HOW MARVEL COMIC BOOKS FROM THE 1960s CAN BE USED BY PARENTS AND THERAPISTS AS POSITIVE ROLE MODELING FOR CHILDREN

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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By

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This thesis project is only possible because of the visionary creators of Marvel comic books during the 1960s. I’d like to begin my acknowledgments with Stan Lee, who co-created, co-plotted and dialogued most of the comic books examined in this paper. Stan showed young minds a world-view that emphasized the importance of morality, integrity and understanding. At a time when most comic books were seen as silly stories without any lasting substance, Stan Lee’s vision aimed much higher. As a result, his work has stood the test of time and the comic books and the characters he co-created have become iconic Superheroes known throughout our society. These characters include the X-Men, the Fantastic Four, The Amazing Spider-Man, The Hulk, Thor, Iron Man and many more.

Jack Kirby was one of the most explosive artists to ever grace the pages of comic books. He was a powerful visionary who created some of the most lasting images ever put on paper. Responsible for co-creating Captain America (at the age of 24), as well as being the co-creator and artistic force behind the Incredible Hulk, the X-Men, the Mighty Thor, the Avengers, the Fantastic Four and so many more, Jack’s artwork contained a raw power and vision that still cannot be matched by all of the special effects in Hollywood. In addition, Jack Kirby and his wife Rosalind were personal friends of mine and two of the nicest, most caring people I have ever met.

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the co-creator of Spider-Man Steve Ditko brought a vision and drawing style to the character that has never been surpassed. The characters he designed and the stories he plotted helped create a blueprint that has been largely unchanged during the 45 years since he has stopped working on the character.

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A recurring theme among comic book collectors that I have heard over and over again when discussing old comic books is how many times people’s mothers threw away their comic books without their knowledge. As a result, I want to acknowledge my mother who never threw away my comic books.

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ABSTRACT

HOW MARVEL COMIC BOOKS FROM THE 1960s CAN BE USED BY PARENTS AND THERAPISTS AS POSITIVE ROLE MODELING FOR CHILDREN

By

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Master of Science in Counseling,

Marriage and Family Therapy

Of the many influences available to the youth of America during the 1960s, none may have been more influential to a sub-section of the population that read comic books than the stories and characters being created at Marvel Comics. Today, Marvel is best known for their dramatic movie blockbusters featuring their comic book characters. The Fantastic Four, The X-Men, The Incredible Hulk, The Amazing Spider-Man, Daredevil, The Black Widow, Hawkeye, The Mighty Thor, and the Invincible Iron Man, to name just a few. Yet before 1961 none of them existed. And by the end of 1964 every one of these characters as well as many more had been introduced into the popular culture by Marvel comics.

These comic books captured the tone of the changing times of the 1960s. They were full of moral lessons and pathways to better understanding of the human condition. Through the examination and analysis of these comic books this project will set out to explore the sometimes complex role-modeling that was infused into them.

This thesis project will examine issues that children face as they’re growing up, and help give parents and therapists a checklist of specific comic books they can share with children to help them understand some very important role modeling lessons of our society. These entertaining comic books can help children understand a variety of...
learning experiences in a constructive, clear way that can be readily understood. In so
doing, this will give parents and therapists a new tool to help children have a guide
toward forming their own views on ethics and morality.
CHAPTER I

Introduction

Background of the problem

During earlier times in our history, sources of authority were considerably more centralized than they are today. For example, before the 1990’s, the general public did not have internet access. Before the 1940s there were no television sets in people’s homes. And with each passing generation, as radio, then television, then the internet grew, sources of information that influenced our children became less centralized and more fragmented. As a result, the influences, role modeling and imparting of morals and integrity became more and more fragmented as our society developed new avenues of mass communication.

This translates to children and adolescents having a less centralized perspective on the expectations of their society and their place within it. While earlier in our nation’s history, all children in a community might receive their lessons about society from a centralized source, whether it was the church or school, today there are literally thousands, if not millions of sources for that child to learn from.

The question then becomes, “how can there be standardized expectations of a child when there is no standardized way to show that child what is expected of him or her in our society?” This is a pressing concern for our society for a variety of reasons, since the more diverse the instilling of morality becomes, the more extreme some of the influences can be. For example, what if a child’s morality is formed by the rap artist talking about extreme violence? What if it’s the lyrics of a rock musician strung out on
drugs? What if a child’s morality is formed by politicians manipulating the views of the public for their own ends?

With all the diversification and conflicting imagery that children encounter, it seems that in today’s world unless a child is very lucky to have highly moral, ethical parents, that child is set adrift in a sea of conflicting viewpoints and differing value structures. Everywhere that child turns, there are images and information that either do not conform to the ethical values of the society, or in some cases are so diametrically opposed to the standards the society expects, that the behavior being espoused can have legal consequences for the child.

**Statement of need**

What has inspired this project is the clear need for a measurement, a yardstick if you will, that a child can use to form the ethical beliefs that are going to aid that child in being able to assimilate into the society in a positive way. This project is designed as one of the ways a child can learn some of the core values that our society espouses. Before the thousands of competing images on television, the internet, etc., that compete for the attention of children, it was much easier for a teacher or parent to instill within a child’s education the straight-forward value systems we present to children. Examples of these values include: “Treat others as you would like to be treated,” “Judge people by their actions and not how they look,” “Living up to your word has real value,” as well as other basic ethical and moral teachings.

With all of the influences now competing for a child’s attention, today’s world is much more complex. For every lesson children learn at school or at home, they are subject to hundreds of messages from people who may not have that child’s best interest
at heart. There are many influences surrounding children today that are promoted because someone is trying to sell the child something, or espousing something destructive to the society for their own personal glory. One of the challenges in today’s world is for a child to be able to synthesize the messages he or she receives into core ethical beliefs and principles. This is a task that is quite daunting considering the sheer volume of conflicting messages the child receives.

**Purpose of the project**

The purpose of this project is to give parents, educators and therapists tools with which they can help a child who struggles with specific aspects of morality and ethics gain a better understanding of what it takes to be a successful member of the society. When a child struggles with his or her own ethical center, reaching that child can be a difficult task. After all, many children rebel against authority and are prone to argue when new ways to view the world are being modeled.

The impact of literature on a child’s ethical formation can be a powerful force. Yet interesting a child in reading in today’s world of shorter sound bites and attention spans can be difficult. That’s where comic books can help. Creating a hybrid of words and pictures, comic books can bridge the gap between children who are reluctant to read full books, but who can benefit from reading. Even better than just reading, is reading material that offers children new ideas about the types of problems they struggle with in childhood and adolescence.

Marvel Comics from the 1960s weaved together a complex blend of ethical, moral and self-esteem issues that gave children a guidepost by which they could view the world. For unlike a parent’s admonishment, the very nature of a comic book story is one
of entertainment. As such, it is not bogged down by the heavy-handedness of giving a child “a lesson.” Instead, the life lessons presented within the pages of these comic books were slipped into the workings of the story and often went unrecognized by the child. The child may very well have picked up on the lessons being shown, but it was done seamlessly within the story-telling. Questions of fairness, integrity, ethics, not giving up, fighting against racial prejudice, as well as many other positive values were role-modeled within the pages of these comic books.

The therapeutic value of being able to reach a child through these stories is that they are not preachy, but instead, are powerful action stories of characters the reader cares about, with important life lessons woven throughout. When a child’s parents or authority figures tell a child something, the child may agree or disagree. In fact, the child’s very nature may be to be defiant as part of that child’s natural individuation process. However, when a child is caught up in the story-telling of action heroes, and those heroes model behavior that is ethical and full of integrity, then that child can be too wrapped up in the story and his or her respect for the characters to even see that life-lessons are being presented. Therefore, the child is more likely to fully accept the hero’s belief structure and assertions because he or she respects the character as represented in the story.

Practical Examples

In the third issue of Spider-Man, the Human Torch gives a talk at Peter Parker’s high school. Peter Parker is Spider-Man’s alter ego and he has just lost a battle with Doctor Octopus. This is the first time Spider-Man has ever been defeated by one of his foes. Peter Parker is ready to stop being Spider-Man and give up being a Superhero due
to this defeat. However, the Human Torch from the Fantastic Four gives a talk at the high school and Peter Parker hears his words. The Human Torch says very clearly to the high school students that they should, “Never give up!” (Lee & Ditko, 1963)

Through role modeling within this comic book, Peter Parker learns the value of sticking with something and not quitting as soon as things become difficult. The Human Torch shares with the high school students “Don’t be discouraged if it sometimes seems tough! The important thing is never give up! Remember that – Never give up!” (Lee & Ditko, 1963)

Through this life lesson, Spider-Man realizes that while he may lose a battle, he can ultimately still win the war, and more importantly so does the young reader. How many children may have read these words and realized that even if what they are attempting to accomplish ends in failure, that doesn’t mean they should give up. In fact, it means that they just have to keep trying. This is a perfect example of the type of role-modeling available to readers of these comic books.

Throughout the pages of Marvel comic books during the 1960s the readers were shown a life plan that worked within our society. The small group of creators, most prominently Stan Lee, Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko were creating fantasy characters that were rooted in realism. The science fiction aspect of super powers were coupled with the real life drama of day to day life within our society. The story concept could be summed up this way: If these characters were real, how would they behave?

