BOYS & GIRLS
Superheroes in the Doll Corner

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With a Foreword by Philip W. Jackson

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ing babies, and runaway pets are as disruptive as the omnipresent bad guy; running is the same whether the runner is Cinderella or Luke Skywalker. Boys do, of course, run more—much more. However, they run more whether or not they are playing cops and robbers. Jonathan gets up and runs around the table every time he gets a king in checkers. I asked him once why he did it and he answered, “That’s what you have to do when you get a king.”

There is a final rule, applicable only to boys; no grabbing, pushing, punching, or wrestling. They are more likely to break this rule, however, when they line up, walk down the hall, get ready for lunch, or come to the circle—those in-between times when controls are least dependable.

Perhaps, then, instead of steering robbers and superheroes out of the classroom, I ought to help them improve their style. After all, stealing and shooting are stage business, not necessarily more in opposition to the rules of good play than the selfish behavior of the stepsisters who won’t let Cinderella attend the ball.

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Teddy is no longer a doll-corner resident; he is now a guest or an intruder there. As a guest, he responds to invitations—usually to be the father. All the boys, even Andrew, will agree to a brief stint as father if they are alone when asked.

The girls understand what turns a guest into an intruder: The magic number is 3. If one boy is summoned into the doll corner, he is likely to cooperate; two, in certain combinations, might still be manageable; three, never. Three boys form a superhero clique and disrupt play. The doll corner is easy to understand, for there is but a single drama to enter, as either protagonist, antagonist, or supporting player.

By contrast, the many unconnected activities in the block area must share the same space and materials, each unit continually readjusting its boundary lines to accommodate the
others. A half hour of constructive play in the blocks requires
one or more of three conditions: socially mature players, a plot
strong enough to make role-playing more important than cov-
etousness, or the presence of leaders with good building skills.

Believing that Franklin would do admirably well in all cate-
gories, I urge him to leave the art table and apply his talents to
the block area. At both the art table and the wood-bench, he is
the model of maturity and aplomb. He performs his self-ap-
pointed tasks with such meticulous care that others watch and
copy him. His intense concentration on clearly defined goals
entices more boys into “work” projects than all my curriculum
ideas combined.

Much to our surprise—the children’s and the teacher’s—
Franklin has the opposite effect in the blocks. There he is dic-
tatorial and intolerant; his sense of perfection rules out any
notion of group participation. Anything less than total control
is an impossible compromise for him to make.

He has this control in art construction and, to some extent,
in superhero play, where his detailed knowledge of movie and
television scripts usually gives him the final word. In the block
area, however, nothing matters as much as a democratic spir-
it, and Franklin does not yet have this. He ends every session
in tears, and block play is in danger of being ruined.

I station myself outside the blocks to see if I can identify the
point at which things go wrong. Ordinarily, by the time I ar-
rive on the scene it is too late; everyone is angry and no one
can explain what happened.

Jonathan is already building when Franklin runs in, asking,
“Can I play?”

“Sure you can,” Jonathan replies. “I’m building a house.”

“Wait! Don’t put it there!” Franklin grabs a block from
Jonathan’s hand and begins to rearrange the design of the
building. “This is the way. Do it like this,” he states firmly.

Jonathan tentatively lays a block on its side.

“No! Leave it alone! You’re spoiling it!” Franklin yells again.

“Just watch me, can’t you?” He does not look at Jonathan as
he speaks; he concentrates only on the blocks.

Teddy, who has been observing the scene, puts a large arc
at one corner of the building. He keeps his eyes on Franklin,
testing to see what his friend will do.

“No, Teddy! That ain’t the way it has to be!” Franklin re-
moves the arc. “Lemme have that! Just put it away. We don’t
need it high over there! It don’t look nice that way!”

I can no longer remain silent. “Franklin, you’re very bossy.
You won’t let the boys do anything.”

He looks surprised. “Yeah they can. I said they can.”

“But you grab their blocks the minute they have an idea.”

“I’m helping them. They want me to.”

“Do you boys want him to?”

Jonathan and Teddy look at each other, but before they can
speak, Franklin is crying and pulling Andrew’s arm down:

“Leave that be, Andrew! It’s mine!”

Andrew looks as if he’s going to hit Franklin with the block.
With me there, all he can do is scream, “He wasn’t even using
it! He’s a stupid pig!”

“I am so using that! It goes right here. I need all those. I was
here first. You’re spoiling my whole thing.” Franklin tearfully
runs back and forth to the block shelf, filling his arms with
blocks as, one by one, the boys leave.

“Franklin, will you please look around,” I say. “Everyone is
gone.”

“Why?”

“Why? Because you’re being very selfish, that’s why.”

Franklin looks worried. “I ain’t selfish. I ain’t said they hata
go.”

“You’re just like the fox in ‘The Blue Seed.’ Remember that
story? He wouldn’t let anyone share his house, so the house
blew up?”

Franklin nods, squinting to take the measure of his build-
ing. “Can I finish my house now?”

The moral of the fox story is of no concern to Franklin. The
offending party never sees the connection to his own behavior
in a morality tale.

“Franklin, wait. Let me tell you what I mean about the fox,”
I say, determined to press my point. “Remember when you
were the fox? You had to yell at everyone, ‘Get out! You can’t
live in my house!' That's just what you're doing in the blocks now."

"I ain't doin' that! Soonest I'm done, everyone can come in. First I gotta get it just right."

"But they want to help."

"I said they can help. They wasn't listening."

My approach is useless. He can picture every detail of the ten-story house he plans to erect but nothing of the scene he just had with Jonathan and Teddy. Yet Franklin knows how to listen to dialog and stay in character. When he is the father in the doll corner, he does not act like Darth Vader. Nor does he make the little pig sound like the Big Bad Wolf. Artistic integrity is important to Franklin. What he needs is an objective view of the scene he just played. The analogy of the selfish fox is too abstract and direct criticism too personal. The story-plays come to mind: "Once there was a boy named Franklin. . . ."

The class is seated around the circle. I have asked Jonathan and Teddy to bring a pile of blocks into the center.

"This is a guessing game," I tell everyone. "I'm acting out a true story. You have to guess who I'm pretending to be. You two boys pretend you're building something, and I'm going to keep interrupting."

Self-consciously the boys begin to build a road. I rush over and grab several blocks. "No, not that way! Give it here! Do it this way!" I shout.

The boys are momentarily startled but continue to lay out blocks. I yell at them again: "Stop doing it that way! You're spoiling my road!"

By now everyone is looking at Franklin, who is pounding his thigh and laughing. "That's me! You're pretending you're me! Is that really me?"

"It really is you. I watched you in the blocks. That's the way you sounded. Remember?"

"I do remember! You did that part just right."

When I confronted Franklin earlier in the block area, he denied everything. The moment I make him the star in his own story, he is flattered and attentive. He is not offended and