Rough Play One of the Most Challenging Behaviors

Frances M. Carlson

Young children enjoy very physical play; all animal young do. This play is often vigorous, intense, and rough. You may know this "big body play" as *rough-and-tumble play*, *roughhousing*, *horseplay*, or *play fighting*. In its organized play forms with older children, we call it many names: King of the Mountain, Red Rover, Freeze Tag, Steal the Bacon, Duck-Duck-Goose, and so on.

From infancy, children use their bodies to learn. They roll back and forth, kick their legs, and wave their arms, sometimes alone and sometimes alongside another infant. They crawl on top of each other. They use adults' bodies to stand up, push off, and launch themselves forward and backward. As toddlers, they pull each other, hug each other tightly, and push each other down. As children approach the preschool years, these very physical ways of interacting and learning begin to follow a predictable pattern of unique characteristics: running, chasing, fleeing, wrestling, open-palm tagging, swinging around, and falling to the ground—often on top of each other.

Sometimes young children's big body play is solitary. Preschoolers run around, dancing and swirling, rolling on the floor or on the ground, or hopping and skipping along. Children's rough play can include the use of objects. For example, early primary children might climb up structures and then leap off, roll their bodies on large yoga balls, and sometimes tag objects as "base" for an organized game. More often, this play includes children playing with other children, especially with school-age children who often make rules to accompany their rough play.

Children's big body play may resemble, but does not usually involve, real fighting (Schafer & Smith 1996). Because it may at times closely resemble actual fighting, some adults find it to be one of the most challenging of children's behaviors. In spite of its bad reputation, rough play is a valuable and viable play style from infancy through the early primary years—one teachers and families need to understand and support.

Misconceptions about rough play

Teachers and parents often mistake this play style for real fighting that can lead to injury, so they prohibit it (Gartrell & Sonsteng 2008). This play style has also been neglected and sometimes criticized at both state and national levels.

The Child Development Associate (CDA) *Assessment Observation Instrument*, which is used to observe and evaluate a CDA candidate's classroom practices, states, "Rough play is minimized. Example: defuses rough play before it

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becomes a problem; makes superhero play more manageable by limiting time and place" (Council for Professional Recognition 2007, 31). In Georgia, a 2010 statewide licensing standards revision includes a rule change that states, "Staff shall not engage in, or allow children or other adults to engage in, activities that could be detrimental to a child's health or well-being, such as, but not limited to, horse play, rough play, wrestling" (Bright from the Start 2010, 25). Standards or expectations like these are based on the assumption that play fighting typically escalates or that children are often injured while playing this way. Neither assumption is true (Smith, Smees, & Pellegrini 2004).

Play fighting escalates to real fighting less than one percent of the time (Schafer & Smith 1996). And when it does, escalation typically occurs when participants include children who have been rejected (Schafer & Smith 1996; Smith, Smees, & Pellegrini 2004). (Children who are rejected are those "actively avoided by peers, who are named often as undesirable playmates" [Trawick-Smith 2010, 301].)

Attempts to ban or control children's big body play are intended to protect children, but such attempts are ill placed because children's rough play has different components and consequences from real fighting (Smith, Smees, & Pellegrini 2004). Rather than forbidding rough-and-tumble play, which can aid in increasing a child's social skills, teachers' and parents' efforts are better directed toward supporting and supervising this type of play, so that young children's social skills and friendship-making skills can develop (Schafer & Smith 1996).

What it is and what it is not

Big body play is distinctly different from fighting (Humphreys & Smith 1987). Fighting includes physical acts used to coerce or control another person, either through inflicting pain or through the threat of pain. Real fighting involves tears instead of laughter and closed fists instead of open palms (Fry 2005). When open palms are used in real fighting, it is for a slap instead of a tag. When two children are fighting, one usually runs away as soon as possible and does not voluntarily return for more. With some practice, teachers and parents can learn to discern

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children's appropriate big body play from inappropriate real fighting.

In appropriate rough play, children's faces are free and easy, their muscle tone is relaxed, and they are usually smiling and laughing. In real fighting, the facial movements are rigid, controlled, stressed, and the jaw is usually clenched (Fry 2005). In rough play, children initiate the play and sustain it by taking turns. In real fighting, one child usually dominates another child (or children) and the other child may be in the situation against his or her will. In rough play, the children return for more even if it seems too rough to adult onlookers. In real fighting, children run away, sometimes in tears, and often ask the teacher or another adult for help.

