Young Children’s Rough and Tumble Play: Apprehensions and Opportunities

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Should we allow young children to engage in rough and tumble play?
Defining Play

- Play is an abstract concept which is difficult to describe in its entirety.

- We all recognize play when we see it in action, but are restricted by a limited vocabulary when asked to reach a definition as to what play is.
Defining Play

- Play gives children the freedom to imagine. It makes anything possible.
- Playing outdoors often supports children in becoming fit and less stressed.
Importance of Play

The young child’s brain constantly undergoes physical and chemical changes as it responds to the environment. This is taken to suggest enormous plasticity, and that, play’s function may be to assist the actualization of the brain potential.

(Sutton-Smith, 1997, p 225)
Typical Play Development

- What we see . . . . .
  - Maturation.
  - Increasingly complex.
  - Increasingly elaborate.
  - Planning.
  - Expanding base of experiences.
  - Greater control of play through planning and creative ideas.
Typical Play Development

What’s expected . . . . .
- Roles become more complex.
- Children become problem solvers.
- Emotional expression.
- Foundation for language, literacy, mathematics, scientific understanding.
Benefits of Play

- Embodies the essence of childhood and much that is healthy and vibrant in society.
- Regular enjoyment of time, space and opportunity to play is fundamental to children’s happiness and essential to their healthy development.
Benefits of Play

- Health promotion.
- Familiarity with environment.
- Promotion of social and emotional development.
- Self-discovery.
Benefits of Play

- Cognitive
- Emotional
- Social
- Physical
Cognitive Benefits of Play

- creativity
- abstract thinking
- imagination
- problem-solving
- empathy, perspective-taking
- mastering new concepts
Emotional Benefits of Play

- enjoyment
- fun, love of life
- relaxation
- tension reduction
- self-expression
Social Benefits of Play

- cooperation
- sharing
- turn-taking

- conflict resolution
- control of impulses and aggression
Physical Benefits of Play

- gross motor development
- fine motor development
- physical challenges
- release of energy
Educational Benefits of Play

- meaningful context to learn concepts and skills
- makes learning fun and enjoyable
- explore and discover together and on their own
- children extend what they are learning
Educational Benefits of Play cont.

- children experiment and take risks
- opportunities for collaborative learning with adults and peers
- practice of skills
Educational Benefits of Play cont.

- self-confidence
- self-esteem
- anxiety reduction
- therapeutic effects
Educational Benefits of Play cont.

- communication skills
- vocabulary
- story telling
- attention regulation
- persistence
Play Types

- Exploratory play.
- Fantasy play.
- Role play.
- Symbolic play.
- Creative play.
- Dramatic play.
- Rough and tumble play.

- Hughes, 1996
What is Rough and Tumble Play?
What is Rough and Tumble Play?

- Children who display acts involving running, climbing, chasing, play fighting, fleeing, wrestling, falling, and open-handed slaps (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Reed & Brown, 2000)

- Display of the cheerful play face (Reed & Brown)
Why This Topic?

- Minimal research on rough and tumble (R&T) play
- Misunderstanding of R&T play
  - Linked with bullying
  - How it ties in with play
Purpose of the Study

- To gain an understanding of the thoughts of young children (five year olds), parents, and educators on R&T play.

- To identify how rough and tumble play is included or excluded in early childhood settings.
Methodology

- **Interviews** (n=48)
  - managers (n=4)
  - educators (n=11)
  - parents (n=16)
  - children (n=17)

- **Observations**
  - Field based: educators and children
  - Educators: 1 male, 10 female
  - Children: 10 male, 7 female
Interviews

- Interviews of Managers
  - Guiding philosophy
  - Daily program
  - Clientele of their setting (including the degree to which the staff and clientele influence program delivery)
Interviews

- Interviews of Educators
  - Programming guidelines
  - Gender differences in R&T play
  - Provision for R&T play
  - Learning and value of R&T play
  - Influence of bullying and aggressive play on their response to rough and tumble play
  - How they distinguish aggressive play from R&T
  - Professional credentials
  - Childhood rough and tumble play experiences
Interviews

- Interviews of Parents
  - Reasons for choosing the childcare setting
  - Extent that rough and tumble play is included in their child’s daycare
  - Educator responses to R&T play
  - Gender differences in participation in rough and tumble play
  - Location of rough and tumble play
  - Value of R&T play
  - Their childhood experiences
  - Rough and tumble play of their children at home
Interviews

- Interviews of Children
  - Their definition of rough and tumble play
  - Rules for play
  - Consequences of rough and tumble play at daycare
  - Their ideas on teacher and parent thoughts about rough and tumble play
Ten 90 minute observations

- 30:25 hours of observation in early childhood education settings
- Daily activities of the children and educators
- Different times of the day on a variety of days
  - Daily routines
  - Structured activities
  - Transitions
  - Free-play time
Data Analysis

- Interviews
  - Authenticity checks
  - Common thoughts grouped together

- Observations
  - Analysis of who, what, where, and when
    - 116 R&T play events recorded
    - Both previously identified elements and 20 elements not previously identified in research
  - Analysis of educator responses
Observed Rough and Tumble Play Behaviors

