“Here I Come to Save the Day!” Does Parental Mediation Moderate Associations Between Superhero Exposure and Behavior in Young Boys?

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Introduction

- Superheroes are very popular among preschool boys, but research on the effects of exposure to superhero media and toys is limited. 
- Content analyses indicate that supereroes frequently use aggression to defend others (Baker & Raney, 2007). 
- Additionally, certain characteristics of superheroes encourage wishful identification among boys, which may increase learning of characters’ behaviors (Hoffner, 1996).
- However, it is unknown whether superhero exposure and identification is associated with aggression, prosocial behaviors, or behaviors with the purpose of defending others. 
- Parental active mediation of media (i.e., discussions of media content) can reduce the negative effects of aggressive content by modifying children’s perceptions of aggression (Nathanson, 1999).

GOALS OF THE STUDY:

1. To examine the associations between superhero exposure/identification and aggressive, prosocial, and defending behavior in preschool boys.
2. To examine whether parental active mediation of television content moderates these associations.

Method (cont.)

Media Monitoring (Padilla-Walker & Coyne, 2011)

- Items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = never to 5 = very often).

Parental active mediation (3 items; α = .87)

- e.g., “How often do you explain reasons why media characters do what they do?”
- Based on a median split, participants were classified as high or low on parental mediation.

Parent Adaptation of the Preschool Social Behavior Survey (PSBS) (Crick, Casas, & Mosher, 1997)

- Items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = never or almost never to 5 = always or almost always).

Verbal aggression (3 items; α = .40)

- Physical aggression (7 items; α = .79)

Prosocial behavior (5 items; α = .69)

Aggressive defending (3 items; α = .69)

- e.g., “Your child aggressively stands up for other kids when someone is putting them down or making fun of them. For example, they may make fun of the bullies or put them down.”

Non-aggressive defending (3 items; α = .68)

- e.g., “Your child assertively, but not aggressively, defends those who are being physically bullied by others. For example, your child may tell the bully to stop.”

Results (cont.)

Associations between Superhero Exposure/Identification and Preschool Behaviors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavior</th>
<th>Superhero Exposure/Identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total (n = 62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal Aggression</td>
<td>.29*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Aggression</td>
<td>.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prosocial Behavior</td>
<td>-.35**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive Defending</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-aggressive Defending</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Fisher’s r to z tests compared the correlations for the low mediation and high mediation groups.

*p < .05  ** p < .01

- For the total sample, superhero exposure/identification was positively associated with verbal aggression and negatively associated with prosocial behavior.
- Among boys whose parents engaged in low levels of active parental mediation, superhero exposure/identification was positively associated with aggressive defending behavior.

Conclusions and Future Directions

- Although superheroes are portrayed as “good” characters fighting the forces of evil, results of this study indicate that preschool boys’ exposure and identification with superheroes is not associated with increased prosocial and heroic deeds. In fact, superhero exposure and identification was associated with decreased prosocial behavior and increased verbal aggression.
- These associations were not moderated by active parental mediation, suggesting that the benefits of discussing media content with children may not apply to programs in which aggression is used in “heroic” ways.
- Additionally, low levels of parental mediation combined with superhero exposure may be especially risky for preschool boys in that it was associated with increased frequency of using aggressive behaviors to defend others.
- Future research should examine gender and age differences in the associations between superhero exposure and behavior. Additionally, questions remain about the differential effects of discussing media content with preschoolers, as this form of mediation may be less effective for certain types of programs during the preschool years.

Descriptive Statistics (n = 62-64)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Superhero Exposure/Identification</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parental Mediation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Verbal Aggression</td>
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<td>.40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical Aggression</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prosocial Behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-aggressive Defending</td>
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