Why it matters

Rough-and-tumble play is just that: play. According to Garvey, all types of play

- are enjoyable to the players;
- have no extrinsic goals, the goal being intrinsic (i.e., pursuit of enjoyment);
- are spontaneous and voluntary; and
- involve active engagement by the players (1977, 10).

Rough play shares these characteristics; as in all appropriate play, when children involve their bodies in this vigorous, interactive, very physical kind of play, they build a range of skills representing every developmental domain. Children learn physical skills—how their bodies move and how to control their movements. They also develop language skills through signals and nonverbal communication, including the ability to perceive, infer, and decode. Children develop social skills through turn taking, playing dominant and subordinate roles, negotiating, and developing and maintaining friendships (Smith, Smees, & Pelligrini 2004; Tannock 2008). With boys especially, rough play provides a venue for showing care and concern for each other as they often hug and pat each other on the back during and after the play (Reed 2005). Rough play also allows young children to have their physical touch needs met in age- and individually appropriate ways (Reed 2005; Carlson 2006), and provides an opportunity for children to take healthy risks.

Rough-and-tumble play, this universal children's activity, is adaptive, evolutionarily useful, and linked to normal brain development.

From an evolutionary developmental perspective, play-fighting allows children to practice adult roles (Bjorklund & Pellegrini 2001).That is, big body play helps prepare children for the complex social aspects of adult life (Bjorklund & Pellegrini 2001). Other researchers speculate that it is practice for future self-defense, providing vital practice and the development of critical pathways in the brain for adaptive responses to aggression and dominance (Pellis & Pellis 2007). There is a known connection between the development of movement and the development of cognition (Diamond 2000), and researchers believe there is a connection between this very physical, rowdy play style and critical periods of brain development (Byers 1998). Rough play between peers appears to be critical for learning how to calibrate movements and orient oneself physically in appropriate and adaptive ways (Pellis, Field, & Whishaw 1999). There is evidence that rough-and-tumble play leads to the release of chemicals affecting the mid-brain, lower forebrain, and the cortex, including areas responsible for decision making and social discrimination; growth chemicals positively affect development of these brain areas (Pellis & Pellis 2007). In other words, rough-and-tumble play, this universal children's activity, is adaptive, evolutionarily useful, and linked to normal brain development.

Supporting rough play

One of the best ways teachers can support rough play is by modeling it for children. When adults model high levels of vigorous activity, the children in their care are more likely to play this way. Children also play more vigorously and more productively when their teachers have formal education or training in the importance of this type of play (Bower et al. 2008; Cardon et al. 2008).

Besides modeling, teachers can do three specific things to provide for and support rough play while minimizing the potential for injury: prepare both the indoor and outdoor environment, develop and implement policies and rules for rough play, and supervise rough play so they can intervene when appropriate.

Environments that support big body play

The learning environment should provide rich opportunities for children to use their bodies both indoors and outdoors (Curtis & Carter 2005). When planning for big, rough, vigorous body play, give keen, thoughtful attention to potential safety hazards. Children need to play vigorously with their bodies, but they should do so in a safe setting.

To support rough play with infants during floor time, provide safe, mouthable objects in a variety of shapes, colors, and textures. Place the items near to and away from the baby to encourage reaching and stretching. Also provide a variety of large items—inclined hollow blocks, large rubber balls, sturdy tubes, exercise mats—so infants can roll on, around, over, and on top of these items. Get on the floor, too, so infants can crawl around and lie on you. Allow babies to be near each other so that they can play with each other's bodies. Supervise their play to allow for safe exploration.

Indoor environments encourage big body play when there is ample space for children to move around freely. Cramped or restricted areas hamper children's vigorous play. When usable space is less than 25 square feet per child, children tend to be more aggressive (Pellegrini 1987). Boys, especially, play more actively when more space is available (Fry 2005; Cardon et al. 2008).

Some teachers find it helpful to draw or mark off a particular section of the room and dedicate it to big body play. One teacher shares the way she established a "wrestling zone" in her preschool classroom:

> First, I cleared the area of any furniture or equipment. Next, I defined the area with a thick, heavy comforter and pillows. After setting up the area, I posted guidelines for the children's rough play on the wall near the wrestling zone.

