

Engaging Boys in the Early Years

the experiences of three Islington settings



'We need to look beyond the weapon to the child holding it' (Holland 2003:43)

This document was inspired by an interest in the role of popular culture and its effect on many of the children in early years settings - most particularly superhero play.

Over the years, many early years practitioners have expressed interest in and also concern about the burning pre-occupation of some of the boys in their settings with this type of play which often involves weapons and fighting. Adults are often unsure of the value of this

media-influenced play, how to manage it effectively or join in as play partners.

Much has been written about this issue as part of a wider debate about gender differences and boys' underachievement. This has led to a greater awareness of the implications on learning of different learning styles and rates of development of boys and girls. As a result, many practitioners have decided that banning or even discouraging superhero and weapon play disadvantages those boys who are so engrossed by it.

The following case studies are from three early years

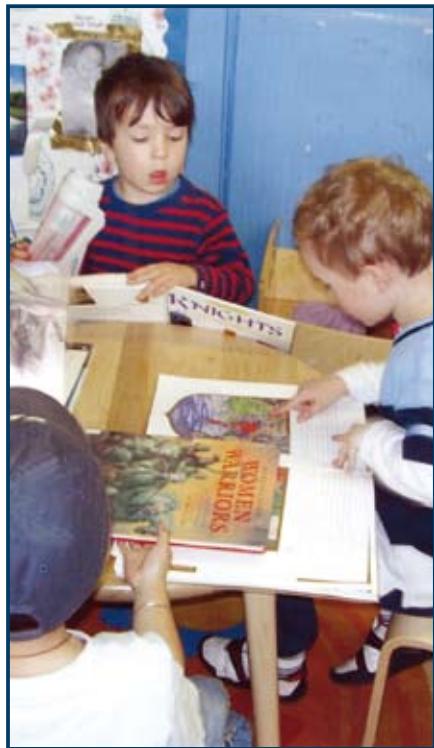
settings in Islington where practitioners considered and came to an understanding of why superhero and weapon play is so important to certain children, often boys. They tell the story of how skilled adults worked effectively to engage with the play, channel it positively and use it as a tool to extend thinking and learning skills and foster imaginative development.

Perhaps most importantly, these examples remind us that bridging the gap between the culture of home and the early years setting is a key strategy in supporting the emotional well-being of all children.



Case Study 1 - Weapon Play

Helen Richards – Nursery Teacher at Rosedale Early Years Centre



The first time I really thought about weapon play at nursery was when some of us on the staff team went to a workshop about boys run by Penny Holland, at a conference at the Barnsbury Centre.

We then talked about the issues raised over the following week because although gun play had always been banned in the nursery, the reasons for this had not been discussed amongst the current staff group. We had heard at the workshop

that other settings who allowed children to play the games of their choice, while applying the usual rules about not hurting other children, had not experienced the expected rise in disruptive behaviour. Instead, it had enhanced the ability of some children to play imaginatively without the constant censure, which had previously led them to be subversive and to avoid adult interaction.

After a whole team discussion we decided to see what would happen if we dropped the ban on weapon play. This happened a few years ago and although we have often discussed the issues again since then, the majority of the staff are very clear that permitting weapon play has a positive effect on some children's nursery experience.

Some children's play around weapons has clearly contributed hugely to their learning and self esteem. One example is the experiences of a small group of boys who were extremely interested in knights and Power Rangers

These children were among the least aggressive at the nursery yet the process of daily sword making with construct-a-straws gave them the confidence to play at nursery, cemented their strong friendship and led them to explore a wealth of books and stories.

For another child, making a red stickle brick gun seemed to be a transient but important form of comfort that helped him settle in to nursery.

On a practical level we now have an expectation that some children will want to make their own pretend weapons. As with other play, children are always expected to be kind to others.

We found that regular whole staff team discussion around the relevant issues was crucial. Not everyone has to think exactly the same but everyone needs to appreciate what is being attempted and why and have the same agreed responses.