This thesis project will be exploring these comic books in regard to the importance of role modeling, and helping children and adolescents form their own moral and ethical beliefs. If a child is easily defeated and gives up when a situation doesn’t go
his or her way the first time, we will show through the pages of these stories, a way that 
child can learn to try harder. If an adolescent exhibits prejudice toward other races or 
cultures, we will show how this was addressed in one of these comic books, and if a child 
does not understand the value of keeping his or her word, we will show in the pages of 
these comic books the importance of personal integrity. All of these very real issues and 
difficulties, that children face every day, will be explored and addressed. We will show 
how these comic books from the 1960s can be used as a teaching tool for parents and 
therapists.
CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

Introduction

Throughout this literature review I will be exploring the importance of role-modeling in a child’s development. How a child develops his or her personality, ethical foundation and views of the world will be examined. The literature quoted will show the importance of these attributes in children, revealing why role modeling can make a powerful difference in the life of a child and help them internalize strong societal values that will potentially aid them throughout their lives.

When it comes to a child’s development, role models are very important. By definition, “A role model is someone whose behavior is imitated by others” (Silverman, 2008). And who becomes our children’s role models is also a subject of much debate. While popular culture defines teachers as likely role models, recent research has not proven this to be the case. According to Bricheno & Thornton, teachers were only role models for 2.4% of the children surveyed in their study (Bricheno & Thornton, 2007). So who are the role models of children?

Increasingly, the people seen on television, the movies and the internet are becoming role models for children. Just ask Madison Avenue advertisers about the importance of having their products featured within the latest movies or popular TV shows. Product branding is so pervasive that companies have built entire businesses on integrating products with entertainment programs (Gupta & Lord, 1998). Clearly, movies and television are highly influential in connecting with young viewers (Calvert, Jordan, & Cocking, 2002).
Efficacy of Role Modeling

To begin exploring the history of role modeling with children, I started with the work of Albert Bandura and his 1961 Bobo Doll Experiment (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). This experiment was performed to bolster the belief that conscious behavior by humans is learned behavior. In addition, conscious behavior is learned through observation and imitation (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961).

Once it is determined that children indeed learn behavior from observation and learned experiences, then the hope is that children are able to develop a set of values, morality and productivity that allows them to have a successful life within our society. And this is important to almost every aspect of their lives.

Developing Prosocial Skills

Prosocial skills are some of the most important things a child or adolescent can learn. These skills can be vital to a child’s successful integration into society (McGinnis, 2011). Prosocial skills can also help a child to grow into a productive adult within our society and allow him or her to fit into a variety of situations easily. Whether it’s finding a way to navigate through school, or handle a job interview, teaching prosocial skills can be very important to a child’s personal growth (McGinnis, 2011).

One of the best ways to help a child develop good prosocial behavior is through mentoring. Mentoring is used to help motivate young adults and help them improve their self-esteem and social skills (Newby and Heide, 1992). To define mentoring, it is the process by which someone with experience at a skill can work with someone who has less experience and help teach them what they know (Manning, 2005). By definition, mentoring can be truly invaluable in helping children find a balance between the myriad
forces that are seeking to influence them for profit and gain, and a real understanding of integrity and morality. Without a moral compass, children can be cast adrift in a sea of advertising, entertainment, videogames, social networks and other competing factions for their attention, without any regard to a consistent, ethical life view (Comstock & Scharrer, 2007).

In fact, one of the highest risk factors for children in our society today is the lack of a consistent plan that they can follow on their pathways to adulthood. With one click of the mouse, adolescents can be exposed to pornography, hate speak, graphic violence and other sites that are inappropriate for viewing at their age. It is this virtual tsunami of information that bombards youth today and can paralyze their understanding of the social and societal norms of our culture that are so vital to their well being throughout their lives (Comstock & Scharrer, 2007).

Importance of Mentors

A strong mentor, or strong input from a source the child respects or looks up to can make a huge difference in helping that child clarify his or her own life views. A child’s sense of morality, ethics, personal integrity, and virtually his or her entire world view can be shifted if someone is able to create a consistent pathway that can help that child make sense of the myriad views he or she is bombarded with on a daily basis (Jekielek, Moore, Hair, & Scarupa, 2002).

An important question in any discussion about people’s formation of ethics and integrity is the issue of causality. Does personal integrity, belief in someone’s own competency truly help people perform better and accomplish more in their lives? Studies have been conducted that have compared how a child’s belief in him or herself, affects their achievement levels (Holden, Moncher, Schinke, & Barker, K, 1990; Multon,
Brown, & Lent, 1991). The results of this research verifies that what a person believes he or she can do, is in large part indicative of what they can actually do, as well as the quality and quantity of the achievements and overall satisfaction levels.

As a result, once it is established that a belief in his or her ability and a sense of personal responsibility can help determine a child’s success in our society, the question becomes: how can a child develop a positive view of the world and believe that he or she can be competent within it. We also have to examine the best ways that a child or adolescent can internalize this positive viewpoint.

Importance of a Positive Self-Image

One of the best ways that a child can develop a positive world view is to have a positive self image (Loeb & Jay, 1987). It has been shown that a belief in one’s self is instrumental in a child’s ability to believe he or she can succeed (Bandura & Locke, 2003). The higher a child’s belief in his or her own abilities, the more the child will attempt to achieve and the higher the expectations he or she will have for him or herself (Bandura & Locke, 2003).

One important thing to consider is that people do not usually take on challenges that they feel they won’t be able to accomplish (Caprara, Regalia, Scabini, Barbaranelli, & Bandura, 2004). In addition, they do not usually attempt ambitious goals that are difficult to finish unless they believe they can be successful at them. That is why it is so important that people have a belief in themselves. Without strong self-efficacy, people tend to lose before they even start, since it is this self-defeating perspective that paves the way for not even trying (Caprara, et al, 2004).
Since someone’s self-perceived competence in a task has been shown to be a significant determinant of that person’s subsequent performance at that task, it is vitally important that children and adolescents develop strong self-efficacy. It has been shown that self-efficacy factors in even more strongly than past performance as to how well a child will perform a given task (Bandura & Locke, 2003).

This brings us to the difference between educating a child about specific world events and educating a child about their own personal formation of a value system that they can live their lives by. Since society has a vested interest in people understanding the values of the society they live in, the process of socialization is often started in school, early in a child’s life (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006). This socialization tries to instill a belief system within the child or adolescent that can be used as a guide post, or a way that the child or adolescent can determine what is best for him or her and the society as a whole. It is this moral education that must take place so that the child has a context in which to assimilate the educational lessons he or she is learning (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006).

History of Moral Education

When examining educational systems in ancient times, ethics and morality were often at the forefront of a society’s value system. In studying ancient India and traditional Native American cultures, it has been shown that these cultures not only valued rules, but were also very interested in having a citizenry that possessed genuine morality and positive community values (Evans, 2000). This included a “lifelong accountability to one’s teacher, family and society” (Evans, 2000). Both of these cultures (ancient India and Native American) considered morality an integral part of their
society’s sense of community. Citizens were expected to have high moral integrity and were trained as such from an early age. It was not only important that the citizenry excelled in knowledge and education, in terms of facts, it was vitally important they understood societal norms and the ethics and values of the day.

During the sixteenth century, an important moralist, Kinalizade (1520 – 1572) lived in the Ottoman society. Kinalizade devoted fifteen pages of his ancient tome, *Ahlak-I Ala’l*, to the subject of moral education for children (Uysal, 2007). Within this ancient tome he discussed the importance of parents being conscientious while raising their children and the value of education to help them become better members of the society.

Kinalizade was clear that children learned from example and that they must be led down the correct path toward becoming productive members of the society. Because he believed that “a child’s mind is pure and is exposed to every kind of influence,” he was clear that children were influenced by what they observed (Uysal, 2007). It is observed from studying ancient civilizations that an enlightened citizenry was very much a desired goal by ancient civilizations and that they valued a moral populace.

Once it has been determined that raising children and adolescents to develop high integrity, principles and morals is a desired goal within the society, the next step is to find the best ways to accomplish this task. How can the teaching of information be separated from the teaching of values?

*Moral Education versus Citizenship Education*

The term “moral education” gained widespread awareness through Jean Piaget and later Lawrence Kohlberg (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006). Moral education is defined as
the efforts to develop a child or adolescent’s moral reasoning in a school setting. This would include a sense of morality or justice (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006).

This moral education is something that is in great danger of deteriorating within our society due to the proliferation of competing sources of a child’s attention. With the inundation of video games, television, websites, social networks and other sources of entertainment, finding a moral center is becoming more and more difficult for children (Jekielek, Moore, Hair and Scarupa, 2002).

That is why a strong moral understanding of who they are is imperative for children. It is this moral center that will help them understand and move forward with their lives.

Once we understand the importance for children to understand morality and ethics, the next question becomes, where does a child turn to for this education? Ideally the school system can help a child understand these socialization skills, however, many times classrooms are overcrowded and students are not able to be given the personal attention necessary to help them better understand what will help them succeed in this society (Dillon, 2011). Even with the realities of the modern classroom, there still needs to be a way that a child can be modeled the moral and ethical behavior necessary to help them lead a successful, moral life within our society.

Unfortunately, even with all of the ways that children and adolescents can access information these days through the internet, a focused worldview can largely be missing. Ideally a child needs actual mentors to help build his or her understanding of ethics, integrity and other belief structures. In addition, a positive mentor can help children develop clarity on who they are and who they want to become. Even with the
bombardment of information on the internet, a centralized focus still needs to be present for children to convert information into judgment and awareness of their own moral guidelines (Hobbs, 1998).