Designate an area for rough play where there is no nearby furniture or equipment with sharp points and corners. Firmly anchor furniture so that it doesn't upturn if a child pushes against it. All flooring should be skid-free, with safety surfaces like thick mats to absorb the shock of any potential impact.

Policies and rules for rough play

Programs need policies about rough play. Policies should define this type of play, explain rules that accompany it, specify the level of supervision it requires, and include specific types of staff development or training early childhood teachers need to support it. In addition, policies can address how to include it in the schedule and how to make sure all children—especially children with developmental disabilities and children who are socially rejected—have access to it. Clear policies about supervision are vital, as this play style requires constant adult supervision—meaning the children are both seen and heard at all times by supervising adults (Peterson, Ewigman, & Kivlahan 1993).

Even with its friendly nature and ability to build and increase children's social skills, this play style is more productive and manageable when guidelines and rules are in place (Flanders et al. 2009).

Children can help create the rules. By preschool age, children are learning about and are able to begin participating in games with rules. Involving the children in creating rules for their play supports this emerging ability.

The rules should apply to children's roughhousing as well as to big body play with equipment and play materials. Wrestling, for example, may have rules such as wrestling only while kneeling, and arms around shoulders to waists but not around necks or heads. For big body play with equipment, the rules may state that the slide can be used for climbing on alternate days with sliding,

or that a child can climb up only after checking to make sure no one is sliding down, and that jumping can be from stationary structures only and never from swings. Other rules may say that tumbling indoors always requires a mat and cannot be done on a bare floor, and that children may only roll down hills that are fenced or away from streets and traffic.

Some general rules for big body play might be

- No hitting
- No pinching
- Hands below the neck and above the waist
- Stop as soon as the other person says or signals stop
- No rough play while standing—kneeling only
- Rough play is optional—stop and leave when you want (A Place of Our Own, n.d.)

Write the rules on white poster board, and mount them near the designated rough play area.

Supervise and intervene

Teachers should enforce the rules and step in to ensure all children are safe, physically and emotionally. It's important to pay attention to children's language during rough play and help them use words to express some of the nonverbal communication. For example, if two boys are playing and one is on top of the other, say, "He is pushing against your chest! He wants you to get up!" Help the larger boy get up if he needs assistance. Instead of scolding, simply point out, "Because you are larger than he is, I think he felt uncomfortable with you on top of him." Allow the smaller boy to say these words, too. Help children problem solve about ways to accommodate their size differences if they are unable to do so unassisted. Say, "How else can you wrestle so that one of you isn't pinned under the other one?"

Children who are rejected. When supervising children with less developed social skills, remember that for these children, big body play can more easily turn into real fighting. Many children who are socially rejected lack the language skills needed to correctly interpret body signals and body language, which makes rough play difficult for them. The children often lack the social skill of turn taking or reciprocity. A child may feel challenged or threatened by another child's movement or action instead of understanding that rough play involves give-and-take and that he or she will also get a turn.

Although more difficult for them, engaging in big body play can help such children build social skills. When supervising these children, remain closer to them than you would to other children. If you see or sense that a child may be misunderstanding cues or turn taking, intervene. Help clarify the child's understanding of the play so it can continue. Strategies like coaching, helping the child reflect on cues and responses, and explaining and modeling sharing and reciprocity help a child remain in the play and ultimately support his or her language and social competence.

Communicating with families

Some children already feel that their rough body play is watched too closely by their early childhood teachers (Tannock 2008). Not all parents, though, find children's rough play unacceptable. Several mothers, when interviewed, stated that rough play is empowering for their daughters and that they appreciate how this play style makes their girls feel strong ("Rough and Tumble Play" 2008). In industrialized countries, rough play is probably the most commonly used play style between parents and their children after the children are at least 2 years old (Paquette et al. 2003).

If children learn that rough play is acceptable at home but not at school, it may be difficult for them to understand and comply with school rules. Children are better positioned to reap the benefits of rough play when both home and school have consistent rules and messages. Children thrive in early childhood programs where administrators, teachers, and family members work together in partnerships (Keyser 2006). Partnership is crucial for children to feel supported in their big body play.

