



Superhero Play

Power up on problem solving, conflict resolution,
and communication skills



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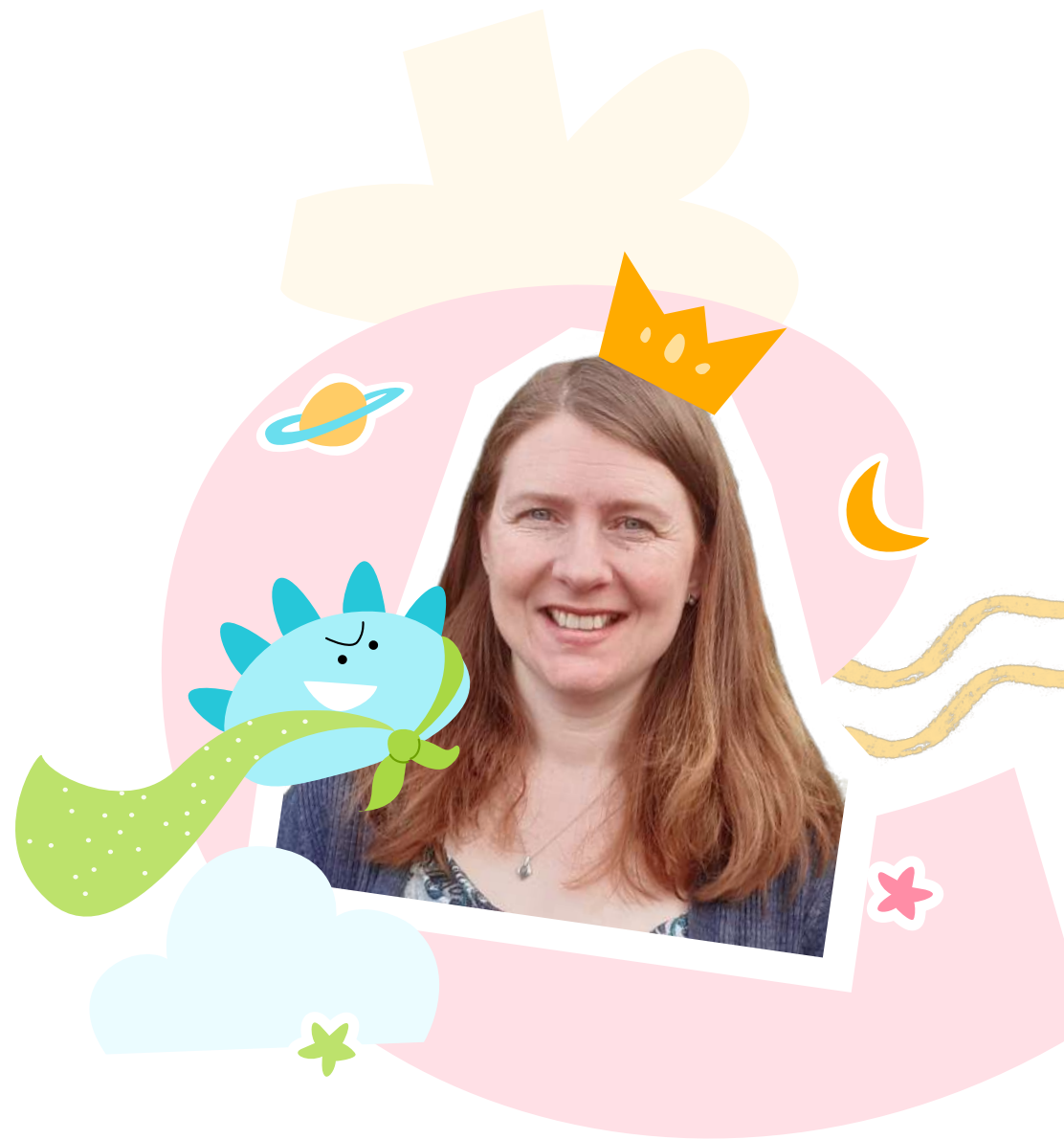
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About the author

Tamsin Grimmer is an esteemed figure in early childhood education, bringing a wealth of experience to her roles as a director of Linden Learning, an associate of Early Education, a lecturer at Norland College, and an Emotion Coaching Practitioner for Emotion Coaching UK.