Case Study 2 - Inspiring Boys to Write

Ndidi Evans –reception class teacher at St Johns Upper Holloway Primary School



I am an advocate for inspiring young children to write for enjoyment and have spent the last couple of years tortuously trying to inspire young boys to write. The inspiration came from a group of boys who spent all of their chosen time outside involved in lengthy 'super hero' play.

The boys were from a mixture of ethnic backgrounds and all but one spoke English as a second language. I would observe them playing, engrossed in role, using vivid imaginative language to set the scene for their play. The boys' play was purposeful and structured, organised from the onset with everyone given a character or a role to carry out. They would dress up and argue about what props they would need and try to justify to me why

they needed it more than someone else. They were really focused and I began to ask the boys to talk about their play to the class during carpet time each day.

By the second half of the term, although the boys' play was meaningful, I felt I had to help them to move their learning on. I planned a trip to the Discover Story Centre in Stratford where the class were exposed to how they could make stories come alive. They were given the opportunities to make their own stories, dress up, sing and tell parts of a whole class story.

The next day I set up a creative table inside with a wide range of resources (lolly sticks, shiny materials, crayons, paper, wool, plastic, pipe cleaners, glue... etc). I placed some 'super hero' comics and a book on the table.

The group of boys, who had spent all of their time outside acting out their ideas, spent the entire morning at the creative table. They made detailed figures of action heroes with gritting teeth

and flames firing out of their figures arms and mouths.

I put their figures on a display cupboard and the next day I called them one by one to tell me about what they had made. One boy explained that his blue power ranger was a brother with another boy's black power ranger and together they were the strongest. He asked me to put them together on the display. While I was listening I was also writing down what the boy had said. I read it back with the child and placed the writing next to his model.

What transpired from this activity was that although the boys seemed engrossed in their own creations, their action models all had some link in a story they had previously taken part in.

The boys' play had moved on and now instead of always playing outside they spent the mornings drawing detailed picture stories inside. The boys would have heated debates about their drawings and began asking me to display their drawings on a wall. By the spring term an entire wall was dedicated to their drawing.



When planning for the spring term, I began planning group time for these boys asking them to begin to write for themselves about their drawings. We would begin with them choosing one of their drawings to talk about and then agree on what they would write.

I was amazed that as a group these boys had mastered how to write using a simple story structure (beginning, middle and end). They were able to write using initial, some medial, final and short vowel sounds. The main difference between their writing and others in the class was their creativity.

The boys used a wide range of vocabulary and they were confident to attempt to write with a clear purpose in mind. Their aim was to create their own hero stories and in fact they had become very competitive about their writing.

As a follow on the next year I set about creating different story boxes full of super hero figures, cars and maps and writing templates such as spider webs and Barbie dolls to support emergent writing.

To support the children's interests I resourced the book and role-play areas inside and out with comics, annuals and popular books that lots of children have access to in some form at home.

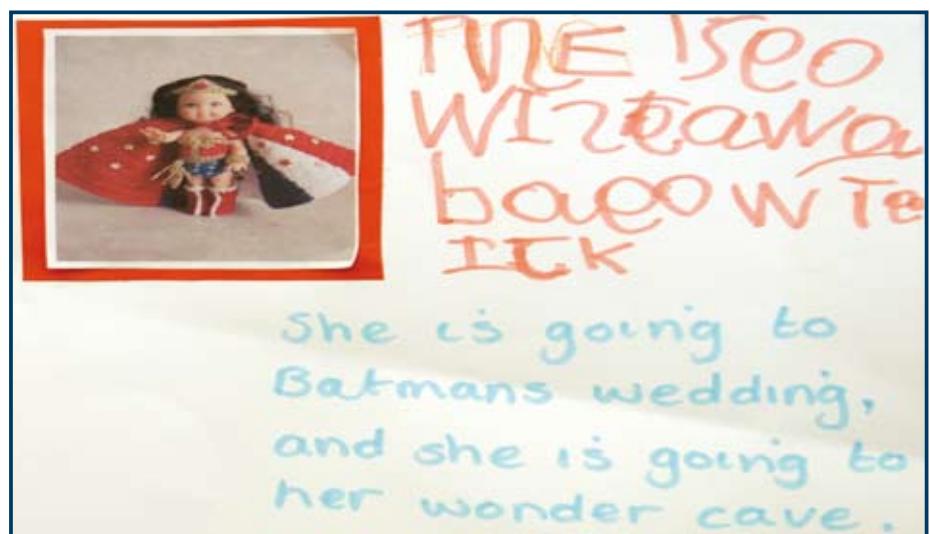
This approach to learning is key. It allows for children

