Superheroes: Bad Role Models for Boys?

Researchers Say Superheroes Are Too Violent, but Close Ties to Mothers, Friends Can Help Boys Shun Negative Stereotypes

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Aug. 16, 2010 (San Diego) -- Today's media superheroes -- including Batman in *The Dark Knight* and the Hulk in *Planet Hulk* -- as well as the "slacker" characters often portrayed in TV shows and movies offer boys poor role models, says a University of Massachusetts professor who polled hundreds of boys up to age 18 to find out their favorites.

The poll results suggest boys hear two ways to be masculine, says researcher Sharon Lamb, EdD, distinguished professor of mental health at the University of Massachusetts-Boston, who presented the findings Sunday at the American Psychological Association's annual meeting in San Diego.

"One was the superhero image, created as someone who shows their masculinity through power over other people, through exploiting women, showing their wealth, and through sarcasm and superiority," she says.

The other is the slacker, "the pot-smoking smelly guy who hates school," she says.

Today's superheroes, she says, are a step down from those in earlier days. Today's superheroes, she says, "use social justice as an excuse for aggression."

But there's a way resist these "macho" images, another researcher reported at the same meeting.

**Superheroes: The Study**

Lamb's team polled 674 boys, aged 4 to 18, asking what they were reading, watching on television and at the movies, and what they were reading in comic books.

She watched the movies and shows and looked at the comic books deemed popular, evaluating popular superheroes, such as Batman, Ironman, the Hulk, and the Fantastic Four, a group of astronauts who gain super powers after radiation exposure.

After finding them aggressive and otherwise undesirable, she noticed that the other extreme in movies and other materials popular with boys was the "slacker," says Lamb, who co-wrote *Packaging Boyhood: Saving our Sons From Super Heroes, Slackers and Other Media Stereotypes*.
She also found a theme of boys hanging out to drink together appearing in media deemed by rating systems to be appropriate for viewing by pre-teens. The message here, she says, is "that the way boys bond with each other is binge drinking or partying."

The theme sometimes appears in animated fare, too, she found. In *Open Season*, for instance, animals get drunk on sugar and trash a store, she says.

**Resisting Superheroes and Slackers: What Works?**

In another study, also presented Sunday, developmental psychologist Carlos Santos, PhD, an assistant research professor at Arizona State University, Tempe, reported that boys who resist these images seem better adjusted.

In his research, he followed 426 middle school boys from six public schools in New York. The boys came from diverse backgrounds, he tells WebMD, allowing him to look at whether ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or immigrant status factored into whether boys adopted the macho superhero image.

He asked the boys, surveyed annually in the spring of sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, to describe the quality of their relationships with their mother, father, closest sibling, and their friends.

**Resisting Superheroes and Slackers: What Works? continued...**

He evaluated whether the boys could resist following the "macho" stereotype to be tough, detached from friends, and emotionally unavailable.

"Boys were acting resistant to stereotypes early in the study," he says. "Over time, there was a decline."

Santos found little difference between the groups, which included African-Americans, whites, Latinos, Asians, and others.

Boys who resisted stereotypes and were less aggressive and more emotionally available remained close to mothers, siblings, and peers, he found.

Closeness to dads didn't help them resist, however. "I didn't find the same pattern with dads," he tells WebMD. Boys who said they had high levels of paternal support tended to be less emotionally available to friends.

Why? "It could be that dads see being close to their son as an opportunity to reinforce traditional gender roles," Santos speculates. "Or it could be that boys perceive their dad's closeness as a call to fulfill traditional gender roles."

Santos isn't discouraging fathers from staying involved with their sons, of course. A father might share with a son, for instance, how being expressive does not make them less of a man, he says.

**Keeping Superheroes and Slackers at Bay**

What can parents do to be sure their sons see other images besides the two extremes?

Realize not every movie labeled PG-13 is OK for children, Lamb suggests.

Pointing out the stereotypes can help, she says. "You can teach kids what stereotypes are and how to resist them and remind them what real people and real kids like to do."
Point out good role models within the family and community, she says. Then kids can differentiate media images from real images.

**Managing Superheroes: Second Opinion**

Watching superheroes who don't portray a good role model does affect boys as well as girls, says Karen Dill, PhD, director of the media psychology doctoral program at the Fielding Graduate University in Santa Barbara, Calif.

Fielding is the author of *How Fantasy Becomes Reality* and has researched the evolution of female superheroes in the media and how some of them are now sending less than ideal messages to girls.

"I agree with the authors [of the new studies] that the way a social group is portrayed in media affects both public perception of the group itself and affects the members of the group and their self-images," Dill tells WebMD.

Resisting the media choices of superheroes, Dill tells WebMD, is difficult."We can't underestimate that media, which take up the great majority of kids' and teens' free time, are our storytellers," she says. "The stories they tell make up much of our shared cultural ideals and therefore shape how boys and girls feel about themselves and their peers."

**Input From the American Academy of Pediatrics**

Violence in the media has "a clear effect on the behavior of children and contributes to the frequency with which violence is used to resolve conflict," according to the American Academy of Pediatrics.

On its web site, the group reminds parents that "the primary goal of commercial children's television is to sell products -- from toys to food -- to children."

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**SOURCES:**

Sharon Lamb, EdD, distinguished professor of mental health, University of Massachusetts-Boston.
Carlos Santos, PhD, assistant research professor, Arizona State University, Tempe.
American Academy of Pediatrics: "Where We Stand: Children's Programming."
Karen Dill, PhD, director, media psychology doctoral program, Fielding Graduate University, Santa Barbara, Calif.; author, *How Fantasy Becomes Reality."

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