Her commitment to fostering nurturing and dynamic educational environments is evident in her approach to teaching and mentoring. Tamsin advocates for a loving pedagogy, emphasising the importance of educators who are not only inspiring and dynamic but also reflective and deeply caring towards the children in their charge. With a strong belief in the potential of every child, Tamsin has contributed significantly to the field through her involvement in the Inclusion and Equalities working party for the Birth to Five Matters materials.

For more information about Tamsin Grimmer, her publications, and her work, visit her website at <https://www.tamsingrimmer.com>.



Introduction

Who do you think of when you think about superheroes?

Do traditional heroes such as Spider-Man, Wonder Woman, and Superman come to mind? These heroes are important and have their place in our early childhood settings; however, they are not the only heroes we should be celebrating.

Post-pandemic, it's the perfect time to explore superhero play with your children. During this period, ordinary heroes—healthcare workers, refuse collectors, educators—have shone, reminding us of the many forms heroism can take.

Most children are aware of superheroes through films, television, apps, gaming, or just from toys, and merchandise.

Talking about them is a natural conversation that continues with young children, at home and in schools.

Superhero play is the perfect opportunity to engage children in discussions about right and wrong, goodies and baddies, and navigating potentially sensitive topics such as killing, death, and dying. Superhero and power play can serve as powerful tools for children to develop problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills, while also allowing us, as educators, to foster their self-regulatory abilities. It's a chance to address these subjects in developmentally appropriate ways, empowering children as they discover the hero within themselves.



Superhero book recommendations

A treasure trove of stories that use superheroes as a launchpad for learning



Supertato

by Sue Hendra

A superhero potato, on a humorous adventure to thwart the mischievous Evil Pea in the vegetable aisle.



How to Be a Superhero

by Sue Fliess

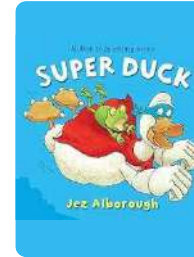
Embark on an exciting journey, discovering essential qualities and skills needed to become a superhero.



Zippo the Super Hippo

by Kes Gray

Meet Zippo, an unusual hippo, who uses humour to navigate the challenges of being a superhero.



Super Duck

by Jez Alborough

Super Duck discovers his extraordinary abilities, delivering a heartwarming tale of courage and friendship.



Superkid

by Claire Freedman

Bursting with action and humour, Superkid celebrates the power of imagination and bravery.



Ladybug Girl

by Jacky Davis

Discover the power of creativity and the joys of friendship as you follow Ladybug Girl on her adventures.

Superhero adventures and social-emotional learning (SEL)

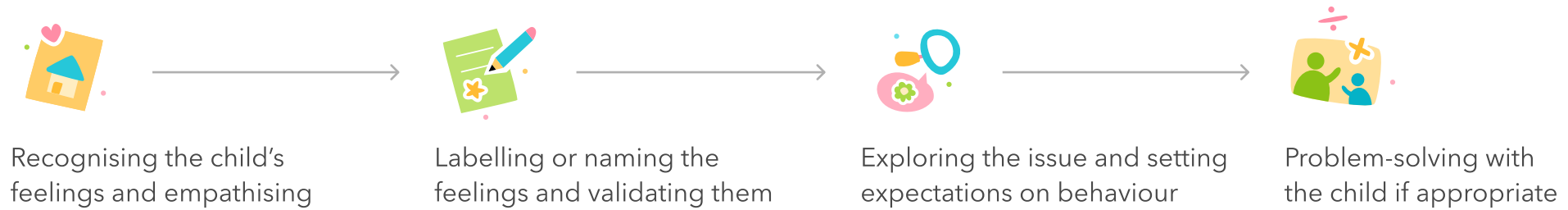
Engaging in superhero play is a thrilling journey for children. Whether they're playing superheroes or crafting their own tales, qualities like bravery, resilience, and empathy take centre stage. Yet, amidst the fun, we might spot some rough play, aggressive actions, or emotional bursts. As educators, our superpower is picking up on those subtle signs and hidden emotions, guiding children to respond effectively. One way to approach this is through what is called Emotional Coaching.