to identify with the same popular children's culture that they often experience in their homes. This is something all teachers should take into account when planning for learning.

This is just one approach to writing and it formed part of a wider range of whole class and group literacy activities. These children were in a well-resourced environment, where child initiated learning was part of a planned learning schedule.

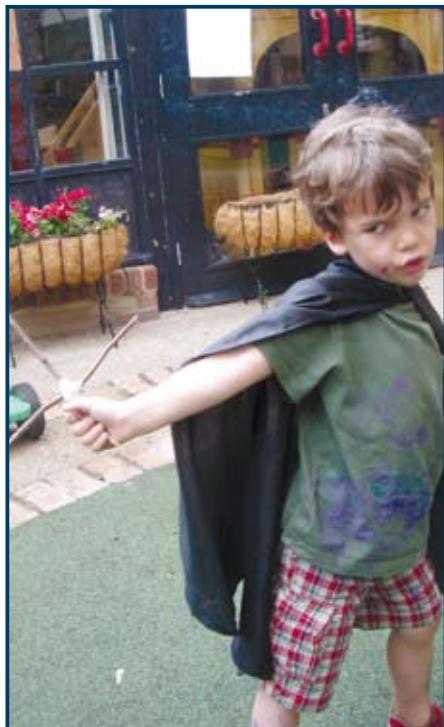
Assessment of children's learning and learning styles should affect how we plan for the development of key skills.

If we are to motivate young children to write, then we need to excite their imaginations and start from their interests, as all that children learn in the early years can influence their future outcomes.



Case Study 3 - Superhero Play

Anita Mohindra – Head of New River Green Children's Centre



Relaxing our policy on superhero play was not an easy decision. It took months of discussions and looking at research before we began this journey.

We began in 2001 when, after going on a course I began to think about the impact we were having on children's play, particularly the boys, by having a zero tolerance policy towards superhero and weapon play.

I came back from the course very excited and began to feed back to the staff at the centre. I introduced the research evidence both for and against

superhero play. We continued to discuss superheroes for a whole term before making any decisions.

In September 2001 Penny Holland came to the centre and ran a training session; she talked about her experiences and how she had introduced superhero play. This inspired some staff and we decided to carry out some observations of the play that was going on in the centre.

Our observations revealed that the boys and some girls were involved in superhero play; this was mainly done out of sight of adults e.g. in the bushes, in dens, in the block area. Children were using guns in their play and shooting at one another but as soon as an adult was in sight the weapon would change and become a 'phone', 'a hose pipe' etc.

The main starting point for our shift in practice was a discussion we had on the following points:

- If we really believe in promoting children's interests then why are we not taking seriously the interests of some children?

- Should we give up the opportunity of talking to children about alternatives to violence?
- Are we giving boys the same opportunities to explore imaginative play as the girls, whether this is through superhero play or developing other imaginative interests?

Our journey was not an easy one. As soon as we relaxed our policy it felt as though ALL the children were running around the nursery pretending to 'shoot' one another. The noise level in the nursery increased and we soon realised that we needed to establish some boundaries. We made the decision that children could only play 'shooting games' with other children and adults who were already part of their game.

Further observations revealed that the play was limited both in storyline and in the quality of the play. We discussed how adults could become involved and develop the children's ideas and this was really successful.

We are extremely fortunate to have lots of staff who are

excellent play partners for children and were able to take the children's ideas forward.