While the specific content children learn in school and the literature they study may not all be retained through the years, the values, belief structures and ethical lessons they are shown can last a lifetime. This type of role modeling can be imperative as a future resource for children. It can help them through their continuing life experiences and help with the choices they make throughout their lives.

*Comic Books and Influence*

While films, books and plays have long been seen as literary forms that can help educate, comic books have now joined those other media forms to be seen as potentially excellent teaching tools (Gerde & Foster, 2007). Pictures and words can be a powerful combination as an educational tool. Comic books are able to make the point not just as a representation of words on paper, but as a visual representation as well.

Comic books also let the reader look at highly charged issues and yet have a safe distance from them. Since characters who are facing real-life moral questions and choices are once-removed from the person reading, the reader can look at the situation more objectively and not be tied as strongly to his or her own personal belief structure. This leaves more of an opening for the child or adolescent to see theoretical issues objectively and not be tied to a specific pre-conceived belief system (Gerde & Foster, 2007). Even more striking is that the heroes within comic books are often looked up to by the reader. When trying to impart a moral or life lesson, it’s easier to have the reader
internalize that message when it is coming from a hero rather than an authority figure (Schwartz, 2007).

There are a number of books and articles in print discussing the value of comic books as a teaching tool (Gerde & Foster, 2007; Pustz, 2012, Tabachnick, 2010). These books and articles readily point out the advantages that comic books have to teach complex subjects by marrying text and pictures. Adding to this is the bond that the reader feels with the characters, and that helps give an investment in learning that is not always available through conventional teaching. In addition, there are numerous classes taught on college campuses specifically about comic books, their literary value and their impact on students (Tabachnik, 2010).

In recent years, comic books and comic book characters have become almost synonymous with summer blockbuster movies. It is this incredible popularity that has made comic book characters iconic to millions of young people throughout our society. During the early years of the 21st century, Marvel Comics’ characters in particular have broken through as major movie heroes. Characters such as The Amazing Spider-Man, The Incredible Hulk, The Mighty Thor, the Uncanny X-Men, Iron Man have done incredibly well at the box office. According to industry website, Box Office Mojo, no less than nineteen Marvel comic book character-based movies have individually grossed over 100 million dollars each (Box Office Mojo, 2012).

It is this very popularity that makes comic books potentially powerful influences on children and adolescents. The world view being presented in the pages of these works can be highly influential on the people reading them and as such, can be used to help impart abstract concepts such as integrity and morality (Gerde & Foster, 2007).
Almost all of the comic books characters featured in the top-grossing Marvel Comics’ movie blockbusters were created by a handful of people between the years 1961 and 1964. These creators were Stan Lee (born Stanley Lieber), Jack Kirby (born Jacob Kurtzberg), Steve Ditko and a few others. This small group of creators were responsible for defining the look and characterization of the entire line of Marvel comic books, with characters that included Spider-Man, The Hulk, Thor, Iron Man, The Fantastic Four, The X-Men, Dr. Doom, Dr. Octopus, and many more (Ro, 2004). Writer/Editor Stan Lee’s defining achievement with these characters was in making them have truly human emotions (Raphael, 2007). These characters lived and breathed.

Rival DC Comics had heavy-weight characters like Batman and Superman. Yet, while Superman and his costume may have been virtually invincible, Spider-Man was much more problematic. Spider-man’s costume was likely to rip in battle and have to be sewn before he could continue the fight (Lee & Ditko, 1963). The Thing and the Human Torch, characters in the Fantastic Four, didn’t get along and argued (Raphael, 2007). The Submariner might be a hero one day and a villain the next (Lee & Wood, 1964). These were real people living in a real world. They may have had super-powers, but they also had real-life problems like homework.

Stan Lee, the writer and editor of most of the stories of the era, injected realism into a medium that was more known more for its outlandish plots, with logic inconsistencies you could drive a truck through. While Superman spun the Earth backwards to turn back time, Spider-Man had to get permission from his Aunt May to fly to Florida so he could battle the Lizard (Lee & Ditko, 1964).
Marvel Comics and the Reality of the Superhero

Keeping their comics rooted within the firm reality of our society helped make Marvel Comics extremely compelling to children during the 1960s. Stan Lee was a perfect ringleader for the entire line of comics. He was the editor, so he could create a cohesive group of comic books that were all inter-related (Raphael & Spurgeon, 2003). By being able to fully control the way the characters lived from issue to issue, Lee was able to weave a complex universe populated with flawed characters who rose above their afflictions to prove themselves as heroes (Ro, 2004).

No longer would the old-time super heroes, in their perfect world, with their perfect hair be hip. Starting in the early 1960s, Marvel Comics started building a foundation that would sustain a line of comics and characters that would continue to grow in popularity through the decades (Comtois, 2011). Adding to the realism in the comic books, most of the heroes in Marvel Comics lived in the real world, most of the time in New York City, as opposed to fictional cities like Superman and Batman lived in.

Perhaps one of Stan Lee’s greatest talents was to make children feel included within a special community. Every child reading Marvel Comics during the 1960s was made to feel that they belonged to something special. Stan Lee’s legendary hucksterism let everyone reading Marvel comics feel that they were reading something important – and that they were important as well.

During the early 1960s, so many concepts and heroes were introduced by Lee, Kirby and Ditko, that those few years between 1961 and 1965 supplied the raw material with which Marvel comics still feeds today. The amount of creativity and loyalty engendered by those comic books created a subset of society that has been fiercely loyal
to Marvel Comics and their characters for over 50 years (Genter, 2007). Go to any comic book convention these days, and it’s not the children that overrun the aisles, but the adults, primarily still caught up in the mythos of those comic books. It is this core group that has fueled these characters all of these years until Hollywood finally caught on (Leonard, 2007).

One of the reasons these stories were so engaging is that while the stories were about super powered characters, they were always firmly rooted in reality. Stan Lee’s concept was simple... if a character had extraordinary powers, but still had to deal with living in the real world, how would they act (Raphael & Spurgeon, 2003). What if the Thing from the Fantastic Four lost his powers for a while? What would he do? (Lee & Kirby, 1965) What if Spider-Man was defeated. How would he react? (Lee & Ditko, 1963) What if a man who lived in the 1940s came out of suspended animation and found himself living in the 1960s? (Lee & Kirby, 1964) These were all reality based questions that readers were curious about. Lee, Kirby and Ditko created fantastic worlds, with characters whose extraordinary powers were rooted in reality. That was the magic of Marvel Comics and young readers couldn’t get enough (Raphael & Spurgeon, 2003).

Beyond the exciting stories and soap opera elements that made these comic books so engaging, there was a clear world view being portrayed that was firmly rooted in the American Dream. Lee, Kirby and Ditko all grew up during the depression. While Lee and Kirby both were in the armed forces during World War II, the younger Ditko enlisted after High School and was stationed in post-war Germany. These men all worked in the comic book industry during the 1950s at a time when working in the industry seemed unseemly at best and harmful at worst. Comic books during the 1940s and 1950s were
sometimes viewed by the general population as a bad influence on children and certain
groups even saw them as promoting juvenile delinquency (Thrasher, 1949).

Due to their bad reputation during the 1950s, sales decreased and the company
now known as Marvel Comics almost went out of business before creating the iconic
characters we know today (Lammers, 2006). Stan Lee had all but given up writing comic
books (Raphael & Spurgeon, 2003). He felt that his writing talents could be utilized
better elsewhere and was contemplating leaving comics (Kaplan, 2005). Lee claims it
was his wife Joan who convinced him that if he was going to quit anyway, why not do
comics the way he wanted to do them? (Raphael & Spurgeon, 2003) And with that, the
Fantastic Four (the first of the Marvel superhero comic books of the 1960s) was born.
Jack Kirby remembers things differently, believing it was his idea to create the Fantastic
Four (Groth, 1990). No matter which account is more accurate, the first issue of the
Fantastic Four was published with a cover date of November, 1961.

While the publisher of Marvel Comics may have asked for a new team of
superheroes, it was Lee and Kirby who took that edict and came up with something that
had never been done before – Superheroes as soap opera. Lee and Kirby’s superheroes
argued amongst themselves, had money problems and threatened to quit the superhero
business when upset (Lee & Kirby, 1962). Superman never truly felt human, in that his
problems were not the reader’s problems. Marvel comics characters were always human,
always flawed, and as such, always relatable to the reader (Raphael & Spurgeon, 2003).

As therapeutic tools for modeling behavior, these comic books were instantly
relatable to children and adolescents of all ages. Spider-Man’s alter ego is a bit of a nerd,
is picked on by other kids, and he struggles to fit in. With 27% of students in fourth
through sixth grade experiencing some form of bullying from fellow students (Beran & Tutty, 2002), it stands to reason that a comic book character who is bullied, downtrodden and unsure of himself would be very relatable to the readership.

Daredevil is blind. Yet he overcomes his blindness to be able to still fight crime (Lee & Everett, 1964). Sgt. Fury (later Colonel Nick Fury) sees racism in completely black and white terms as being a blight on the society. There is no grey area where bigotry is concerned, and for a comic book published during the height of the civil rights movement in 1964, this was a brave stance to take (Lee & Kirby, 1964).

