



Crusaders at play

LOOK! Up in the sky, it's a bird, it's a plane, no, it's a group of Victorian pre-schools outlawing superhero play. Faster than you can say "speeding bullet", Spiderman, Batman, Wonder Woman and even Shrek costumes are banned because of fears that children's dressing up as superheroes will encourage real violence.

When you're responsible for looking after other people's children and have to answer to tired, guilt-ridden parents, then safety is more than a problem, it's a very real and potentially explosive if not expensive issue. But they're not the reasons given for this interdict.

There's the belief that young children cannot tell the difference between reality and fantasy. Well, this depends on their age and the relationship children have to fantasy play. Dressing-up, whether as fairies, princesses, pirates or jolly-green ogres, is one of the great delights of childhood. From about the age of four and up, children understand that in donning a mask, strapping a sword or wand to their wrist and having a bit of face-paint slapped on, they're taking a giant step outside their reality and into a world where make-believe reigns.

Just what their imaginations do once there depends on what other sorts of restrictions have been placed on their behaviour in real life. There are bound to be children who take further risks and test the boundaries, particularly under the relatively safe guise of pretending.

Bentleigh early learning centre director Tracey Young is concerned these dress-ups permit "quite rough and outlandish behaviour". I thought that was the point. While children may play at sword fights or even whack another child with a stick or lash out with a foot, all that's usually required is an explanation about acceptable and unacceptable conduct for this to be prevented and certainly to avoid repetition.

If that fails, well, there's always the "C" word — consequences, that is.

Adults still control what is and isn't permitted, even when children are in costume. Make-believe "violence" in

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WEDNESDAY VIEW

the form of superhero and other age-appropriate play and dress-ups gives children the space to check limits, learn about co-operation, team work, fair play and rules and empowers them in a world that mostly seeks to render them impotent.

Most significantly, however, violence does not blossom where the tendencies have not previously been sown and nurtured.

In his book, *Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes, and Make-Believe Violence*, Gerard Jones discusses the case of a Year 1 child who shot and killed a classmate in the US in 2000. As the community and subsequently the world reeled in shock, there were the usual attempts to link the boy's behaviour to his media consumption. What was over-

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looked was that this child grew up "in a crack house full of real guns, surrounded by men who used real violence to settle their disputes — he didn't have toys or video games or any other safe way to relieve his anxiety or express his aggression".

As Jones discusses, from the 1960s onwards, millions of professionals and parents swept violence from the education and culture of children. And, "as we removed violence from their officially sanctioned culture — from the classroom, from bedtime stories, from adult-approved play — they were left with no source for it but the commercial entertainment industry". This is partly why children are so drawn to these types of dress-ups, games and objects.

They desire what the fantasies

offer; a chance to assert themselves in different social groups and try on "power" for size, even though we're sometimes alarmed by what this suggests. But serial killers, partner beaters and child abusers these costumed children won't be — unless they've learned that behaviour elsewhere.

Sue Palmer, in her book *Toxic Childhood*, writes about "feral" children in the UK for whom real and terrible violence is a daily occurrence. She states that "their parents are often junkies, alcoholics, (and) involved in crime". Experiencing real aggression, these children don't know how else to treat others or themselves.

To the overwhelming majority of children, superheroes are just that: heroes. That is, good men and women who fight for "truth and justice" (and not only the American way), and who grapple with the notion that "with great power comes great responsibility". In other words, these fictive figures are role models in the ways that count. They're mostly honourable, admired, powerful and fair. They may fight, but it's usually to defend the weak and restore justice.

