

## MEDIA REVIEW: *Why Can't We Be Superheroes?: Researchers' With and Without Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Thoughts on Defendor*

As part of a research project exploring cinematic representations of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), we offer here a review of the Canadian film *Defendor* (Stebbing & Tabarrok, 2009). Our research group is a mix of people who have IDD and people who don't have IDD. It includes three people living with IDD, two academic researchers, and four graduate-level university students. The purpose of this collaborative research project is to look critically at how people with IDD are portrayed in mainstream films. As co-researchers, we all work together on the project and are all involved in choosing the films, analyzing the films, and in the writing of any reports or papers and preparing presentations. We have chosen to write this film review in plain language so that it will be accessible to readers who have IDD.

All of the films we have chosen to include in our project have met the following criteria: a person with IDD is either the lead character or a main character; the film is a fictional portrayal (not a true story); it is a mainstream film that many people will have seen; and has been released between 2000 and the present. Also, all of the films are English language films and are available for rental or purchase.

Together, we watch each film at least twice. After each viewing, we have a group discussion about the film. In these discussions, we ask ourselves questions about what messages we think the film gives about IDD. We think it is important to consider what people who don't have IDD would learn about people with IDD by watching these films. We also talk a lot about how we feel about these messages. When people receive the wrong messages about people with IDD from these films, this can have negative impacts on the lives of all people with IDD.

We have been working together for the past two years and have, to date, reviewed nine films. The Canadian film, *Defendor*, is one of the first films that we watched. We all enjoyed this movie; for some of us, it has been one of our favourite films. What we really like about this film is that it is an action movie and has many very exciting scenes. It is also a drama that, while sometimes very sad, also has several funny moments in it. The main character is a person with an IDD who is a superhero (or at least trying to be one). This was very surprising to us: it is, we think, the first superhero movie in which the superhero character is a person with an IDD. Generally speaking, if you are different in this way

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### Keywords

intellectual disability,  
developmental disability,  
fetal alcohol spectrum  
disorder,  
film review

(having an IDD), then people don't think you could ever be a superhero.

From the start of this film, we could see that it made clear what many people without IDD think about people with IDD, and how they treat them. For the most part, people without IDD don't see people who have IDD as being very capable; they don't think that they can do very much. We saw many examples in the film where the main character, Arthur (who is a man with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)), is insulted, teased and degraded. He is an adult, but often gets treated as if he is a child. This movie shows that most people believe that all that people with IDD can do is "finger paint"; they could never do something like help solve crimes or catch criminals. Those of us in the group who have been labelled as having an IDD can relate to this; we have all had experiences where people treated us like children and, just like in the movie, it is adults (not children) who typically treat us most badly. But the film also showed that not all people think this way – there are some people who understand people with IDD differently. The characters without disabilities in the film were able to see good things in Arthur; they became aware of the many things that he was capable of doing; and a few shared valuing and respectful relationships with him.

In the movie, it became clear very quickly that Arthur has some type of disability – this was demonstrated primarily in people's reactions to Arthur; in the way they spoke to him and about him. However, no one in the film ever gives him a specific label. At first, we didn't know what kind of disability he lived with. We suspected he had some kind of learning difficulty but we had to read the credits and then do a bit of investigating to learn that the character, Arthur, had FASD. As a group, we debated whether it was a good thing or a bad thing that he was not given a label in the movie. We all believed that general audiences would want a diagnosis at the beginning; that they would feel that a label would help them understand why the character behaved as he did. But we were concerned that this might have simply led people to categorize him, and to think that they knew everything about him based on this label. As a result, they may have had a very limited

understanding of him and might not then have been able to see him as a person.

While there were many different ideas that popped up for us as we watched the movie, in this review we wanted to focus primarily on just one: the idea of a person with an IDD as a superhero.