By having characters with real, human flaws, Lee, Kirby and/or Ditko created heroes you could root for. Add to this the continuing continuity that was created for the heroes and the villains and you had a comic book universe that has built upon itself for more than fifty years and is extremely relatable to the readership (Kaveney, 2005). It is this very reader identification that has engendered such loyalty over the years for readers of these comic books. It is also this simple, but powerful model that makes these characters so multi-dimensional. There is no black and white in terms of good and evil. Good characters can make mistakes (although always coming out eventually on the side of good), and evil characters can show admirable traits, which clearly showed them as three dimensional beings (Alberich, Miro-Julia & Rossello, 2002).

The Comic Books Themselves

When Sgt. Fury admonishes one of the members of his platoon for bigotry in Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos number seven, it is clearly a role modeling event. How can Fury’s admonishment that bigoted people are “rats” and “just crawl out of the mud long enough to poison whatever they touch” (Lee & Kirby, 1964), have any other
possible interpretation? It was very clear from this comic book which side of the civil rights movement Lee and Kirby considered the right one to be on.

When Galactus, a world-devouring god-like creature is bested by the Fantastic Four, he gives his word that he will no longer attack Earth if Mr. Fantastic (the leader of the Fantastic Four) hands over the weapon that has bested him. Mr. Fantastic trusts Galactus and hands over the weapon, believing that Galactus is trustworthy and if he gives his word he will be honorable (Lee & Kirby, 1965). This is a role-modeling moment which shows the importance of honor and having your word trusted.

In Daredevil # 7 (Lee & Wood, 1965), Daredevil fights beyond his endurance against the more powerful Submariner. Submariner is the royal leader of an undersea land called Atlantis, and has been battling the people on the surface. After a long, drawn out battle with Daredevil, Submariner has clearly won. Yet, even as the victor, he has tremendous respect for Daredevil’s courage, as he continued to fight on even when he had clearly lost. It is out of this respect that the Submariner decides to end the battle and head back to his undersea lair. He comments, “Out of respect to the courage of Daredevil, I shall not injure any humans! I shall fly above the waiting armed forces and return to the sea where I am supreme” (Lee & Wood, 1965). This is a clear lesson of honor and respect.

Lee and Kirby also saw the value of honor in many other comics they produced. Within the pages of Thor # 104, 110 and 111 (Lee & Kirby, 1964), the reader is shown the importance of honoring one’s father even when disagreeing with him. Fantastic Four # 51 (Lee & Kirby, 1965) examines greed and bitterness and how it yields bitter fruit. Yet even with an issue that shows such undesirable behavior as extreme bitterness, the
reader is shown that even the most bitter, unhappy person can find redemption during his or her lifetime as long as the person is willing to recognize the error of his or her ways and try to correct it. The villain of the story eventually sees the destructive nature of his jealousy and comments, “That’s the guy I spent years hating – being jealous of?! I-I ain’t even worth his little pinky” (Lee & Kirby, 1965).

These comic books also taught us that physical handicaps may create obstacles to overcome, but need not defeat us. Iron Man has a metal plate in his chest keeping his heart beating. Daredevil is completely blind and relies on his enhanced additional senses to be successful. The Silver Surfer gave up soaring through space to uphold his own belief system. Peter Parker endured the tragic death of his beloved Uncle Ben before realizing that each of us is responsible for our actions in the world. It is this moral structure that has guided the entire Marvel Comic Book universe for the past 50 years and has ultimately helped fuel their success.
CHAPTER III

Project Audience and Comic Book Choices

Project Introduction

This Thesis Project is designed to aid parents and therapists by helping children understand a variety of moral and ethical issues important to helping them develop as responsible people within our society. With the myriad ways that children/adolescents are bombarded with information on television, the movies, the internet and many other sources, it can be difficult to help monitor the values and newly formed moral beliefs of children. Parents are increasingly away from home (Foderaro, 2008), and as a result children are forming their value systems in large part on the things they absorb from the media.

This project incorporates the comic book work of Marvel Comics during the 1960s as it pertains to helping shape a child’s value structure through example. Finding a consistent worldview that can help prepare children for societal expectations can be a valuable resource. The behavior modeling found within the pages of these comic books can help a child understand the values of our culture.

Role Modeling Lessons

The comic books focused on will address nine specific issues that can help a child better understand the morality and ethics of American society. These traits and understandings of being a compassionate, caring person that is represented in these comic books will hopefully bolster children’s own belief structures as they are forming their own sense of right and wrong.
The purpose of this project will be to give a teacher and/or therapists tools with which to help a child who is struggling with his or her own beliefs. These tools will be in the form of Marvel comic books from the 1960s, which will illustrate in a cohesive plotline, the issues in which the child is having difficulties.

These tools in turn, will give the child a new perspective on these issues and hopefully help him or her be able to give deeper thought to the morality issues they are focusing on. These comic books can help with a wide range of ethical issues.

Specific Issues

Racial Prejudice

Racial prejudice and bigotry is a hot button in American society. Throughout recent American history, this subject has been extremely contentious and difficult for people to discuss for fear of being offensive. Whether it’s racial prejudice, gender prejudice, or more recently sexual identity prejudice, America finds dealing with bigotry very difficult and hard to reconcile. Yet, in 1964 at the height of the civil rights movement, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby dealt with the issue head on.

At a time when a good deal of America was caught in the grip of racial hatred, these two men, in the pages of the sixth issue of Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos (Lee and Kirby, 1964), showed clearly and definitively which side of the debate they were on. Sgt. Fury was in charge of a platoon of special forces soldiers who were sent into the most dangerous and deadly situations because of their skills. If an important war secret needed protecting, or a high-ranking general needed to be rescued, the Howling Commandos were the team to send.
Interestingly for 1964, the Howling Commandos were presented as an integrated army platoon during World War II. This was a fictionalization of the truth as the real army of the United States did not become integrated until 1948, three years after the end of the fighting in World War II. Yet by making the Howling Commandos an integrated unit, they took license with reality to show integration as normal for our society.

Within the pages of this comic book, one of the platoon members is injured, which means they need a replacement until he is better. The replacement, Private Stonewall, is shocked to find the unit integrated. He is clearly shown as bigoted and quite surprised that he’s being forced into an integrated barracks. At first the reader sees he’s uncomfortable with an Italian platoon member, then that he is clearly upset by a Jewish member, and finally he almost refuses to be in the same barracks with a black man.

At this time in 1964, this would have been exactly how many adults felt about racial integration. Yet in the pages of the comic book, it is clearly shown that racial harmony is the norm, and that bigots are the problem. Sgt. Fury, upon learning of his new recruit’s racial intolerance lets him know it’s unacceptable in no uncertain terms. He says to Stonewall, “You so much as look at… anyone because of his race or skin color, and I’ll make ya wish you were never born!” (Lee and Kirby, 1964). When another platoon member comments to Sgt. Fury by saying, “Hey Sarge, ain’t he supposed to be on our side??” Fury continues by saying, “Rats like him aren’t on any side! They just crawl outta the mud long enough to poison whatever they touch!” (Lee and Kirby, 1964).

Anyone reading this exchange who respected the heroes presented within this story would have a very difficult time justifying his or her own prejudice. After all, these
are not authority figures lecturing to the reader, these are heroes expressing their views. And if the child or adolescent reading this respects the heroes, they would be hard-pressed to not at least question their prejudice (Schwartz, 2008). During the climax of the story it turns out that the bigoted member of the platoon puts everyone else at risk because of his prejudice. His actions eventually cause him to become wounded and he is shocked to find that in order to save his life, he has been given blood by the black member of the platoon.

What makes this a truly role modeling moment is that no one in the story is in any way shocked by what has occurred. The inhabitants of this comic book storyline feel that prejudice is something to be scorned and that integration, along with sharing of blood and anything else necessary to win the war effort, is completely normal. Plus, anyone getting in the way of this type of racial equality and tolerance is wrong. Pure and simply, wrong. There are no other views presented, just the clear view that bigotry is a trait only for the backward thinking and that racial tolerance is for those who are forward thinking.

It is this situation during the beginning of 1964, during the height of the civil rights movement where many people felt extremely differently than this, that showed real bravery on the part of the comic book creators in terms of representing their worldviews and risking their sales and livelihood. At best this story can change a person’s views on racial prejudice, and at worst, it still opens the reader’s mind long enough to think about it.

*When the going gets tough, keep going!*

Something that is very important for children and adolescents to learn is the concept of continuing to try for something in the face of temporary defeat. When a child
strikes out in baseball, does he or she give up and quit, or continue practicing to get better? That’s an important life lesson for children to learn. They need to know that, if at first they don’t succeed, continuing to try can truly be the difference between a temporary setback and losing their goal.

Marvel Comics in the 1960s were excellent at presenting this important concept to their young readers. Starting with Spider-Man #3 dated July, 1963, we find that for the first time Spider-Man is confronted with a villain that is stronger than he is. This villain is Dr. Octopus and he handily defeats Spider-Man and tosses him out of his laboratory (Lee & Ditko, 1963). Spider-Man, realizing for the first time that he can actually lose a fight, is not sure what to do. He thinks to himself, “I’ve never been beaten before! But this time, my spider powers were not enough! Is this the end of Spider-Man?” (Lee & Ditko, 1963)

After his defeat at the hands of Dr. Octopus, Spider-Man’s alter ego, Peter Parker, is depressed. He sits in on a lecture at this high school by the Human Torch (one of the Fantastic Four) and sadly thinks to himself, “If only I had his power… his confidence!... But that’s easy when you’ve never been beaten!” (Lee & Ditko, 1963) In this exchange we see that Peter Parker feels like most adolescents have felt at one time or another, that when you can’t easily succeed at something, you just want to give up. However, a few panels later, the Human Torch speaks about the power of trying. He says, “Even the Fantastic Four have had defeats – but we always come back! Our motto is never say die!” This invigorates the young Peter Parker who soon suits up as Spider-Man again to go and face Dr. Octopus. He thinks to himself as he’s putting on his costume, “I guess if the Fantastic Four could be defeated, and then go back for more, Spider-Man can, too!”
It is in this moment that a young reader realizes that being defeated is no disgrace, as the important thing is to continue to try. By the end of the story Spider-Man defeats Dr. Octopus and learns the value of continuing to try when things don’t go your way the first time.