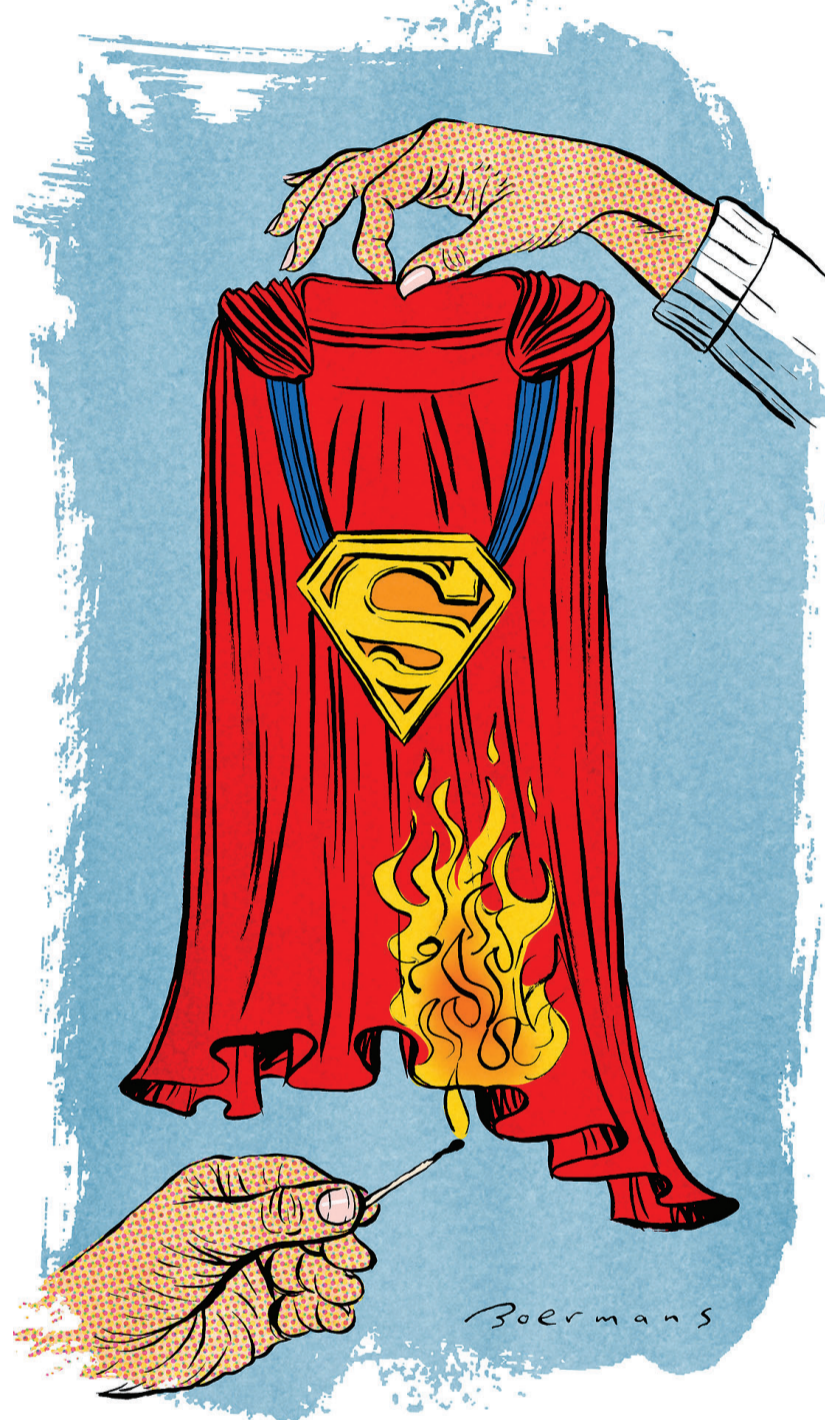
Because a few parents and subsequently carers overreact, the gloves (and capes) are off. Let's be sensible here. Children don't need to be deprived of an important aspect of their imaginary lives because the grown-ups are scared of what "zapping" someone with a wand or "blasting" them with a stick or laser signifies.

In his book, *Parenting for a Peaceful World*, Robin Grille reminds us that good parenting (and caring) "is based on teaching children to be aware of others' boundaries, and to understand the impact of their behaviour on others".

Teaching children that every action has an equal and opposite reaction, or a consequence, and leading by example will go a long way to preventing real violence in our playgrounds and kindergartens.

Banning superhero dress-ups will do little more than punish children for using their imaginations.

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Boost pay to keep top-class teachers

It is time to start rewarding effective teachers, writes Kirsten Storry

THERE is evidence of "a long tail of under-achievement" among our most disadvantaged school children, according to a recent Commonwealth Senate Committee report, Quality of School Education.

By Year 5, the top 10 per cent of readers are at least five years ahead of the bottom 10 per cent.

In Queensland, about 83 per cent of indigenous children in Year 3, along with about 52 per cent in Year 5 and 65 per cent in Year 7, cannot read at the minimum standard to allow them to make satisfactory progress at their grade level.

It begs the question: what should Queensland do about schools whose students consistently post low achievement rates?

Research estimates that teachers are

responsible for about 30 per cent of the variation in student achievement, although some research puts the figure as high as 60 per cent.

But Queensland was among the states and territories which recently refused to provide the Commonwealth with individual performance data on students and schools because identifying data could be used to punish poor performing schools.

In the US, the controversial "No Child Left Behind" legislation (the reauthorisation of which is before Congress for consideration) tackled accountability for the academic achievement of such disadvantaged student groups head-on.

It placed accountability for student achievement in literacy and numeracy squarely with schools and recognised

the link between teacher quality and student achievement.

Of course, even its supporters realise that the legislation has its problems.

However, as the Education Sector think tank's co-director Andrew Rotherham put it, people "worry that calling attention to these problems and publicly identifying schools that have to improve will erode support for public schools, while increasing sup-

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port for ideas like school vouchers. But they have it backwards: it is inattention to the problems that 'No Child Left Behind' is pointing out that is the biggest problem facing public schools".

What is our community more concerned about: that children are not reading and writing at grade level or that poor performing schools and

teachers might be treated differently from their more effective counterparts? In Queensland, as in the US, we need to face up to the issues of teacher quality, performance and remuneration. In other professions, those who are more effective or take on more difficult tasks are rewarded.

In the teaching profession, the fixed-pay system rewards seniority, not performance, and teachers hit maximum salaries by their mid-30s.

This was a central issue on the mind of the Senate Committee in its report.

It recommended that steps be taken to improve the remuneration of teachers so as to raise the profession's entry standard and retention rates by providing incentives. The key will be to get the incentives right.

Take, for example, Queensland's hardest to staff rural and remote primary schools such as those on Cape York. Available incentives under the Remote Area Incentives Scheme include an incentive payment of up to

\$5000 a year to stay on after the minimum service period, a "compensation" payment to offset travel costs, and extended emergency leave.

Not one of these incentives is directed at attracting teachers who are effective in the classroom. Nor is a single incentive directed at retaining teachers whose students achieve strong gains in literacy and numeracy.

Queensland is not alone. The other states and territories have incentive systems to attract and retain teachers in rural and remote schools, but not to boost or reward performance.

It is time to start rewarding those teachers who repeatedly demonstrate their effectiveness, especially those who teach the most disadvantaged students in remote and rural areas.

For that, we will need to start linking teacher and student performance data and start paying good teachers what they are worth.

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