Emotion coaching is based on John Gottman's work (Gottman et al., 1996) who looked at different parenting styles. It emphasises the importance of looking at the emotions that underlie particular behaviours. It responds in the moment, setting behavioural expectations and resolving situations through problem-solving.

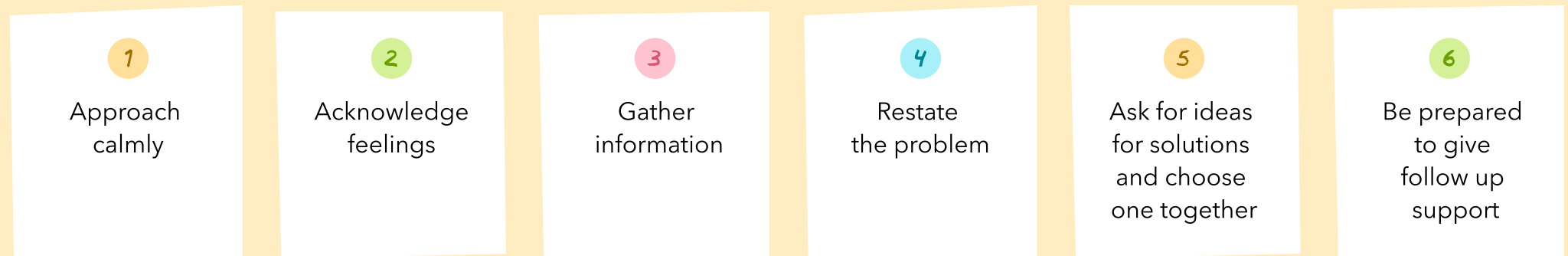
A key belief is that all emotions are acceptable but not all responses or behaviours. So it's OK to feel angry, but it's not OK to throw a toy when I am angry. When we respond to children in this way we are helping to co-regulate their behaviour and teaching them skills which will help them resolve conflicts or deal with big emotions in the future.



Emotion coaching is based on the following steps:



The last step of emotion coaching invites us to problem-solve if needed. Use the 6-step process for conflict resolution below. This process can be used with young children as long as we can simplify the questions and role-model solutions.



Tips to build problem-solving skills during superhero play



Solution cards

Consider having a set of solution cards or suggested ideas to explore with the children. Point to a card and ask them, “Would this solve the problem?”



Visual display

Create a visual problem-solving display. Invite children to point to a resolution they think fits well with the problem. You may want to use real photos of children to make it more relatable.



Follow the child’s lead

Whenever possible, follow the child’s lead and value all attempts at finding solutions. If they suggest a solution that we do not think is workable, for example, “Buy another one...” tell the child this is a great idea and would solve the problem, however, we haven’t got enough money to do that. This way we are valuing their contribution whilst still seeking to find a solution that works for everyone, children and adults included.