Some of the ideas that developed were:

- Chasing games – rough and tumble play
- Rescue games, problem solving scenarios
- Looking at what superheroes might eat
- We still had shooting games but children soon realised that if they shot an adult the adult would no longer be part of their game. So children started to look at ways of capturing and holding on to the baddies and making magic potions for those who have been hurt in the game.
- Dens became a huge part of superhero play; children used all sorts of materials to make dens.
- Superhero play developed in all areas of learning both inside and outside, we had lots of creative work and stories, mathematical activities involving superheroes, children made batman's car using the blocks etc.
- Children changed the home corner to make it resemble 'Spiderman's house'

To support the play some parents made capes and masks for the children to use. In relaxing our policy on 'zero tolerance' we had to spend a lot of time negotiating with children about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. We made posters and put them up around the nursery, so everyone was clear about the rules. I believe it took us about a year to establish this change in policy. Some members of staff found this process easier than others because:

- They were positive towards the change
- They were eager to learn from their observations
- They became excited about the play and how it was developing
- They were eager to develop childrens' ideas
- They were having a great deal of fun!

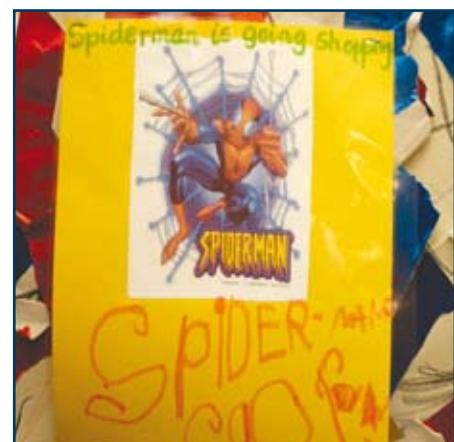
The benefits of superhero play:

- All children found it easy to access superhero play. They were able to participate in the chase and the excitement, and be part of a group.
- It offers positive opportunities for developing cooperative skills: it is in its

very nature a cooperative activity – you cannot have a capture and rescue game on your own.

- It encourages children to express their feelings in a safe and secure environment.
- It helps children understand that there are alternatives to aggression. Certainly we found that over the year, children demonstrated an increased range of alternatives to aggressive behaviour.
- It helps children develop negotiation skills that they are able to transfer to everyday situations.
- It's great fun for children and adults.

Superhero play has become a natural part of the children's play experiences at New River Green. We seldom have children using weapons against each other, instead the children use superhero themes and plots to extend their own play ideas.



In conclusion, whatever our personal views about the predominance of superheroes and weapons in children's popular culture it seems clear that they can have tremendous power to motivate and inspire many children, especially boys. These examples have shown that accepting, valuing and even encouraging weapon and superhero play can be an effective way to support all children to reach their full potential.

'If I have not yet learned to love Darth Vader, I have at least made some useful discoveries while watching him play. As I interrupt less, it becomes clear that boys play is serious drama, not morbid mischief. Its rhythms and images are often discordant to me but I must try to make sense of a style that, after all, belongs to half the population of the classroom'

(Paley V G 1984)

Further reading

- We don't play with guns here Penny Holland, Open University Press
- Boys and girls come out to play Ros Bailey & Sally Featherstone, Featherstone Education
- Raising boys: why boys are different, and how to help them become happy and well-balanced men Steve Biddulph, HarperCollins
- Boys and girls-superheroes in the doll corner Vivian Gussin-Paley, University of Chicago Press
- Gender issues in early education Ros Bailey, Early Years Educator, Jan 07

References

- Holland, P. (2003) *We don't play with guns here*
London: Open University Press
- Paley, V.G. (1984) *Boys and girls – Superheroes in the Doll Corner*
Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.



This document was developed by
Tracy Smith, Islington Primary Strategy Early Years Team

Thanks to Fran Guy, Sindhu Hope, Maria Tallon and Rose White
for their feedback & contributions

For further information please contact:

Tracy Smith, Primary Strategy Early Years Team

T 020 7527 5582 E tracy.smith@islington.gov.uk

www.islington.gov.uk/earlyyears

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