

What the Experts Say

Rough-and-Tumble Play

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WHY IT IS IMPORTANT

Many adults have fond, childhood memories of play that involved wrestling, tickling, chasing, and being bounced, swung, or lifted. This type of play is called rough-and-tumble play and refers to the vigorous type of behaviors, including some that may look like fighting, that occur in the context of play.¹ Rough-and-tumble play is often mistaken for aggression or misbehavior and thus, discouraged by adults. However, as with other types of play, it enhances healthy child development. Today, children have increasingly less time and space to enjoy outdoor rough-and-tumble play.² Children need safe opportunities for vigorous, physically active social play.

WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

Young children in all cultures engage in rough-and-tumble play.^{3,4} Rough-and-tumble play is spontaneous and extremely fun for children. This is quite evident by their smiles and laughter when engaged in this type of play. Rough-and-tumble play is social play that involves physical contact, positive emotions, shared stories, and vigorous activities such as jumping, swinging, chasing, and play fighting.⁵ This type of play is normal activity for children from preschool to early adolescence.

Benefits of Rough-and-Tumble Play

Rough-and-tumble play shapes many physical, social, emotional, and cognitive behaviors.⁶ Rough-and-tumble play helps children learn self-control, compassion, boundaries, and about their own abilities compared to other children.

- Chasing games exercise children's bodies as well develop social skills.
- Children independently problem-solve and self-correct in order to remain with the group activity.
- Children learn how to adjust to change in the play scheme and assess how their playmates respond to those changes.
- Children learn to show care and concern when a playmate falls and to express their thoughts to others in a game.

Highly active outdoor play improves preschool children's attention in learning tasks that follow.⁷ Rough-and-tumble play requires opposing social skills of competition and cooperation. Competition includes defending oneself, facing adversity, and dealing with conflict in a prosocial manner. A healthy sense of competition enhances a child's self-esteem and makes it more likely she will stand up for her rights. Basic aspects of cooperation include being able to listen to others, see things from the other person's viewpoint, taking turns, and sharing. A person who is always competitive may become socially isolated and unable to work with others. A person who is always cooperative may not learn to assert or defend himself. Rough-and-tumble play provides children opportunities to balance competition and cooperation.³ Children who are successful in rough-and-tumble play develop skills for later rule-based sporting activities and language-based competition. Less successful children who are unable to grasp the concepts of play fighting in early childhood are at risk of becoming less socially successful, more aggressive adolescents.⁸ Popular preschool boys are more likely to engage in more rough-and-tumble play compared to less well-liked children.⁹

Rough-and-tumble Play versus Aggression

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) initially discouraged rough-and-tumble play¹⁰ but later recognized that it is acceptable.¹¹ However, most teachers do not¹²:

- believe that rough-and-tumble play is appropriate in early childhood education programs,
- say they do not have guidelines for distinguishing between rough-and-tumble play and aggression,
- allow rough-and-tumble play in moderation, and
- monitor carefully to ensure children's safety.

Parents and teachers worry that rough-and-tumble play will escalate into real fighting. However, rough-and-tumble play leads to real fighting less than 1% of the time for preschoolers.¹³ Table 1 lists the differences between rough-and-tumble play and aggression

Table 1: Differences between rough-and-tumble play and aggression ^{14,15}:

Rough-and-Tumble Play	Aggression
Children smile and laugh	Children frown, stare, cry, get red in the face
Children are willing participants, eagerly join in the play	One child usually dominates another
Children keep returning for more	Children separate after episode
Stronger or older children may let opponent “win”	No self-handicapping
Contact is relatively gentle	Contact is hard and harsh
Children alternate roles (i.e., chase and are chased)	No changing roles
Lots of children can participate	Usually involves just 2 children
No spectators	Draws a crowd

Most children know that rough-and-tumble play is not real fighting. Therefore, they act appropriately in order to sustain the play. As children get older, they get better at distinguishing between real fighting and rough-and-tumble play. This is also true for children with learning disabilities.¹⁶

