

Are superheroes good role models?

PRE-READING Skimming

Skim the passage. Check (✓) the superheroes who are named as good role models.

- Superman Iron Man Spider-Man Daredevil

DC漫画公司 (Detective Comics)

漫威漫画公司 (Marvel Comics)

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▶ 2.8

1 Superheroes are everywhere: in comic books, movies, video games, and in posters on buses and trains. But what effect, if any, do superheroes have on our behavior?

5 A research team at Stanford University decided to explore this question by setting up a **virtual** reality experiment. In the study, people were given a mission—to find and rescue a sick child. One group of participants was made to feel as though
10 they could fly like Superman, while another group attempted the same task in a virtual helicopter. After the mission, each participant was interviewed.

During the interviews, the researcher pretended to accidentally knock over a cup filled with pens.
15 People who had just flown like Superman were not only quicker to help, but picked up an average of 15 percent more pens. Every “superhero” picked up at least a few pens, whereas some of the helicopter participants failed to offer any help at
20 all. This suggests that **heroic behavior in a virtual environment might transfer to helpful behavior in the real world.**

Superheroes may have a particularly important influence on children. Children have very limited
25 control over many areas of their lives. Therefore, **pretending to be a superhero allows a child to act out and process any anxiety that they have, and thereby resolve or reduce underlying fears,** claims Dr. Amy Bailey, a clinical psychologist at kidsFIRST
30 Medical Center, Dubai. “Children age three to four years find it difficult to differentiate between reality

and fiction and, as such, **the trait of superhuman strength is completely believable to them,**” she says. It “allows them to access some sense of power.”

35 Bailey adds, “The risk to superhero play is that sometimes **children’s behavior can become out of control and escalate into chaotic play** as a child becomes **deeply involved** ^{deeplyinvolved} **submerged**¹ in these roles.” She advises parents to **limit exposure to** more aggressive
40 shows and to have children focus on “other positive characteristics of their favorite hero, such as their clever thinking and care of others.” Concern over the potential effect of aggressive behavior has led to some schools banning superhero play from the
45 classroom altogether.

Other psychologists share this concern. Some point to **the evolution of the superhero over time,** and are **critical of modern renditions.**² “There is a big difference in the movie superhero of today
50 and the comic book superhero of yesterday,” says



Batman impersonator Leonard Robinson visits a sick child at a hospital in West Virginia, U.S.A.



psychologist Sharon Lamb of the University of Massachusetts. "Today's superhero," Lamb says, is "aggressive, sarcastic, and rarely speaks to the virtue of doing good for humanity."

55 Lamb compares the selfish, playboy millionaire Tony Stark (Iron Man) to a superhero of the past, such as Superman. Superman, she points out, had a real job as a newspaper reporter and was dedicated to fighting injustice. More recent
60 characters such as Stark "exploit women, show off expensive jewelry, clothing, etc. flaunt bling,³ and convey their manhood with high-powered guns."

Jeff Greenberg, a social psychology professor at the University of Arizona, is less critical of modern
65 superheroes. According to him, superheroes give children confidence and can deliver a positive moral message. Many superheroes—such as Spider-Man or Superman—use their powers to protect the weak. And more modern superheroes such

70 as Daredevil, who is blind, and Charles Xavier (Professor X), who is paralyzed,⁴ promote diversity and present positive images of disability.

It is becoming clear that superheroes offer us more than just entertainment. "If you design games
75 that are violent, people's aggressive behavior increases," claims Jeremy Bailenson, who led the Stanford University study. But he also believes that video games and other forms of superhero entertainment could be designed to train people to
80 be more empathetic⁵ and helpful in the real world—perhaps giving us all the power to be a little more like Superman.

¹ **submerged:** *adj.* deeply involved

² **renditions:** *n.* versions or interpretations

³ **flaunt bling:** *v.* to show off expensive jewelry, clothing, etc.

⁴ **paralyzed:** *adj.* unable to move all or part of the body

⁵ **empathetic:** *adj.* having the ability to understand someone else's feelings

UNDERSTANDING MAIN IDEAS

Choose the main idea of the passage.

- a Parents should limit children's exposure to violent superhero movies.
- b Superheroes can have a powerful impact on children's behavior.
- c The concept of the superhero has evolved over time.

UNDERSTANDING DETAILS

A Complete the chart showing pros and cons of superheroes.

Pros	Cons
The heroic behavior of superheroes can encourage children to be more ¹ _____ in real life.	Imitating superheroes can sometimes lead to violent or ² _____ behavior in children.
Superheroes give children ⁵ _____ and send a positive message about protecting ⁶ _____.	Some superhero characters exploit ³ _____ and convey a narrow version of ⁴ _____.

B Match the superheroes to the characterizations mentioned in the passage.

- 1 Superman He is self-centered and is not a good role model for children.
- 2 Iron Man He empowers children and stands for justice, fairness, and decency.
- 3 Professor X He shows children that it's OK to be different.

BUILDING VOCABULARY

A Match the words in blue from the passage to their definitions.

- 1 virtual having contact with something and being affected by it
- 2 transfer existing only on computers or on the Internet
- 3 underlying concealed but detectable
- 4 exposure to committed to a task or purpose
- 5 dedicated to to carry over from one situation to another

B CRITICAL THINKING

Reflecting Discuss these questions with a partner.

- 1 Do you agree with the characterizations of the superheroes mentioned in the passage? Why or why not?

In my opinion, Iron Man is a ... because ...

I disagree. I think that ...

- 2 Can you think of any other examples of superheroes who make good or bad role models?