In *Defendor*, Arthur is portrayed as just a "regular guy" during the day, but at night he takes on the persona of a "superhero" – fighting crime and avenging the death of his mother. Overall, we thought this was really interesting and fun. Most of us felt his costume was really great; in the words of one of our members, it "kicked ass." We did decide that he probably wasn't as "cool" as Spiderman (who is a superhero character who has far more power and unique abilities): Defendor more closely resembled Batman because of all the different gadgets that he used to fight crime. Nonetheless, he is still a superhero – a figure many of us might want to be if given the opportunity. Arthur's being a superhero took on more importance given the reality that, in the movies, you typically don't see heroes with disabilities. Usually it is the villains who have disabilities (for example, Joker and Penguin from the Batman movies).

Some of us saw this as a very positive thing for a few reasons. We thought about the effect of being a superhero on the Arthur character, as a person with FASD. From our viewing of the film, we understood that Arthur feels more powerful in the costume. He feels – and comes across – much differently when he is "Defendor" than when he is "Arthur." In the film, Arthur tells another character that, as Defendor, he is "a million times better" than Arthur, that he is no longer "stupid," or "afraid." It seemed to us that he did not feel like he had a disability when he was dressed in his superhero costume. For Arthur, the costume and Defendor persona appeared to let him hide his FASD – from other people and, perhaps, from himself. Some of us thought that the filmmakers were making the point that as a person with a disability, the Arthur character might have felt more "normal" as a superhero. Because he didn't really like himself when he wasn't a superhero, taking on the persona of Defendor allowed him to be who he really wanted to be. In the movies, superheroes are never portrayed as stupid or afraid. The charac-

ter Arthur faced a number of challenges in his life; he was often alone and had very little support. To some of us, Arthur seemed to be afraid much of the time and being a superhero helped him to be brave, to help those who needed help, and to work to set the world to rights. Being a superhero gave Arthur a purpose: it wasn't just about dressing up in a costume, it was about going after the "bad guys," trying to do the right thing, and to make the bad guys pay for the things that they had done. We also understood that Arthur believed he would be regarded differently, judged more positively by people without disabilities if they saw him as a superhero.

Some of us, however, saw the portrayal of a person with FASD as a superhero in a different light. One of our group members commented that the character was "trying to be somebody he isn't" and that this made not only the character but also all people with FASD and other IDD look bad. For example, Defendor wore a homemade costume. He used weapons such as marbles and a jar full of wasps against people armed with guns. He didn't seem to recognize or accept that he might get hurt or killed. He took a lot of chances and risks, and didn't seem to consider the consequences. We recognized that some of these behaviours might be a realistic portrayal of some persons with FASD (for example, taking risks and not always understanding the consequences). Yet some members of our group worried that this portrayal would make people with IDD look "silly" or "stupid" in the eyes of people without IDD. The message that many viewers without disabilities would take away from the movie was that people with FASD or IDD were childish, foolish, and unrealistic. Instead of seeing Arthur/Defendor and all people with FASD or IDD in a more positive way, people without disabilities would simply find his attempts to be a superhero funny and humorous – they would just laugh at him. This made it much harder for one member of the group to relate to Arthur as a character, because for this group member, being a superhero isn't how people with IDD live their lives.

Some of us, however, thought that the film actually conveyed different messages about people with IDD. Arthur was a strong character – this is unusual for a film character with an IDD. He has a strong set of values, and he fights for what he believes in. This film portrayal of

a person with IDD suggests that people with disability can stand up for themselves. Arthur didn't just run away from things that were scary, he would stand up for himself and for others – which is what a superhero does. As we mentioned, in this film Arthur is portrayed as a real person with an IDD who wants to be a superhero. He does not have any superhuman powers. To most of us, this made this portrayal of a person with IDD even more impressive. The film offers us a guy who is playing someone with a disability, and yet he is doing all these amazing superhero things without actually having superhero powers, so he's doing it all based on his own abilities. He doesn't have any special powers, only some special gadgets, but he uses whatever he's got to fight crime and do good things. In this case, his homemade weapons could be seen as being quite creative and clever. As Defendor, Arthur is actually fighting people in a very serious way – there is nothing childish about this. And, though he gets killed in the end he manages to take some bad guys with him: several criminals in the film are arrested in the scene where Defendor is killed.