Exposure to media-related superheroes impacts children’s play. When preschool boys are given superhero toys, they engage in more media-related roles. When boys are given non-media related toys (i.e., blocks, craft items, puzzles, etc), their play is more active and roles are based on familial and occupational roles and exploration.¹⁷

Differences between Boys and Girls in Rough-and-Tumble Play

Both boys and girls enjoy, and benefit from rough-and-tumble play. However, there are differences between boys and girls rough-and-tumble play.^{5,13,18,19}

- Boys engage in rough-and-tumble play more frequently and at a higher energy level than girls.
- Boys’ rough-and-tumble play tends to be more hierarchical, active, intense, competitive and aggressive than that of girls.
- Girls’ rough-and-tumble play involves more language than boys. Girls’ scripts are typically based on caring, protecting, and rescuing while boys’ scripts are generally related to fighting and play strength competition and are based current media (e.g., television, movies, and video games).

Rough-and-tumble play that involves both boys and girls is more complex than single-gender play. It is mostly likely to involve chasing. Girls are most likely to initiate the chase games, often through a “touch and run” action and maintain the play by continuing to give boys directions as their attention often wanders. Children create complex stories. The underlying stories tend to involve boys pretending to be some kind of monster and girls run away from them. Stories are varied and based on themes, such as capturers and captives, dodge and catch, and poison touch in which boys play dead until a girl touch revives them.⁵

Rough-and-Tumble Play with Parents

Children benefit from play with both mother and father. Children’s playfulness is related to both their own abilities and their parent’s responsiveness.²⁰ For example, parents of popular boys tend to be less directive of the play and more sensitive and responsive to their child’s signs of over-stimulation. Adult support during early play promotes secure attachment, self-regulation, and social skills. Securely attached children display more flexibility and complexity in their play than insecurely attached children.⁶ Mastery of early play and self-regulation skills allow older preschoolers to play with peers cooperatively, solve conflicts, and develop friendships. Although the amount of time adults spend supporting children’s play decreases with age, adult support continues to be important even in adolescence, such as when adults facilitate sports.⁶ Because children from at-risk neighborhoods may lack social skills due to play deprivation, encouragement of rough-and-tumble play with sensitive and responsive fathers may enhance social skills.

Rough-and-Tumble Play with Fathers. Fathers are less involved than mothers in all aspects of child-rearing with the exception of physical play. Fathers’ play is typically more physical, unpredictable and vigorous than mothers’ play. Mothers are more likely to be cautious, engage in pretend play, use objects and use more language than fathers.³ Generally, fathers do the same types of activities as mothers (e.g., reading, playing with toys, and being affectionate) but are more physical, tease more, and talk less.

Children’s pleasure in rough-and-tumble play seem to be more intense when they play with their fathers.³ Men tend to excite, surprise, and momentarily destabilize their children during play. For example, fathers toss children into the air or sneak up and grab them. While teasing, fathers maintain a sense of safety and security and promote problem solving and learning to deal with unexpected events. Competent fathers stimulate and challenge children during rough-and-tumble play without frustrating the child to the point of aggression or tears.²¹

Roughhousing with dads helps children, especially boys, learn to regulate their behavior and their emotions.²² Fathers’ physical play with toddlers enhances their cognitive and language development.²³

- The more fathers played with their toddlers at 14 months, the higher the child’s cognitive and language scores at age 24 months.
- During rough-and-tumble play, fathers encourage children to take initiative, explore, take chances, and overcome obstacles.²¹ Fathers tend to encourage children to push their limits physically – run faster, climb higher, jump farther. With a competent father, this can lead to independence, confidence, and self-control in the child.²⁴

- Fathers can teach their children how to control aggression through rough-and-tumble play when they teach children that biting, hitting, and other types of physical violence are not acceptable.
- Fathers help children learn to self-regulate when they tell them it is time to settle down or stop. Fathers help children learn a balance between being timid and being aggressive.²⁴