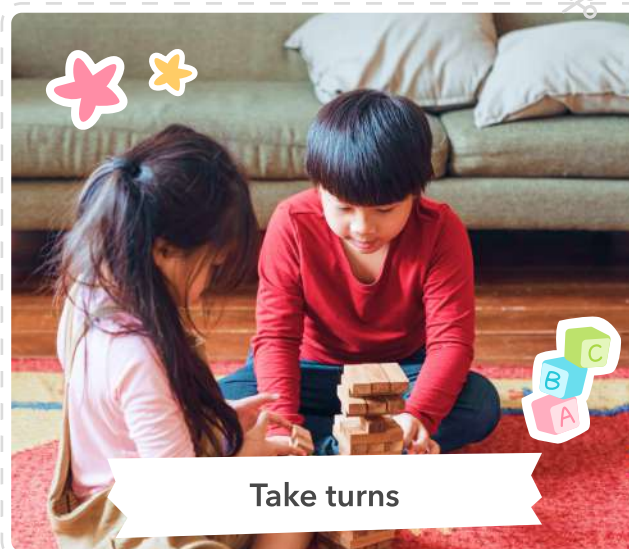
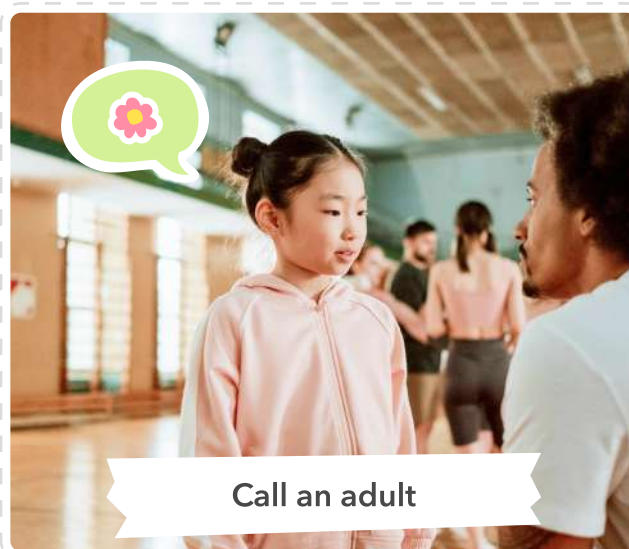


Calm collaboration

A good idea for a peaceful resolution would be to engage with the child when they are calm. Invite them to collaborate and try finding solutions. This is quite challenging for young children and may need to be demonstrated several times before they can recall an appropriate resolution independently.

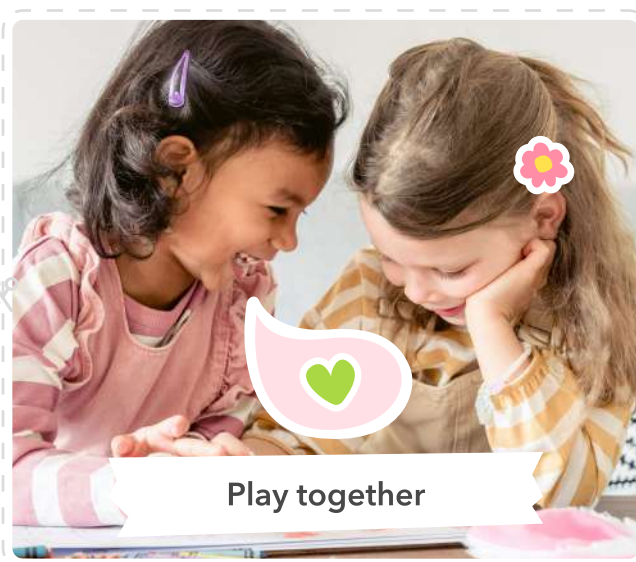
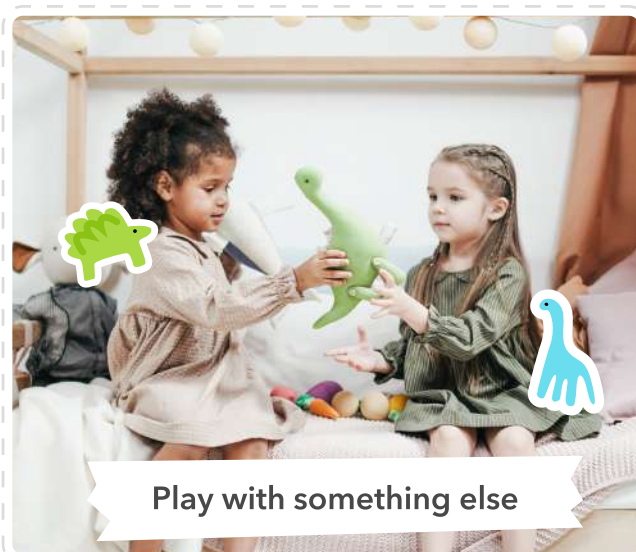
Here is a set of solutions cards for you.