Another example of making sure you continue to fight even when things look hopeless is in Spider-Man #33 (Lee & Ditko, 1965). This is the third issue of a three issue story arc. In this climactic issue, Spider-Man is trapped under tons of machinery in an underground complex under a river. While he lies there helpless underneath the rubble, he notices a crack in the ceiling and water from the river above starting to drip into the undersea structure.

It is in this comic book that Spider-Man realizes that determination of will can accomplish many things in life. While seemingly helpless and unable to escape from what could very well be his final defeat, Spider-Man struggles to lift the machinery. Just out of reach is a container of medicine that Spider-Man needs to save his Aunt May. He is clearly agonizing over his failure to bring her the medicine she needs. He says on the very first page of the story, “I’ve failed! Just now – when it counted the most – I’ve failed!” (Lee & Ditko, 1965) Here Spider-Man spends a full five pages of this story, 25% of the entire comic book, struggling with all his might to free himself from the heavy machinery that has trapped him. While Superman might have been able to toss the machinery off his body quickly, within one page, it takes Spider-Man five pages to be able to muster up the strength to do this.

We watch his agony and struggle and we root for him. We hear his thought processes as his determination to free himself builds. As he struggles, Spider-Man says,
“Anyone can win a fight – when the odds – are easy! It’s when the going’s tough – when there seems to be no chance – that’s when – it counts!” And with that, Spider-Man is able to show that determination and continuing to try can pay huge dividends in life. He lifts the machinery off of himself and gets the medicine he needs to save his aunt’s life. What a child or adolescent hopefully gets from this sequence is the idea that when you’re willing to put all you have behind something, you can (at least in Spider-Man’s case) literally move mountains!

Handicaps can be overcome

Marvel introduced the concept of the imperfect hero to comic books. In this case, imperfect is defined as having something a hero needed to overcome that was integral to who they were and what they became. Whatever the superhero’s impediment, they were able to rise above it and succeed anyway. Almost every Marvel Superhero had a physical or emotional challenge of some type: Iron Man needed electricity to keep his heart going, Daredevil was blind and needed to use his other senses to compensate, The Hulk became a mindless brute, the Thing could not change back to his human form, Thor was unable to marry the girl he loved because it was prohibited by his father, and Spider-Man lived with the guilt of not stopping the burglar that killed the uncle that raised him. Each hero’s tragedy brought a sense of empathy to the character that made readers want to root for them.

It was this awareness of not letting obstacles get in their way that was a hallmark of the Marvel line of comics and a valuable life lesson as well. Whenever life hands you a setback, whether it be large or small, you can still muster up the courage and resolve to rise above your problems and succeed.
One of the most important lessons a child or adolescent can be taught is the value of his or her word. When you give your word and follow through with what you say, it earns you respect and trust. Another role-modeling example shown in the pages of Marvel Comics was the idea that your word was truly important. When a character made a commitment, he or she honored that commitment. The heroes that populated the Marvel comic books of the era understood that their word meant something and so did the word of others.

Never was this more apparent than in the epic battle between the Fantastic Four and Galactus in issues # 48 through # 50 of the Fantastic Four (Lee & Kirby, 1965). In this powerful three issue series, Galactus, a God-like character who feeds off the energy of entire worlds, comes to Earth to basically drain its energy and leave it a barren world, devoid of life. Galactus is not an evil character, just a hungry one. While he has no desire to kill the inhabitants of Earth, he also sees it as a natural consequence to feeding his hunger. Naturally, with a threat of this size, Earth’s Superhero team, the Fantastic Four, attempt to stop him. Unfortunately, they are little more effective than mosquitoes when it comes to stopping Galactus.

After an epic battle, with some help and determination, the Fantastic Four are able to acquire a weapon that can destroy Galactus and threaten him with it. Reluctantly he agrees to leave Earth without draining it of its energy. Galactus laments, “The prize is not worth the battle! Let the human surrender the weapon and I shall tarry her no longer!” (Lee & Kirby, 1966). The Fantastic Four realize that when Galactus gives his word, it is his bond. In this sequence we are shown that giving one’s word means
something. It is clear that when you give your word, it is a thing of value and should be honored.

This can be a very valuable life lesson for a child. It can be empowering to know that your words have value and can be respected. When you give your word it is important that you honor it and when you choose not to agree to something, that has value as well. The role-modeling in this story can be of real value to the reader who is struggling with learning to be responsible with his or her promises and commitments.  

Sacrifice for others

Within the pages of Fantastic Four # 48 through # 50, a character is introduced that shows children and adolescents the true meaning of sacrifice. This tale of sacrifice and honor comes from an unlikely source. It is told from the point of view of an alien visitor.

As discussed in the previous section, Galactus is a God-like character that was intending to use Earth as his own personal energy meal. The Fantastic Four set out to stop him in order to save the planet. Another character introduced in this story arc was the Silver Surfer. This silver coated humanoid character, rode the galaxies on a surfboard. He was the herald of Galactus, his trusted assistant who searched throughout the galaxies for planets suitable to satiate the hunger of Galactus. It was the Silver Surfer who first brought Galactus to Earth.

During the course of the battle for Earth with the Fantastic Four, the Silver Surfer encounters a human woman, who shows him compassion and caring. Through her warmth, he is shown the value of human life and the value of humanity itself. He decides to battle his master Galactus to try and save the planet. He says, “Perhaps for the
first time in memory… I have found something – something worth protecting!” (Lee & Kirby, 1966)

By issue # 50 of the Fantastic Four, Galactus has been defeated, making his vow to not attack the Earth. However, since his herald, the Silver Surfer, betrayed him, Galactus strips him of his abilities to roam the galaxies, essentially exiling him to Earth. Galactus remarks, “Since you shall be herald to Galactus no longer, I remove your space-time powers! Henceforth, the Silver Surfer shall roam the galaxies no more!” (Lee & Kirby, 1966)

Stripped of his ability to soar the galaxies, the Silver Surfer is trapped on Earth. A few issues later, the reality of his plight starts to set in. In Fantastic Four # 55, cover dated October 1966, he realizes the sad truth of his current existence. “I, who have crested the currents of space… who have dodged the meteor swarms and out-distanced the fastest comets – I must resign myself to this prison which men call Earth – because I dared give up the freedom of the universe to aid the hapless humans!” (Lee & Kirby, 1966). These issues truly demonstrate the idea of honoring what you believe in (with the Silver Surfer recognizing the value of humanity and fighting for it), and the concept of sacrifice for the greater good. It is a valuable lesson of selflessness that can be easily understood and recognized through these comic books.

*Envy, jealousy and bitterness versus the courage of redemption*

One additional foray into the life lessons shown in the pages of the Fantastic Four has to do with envy, jealousy and bitterness and how they can cloud people’s judgment and truly poison their chances of happiness.
After defeating Galactus in Fantastic Four # 50, the Fantastic Four are relieved to have saved the Earth. However, one of the factors that went into the Silver Surfer turning against Galactus was a discussion he had with Alicia, the blind girlfriend of the Thing (Lee & Kirby, 1966). Alicia and the Silver Surfer connected on some level which gave the Silver Surfer a better understanding of the value of humanity. This very much threatened the Thing (a man who was transformed by gamma rays into a super-powered orange rock creature by radiation and cannot change back to his human form). The Thing sees his girlfriend spending time with the Silver Surfer and concludes that he’s losing her. He thinks to himself (complete with his New York accent), “… If I wuz Alicia… who would I pick?? A gleamin’ gladiator like him… or an ape like… me? Face it, ugly, it ain’t no contest!” (Lee & Kirby, 1966).

The Thing wanders the streets feeling sorry for himself and then comes upon an understanding man who invites him in out of the rain. This man is a scientist who is outwardly kind to the Thing, but drugs him causing him to fall asleep. It is here we learn that this was not a random meeting. The man is a rival scientist of Reed Richards, the scientist in the Fantastic Four. His envy of Reed Richards has caused him to concoct a plan where he’s going to steal the Thing’s power and transform himself into the Thing through a “duplication apparatus” he’s created (Lee & Kirby, 1966).

The scientist transforms himself into the Thing, leaving Ben Grimm back in his human form. It is here we see the full degree of his envy and jealousy. Now looking exactly like the Thing and having his super-strength, he heads over to the headquarters of the Fantastic Four to destroy Reed Richards. While the story began with Ben Grimm
feeling sorry for himself, it now has taken a twist where another man’s jealousies have fueled his life to the point that he wants to destroy the man he has spent his life envying.

The imposter is greeted by the Fantastic Four with kindness and caring just like the real Thing would be. He is enlisted to help Mr. Fantastic (Reed Richards) who is about to enter “Sub Space.” This Sub Space area is within another dimension and the Thing is given a tether line to pull Mr. Fantastic back into our dimension if anything goes wrong.