We talked about the filmmakers' decision to have Defendor killed. While we were all rooting for Defendor, we felt this was a good decision. It would have been so unbelievable had he lived. There was no way he could have defeated all the bad guys who were armed with guns and who outnumbered him greatly, using only his homemade weapons. This would have taken away from the movie's ability to effectively and believably portray Arthur as a person with an IDD who was complicated, complex, strong, and capable. The most important message of the movie would have been lost

In the film, most of the characters without disabilities didn't understand Arthur/Defendor's motives, or realize the good he was doing until after he was killed. People then came to see him differently, as a hero. It was only then that they were able to recognize his abilities, to understand that he was smarter and more capable than they had believed. We all agreed that most people would not think it was possible for a person with an IDD to be a superhero, or even a hero of any sort. But we thought this movie suggested that it might be. The movie itself seemed to create this possibility, to

create a different way of thinking about what people with IDD might be able to do. While it would certainly be difficult for anyone to be a superhero, and maybe even to be a hero, this would undoubtedly be more difficult for people with IDD. First, this is because people don't think they could ever do it. Secondly, it is because people with disabilities aren't allowed to try to be something different than "who they are," than who they are believed to be – they are expected to be only the way non-disabled people understand them to be.

The film demonstrated to us that this assumption might, however, work in the favour of people with IDD, because it would be so unexpected. No-one would think that someone with an IDD would ever even try to fight the bad guys, or to be creative enough to develop these kinds of weapons. Nor would they ever believe a person with an IDD could successfully fight crime or be heroic in any way. It would create the element of surprise and people would be caught off-guard. This seemed to another message being conveyed by the film. This message was, we thought, made most clear in the scene where Arthur saves a little boy from being hit by a car. In this case, he wasn't in his Defendor costume, or pretending to be a superhero. Here he demonstrated his bravery as "Arthur," as a man with an IDD. This scene, in our opinion, might reveal to audiences the "true self" of the character Arthur: a self that is capable and brave and quick thinking, a heroic person who doesn't need to wear a costume to be heroic. This is certainly not the typical understanding of someone with an IDD. Maybe in this way, the character was more realistic and believable as a superhero. He risked his own safety, but in a way most non-disabled people would find admirable, instead of silly, childish, and dangerous.

The problem, however, is that we are looking at the movie with a critical eye – our work with films has taught us all to look at films about IDD more deeply, more critically. However, most viewers would not be coming to the film with this same critical eye and so we wondered just what messages most people would take away from this movie. We worried that most viewers without IDD would see it only as funny, unrealistic, and as entertainment. They would not really think about the messages it conveys about IDD. How the movie would be interpreted, how

it is understood, would depend so much on who was doing the watching. It matters who is watching the movie, because if you're somebody who has an IDD, or somebody who has relationships with people with disabilities (for example, somebody who is friends with people with disabilities or has a family member with a disability) then you are probably going to understand Arthur in a different way.

In conclusion, we generally believe this film is an important film for people without IDD to see. The movie clearly shows that it is common practice to devalue people with IDD, but then it goes on to show people with IDD in a different light – as capable, heroic, brave, and smarter than people generally think. Our biggest concern is that we are not always sure that people without IDD would be able to see this message, or be willing to accept it. We worry that they might hold such strong assumptions about people with IDD that, for them, this movie would only serve to reinforce all the negative things they think that they know about people labeled intellectually and developmentally disabled.

## References

- Stebbing, P. (Writer/Director), & Tabarrok, N. (Producer). (2009). *Defendor* [DVD]. Darius Films/Buck Production.