Use the blank template to add solutions that work for your setting!



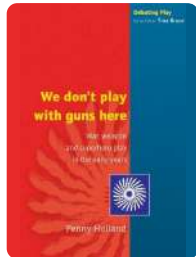
Here is a set of solutions cards for you.

Use the blank template to add solutions that work for your setting!



Further recommended reading

by Tamsin Grimmer



We Don't Play with Guns Here

by Holland, P

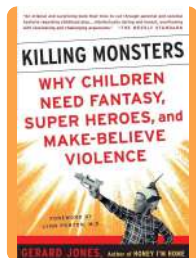
Consider the implications of a zero-tolerance response to weapon play.



Rethinking Superhero and Weapon Play

by Popper, S

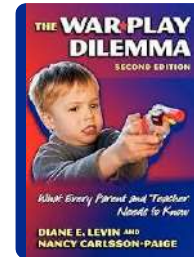
Unpack ideas and guidance by exploring ways to support this type of play.



Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes and Make-Believe Violence

by Jones, G

Explore the advantages of fantasy elements of play.



The War Play Dilemma: What Every Parent and Teacher Needs to Know

by Levin, D. and Carlsson-Paige, N

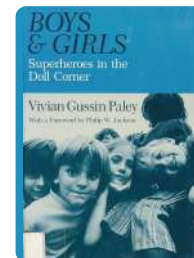
Support children's war play with these practical ideas.



50 Exciting Ideas for Using Superheroes and Popular Culture

by McTavish, A

Discover 50 exciting ideas to integrate superhero play into your setting.



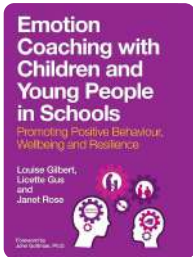
Boys and Girls: Superheroes in the Doll Corner

by Gussin-Paley, V

Embark on a journey through stories and insightful observations about children's play.

Further recommended reading

by Tamsin Grimmer



Emotion Coaching with Children and Young People in Schools

by Gilbert, L., Gus, L. & Rose, J

Put emotion coaching into practice with these case studies.



Supporting Behaviour and Emotions

by Grimmer, T

Takeaway ideas and strategies on how to support children's behaviour and emotions.

Website links for blogs and articles:

- [Articles by Tamsin Grimmer](#)
- [Superhero Play - At the ready?](#)
- [Emotion Coaching approach](#)
- [Parental Meta-Emotion Philosophy & the Emotional Life of Families. Journal of Family Psychology](#)



10 Superhero Learning Experiences for Your Children

Created by Toddle Play





Super rescue

Age 2-3

Intention: To build eye-hand coordination | To develop fine motor skills

1 Facilitate: Set up the learning environment

- An open space for children to freely move around.
- Small world toy cars, animals, and people.
- Materials such as masking tape, yarn, small cartons, or containers.

2 Invite children to be super-rescuers!

- Hide small world toys around the setting.
- Place some in boxes with lids to unscrew or flaps to open.
- Place some under desks and a few chairs and secure with a masking tape.
- Tie a few with soft satin ribbons with one single knot.
- Tell the children about the 'mission' to rescue all the toy animals, vehicles, and people that are hidden.
- Demonstrate using fingers, palm grasp, and pincer grip, as you unwrap the hidden toy.

