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"Good Guys" in Superhero Films More Violent than Villians

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New research being presented at American Academy of Pediatrics 2018 National Conference & Exhibition in Orlando finds violent acts by protagonists in popular film genre significantly outnumber those by "bad guys."

ORLANDO, Fla. – In a film genre more popular than ever, courageous superheroes wield special powers to protect the public from villains. But despite positive themes these films may offer, new research suggests superhero characters often idolized by young viewers may send a strongly negative message when it comes to violence. In fact, according to a study being presented at the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) 2018 National Conference & Exhibition, the "good guys" in superhero films engage in more violent acts, on average, than the villains.

An abstract of the study, "Violence Depicted in Superhero-Based Films Stratified by Protagonist/Antagonist and Gender," will be presented on Monday, Nov. 5, at the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando, Fla. Researchers involved in the study analyzed 10 superhero-based films released in 2015 and 2016. They classified major characters as either protagonist ("good guy") or antagonist ("bad guy") and used a standardized tool to compile specific acts and types of violence portrayed in the films.

The researchers tallied an average of 23 acts of violence per hour associated with the films' protagonists, compared with 18 violent acts per hour for the antagonists. The researchers also found the films showed male characters in nearly five times as many violent acts (34 per hour, on average), than female characters, who were engaged in an average of 7 violent acts per hour.

"Children and adolescents see the superheroes as 'good guys,' and may be influenced by their portrayal of risk-taking behaviors and acts of violence," said the abstract's lead author, Robert Olympia, MD, a Professor in the Departments of Emergency Medicine & Pediatrics at Penn State College of Medicine and an Attending Physician at the Milton S. Hershey Medical Center/

Penn State Children's Hospital. "Pediatric health care providers should educate families about the violence depicted in this genre of film and the potential dangers that may occur when children attempt to emulate these perceived heroes," he said.

The most common act of violence associated with protagonists in the films was fighting (1,021 total acts), followed by the use of a lethal weapon (659), destruction of property (199), murder (168), and bullying/intimidation/torture (144). For antagonists, the most common violent act was the use of a lethal weapon (604 total acts), fighting (599), bullying/intimidation/torture (237), destruction of property (191), and murder (93) were also portrayed.

To help counteract the negative influence superhero films may have on children, the study's principal investigator, John N. Muller, MS, suggests families watch them together and talk about what they see.

"Co-viewing these movies as a family can be an effective antidote to increased violence in superhero-based films," said Muller, a medical student at the Penn State University College of Medicine. But the key, he said, is discussing the consequences of violence actively with their children.

"In passively co-viewing violent media, there is an implicit message that parents approve of what their children are seeing, and previous studies show a corresponding increase in aggressive behavior," Muller said. "By taking an active role in their children's media consumption by co-viewing and actively mediating, he said, parents help their children develop critical thinking and internally regulated values."

Mr. Muller will present the study abstract, available below, from 3:34-3:42 pm EST in the Plaza International Ballroom at the Orange County Convention Center in Orlando, FL. T

In addition, Mr. Muller will be among highlighted abstract authors available during an informal Media Meet-and-Greet session Saturday, November 3, from 1 p.m. to 1:45 p.m. EST in room Room W208AB of the Orange County Convention Center (Press Office). During the meeting, you may reach AAP media relations staff in the National Conference Press Room at 407-685-5404.

Please note: only the abstract is being presented at the meeting. In some cases, the researcher may have more data available to share with media, or may be preparing a longer article for submission to a journal.

# # #

Abstract Title: Violence depicted in superhero-based films stratified by protagonist/antagonist and gender

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Purpose: Superhero-based films have become an incredibly popular genre. A recently published study found that the number of negative themes depicted in superhero-based films, especially acts of violence, outweighs the number of positive themes. Superheroes depicted in film are often viewed by children and adolescents as "the good guy," and therefore may be influenced by their portrayal of risk-taking behaviors and acts of violence. Similarly, young girls may be influenced by the behaviors of female superhero characters depicted in film. The objective of this study was to describe acts of violence portrayed in a select number of superhero-based films, stratified by protagonist/antagonist characters and gender.

Methods: We conducted a content analysis study examining superhero-based films released during 2015 and 2016 as identified by boxofficemojo.com. A data collection tool, listing specific acts of violence, was developed by the study investigators to quantify types of violence portrayed in each film. Prior to data collection, each major film character was classified as either a protagonist ("good guy") or antagonist ("bad guy"). Each film was independently viewed and scored by 5 reviewers. Data analysis included quantifying specific acts of violence (mean events per hour), then stratified by protagonist/antagonist and gender.

Results: A total of 10 superhero-based films were analyzed. The average number of violent acts associated with protagonist and antagonist characters for all included films was 22.7 (95% CI: 16.8-30.7) and 17.5 (95% CI: 13.9-21.9) mean events per hour, respectively (p=0.019 with adjustment for significant reviewer variability). The most common acts of violence associated with protagonists for all included films were: "fighting" (1021 total acts), "use of a lethal weapon" (659), "destruction of property" (199), "murder" (168), and "bullying/intimidation/torture" (144). The most common acts of violence associated with antagonists for all included films were: "use of a lethal weapon" (604 total acts), "fighting" (599), "bullying/intimidation/torture" (237), "destruction of property" (191), and "murder" (93). The average number of violent acts associated with male and female characters for all included films was 33.6 (95% CI: 27.3-41.4) and 6.5 (95% CI: 3.9-11.0) mean events per hour, respectively.

Conclusions: Based on our sample of superhero-based films, acts of violence were associated more with protagonist characters compared with antagonist characters, and were associated with male characters more than female characters. Therefore, pediatric health care providers should educate families to the violence depicted in this genre of film and the potential dangers that may occur when children attempt to emulate these perceived heroes.

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