The website www.father.com provides hands-on information on rough-and-tumble play.²² A father should convey several messages to his child:

- I like to be with you and enjoy your laughter and pleasure.
- Although I can control you, I will let you lead and feel like a winner sometimes.
- I can be both powerful and gentle at the same time.
- I will not let you be hurt and I will not let others hurt you.
- It's okay to be excited, but you can calm down when it's time.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

- Ensure rough-and-tumble play remains safe^{14,15}:
 - ◇ Ensure the play space is free of hazards and safe as possible.
 - ◇ Help children develop rules to guide play, such as tagging with open hands on the arm or shoulders, no kicking or choking, and "Smiles stop. Play stops."
 - ◇ Create classroom environment of cohesiveness (e.g., sense of belonging, nurturing and support) and cooperation (e.g., see things from another's point of view, work together, negotiate, problem solve, share, accept and help one another) during structured and unstructured times.
 - ◇ Provide adequate supervision.
- Share information with parents about the benefits of rough-and-tumble play:
 - ◇ Creates a positive parent-child emotional bond
 - ◇ Teaches social-emotional and cognitive skills, problem solving, self-control, appropriate risk taking, self-esteem, cooperation, and competition.
- Encourage parents to engage in rough-and-tumble play with their children.
 - ◇ Include time for rough-and-tumble play with their child for at least a short time on most days.
 - ◇ Be positive, nurturing, and warm when playing with their child.
 - ◇ Challenge children, but be aware of cues of frustration.
 - ◇ Recognize and praise the child when he is able to calm down.

- Use rough-and-tumble play to start a dialog with fathers. Since rough-and-tumble play often comes naturally for fathers, it is an easy way for teachers to start a conversation with fathers. Support fathers' engagement in other activities such as reading and household routines.²⁵

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*Quick Reference***ROUGH & TUMBLE PLAY****02-A2****Parent Messages**

- Rough-and-tumble play is beneficial for children.
- Fathers can help children develop social-emotional and cognitive skills by engaging in rough-and-tumble play.

Parent Skills

- Talks with teacher about the benefits of rough-and-tumble play.
- Engages in rough-and-tumble play with child.
- Allows child to take the lead or be the “winner” at times.
- Recognizes child cues of over-stimulation.
- Is sensitive to child’s frustration level and avoids causing anger or tears in the child during rough-and-tumble play.
- Guides child to calm down after a session of rough-and-tumble play.

*Parent Tip***ROUGH-AND-TUMBLE PLAY**

Dear Parents,

Rough-and-tumble play is when we do fun things like wrestle, tickle, and chase. I laugh and act silly sometimes. Did you know it’s good for me? It teaches me:

- You like to be with me and laugh with me.
- You don’t mind letting me win sometimes.
- You can be both powerful and gentle at the same time.
- You make sure I won’t get hurt and won’t hurt others.
- You show me that I **can** calm down when it’s time to stop.

Thanks for playing with me,
Your Child



Most kids love rough & tumble play, but different kids like different amounts. Pay attention to your child’s cues. Crying or anger means it’s time to stop.

JUEGOS DE CONTACTO FÍSICO

Queridos Padres:

El jugar con las manos, hacernos cosquillas, luchar juntos y perseguirnos es divertido y me hace reír y actuar tonto algunas veces. ¿Sabias que esto es bueno para mí? Me enseña que:

- Les gusta estar y reírse conmigo.
- No les importa dejarme ganar algunas veces.
- Pueden ser fuertes y amables al mismo tiempo.
- Se aseguran de que no me lastimaré y lastimaré a otros
- Me muestran que **puedo** tranquilizarme cuando es el momento de parar.

Gracias por Jugar Conmigo,
Su Hijo.



A la mayoría de los niños les gusta jugar pero a algunos les gusta en diferentes proporciones. Este atento a alguna señal. El llanto o la rabia quieren decir que es tiempo de parar.

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