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Rough in a Good Way – Supporting Children’s Big Body Play

Children enjoy vigorous, intense, and rough physical play. As infants, they roll on their own body, and on the bodies of their peers. They crawl on top of each other. They enjoy being bounced in a game of “horsey” and giggle and smile when adults swing them through the air on upraised arms. Toddlers still crawl over each other, chase each other, and hug each other tightly; sometimes, they push each other down. Preschoolers chase, dance, swirl, jump, climb, hop, and skip on their own and with their classmates. All of this big body play is so boisterous and vigorous, and almost always involves the children’s bodies. At times it closely resembles actual fighting; thus, some adults find it to be one of the most challenging of children’s behaviors.

But rough play is a valuable play style for all children. Teachers and families need to understand and support this kind of play.

What it is and what it is not

Big body play is different from fighting. 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. While enjoying appropriate rough play, children have free and easy faces. Their muscle tone is relaxed and they are usually smiling and laughing. Children typically start rough play and keep it going by taking turns. In real fighting, one child usually dominates another child (or children) who 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

As in all appropriate play, when children engage in rough 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. Infants are developing their sense of body awareness and body ownership. Toddlers are learning how to control and guide their physical movements as well as how to propel their bodies purposefully across the yard, or down a hill. Children – infants, toddlers, and preschoolers - develop language skills through signals and nonverbal communication, including the abilities to perceive, infer, and decode. And they develop social skills through turn taking, playing dominant and subordinate roles,

negotiating, and developing and maintaining friendships (Smith, Smees, & Pellegrini 2004; Tannock 2008). For boys, rough play is a way to show care and concern for each other. They often hug and pat each other on the back during and after the play (Reed 2005). Boys, especially, seem to enjoy wrestling with their arms held tightly around each other.

Supporting rough play

Teachers can do three things to provide for and support safe rough play, as described below.

1. Prepare environments that support big body play. First, look around and think about potential hazards. Children need to play vigorously, but they should do so in a safe setting. You can draw or mark off a section of the room and dedicate it to big body play. Make sure there is no nearby furniture or equipment with sharp points or 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 impact. Infants and toddlers, especially, require safety surfaces under their climbing equipment – even padded play equipment like nests and play rings.
2. Establish policies and rules for rough play. Include the following information for teachers, children, and families:
 - A definition of rough play.
 - Rules for rough play.
 - How teachers will provide supervision.
 - A schedule for rough play.
 - Strategies for including all children— especially those with developmental disabilities and who are socially rejected.

Even with its friendly nature and ability to build and increase children’s social skills, guidelines and rules are needed for rough play. Infants and toddlers have not developed enough self-regulation and body control to play roughly unattended, and so close monitoring of their big body play is imperative. Teachers should not intervene to stop their body play; rather, teachers gently guide and redirect the infants while verbalizing for them the emotions their expressions and body language are communicating. Many preschoolers are learning about and beginning to participate in games with rules. Involving the children in creating rules for the play supports this emerging ability. Some general rules for big body play for preschoolers might be:

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- Gentle touching only—no hitting, kicking, or pinching
- Keep hands below the neck and above the waist
- Stop as soon as the other person says or signals to stop
- Rough play while kneeling only—not while standing.
- Rough play is always optional—stop and leave when you want (adapted from *A Place of Our Own*, n.d.)

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

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 “Wrestle only while kneeling” and “You can put your arms around each other from the shoulders to the waist, but not around necks or heads.”

3. Supervise and step in when needed

Be sure to enforce the rules to ensure all children are physically and emotionally safe. Get involved when it seems like one or more children need your help to stay safe. Pay attention to children’s language during rough play and help them use words to express their actions. For example, if Javier and Derek are playing and Derek is on top of Javier, you might say, “Derek, Javier is pushing against your chest! He wants you to get up!” Instead of scolding, simply point out, “Derek, you are larger than Javier. I think he felt uncomfortable with you on top of him.” Encourage Javier, the smaller boy, to say these words, too. Help children problem solve about ways to wrestle without hurting each other. Say, “How else can you wrestle so that one of you isn’t pinned under the other one?”

A colleague from the field shared his account of how to navigate rough play with the children’s involvement:

Now here is where I have something to say about rough and tumble play. Where I work now there is a small group of older boys that play pretty rough games with each other. They have gone from wrestling contently to wrestling hurtfully that might be seen as from playing to fighting, but could be seen happening in any progression of play on any theme. They also have been hurt, not seriously, but enough to draw attention to the risks of rough play. However, instead of taking steps to limit the play, we recognized that this kind of play was natural and important for children, maybe more so for boys; and we tried to formalize it. I brought the group

together and we discussed the rules that we would need to play the wrestling game and be safe. I wrote them all down, which they decided included the need for a referee to make sure everyone was following the rules, and designated a space to play the game, on some mats but it could have been big pillows. The kids played wrestling for the rest of the day and many other days in a completely safe and satisfying way and I was able to document little pieces of the experiences to tell families and colleagues about it.

Going forward

Most children engage in rough play, and research demonstrates its physical, social, emotional, and cognitive value. High-quality early childhood education settings provide children with what best serves their developmental needs. When children successfully participate in big body play, they build skills that are necessary for lifelong success in relationships.

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