3 Reflect

- What was your superhero mission?
- What did you find easy? What was challenging?
- Which part of your body did you use to 'rescue' the toys from different places?
- How did it make you feel to be a superhero and rescue the animals/people?

4 Extend

- Invite children to build on their fine motor skills.
- Use chalk and paint to create paths for superhero vehicles.
- Provide fabrics and pegs for cape creations.



Superhero training

Age 3-4

Intention: To develop balance and coordination | To begin safely using large and small equipment

1 Facilitate: Set up the learning environment

- A large open area for children to move freely, such as a gym.
- Make available gym equipment such as mats, foam blocks, and hula hoops.

2 Invite children to move like superheroes!

- Invite children for superhero training. Go over all necessary safety instructions and essential agreements.
- Use the equipment mentioned above to set up a course. Use masking tape to mark a start and finish point.
- Plan sets to include movements like jumping jacks, side-to-side jumps, back-and-forth jumps, fast jumps, big jumps, left foot, and right foot hops, etc.
- Invite children to balance and walk on the beams, jump from tall buildings (stacked mats), crawl into a cave (play tunnel), jump in a lake (ball pit). Be as creative as you like!
- Model exercise sets such as squats, heel raise, toe raise, wall push-ups, squats to the ground and jumps.

3 Reflect

- What parts were easy for you, and what was a bit tricky?
- How did you quickly get out of the tunnel? What helped you?
- How did you stay balanced on the beams? What did you do?
- What do you think superheroes do to stay strong and healthy?
- Why is it important to stay strong and healthy?

4 Extend

Elevate the training experience by creating a giant web using string or masking tape across the room, extending from the entrance to the back. Encourage the children to navigate through the web, going over, and under the string.



Create your own superhero!

Age 3-4

Intention: To develop creativity and imagination | To help children to collaborate and build social skills

1 Facilitate: Set up the learning environment

- Low clear tables for children to work on.
- Craft material, such as googly eyes, play dough, yarn, craft sticks, loose parts, etc.

2 Invite children to put on their creative hats!

- Invite the children to work in pairs or individually and create a 'superhero' using materials of their choice.
- Demonstrate a few ideas to get them started. For e.g., a box as a mask, a stick as a wand, etc.
- Give them ample time for ideation, planning, and creation.
- Plan a show and share for children to talk about their creation.

3 Reflect

- What did you make?
- What's your superhero's superpower?
- What do they use their superpower for?
- What are the special goggles/cape/wand for?
- What superhero powers are helpful for others?

4 Extend

- Make it fun! Have them create special vehicles for their superheroes using blocks, Duplo, Lego, etc.
- Introduce additional superhero books for children to refer to. You could use the ones mentioned in this toolkit!



Even superheroes can have bad days!

Age 4-5

Intention: To help identify big emotions and feelings | To think of appropriate ways to respond to big emotions

1 Facilitate: Set up the learning environment

- A cosy space for a read-aloud and discussion.

2 Invite children to be thinkers!

- Introduce the title of the book *Even Superheroes Have Bad Days* and encourage them to predict the story.
- Do you think superheroes have bad days?
- What could a bad day look like for a superhero?
- Read the book [Even Superheroes Have Bad Days](#) (Shelly Becker).
- What do you think these superheroes will do when they feel bad/mad/angry? How will they use their superpowers? To destroy? Or help and do good deeds?
- Use this as a starting point to talk about different feelings and emotions. And how with time, we learn to deal with them.

3 Reflect

- What did you observe in the story?
- How are you similar and different compared to the superheroes in the story?
- Do you have bad days as well, where you feel angry or sad?
- What do you do on those days?
- What can you do when facing those 'super emotions' now?
- How do our feelings affect other people?

4 Extend

Introduce calming strategies for children to use when they face similar feelings. You could introduce routines to help children self-regulate and manage their emotions:

- [Calming jars](#)
- [Breathing routines](#)
- [Yoga postures](#)



Kindness is my superpower

Age 4-5

Intention: To use superhero play to reinforce being kind | To foster social-emotional development

1 Facilitate: Set up the learning environment

- A cosy space for read-aloud. Provide a variety of seating options for children to be comfortable.
- Chart paper, writing tools, and craft materials.

