

# 'Good guys' in superhero films more violent than villains

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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."

Provided by American Academy of Pediatrics

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