, for children so much of life is not in their control--they can't decide when they get up, whether they go to school, what they get to eat, etc.--adults decide these things for them (and rightly so). So they turn to what they can control--how they play. They make sure the "good guys win," the "monsters are defeated," and that "good conquers evil."

Children learn a lot through play. They use their play to explore and understand their world. There are many different kinds of play--in fact four play patterns that commonly emerge involve nurturance (caring for a doll or stuffed animal), competency (seeing how tall he/she can build a tower of blocks), creativity (drawing or painting "just for fun"), and aggression (making toys "fight"). In general, we as parents are unconcerned about how our children play--except when it comes to the aggressive play. We are automatically cautious about what level of aggression is healthy. So, we tend to limit aggressive toys such as guns, swords, army men, etc. We don't expose our children to aggressive shows such as Power Rangers or "Tom and Jerry". We feel that if we limit this exposure we will decrease the chances of our children becoming violent.

However, before we prohibit aggressive play it is important to note the following:

1. Aggression is a <u>natural</u> play pattern that most children crave on some level--mostly due to their need for power. An aggressive play pattern may be expressed by the child acting in a way that looks violent or angry (such as pounding on something or creating a

game in which he is always the hero), but it is not the same as violence--it does not mean anger or intent to harm. Instead, it means "me first," "I'm important," or "I can do what I want." Seeking power in this way is important to child development--it comes naturally as children look for ways to be independent. So, forbidding this kind of play usually doesn't work--at least not completely. Many parents find that when toy guns are prohibited their children respond by making guns out of Lego's, use their fingers to shoot, and/or become fascinated with Pokemon when friends at school explain the card game for the first time.

2. Children need the freedom to use play to explore and understand their world. For example, a preschool teacher noted that after 9/11 her preschoolers began building towers with blocks and knocking them down with airplanes. As adults, when we see something like this we may become concerned. We could interpret the play as the children "glorifying" what happened on 9/11. However, if we truly understood the intent of the play we would know that it does not glorify terrorism. Instead, this kind of play is a child's attempt to *understand* what happened so it is no longer as scary. Similarly, children may want to be scary figures such as Darth Vader for Halloween--NOT because they are evil or want to become evil--but because if they can somehow identify with the character they can understand it better and it will not be as scary.

3. Children use good and bad characters to gain an understanding of "good vs. evil." Many children are particularly drawn to stories with "superheroes"--stories where the bad person is caught so the good person can prevail. Superhero figures such as Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, etc. provide a great opportunity for children to explore both power and vulnerability. When we examine the superhero stories closely we can see that each character has a weakness--but one that can be overcome. As children observe the superheroes choosing "good" and fighting evil they experience a distinction that is helpful as they try to come to terms with their own internal struggles. They have a model for finding their own personal "power," including the "good" within.

4. Children need to know that we have faith in them to handle complex issues. If we tell our children that aggressive play is not allowed because it can make them violent we are telling them that we do not think they can tell the difference between fantasy and reality. Usually by the age of 4 most children DO know the difference between fantasy and reality--especially when we as parents take the time to explain it. They WISH superheroes were real, but they know they aren't. They PRETEND the dinosaur is eating the rabbit, but they know it isn't really eating it. Of course, it is very appropriate to set limits on aggressive play if it affects someone else. For example, the child who watches Power Rangers and then "kicks at the air" is playing appropriately--as long as it does not lead to kicking his brother or the dog!

5. Children are at a different stage developmentally than we are as their parents--therefore they have different needs and they perceive stories differently. Many children's stories, whether they are classic fairy tales, Harry Potter, "Lemony Snicket's

Series of Unfortunate Events", etc. are about children who overcome horrific events such as the loss of their parents and/or an evil figure who tries to kill them. As parents we read these stories and become traumatized thinking about children having to endure such pain and fear--but the child grabs ahold of the message at the end: the message that says "I can go it alone...I can take care of myself....I have <u>power</u> to overcome great obstacles without the help of adults." In our society this is one of the tasks of childhood--learning to become independent of one's parents and develop the capability to face the real world with confidence.

6. Children may be eager to watch violent shows--not because they want to be violent--but because they want to understand why it happens. Research supports limiting TV and movie violence--but, some exposure is usually o.k. (especially if the child does not experience REAL violence in any other part of his/her life). However, a less graphic way to fill a child's need to explore good vs. evil can be through print literature--such as comic books, novels, or short stories. A recent superhero movie may be too graphic for younger children--but usually there are books that share the story without exposing children to the traumatic images.

7. When children are interested in good vs. evil characters and superpowers, it gives parents the opportunity to explore moral values. Parents can talk about what makes someone "bad" or what makes someone a "hero." This can lead to discussions about real-life heroes such as firefighters or Martin Luther King, Jr. and/or to discussions about the family's religious beliefs and values.

Happy Parenting!