2 Invite children to be thinkers!

- Gather the children.
- Introduce them to a superhero toy figurine, Kate.
- Discuss Kate's superpower which is kindness.
- Do you think kindness can be a superpower?
- What do you think she does?
- Read the book [Kindness Is My Superpower](#) (Alicia Ortego).
- Encourage the children to share their personal experiences.

3 Reflect

- Who can you be kind to?
- What are different ways you can show kindness?
- Tell us about a time when you were kind to someone.
- Can you recall a moment when someone was kind to you?
How did it make you feel?
- Do you think that kindness is a 'superpower'?
- How do our kind actions affect others?

4 Extend

- Co-create a visual display, 'Different ways we can be kind'. Encourage them to add words, illustrations, and photographs.
- Invite children to be Kindness Ninjas, looking for opportunities to spread kindness.



Beautiful oops!

Age 4-5

Intention: To explore making marks and textures in clay | To find joy in “squishing and starting over”

1 Facilitate: Set up the learning environment

- Identify a place outdoors where children can forage natural loose parts such as sticks, leaves, seeds, grass, and flowers.

2 Invite children to celebrate mistakes!

- Introduce the book [Beautiful Oops](#) (Barney Saltzberg) as the book superheroes read when they make mistakes!
- Read with intonation and expression pausing at every “oops”.
- Do they think the smear of paint, tear of paper, etc., are mistakes? How do you think superheroes can fix it?
- Use the illustrations to show how each oops can be turned into something beautiful. What do you think it looks like now? Is it still a paint spill or something different?
- Invite children to use the paints, newspaper, paper, craft materials, etc. and intentionally create an oops.
- Now, turn these oopsies into something beautiful and tell your friends about it!

3 Reflect

- Have you made a similar oops before? How did it make you feel?
- Next time you spill paint or accidentally tear a piece of paper what could you do about it?
- Do you still think paint spills and crumpled papers are mistakes?
- What might you tell a friend if they get upset when they make a mistake?

4 Extend

- Invite children to talk about the original oops and how they turned it into something beautiful.
- Normalise saying oops in your daily routine. This will serve as a reminder for children to see their perceived mistakes as an opportunity for something new!



Superhero outdoors

Age 4-5

Intention: To develop teamwork, and engineering skills | To foster creativity and imagination

1 Facilitate: Set up the learning environment

- Identify a place outdoors where children can forage natural loose parts such as sticks, leaves, seeds, grass, and flowers.

2 Invite children to be creative!

Gather the children outdoors, and go over essential agreements and safety requirements as needed. In pairs or small groups invite them to try out different challenges.

- **Build hideouts:** Invite children to work in groups and collect twigs, and sticks, and create superhero dens.
- **Make magic potions:** Encourage children to make magic potions using flowers, seeds, leaves and other natural materials.
- **Stick play:** What can you use these sticks as? (Lightsabers, walking sticks, magic wands, etc.)
- **Team missions:** Invite children to work in teams and look for hidden treasure/magical stones or create their own missions.
- **Magical accessories:** Invite children to create magical crowns, and rings using leaves and flowers.

3 Reflect

- What did you do outdoors? (Make note of the vocabulary used)
- What did you add to the magic potion?
- What did you use the stick as?
- Was creating the hideout easy or difficult?
- How does playing outside make you feel?
- What could you do or use outside that isn't possible inside?

4 Extend

- Organise team games such as hide and seek, and rescue missions to build on gross motor skills.
- Plan building challenges to foster critical thinking and problem-solving skills.



Super design challenge

Age 5-6

Intention: To build on problem-solving skills | To explore engineering concepts (balance, size, weight, design, etc.)