Teachers who decide to offer big body play must make sure that families are aware of and understand why rough play is included. Communicate program components to families when they first express interest in the program

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Sample Handbook Policies for Big Body Play

Big body play for preschool and school-age children

Here at [name of school or program], we believe in the value of exuberant, boisterous, rough-and-tumble play to a child's overall development. This vigorous body play allows children opportunities to use language—both verbal and nonverbal—and learn how to negotiate, take turns, wait, compromise, sometimes dominate and sometimes hold back, and make and follow rules. They are learning about cause and effect and developing empathy. Big body play also supports optimum physical development because it is so vigorous and because children—since they enjoy it so much—tend to engage in it for an extended amount of time.

To support the use of big body play, we do the following:

- Provide training to all staff on the importance of big body play and how to supervise it
- Prepare both indoor and outdoor environments for this play style
- Establish classroom and playground rules with the children to keep them safe and help them know what to expect
- Encourage staff to use big body games with the children
- Supervise the play constantly, which means ensuring an adult is watching and listening at all times
- Model appropriate play; coach children as they play so that they are able to interact comfortably with each other in this way

The following indoor and outdoor environmental features of our program support big body play:

- At least 50 square feet of usable indoor play space per child, free from furniture and equipment so that children can tumble and wrestle (for example, a wrestling area for two children would consist of at least 100 square feet with no furnishings in the area)
- At least 100 square feet of usable outdoor play space per child, free from fixed equipment so that children can run, jump, tag, roll, wrestle, twirl, fall down, and chase each other (for example, a group of six children playing tag would have at least 600 square feet in which to play)
- Safety surfaces indoors under and around climbers, and furniture that children might use as climbers (a loveseat, for example)
- Safety surfaces outdoors under and around climbers, slides, balance beams, and other elevated surfaces from which children might jump

From F.M. Carlson, *Big Body Play: Why Boisterous, Vigorous, and Very Physical Play Is Essential to Children's Development and Learning* (Washington, DC: NAEYC 2011), 87–88.

or at events such as an open house before the first day of school. Explain the use of and support for big body play in a variety of ways:

- Include in your family handbook a policy on big body play—and how it is supported and supervised in the program or school (see "Sample Handbook Policies for Big Body Play").
- Send a letter to families that explains big body play and its many benefits.
- Show photographs of children engaged in big body play
  - —in newsletters
  - —in documentation panels
  - —in promotional literature, like brochures and flyers
  - —on bulletin boards at entryways

Going forward

Most children engage in rough play, and research demonstrates its physical, social, emotional, and cognitive value. Early childhood education settings have the responsibility to provide children with what best serves their developmental needs. When children successfully participate in big body play, it is "a measure of the children's social well-being and is marked by the ability of children to . . . cooperate, to lead, and to follow" (Burdette & Whitaker 2005, 48). These abilities don't just support big body play; these skills are necessary for lifelong success in relationships.

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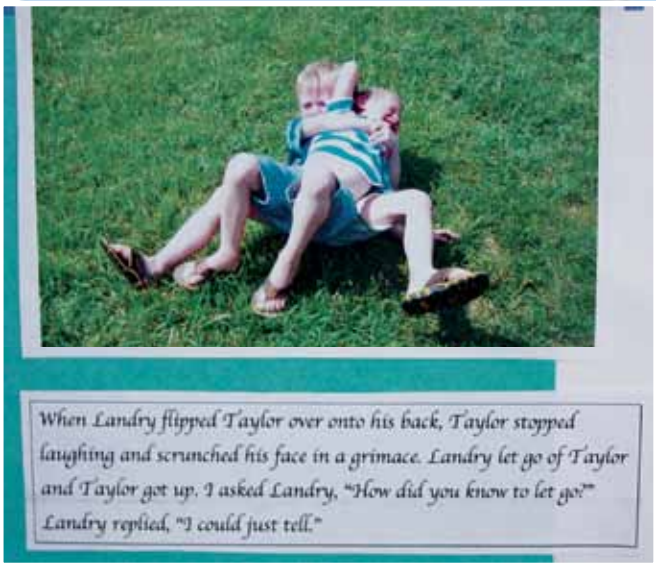

When Landry flipped Taylor over onto his back, Taylor stopped laughing and scrunched his face in a grimace. Landry let go of Taylor and Taylor got up. I asked Landry, "How did you know to let go?" Landry replied, "I could just tell."

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