While interacting with Reed Richards for the first time, the imposter realizes that he is a kind, brave man, who is doing good things for the society. He is conflicted. He has spent years hating Reed Richards and now is seeing him in a new light. When the time comes for him to pull back the tether cord to bring Reed Richards back to our dimension, the imposter Thing hesitates. He delays too long and the tether snaps, thus seemingly dooming Reed Richards in Sub Space. However, by this time he’s realized that his jealous and envy have robbed him of a worthwhile life. He thinks to himself, “I never did a worthwhile thing in my whole life!! But now – I’ve finally got the chance! I can really be Ben Grimm! I’ve gotta do it! I’ll save Richards!!” (Lee & Kirby, 1966)

The imposter Thing rushes into the sub space area to save the man he’s hated all these years. The reader sees that envy and jealousy are destructive forces and that accomplishing something is much more desirable than hating someone else’s accomplishments. The imposter finds Mr. Fantastic and together they sit on a rock, doomed in Sub Space. Even then, we see that Mr. Fantastic cares more about his partner’s life than his own. Reed Richards is a true hero and even when facing death, models the idea of self-sacrifice. The imposter realizes his mistakes and thinks to
himself, “This is the guy I spent years hating – being jealous of!! I – I ain’t even worth his little pinky!” (Lee & Kirby, 1966).

At this point the villain of the story redeems himself. He saves Reed Richards by throwing him with his massive arms through Sub Space and back into his own dimension. And to reinforce the life lessons being modeled within this story, as the imposter faces his own death in Sub Space, he sits alone and thinks to himself, “As for me, I’m not gonna feel sorry for myself! Not many men get a second chance – to make up for the rotten things they’ve done in their lifetime!” It is here we see the true power of role modeling. As the person who was consumed by jealousy and envy redeems himself we see a complex message of how bitterness can destroy a person’s life and rob them of their joy, and how selfless actions can bring redemption.

*Family Respect*

There are times when everyone disagrees with their parents. Yet, even in those disagreements, our society expects that children will treat their parents with a sense of respect. This respectful behavior toward a parent is modeled successfully in the pages of *The Mighty Thor*. During the course of this series, Thor’s alter-ego, Dr. Don Blake falls in love with his nurse, Jane Foster. Yet, because Jane Foster is a mortal and Dr. Blake is really Thor, the God of Thunder, Thor’s father Odin forbids the romance.

As young people do, Thor continues to carry a torch for Jane Foster despite his father’s disapproval. Odin grows frustrated, trying time and time again to stop Thor from being with Jane Foster. In issue # 104 of *Journey into Mystery*, the comic book that Thor appeared in during the early 1960s, Odin realizes his limitations. He muses, “The only
emotion I cannot control is… love! I cannot drive his longing for the Earth woman from his heart” (Lee & Kirby, 1964).

During Thor’s courtship with Jane Foster, he rebels against his father, but even in his rebellion, he never loses respect for him - like adolescents often do when they are trying to differentiate themselves from their parents, Thor refuses to bend to his father’s will. However, no matter what the disagreement, no matter how stressful the argument between father and son, Thor always remains respectful of his father. He may not do as he wishes all of the time, he may be angry with him, but in spite of this, he almost always shows him respect.

Shades of Grey

Is there such a thing as pure evil? In other comic books, you had good guys and bad guys. In Marvel comic books from the early 1960s, heroes were often misunderstood. Spider-Man was a misunderstood hero. People within the comic books were ambivalent about him. They sometimes saw him as a menace: other times a hero. As in real life, people’s opinions fluctuated.

In the pages of Marvel Comics, characters that started out as villains often changed sides to become heroes. The Black Widow was introduced as a Russian Spy in the pages of Iron Man, and later became a Superhero living in the United States. Hawkeye, the expert marksmen, fought Iron Man because of his love of the Black Widow. The Submariner was fueled by anger toward the human race because of their actions in the ocean that threatened or harmed his undersea kingdom of Atlantis. Later on Hawkeye went to work with the Avengers and the Submariner became a member of the Defenders – both teams of heroes.
In Marvel Comics people were not relegated to one-note characterization. They were three dimensional and as such, showed their young readers that life is not about absolutes and that people can grow and change. In this way, the role modeling in these comic books showed that you can make mistakes, and then still turn your life around and correct them.

*With Great Power, comes Great Responsibility*

How do children and adolescents learn about social responsibility? The concept, that as citizens of our society, we have a responsibility not only to ourselves but to the world around us as well. This is a difficult concept to understand. Yet, this type of role modeling occurred throughout Marvel comic books during the 1960s. The most famous example of this comes in the pages of Spider-Man during his first appearance in a comic book titled Amazing Fantasy. In issue # 15 of Amazing Fantasy, Spider-Man was introduced to the public and in his very first story, clearly showed the world the concept of social responsibility in the absolute strongest terms possible (Lee & Ditko, 1962).

After newly acquiring his powers, the young Peter Parker decides he should use his new found super strength and wall-crawling ability to earn some extra money. He tries his hand as a professional wrestler, then appears on television, building his fame with the public. Then after a triumphant television appearance, and with numerous entertainment companies clamoring for his time, Spider-Man starts to head home as a burglar sprints by him! A police officer calls out, “Stop Thief! Stop him! If he makes it to the elevator, he’ll get away!” (Lee & Ditko, 1962) Spider-Man does nothing to stop the thief and is berated by the police officer but he doesn’t care. Spider-Man says,
“That’s your job! I’m thru being pushed around – by anyone! From now on I just look out for number one – that means – me!” (Lee & Ditko, 1962)

A few days later, Spider-Man’s uncle is murdered! When he tracks down the killer, he discovers that it’s the very same burglar that he let escape earlier in the story! He has learned in the most dramatic way possible that social responsibility falls to everyone. As Spider-Man walks sadly away with the knowledge that his actions could have prevented his Uncle’s death, the caption reads, “And a lean, silent figure slowly fades into the gathering darkness, aware at last that in this world, with great power there must also come – great responsibility!” (Lee & Ditko, 1962).

*Your Mind is your Real Power*

While Marvel comics in the 1960s showed that super-powered beings could dominate New York City with their adventures and extraordinary powers, when you read the comic books, you couldn’t help but be impressed by the minds of these heroes. Bruce Banner (The Hulk) was a scientist. Peter Parker (Spider-Man) was an honor student, interested in science. Reed Richards (Mr. Fantastic) was a scientist. Hank Pym (Ant-Man and Giant Man) was another scientist. Stephen Strange (Dr. Strange) was a doctor, as was Don Blake (Thor). This was a universe dominated by people who were professional, educated people who understood the value of education. Throughout the comic books and stories, ingenuity trumped raw strength. Even when the heroes were outmanned and outgunned, their cleverness often won the day.

It was continually emphasized within the pages of these books that reason and intelligence was the key to success and that mindless battling was only the last resort. Whether Reed Richards invented a machine to another dimension within the pages of the
Fantastic Four, or Peter Parker mixed up a formula for webbing so he could secure his defeated foes, or Thor saved the life of someone in the operating room as his alter ego Dr. Don Blake, adolescents were continually shown a world where a good education was vital to success as an adult.
CHAPTER IV

Summary and recommendations

Throughout this thesis project I have shown life lessons that reinforced some important aspects of growing up within our society. These comic books present life lessons that are now 50 years old, yet are still as relevant today as they were back in the 1960s. The key to their relevance is that the life lessons being shown in the pages of these comic books are not lectures; they are a way of thinking addressed by the characters within these books that “role model” positive behavior for the readers.

It is easy for children and adolescents to see or hear a lecture from an authority figure and dismiss the message. It is much harder to dismiss the message when that same child reads a story where the heroes are role-modeling behavior that will be advantageous for them to internalize. To anyone questioning the relevance of these characters from half a century ago, one must look no further than the current movie releases based on these characters that have been breaking box office records worldwide during the first part of the twenty-first century. Movies featuring Spider-Man, the Avengers, Iron Man, the X-Men, Thor, the Hulk, the Fantastic Four and others have grossed billions of dollars and created a franchise of characters that gain more and more popularity every year.

The type of popularity achieved by Spider-Man and the other characters discussed within this thesis project gives them a current relevance to children and adolescents throughout our society and throughout the world. As a result, using these moral, ethical, role-modeling comic book stories as instructional tools to aid children in understanding their society not only makes sense, but makes sharing these ideals completely understandable to the youth reading them.
No longer will parents have to insist their children learn about the value of education, respecting authority, overcoming handicaps, the unfairness of prejudice, and building integrity. Parents and therapists can use this literature to have the child’s very heroes espouse these beliefs! These comic books are hungrily read by young readers and the life lessons inside can be readily absorbed. It is with the hope that these comic books can be seen as more than just entertainment that this thesis project was undertaken. Hopefully through the pages of this work, the reader will have a clearer understanding of the value of these early Marvel Comic Books.
REFERENCES


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APPENDIX

WORKBOOK FOR PARENTS AND THERAPISTS TO UTILIZE MARVEL COMIC BOOKS FROM THE 1960s AS POSITIVE ROLE MODELING FOR CHILDREN

The following workbook focuses on nine societal issues and gives the teacher and/or therapist the tools by which they can illustrate the moral and ethical choices they are discussing. A specific comic book (or comic books) for each of these societal issues will be recommended and can be given to a child. The child will be able to enjoy the entertainment value of the comic book and at the same time, incorporate the thoughts presented into his or her own understanding of the issue being discussed. In addition, each comic book lesson within this workbook will have a list of discussion questions to further the conversation after the child/adolescent has completed his or her reading. It is the intent of this workbook that this list of comic books will be read and discussed with young readers as an aid to opening the discussion of ethical and moral questions about our society. It is not reasonable to believe that a piece of literature, whether it is a book or a comic book, can instill all that a child needs to understand about morality and ethics. This workbook is designed to create a starting point, helping parents and therapists open a discussion – especially when a child is exhibiting questionable understanding of these important issues.

