



Urgent Bulletin for Teachers

Power Rangers: An Explosive Topic

by Diane E. Levin

The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers (PRs) has been an unprecedented success. Its TV show is at the top of the charts. Retail sales of PRs toys and products surpassed \$1 billion in 1994, an all-time record. The phenomenon is likely to continue for some time; new marketing strategies are planned for a movie soon to be released and a line of fashion dolls (as opposed to action figures) which will compete with Barbie. The PRs represent a pinnacle in the marketing of violence to children.

The PRs' TV program is like many that have appeared since deregulation of children's television in 1984 — Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Transformers, and GI Joe — when, for the first time, it became possible for TV shows and lines of toys to be marketed together. This is television programming designed to sell toys and other products to children.

PRs present a dangerous world which is neatly divided into all good and all bad — a world where the good guys are always in danger; but because they're good, they can do anything they want to beat the bad guys.

But the PRs' show also has special features which distinguish it from those that came before. Using special effects, real actors act out the same plots and behaviors that until now were only done by animated superheroes. The heroes are real teenagers who look like the adolescents children look up to in their own lives; they serve as powerful role models for many children. And,

there are over 200 acts of violence per hour, more than double that clocked on the Ninja Turtles' cartoon.

All around the country, teachers are voicing concerns about how the PRs' TV show, toy line, and other products are affecting the children in their classrooms (Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1994). Teachers say:

- They see more children getting hurt and **increased levels of aggression** as children hurt each other with karate chops at the first sign of conflict. Then children say they are PRs, or are using karate chops "just for fun" and only accidentally hurting one another.
- The **quality of play is undermined** as children imitate the PRs' fighting and bring little creativity, problem solving, or imagination to their play.
- Many children are **confusing fantasy and reality** as they often get hurt acting out PR actions and behaviors (mostly violent ones) and talk about PRs as heroes to be emulated.
- Some children are **obsessed with the PRs and PR products** throughout the day, seemingly unable to get them off their minds.
- While many parents seem to be unaware of the effects of the PRs, those who do try to limit their children's exposure find their efforts are under-



mined because of the **far-reaching presence of the PRs** in childhood culture.

- In many cases, teachers have tried to ban some or all aspects of the PRs from their classrooms because of the negative effects they are having but find **children still sneak them in**.

Even though there is no simple or fully adequate antidote, we need to work to counteract the negative effects teachers see the PRs having on children. Banning alone rarely can get the PRs out of children's lives (Carlsson-Paige and Levin, 1987). Trying to ban PRs carries the risk of making children feel guilty for their involvement with the PRs, when it is hardly their fault. It also cuts us out of the process of influencing the PRs' effects; and, instead, leaves the TV industry and toy manufacturers in control of the effects the PRs will have.

Here are a few ideas to help you in your efforts to deal effectively with the PRs in your settings:

- Whether or not you decide to ban the PRs, **children will need help working through the content they are seeing**, especially the violence. Have open discussions (see Margie Carter's article in this issue); help children find alternative ways to feel powerful; teach conflict resolution skills; invite real teenagers into your classroom who show how they're different from PRs and can serve as healthier role models.
- **Help children regain control of their play** by transforming it from simple imitative play to creative, imaginative play. Provide appealing alternative content children can use in their play which either expands upon the content of PR play or helps children do new activities with their fighting characters and supports their use of open-ended play materials.
- **Work with parents, teachers, and the early childhood community** to understand and support each other's efforts. To educate and begin dialogues with others, many centers have held staff and parent meetings and sent home

letters about their concerns. Share your concerns and strategies for responding — what has and has not worked — and help parents to work together to create a community less influenced by PRs.

- **Work against the marketing of violence to children** by the TV and toy industries. Speak out about your concerns. Support boycotts; organize phone and letter writing campaigns to manufacturers, stations, politicians, and reporters.

These starting points can support your efforts to counteract the negative effects of the PRs on the children in your classrooms; but they will not solve all the problems the PRs are creating for children, families, teachers, and communities. Until the marketing of violence to children through media and toys is understood to be harmful for children and integrally connected to the overall increase in violence in society, this exploitation of children for the profits of a few will go on. Ultimately, we must work to ensure that the voices of teachers are heard on this issue.

References

- Carlsson-Paige, N. and Levin, D. E. (1987). **The war play dilemma: Balancing needs and values in the early childhood classroom**. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Levin, D. E. and Carlsson-Paige, N. (1994). **The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers: Teachers voice concern**. Unpublished manuscript.

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