

# rough and tumble play 101

by Frances Carlson

When my three teen-age children were young, they spent every Sunday afternoon at Grandma's house playing roughly with each other in the backyard with their two cousins. They played a game they called 'Team' — a rousing, big-body game that involved chasing, tagging, swinging around, throwing to the ground, many smiles and much laughter. Often, while they were playing Team, someone would question the safety of this type of play and why my husband and I allowed it to continue week after week. We allowed it, we would respond, because it reminded us of the way we played when we were kids. And, we argued, if they were hurting each other, would they continue to voluntarily pursue this type of play week after week? Would there be so much laughter involved?

Now, as an early childhood college instructor, I work with students who share the same concerns my family shared with me all those years ago:



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- Is rough and tumble play dangerous?
- Is it aggressive?
- Does it make children more aggressive?
- Should we — as early childhood educators — learn how to prevent and de-emphasize this type of rough play?
- Is there a place for rough play in quality programs for young children?

## Fears and misperceptions

There are many fears and misperceptions surrounding this rough, big-body play that children seem to crave. Many people fear that play-fighting or rough and tumble play is the same as real fighting. There is also a fear that this rough play will become real fighting if allowed to continue. Most of all, though, parents and teachers fear that during the course of rough and tumble play a child may be hurt. To provide for and allow children to play rough without injury, teachers need to understand how rough play is different from aggression, as well as about how to offer it in a safe and supportive environment.

For young children, rough and tumble play is seemingly universal and dates back to the 12th century (Jarvis, 2007). This style of play incorporates a range of physical behaviors that range from running and chasing to tagging and wrestling. By defi-

inition, rough and tumble play is when children willingly do the following:

- laugh
- run
- jump
- open beat (tag)
- wrestle
- chase, and
- flee

When children are being aggressive, though, they typically show the following behaviors:

- fixate
- frown
- hit
- push, and
- take-and-grab

Rough and tumble play may resemble fighting, but it is distinctly different from fighting (Humphreys & Smith, 1984).

## Significance of rough and tumble play

Rough and tumble play has considerable merit in a young child's overall development (Pellegrini, 1987; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Pellis & Pellis, 2007). Through the (very) physical interactions required in rough and tumble play,

children are learning the give-and-take of appropriate social interactions. Successful participation in this play requires children to become adept at both signaling and detecting signals — a social skill they will need and use throughout their lives. When detecting these signals, they are learning to read and understand the body language signifying the play should come to an end. The play also requires children to alternate and change roles. Sometimes one child chases; at another time the child is chased. Because this give-and-take mimics successful social conversations and interactions, the social roles practiced and learned in rough and tumble play provide children with the social knowledge needed for future relationships.

### Physical benefits of rough and tumble play

Social and emotional domains are not the only developmental areas positively affected by this play. When children use this big-body play, the intense physical exertion of rough and tumble play also supports cardiovascular health. Through their involvement, young children get the moderate to vigorous physical activity needed for optimum physical health. And, because rough and tumble play is so physical, children get many of their vital touch needs met through the play (Carlson, 2006). Because the preschool period is a critical period for children to develop both physically and emotionally, rough and tumble play for preschoolers is invaluable.

### Rough and tumble play vs. aggression

What about the fears? Is rough and tumble play the same as real fighting? Let's look at three factors present in rough and tumble play and compare them to three factors present in real fighting:

- In rough and tumble play, children's expressions are often characterized by smiles; they are often laughing. In

real fighting, children's expressions are characterized by frowns as well as tears.

- In rough and tumble play, the children involved are willing participants. They join the play readily and eagerly and remain as long as the play sustains. In real fighting, one participant is usually dominating another one.
- In rough and tumble play, the children keep returning for more. In real fighting, as soon as an episode resolves, the unwilling participants often flee.

Even for parents and teachers who recognize the signs of rough and tumble over play fighting, there often is a concern that — if allowed to continue — the play will become fighting. The reality, though, is that rough and tumble play digresses into real fighting less than 1% of the time for preschoolers (Scott & Panksepp, 2003). Comforting to know, too, is that most children are quite adept at recognizing that the play is rough and tumble and not real fighting, and they respond accordingly in order to sustain the play. Actually, children are better at discerning rough and tumble from real fighting than are their teachers (Boulton, 1996).

### Environments that support rough and tumble play

So how can parents and teachers ensure the play remains safe? Often, supervising adults fear a child may tag too hard, or tag on a vulnerable body part. What if a child is chasing and trips and falls? What if children are wrestling and one or more of them gets pinched, strained, bruised, or worse? To support rough and tumble play and maintain its appropriateness, parents and teachers need to first ensure the surrounding environment is as safe as possible. Look for and offer the

following environmental features:

- Are all hard edges rounded instead of pointed?
- Are the rugs skid-free?
- Is the area free of tripping hazards?
- Is there enough space for the children to move around comfortably?
- Is there an indoor or outdoor safety surface to absorb the shock of falling?
- Are the walls and/or sides of surrounding equipment padded or covered with padding?

### Policies and rules for rough and tumble play

Before planned or unplanned rough and tumble play occurs, help the children develop rules or policies to guide the play. For example, when playing 'Duck, Duck, Goose,' make sure children understand that all tags are with an open hand and can only be made on the arms and shoulders and not on the head. If your classroom has an area dedicated to big-body play, post a prominent sign with both pictures and words to remind children how to keep the play appropriate. The sign might list these rules:

- No kicking
- Tags with open hands only
- No choking
- Keep hands away from hair and heads
- Smiles stop — Play stops

Supervising adults can help children develop body language or a body code that will allow them to better communicate with their playmates if the



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play begins to feel uncomfortable. For example, if two children are wrestling and the play starts to hurt, help the child say, "That hurts. Please let go" or "Too tight; I can't move." Because rough and tumble play is such a physical activity, children have lots of opportunities in it to learn about their bodies and their touch preferences. Last, allowing rough and tumble play does not mean allowing it unsupervised. The best accident prevention for young children comes from adequate adult supervision.

### Conclusion

Children — both boys and girls — seem to love the experience of this very rich big-body play. Once you learn to recognize what it looks like and how to keep it safe, you can feel good about allowing and supporting it within your program as a developmentally appropriate and important part of children's naturally occurring play.

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