Whether it is a belief in oneself, or learning to become a person of integrity, the pages in these comic books provide a basis for understanding of these things. It is hoped that the use of comic books can aid children in learning some important life lessons through role modeling on their way to adulthood.
All of the comic books discussed within this workbook were printed as 12 cent comic books during the 1960s. As such, they are not readily accessible in their original form and could cost hundreds, or even thousands of dollars in the collectibles market. Fortunately, all of these stories have been reprinted in book form, collecting as many as ten to twenty issues of each comic book. These reprints are readily available at Amazon.com, as well as other book sellers. When discussing the comic books in this workbook, there will also be a mention of the current book in print where each of these stories can be found.

In addition, after summarizing each story within this workbook and the ethical issue it examines, a series of discussion questions will be included that can used by the therapist or parent to further the discussion about the situation and help a child internalize its meaning.
When it comes to attacking racial prejudice, you would be hard pressed to find a better example to share with children than this comic book. At a time when the civil rights movement was in full bloom during 1963 and 1964, Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos tackled the issue of racial prejudice head on.

This comic book made it clear in no uncertain terms, through the words of the hero of the story, that people who judge others because of their ethnicity or skin color were “rats” and “just crawl outta the mud long enough to poison whatever they touch!”

This comic book openly addresses the issue of racism and makes it clear to the reader that racial prejudice is unacceptable within our society.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. Why is George Stonewell unhappy to be with some of the “Howlers” in his platoon?
2. What specifically does he not like about them?
3. What does Sgt. Fury think about George Stonewell’s dislike of some of the other members of the platoon?
4. What do you think about the things that Stonewell believes?
5. What are your own thoughts on prejudice and racism?
6. Did you learn anything from the characters in this story?

7. What other thoughts do you have about this story and prejudice?
WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH – KEEP GOING!

Comic Book:  The Amazing Spider-Man # 3

Collected in:

The Essential Spider-Man, Volume 1, 2006

Marvel Masterworks – Spider-Man, Volume 1, 2007

It is important for a child to understand the concept of sticking with something. Even if he or she doesn’t succeed at first, it is important to keep trying and not give up too quickly. It is this perseverance that can lead to eventual success.

In the pages of Spider-Man, Stan Lee and Steve Ditko brought to life a teenager who acquired extraordinary powers. This teenager was inexperienced and had a very difficult time understanding that when things don’t come easily, it is important to stick to it and not give up.

For Spider-Man’s alter ego Peter Parker this point was driven home in the pages of Spider-Man # 3. In this issue, early in the story Spider-Man is defeated by Dr. Octopus. It was the first time Spider-Man ever lost a battle and it caused him to become disillusioned and actually want to quit being a Superhero.

Another Marvel Superhero, the Human Torch inadvertently helps Spider-Man understand about perseverance when he talks about how the Fantastic Four continue to try after a setback. The Human Torch says, “Even the Fantastic Four have had defeats – but we always come back! Our motto is never say die!” It is in the pages of this comic book that Spider-Man learns the importance of continuing on even after an initial defeat.
Discussion Questions:

1. Why was Peter Parker/Spider-Man so upset when he failed against Dr. Octopus?

2. What did he think about losing the battle?

3. Have you ever felt like you wanted to give up after finding something was harder than you thought it was? How did that feel?

4. What did you think of what the Human Torch had to say to the high school students?

5. What do you think Peter Parker felt about his talk to the school?

6. How do you think you might apply these feelings toward yourself when things are harder to do than you thought they’d be?

Additional Readings on not giving up

Further discussion on persevering in the face of adversity can be found in the three part story in issues # 31 – # 33 of the Amazing Spider-Man (Collected in The Essential Spider-Man, Volume 2, 2006 and Marvel Masterworks – Spider-Man, Volume 4, 2007). In this three part story, Spider-Man faces incredible odds to save the life of his Aunt May. The beginning of issue # 33 shows Spider-Man continuing to struggle even when things look hopeless. He eventually succeeds, even though the odds are incredibly stacked against him.
OVERCOMING HANDICAPS

Comic Book: Daredevil #1

Collected in:

The Essential Daredevil, Volume 1, 2006

Marvel Masterworks – Daredevil, Volume 1, 2007

One of the hallmarks of the Marvel Comics Universe during the 1960s was the concept of Superheroes with mental and physical challenges. For example: Iron Man needed electrical impulses to keep his damaged heart beating. The Hulk turned from the brilliant scientist Dr. Bruce Banner into a mentally compromised super-powered behemoth. However, this life lesson is about the Superhero known as Daredevil. Daredevil grew up blind and still became a crime-fighting superhero.

Matt Murdock, Daredevil’s alter-ego was blinded as a child after helping save an elderly man who was about to be hit by a truck. Matt was struck by the truck instead and a radioactive cylinder struck him in the face, blinding him instantly. Matt may have been blinded, but he doesn’t spend time feeling sorry for himself. In fact, he reassures his father that even if he has lost his sight, at least he’s alive. Soon after getting out of the hospital Matt Murdock realizes the radioactive cylinder may have blinded him, but it has also heightened his other senses to help compensate for his blindness.

In this comic book, a child learns that even if someone is physically challenged in some way, he or she can overcome that handicap to still make the most of their lives. Throughout the comic book series, Daredevil continually uses his ingenuity and heightened senses to battle crime. Even without super-powers, other than his heightened senses, he is able to use his skills to help society.
Discussion Questions:

1. How did Matt Murdock feel when he lost his sight?

2. What do you think about people with physical challenges still being able to accomplish great tasks?

3. Do you ever feel sorry for yourself if you can’t do everything as well as you would like? How does it make you feel?

4. How do you think you’d feel if you couldn’t see?

5. What do you think about people being able to overcome their physical or mental challenges?

Additional Stories on overcoming challenges

Further stories on overcoming physical challenges can be found in the pages of Iron Man, featured in Tales of Suspense issue # 74 (Collected in The Essential Iron Man, Volume 2 and Marvel Masterworks – Iron Man, Volume 3). Iron Man has a damaged heart and requires electricity to keep his heart beating. In issue # 74 his electrical charge has become fully drained and we see that Iron Man is near death. It is a testament to overcoming adversity that the powerful Iron Man courageously defends society even though his heart can give out at any minute if he loses the electrical power keeping it beating.
THE VALUE OF INTEGRITY

Comic Books: The Fantastic Four #48 - #50

Collected in:

The Essential Fantastic Four, Volume 3, 2006

Marvel Masterworks – The Fantastic Four, Volume 5, 2007

A very valuable lesson for a child to learn is the importance of being able to be someone who is trustworthy. The concept that when you give your word to someone it means something. If you promise to do something, following through is important to your ability to succeed later in life. After all, being able to be responsible for your own actions can make the difference between having a successful life of accomplishment, versus a life where you are unable to actualize your goals.

In Marvel Comic Books, integrity was everywhere. Even the villains of the story could often have enough integrity to be trusted when they gave their word. Seeing the heroes and even the villains of the story have integrity is a very good role-modeling moment. It shows the young reader that being trustworthy is important and that integrity is a valuable commodity. This awareness can help a child in numerous ways when they reach adulthood. After all, in just about any job, someone who can be trusted to deliver what they promise is a valuable asset to almost any company.

Fantastic Four #48 through #50 are terrific examples of the concept of integrity. In this powerful three issue series, the Earth is threatened by a God-like creature named Galactus. Without regard to the life or death of the people of Earth Galactus is going to devour the energy from Earth. The fact that it will destroy the entire population is not his concern.
Through a series of plot twists, the Fantastic Four are able to acquire a weapon that is so powerful it can even destroy the God-like Galactus. In order to stop him from devouring the energy of Earth, the Fantastic Four make a deal with Galactus to give up the ultimate weapon in return for his leaving Earth without harming it.

The question is, will Galactus keep his word and leave Earth once receiving back the dangerous weapon? He does, and Earth is saved. It is clear in this story by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby that giving your word means something, whether you are merely mortal or a galactic, super-powered being.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What do you think about Galactus promising to leave the Earth alone?
2. Did you believe him? Why?
3. Why would he give his word like that? When he got the weapon back from the Fantastic Four, why didn’t he then destroy the Earth?
4. Do you feel doing when you promise something it’s important?
5. When you promise to do something, do you usually do it? Can you give me an example?
6. How do you feel when your friends don’t do what they say they’re going to do?
7. Why is it important to do the things you say you’re going to do?
SACRIFICE FOR OTHERS

Comic Books: The Fantastic Four # 48 - # 50

Collected in:

The Essential Fantastic Four, Volume 3, 2006

Marvel Masterworks – The Fantastic Four, Volume 5, 2007

The Silver Surfer was created as a herald for Galactus, a God-like creature who drained entire planets of their energy, leaving them barren. The Silver Surfer was the herald of Galactus and sought out new planets for Galactus to drain. When the Silver Surfer found Earth, he also found a great lesson as the Fantastic Four fought Galactus. The Silver Surfer learned the value of our species and was willing to sacrifice himself to help the Earth survive.

