Rough and Tumble Play: Important to Development

by Gregory Uba
NAEYC Men’s Caucus 2004 Leader of Men and Children Award

Rough and tumble play, also known as rough-housing, has been a part of children's play for as long as there have been children. This type of play has important developmental significance in a number of areas. Often adults mistake this sort of play as violent, aggressive, intimidating play or even fighting, yet to the child, this type of play has physical and social developmental value.

Rough-housing play can take the form of tumbling, wrestling, jumping from high places, mock-fighting, digging, throwing, banging objects, crashing toys and knocking down blocks. The noise, sensory stimulation, motor skill requirements and social interactions drive this play.

Physical Development:

A child practices important gross motor skills when they wrestle, climb, dig and jump. Often times this is their first attempt at what adults would consider sports or exercise. Children are motivated by their desire to demonstrate their physical competence. For some children, they are driven by sensory needs for "heavy touch". Children with sensory integration challenges seek out this sort of "pressure" on their muscles. Occupational therapists work with these children to give them important sensory experiences.

Social Development

A child engaging in rough-housing may be imitating the play that he or she engages in with a parent at home. In our society men have few socially accepted opportunities to touch other people. Often, it is primarily through play that men are "allowed" the chance to touch other people. This would explain why sports are so important to boys and men. It is also through playing with their children that men are able to enjoy physical touch that is considered nurturing and appropriate.

Furthermore, it is through rough-housing that many children first enter associative and eventually cooperative play. The rules for rough-housing are generally quite simple, indeed, if you were to view unguided rough and tumble play among young children across the country, you would find that it varied little from place to place. It is this "universality" of rough-housing that offers children entry into group play. A child new to a community, with no friends, will understand and be able to engage in a game of chase or tag or wrestling or "Power Rangers" with other children, thereby gaining acceptance into a peer group. The importance of this physical play for young boys is perhaps even more significant than it is for girls, given the stigmas that are placed on boys that fulfill the need for physical touch by clinging to a parent, or holding hands with other children as a matter of self-comfort or social need.
The Need for Power

In today's urban setting, where children may spend most of their day in passive, sedentary activities, whether at school, in front of the television, staring at a computer, or standing in line at the grocery store, department store or bank - the need for physical play is vital. Through rough-housing, children challenge themselves and seek to demonstrate their competence to those that they value. Early leadership opportunities present themselves through this type of play. The beginnings of team skills are developed as these children take on roles, "characters" and relationships. Children act out their concerns regarding power, safety, independence and interdependence. They try on meaningful social values such as loyalty, friendship, courage, risk, and strength.

Teachers, caregivers and parents can facilitate rough-housing to maintain a safe and healthy environment for children. Supervised wrestling... martial arts and gymnastics classes... sports... tree-climbing... obstacle courses... digging holes, planting trees, cutting, hammering, rolling down hills...etc...all offer appropriate opportunities.

Perhaps society has evolved from more primitive times to make life easier, cleaner, more comfortable, but the human animal has not evolved at this remarkable rate. Children still have the need to test their physical prowess and their social interdependence.

Rough and tumble play is a child's entry point into "grown-up" culture. Very much like lion cubs wrestle in what is ultimately practice for their future, children find a safe way to demonstrate to the world and to themselves that they are worthy of a place in our society.