

Case in Point: Understanding the Value of Action Figures for Kids

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"BAM! POW!" He falls to the ground, his face curls up into a grotesque expression of powerful rage. Any onlooker would be frightened. Jared and his action figure transform, plundering into the kitchen gulping his milk and stuffing his mouth full of the cookies. "GRURR." He moves on to find his next victim in his path of destruction.

Do you sometimes wonder how many more heroes and villains our culture can create and how we can monitor the impact of them on our children? We mothers get caught in the dilemma of buying or allowing action figures that tend to portray violence. We see ourselves as nurturers, promoting non-violence. And teaching communication to solve problems, rather than promoters of aggression. Yet, if we step back and take a look at the value of heroic characters, we cannot live without them nor can our children.

So Where's the Value?

For young children to feel a sense of mastery and confidence over some pretty tough life issues, they use fantasy or magical thinking. So comes the importance of the Super Hero to children's fantasy play. In order to understand good there is the necessary opposite: bad.

In play, children and teens act out angry and fearful issues with which they are wrestling. They may pretend to be the super hero or villain with classmates, parents or teachers. Rather than trying to eliminate the Dark Shadow, or the protectors Incredible Hulk or X-Men, it is more useful to understand what intrigues our children about these figures. In fantasy, young children are able to use their imagination to conquer their fears and anger as they grow emotionally.

Remember when Johnny kept throwing his teddy bear down the stairs to master his fear of falling? He was using Teddy as an extension of himself. The action figures can act out angry, scary feelings toward his oppressor; our children can use them to express the aggression they feel through these toys. How many times have you watched a hockey game or soccer game and felt the release of your own adrenaline? In a grown-up way, these players become action figures on the athletic field for adults.

Play is the Language of Children

Starting with the premise that play is the language of children, and they act out their problems and fantasies through play, we begin to see how each action figure becomes a voice for our child. It is important

character and what value the action figure represents to our child. Children need to have both heroes and villains to play off each other and sort through the conflicting feelings and values our society presents them. I'm not sure that these toys are much different than the spacemen and aliens, cowboy and indians or the 1950's Superman character. When children view fighting on television or videos, they must choose a side. Who can they use to help increase their courage?

Teens have their Superheroes, Too

Action figures transform into music idols during the teenage years emerging to reflect the same power struggle they experienced in earlier. Listening to their new SuperHeroes and the raging sounds blasting out of their CD players may be difficult. If you can gain an understanding of what the teen is hearing and feeling, you can begin to communicate with your young adult. Teens often dress the part of the idol of the times, which is another way to play out their internal feelings. When children or teenagers get stuck in the conflict, the Hero's power will often intensify.

The Bottom Line

Our culture continues to press the limit of our ability to conquer the bigger, the stronger, the scarier. A better understanding of the value of the Action Figure represents to our child makes a big difference in whether a parent decides to buy or not to buy that toy. Not all bad guys need to be ruled out.

How do we help our children balance good and bad? It is in knowing the power of the shadow side in ourselves that we conquer the fear of it taking over. Acknowledging all aspects of individuals brings harmony. Without anger, how are we to know peace? Without hate, how do we know love?

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