1 Facilitate: Set up the learning environment

- Low clear tables for children to work on.
- Provide craft sticks, cubes, cups, wooden blocks, building cubes, cardboard boxes, superhero toy figurines, yarn, etc.

2 Invite children to create!

- Display the materials for the children to observe and explore.
- Encourage them to work in pairs or small groups for this.
- Introduce the provocation question: How can you make these superheroes fly without touching them? (Think of using yarn, string, sticky tape, blocks, etc.)
- Give them ample time for ideation, trial and error, and creation.
- Make a note of all their wonderings, thoughts, and discussions.

3 Reflect

- What did you think of the challenge? Was it simple or tricky?
- What materials did you use and why?
- What did you learn about the different materials? (Think about the vocabulary they use to describe the properties of materials)
- What were the discussions and conversations in your group?
- Did your initial design work, or did you have to change it?
- What would you do differently the next time?

4 Extend

Include different design and engineering challenges. For example, you could design a special vehicle for your superhero. How can you make this vehicle move faster than others? Think integrating force (push/pull), exploration of different surfaces, and experimenting with ramps.



Everyday superheroes

Age 5-6

Intention: To name and identify 'superheroes' in real life | To describe the roles of community helpers

1 Facilitate: Set up the learning environment

- A cosy space for a read-aloud and discussion.
- Materials to include in the pretend play corner (community helpers' uniforms, helmets, tools, etc.)

2 Invite children to be thinkers!

- Gather the children for a discussion. Cover the title of the book and only show the illustration to the children.
- What do you see? Can you name some of the people on this page? What work do they do? How do they help us? Do you think they are superheroes? Why or why not?
- Make note of their thoughts on what makes a superhero. This can be used later to draw parallels between comic superheroes and real-life superheroes.
- Now, read the book [A Superhero Like You](#) (Dr. Ranj Singh)
- Pause the book, to engage them in a discussion. What do you think is the superpower of a doctor/teacher/fireman, etc.?

3 Reflect

- What similarities do you notice between superheroes and everyday heroes? (Think uniform, special skill, tools, etc.)
- How do community helpers make our everyday lives better?
- What do you think would happen if we didn't have <insert community helper>?
- What superpower did Lily's mom have? Do you think your parents, siblings, and you have a superpower?
- What can you do to make a positive contribution to our class?
- How might this help others?

4 Extend

Add a variety of resources to the pretend play corner such as uniforms, tools, headgear, small-world toys, animals, play kitchen, etc. Invite the children to set up fire stations, construction sites, and doctor's clinics.



If I was a superhero

Age 5-6

Intention: To develop vocabulary | To provide opportunities for mark-making and writing

1 Facilitate: Set up the learning environment

- A cosy space for children to gather for a discussion.
- Writing tools, markers, whiteboards, and chart paper.

2 Invite children to be writers!

- Invite the children to pretend they are superheroes. They could use props, masks, headgear, and capes if they wish to.
- Provide children with a paper titled, 'Me as a superhero', and invite them to share their ideas
- Encourage them to write their superhero names, draw their costumes, label their special accessory, and superpowers.
- Enable them to collate their thoughts and revise and add to this over a period of time.

3 Reflect

- What words did you use to describe your superpower?
- For the superhero name, which letters did you find easy to write? And which were challenging?
- I noticed you drew a hammer/wand/shield as your superpower. What do you think you can do with it?
- How will this superhero interact with others?
- What will this superhero contribute to the community/world?

4 Extend

- Display children's work on a gallery wall. Invite children to show and share. Encourage them to observe other's creations, ask questions, and get inspired.
- Read [How to Be a Superhero](#) (Sue Fliess) for children to draw inspiration from.



Elevate learning with our research-informed curriculum

Access our growing library of 40+ units and 1600+ learning experiences designed to drive play and inquiry. Developed by EY experts, these resources equip you with everything you need to create an authentic learning environment for 2 to 6-year-olds.



Know more about Toddle Play!

Book a demo