While chances are that children will not have to make such a dire decision to possibly sacrifice themselves to help someone else, the fact that they learn there are things worth sacrificing for, is a valuable lesson. Sometimes people have to put their own needs aside to help others who are in greater need. And this trilogy presented in Fantastic Four # 48 – # 50 clearly shows someone who learns the value of our species, and is willing to put his own well-being on the line to help our planet.

The hope is that a child reading this story sees that sometimes you have to put aside your own personal needs for the greater good of those around you. It is a clear role-modeling moment that can be used to initiate a discussion with children about social responsibility.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why did the Silver Surfer come to Earth?
2. Did his views about helping Galactus change during the story? In what way?

3. Why did he decide to turn against Galactus and help the Fantastic Four?

4. What were the consequences of his actions?

5. Do you think it was the right thing for him to do? Why do you think the Silver Surfer thought it was the right thing to do?

6. What did you think about the Silver Surfer making this sacrifice for Earth?
ENVY AND JEALOUSY

Comic Books: The Fantastic Four # 51

Collected in:

The Essential Fantastic Four, Volume 3, 2006

Marvel Masterworks – The Fantastic Four, Volume 6, 2007

A common issue that children face is jealousy. Children often want what other kids have. Sometimes this can lead to fights, other times to envy and bitterness. Dealing with a child that is not satisfied with their own toys and wants to have everyone else’s toys as well can be very upsetting.

Marvel comics dealt with jealousy and envy numerous times in their comic books, but perhaps there was no more poignant example of this than in the pages of Fantastic Four # 51. In this issue, we see how low someone can sink when they are consumed by envy, jealousy and bitterness. By the end of the story the villain takes action to redeem himself after realizing the destructiveness of his behavior.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why was the scientist jealous of Reed Richards?
2. What do you think of his jealousy?
3. Do you ever feel jealous of people? How does it feel?
4. Can you think of an example of someone you’ve been jealous of?
5. How do you feel about yourself when you’re jealous of someone?
6. What do you think might be a better way to handle those feelings?
FAMILY RESPECT

Comic Books: Journey Into Mystery #110 - #111

Collected in:

The Essential Thor, Volume 1, 2001

Marvel Masterworks – The Mighty Thor, Volume 2 and Volume 3, 2010

Children do not always agree with their parents. Clearly a child arguing with his parents is common place throughout our society. Yet, how do you model to children that they can disagree with their parents, even defy their will, but still be respectful toward them? Throughout the Mighty Thor comic book during the early to mid 1960s, this issue was addressed.

Thor was in love with a mortal woman, and his father, Odin was against it. During the course of these comic books, Odin kept forbidding Thor from seeing this woman, and Thor (in his mortal form of Dr. Don Blake) kept right on seeing her. He was actively defying his father. However, even in his defiance, Thor still respected his father. Even when Odin expressly forbid Thor from seeing Jane Foster, or even actively acted against his son due to his rage of not being listened to, Thor almost always showed respect.

The life lesson to be learned within the pages of these comic books, was that no matter how much we disagree with our parents, our families should be respected. This is a lesson that sadly is lost on many of today’s children who rail against their parents in the most disrespectful language possible. In issues #110 and #111 of Journey Into Mystery, there is a two part story that explores Thor and Odin’s patriarchal relationship and shows Thor, even in his defiance, still a son with tremendous respect for his father.
Discussion Questions:

1. What does Odin want in from Thor?
2. Why is Thor in disagreement with his father?
3. Why is Thor unable to do what his father wants regarding Jane Foster?
4. In what ways does Thor show respect to his father during the story?
5. What do you argue about with your own family?
6. What do they want you to do that you don’t want to do?
7. When you argue with your family, do you ever show disrespect?
8. In what ways could you disagree with your family and still show them love and respect?
One of the challenges in teaching children about differences of opinion is that in our society adults see so many things as “right” or “wrong” -- “Good” or “evil.” This type of thinking is pervasive in our political system and in so many segments of our society. Yet, in Marvel Comics during the 1960s, there were areas of grey. Sometimes characters would be somewhere between good and evil. The Submariner was an undersea sovereign, who was a just ruler, yet he sometimes did battle against the surface world. There were also other characters had murky pasts and then redeemed themselves to become heroes.

Hawkeye, an excellent marksman, was introduced into the Marvel Universe as a villain, as were the Scarlett Witch and her brother Quicksilver. Yet, these characters had much good in them, and as a result, later became heroes in the pages of the Avengers. In the Avengers # 16, we see that although these characters had questionable pasts, there was an openness to allow them to prove themselves and change their lives. It was this willingness to see people as more than just “completely good” or “completely bad” that allowed young readers to understand that people can have both good and evil within them. Once a child understands that he or she does not have to be perfect to be accepted and loved, it can empower that child to see his or her own value in the world even if they occasionally make poor choices.
Discussion Questions:

1. What do you think about giving Superheroes like Hawkeye a second chance and letting him join the Avengers?
2. When someone does something they shouldn’t have done, can they make things better?
3. What are some ways a person can make up for doing something wrong?
4. Do you think a person who does something wrong deserves a second chance?
5. Even if the Scarlett Witch and Quicksilver did bad things, does that make them bad people? Why?
6. Can someone who has done something wrong be trusted again?
7. If they can, what can someone do to prove they are trustworthy?
WITH GREAT POWER COMES GREAT RESPONSIBILITY

Comic Book: Amazing Fantasy # 15, 1962

Collected in:

The Essential Amazing Spider-Man, Volume 1, 2001

Marvel Masterworks – The Amazing Spider-Man, Volume 1, 2010

People often talk about Karma, the concept that the actions you take now can come back to impact your life later. If there ever was an example of Karma, it was in the first appearance of Spider-Man, who is one of, if not the most popular character in the Marvel Comics universe. In 1962 Spider-Man, a shy high school student named Peter Parker, wasn’t very popular at school. Suddenly, after being bitten by a radioactive spider he developed super powers and one of his first thoughts was that he could use his powers to make some extra money.

Soon, Spider-Man appeared on television and became an overnight sensation, which was quite the opposite of his unpopular alter-ego Peter Parker. It was during this first experience with fame that disaster struck. Spider-Man let a thief escape that he could have easily caught. He even rudely told a police officer that it wasn’t his responsibility to catch the criminal.

Peter Parker then returned to his loving home where he lived with his Aunt May and Uncle Ben who had both raised him since childhood. He felt happy and confident in his life for possibly the first time. Unfortunately, soon afterwards, Peter Parker discovered that his Uncle Ben had been shot and murdered! He rushed to the scene as Spider-Man to avenge his Uncle’s death. It is there that he discovered that the person who shot his uncle was the same thief he had allowed to escape earlier in the story! It is
here, in his very first story, that Spider-Man learns the important meaning of societal responsibility. From then on, due in large part to his guilt over the death of his uncle Ben that Spider-Man becomes a crime-fighter, determined to protect the city from criminals.

Discussion Questions:

1. How do his friends treat Peter Parker?
2. Why doesn’t Spider-Man stop the thief when he runs away from the police officer?
3. What does the thief do next?
4. What would you have done if you were Spider-Man?
5. Do you do any things that affect other people? Anything that affects your family?
6. What can you think of that you could do that would make life better for people in your family or your friends?
7. How would you do those things?
YOUR MIND’S YOUR REAL POWER

Comic Books: Fantastic Four #37

Collected in:

The Essential Fantastic Four, Volume 2, 2001

Marvel Masterworks – The Fantastic Four, Volume 4, 2010

When it comes to Marvel Comic Books from the 1960s, scientists and brain power were in almost every series. It was clearly shown that while Superheroes may have powers that let them do extraordinary feats, it is really their minds that save the day. In fact, the Incredible Hulk, the strongest of the Marvel Superheroes was shown as a dim-witted brute. This was a sharp contrast to the physically weak Dr. Bruce Banner who was the Hulk’s alter-ego.

There were many intelligent heroes in the Marvel Universe, including numerous scientists, such as the alter-egos of Iron Man, Ant Man, Mr. Fantastic and the Hulk. There were also a number of medical doctors, including the alter egos of Dr. Strange and the Mighty Thor. It was the cleverness of the hero’s minds that saved the day as often as their powers.

To give an illustration of how the heros’ minds were as important as their powers, we focus on Fantastic Four #37, from 1965. In this issue, the Fantastic Four are captured by an alien space ship that has negated their super powers. While helpless, Reed Richards (Mr. Fantastic) convinces the leader of the aliens that a special weapon he is in possession of will allow the aliens to defeat all of earth with “unlimited power.”

Testing out this “unlimited” weapon on the Fantastic Four themselves, Reed Richards has fooled the aliens into reinstating their powers! The machine he said would
defeat all of Earth, actually restores the powers of the Fantastic Four and allows them to
defeat the alien space ship! In this example, it is clear that Reed Richard's intelligence
saves the day even when their strength fails them.

Discussion Questions:

1. What happened to the Fantastic Four?

2. The aliens had taken away their powers! How did the Fantastic Four beat them?

3. What is more powerful, your physical strength or the power of your mind? Why?

4. What saved the Fantastic Four?

5. What do you think of the way Reed Richards handled the aliens?

6. How important do you think it is to use your mind to figure out problems?

7. What do you think about the value of a good education?