- Grabbing body of other player
- Use of voice ~ roaring
- Chasing (e.g., in pursuit of other player)
- Grabbing and moving body of other player
- Falling
- Banging body into body of other player
- Hitting motions
- Kicking motions
- Rolling around on ground with other player
- Running (e.g., without intent to chase or flee)
- Large body motions (e.g., twirling body with arms outstretched)
- Pushing other player
- Open handed slaps
- Jumping on object (e.g., couch)
- Kicking object
- Making crashing motions with held object
- Throwing object
- Banging body into fixed object (e.g., wall)
- Hitting self
- Holding hands
- Making hitting motions while holding an object
- Pulling other player
- Rolling around on ground on own
- Use of a loud voice
- Crashing body into object
- Fleeing (e.g., avoiding being caught by pursuing player)
- Wrestling (e.g., lifting other’s body, rolling on ground, etc.)
Observed R&T Play

- Physical Contact Between Players
- Independent Physical Play Behaviours
- Play Behaviours Where an Object is an Instrument Component
Observed R&T Play

- Physical Contact Between Players
  - 45 recorded incidents (40%)
  - Previously identified R&T play elements
    - Pushing, open handed slaps, wrestling
  - Newly identified R&T play elements
    - Grabbing the body of another player
    - Banging body into body of another player
Observed R&T Play

- Independent Physical Play Behaviours
  - 54 recorded incidents (46%)
  - Previously identified R&T play elements
    - Fleeing, running, falling, chasing
  - Newly identified R&T play elements
    - Use of a loud or roaring voice
    - Large body motions, hitting and kicking motions
Observed R&T Play

- Play Behaviours Where an Object is an Instrument Component
  - 17 recorded incidents (14%)
  - No previously identified R&T play elements
  - Newly identified R&T play elements
    - Banging body into fixed object
    - Crashing into object, kicking and throwing objects
What would your response be?
Observed Educator Responses

- Rule reminders
- Redirecting play
- No intervention
- Joining rough and tumble play
BABY BLUES

BY RICK KIRKMAN & JERRY SCOTT

Vigilant
Alert
Careful
Fun
Results/Findings

- Interviews
  - Adults
    - Thought rough and tumble play to be a normal part of childhood
    - R&T play aids in the development of social competency
      - Learning to make judgments, self-control, compassion, boundaries, and how to adapt play for other players
    - Aggression is viewed as a separate issue from rough and tumble play
    - Educators and parents acknowledged a lack of education on R&T play
Results/Findings

- Children
  - Expressed concerns about safety
    - “someone might get hurt”
  - All the children were observed engaging in rough and tumble play
    - 40% stated they do R&T play at daycare
    - 60% stated they do not R&T play at daycare
  - Rough and tumble play is more acceptable at home
    - Considered a family form of play
Results/Findings

Observations

- Rough and tumble play occurs both indoors (38% of observations) and outdoors (62%)

- Both boys and girls engage in R&T play although boys accounted for 80% of observations and girls 20%

- Predominately a peer form of play
Implications

- Expansion of understanding of the development of rough and tumble play.
  - Pre-operational elements of rough and tumble play
  - Newly identified categories expanded the definition of rough and tumble play
  - Further research is required to assess the universality of the findings
Implications

- Typology and Classification system supports
  - educators seeking to recognize differing forms of young children’s rough and tumble play
  - educators seeking to effectively manage young children’s rough and tumble play
  - development of policies and procedures
  - rough and tumble play as sequential within a normative developmental perspective
Implications

- Need for educator and parent information on rough and tumble play.
  - Parents and educators articulated a lack of knowledge about rough and tumble play.
    - Early childhood education training programs
    - Professional organizations and conferences
    - Parenting books, websites and other resources
  
- Programs and schools should be planning for the inclusion of R&T play.
  - Policies and procedures, staff discussions
Girls and Rough and Tumble Play

- Girls participate in rough and tumble play to a lesser degree than boys.

- Absent rough and tumble play behaviors for girls included banging into another player, making hitting motions, throwing objects, pulling other players, crashing body into an object, and wrestling.
Aggression and Rough and Tumble Play

- Rough and tumble play *mimics* intentionally aggressive actions.
- *Symbolic* of aggression, not true aggression.
- Players do not intend to hurt their partners.
- Boys declared their friendship as R&T gave them an opportunity to show that they cared for each other.
Family Connections

McBride-Chang and Jacklin (1993)

- Choice of sex-typed play an indicator of rough and tumble play.
- Choice of ‘girl’ play (e.g., having a tea party) was negatively associated with R&T.
- Choice of ‘boy’ play (e.g., playing football) was positively associated with displays of R&T.
Fagot (1978)

- No significant gender differences in the play behaviours of the parents with their son or daughter up to the age of 3 years.
- By 3 years of age, parents direct rough and tumble play towards their sons rather than daughters.
Mothers and Rough and Tumble Play

- Mother’s arousal and encouragement of rough and tumble play is not associated with later displays of rough and tumble play by children.
Children who are encouraged or discouraged from R&T by their fathers exhibit long-lasting tendencies either to participate in or to shy away from R&T play.

Rough and tumble play of fathers with their children is associated with later (i.e., first grade) displays of rough and tumble play.
See-saw
Swings
Monkey Bars
Trampoline

Happy Father's Day to the best Playground ever.
Social Connections

- Rough and tumble play for boys:
  - Practice for caring friendships.
  - Development of social competence.
  - A place for negotiation, problem solving, fulfilling the need to belong to a group, having intimate contact with friends, experiencing friendly competition.
  - Development of a sense of community.
    - Between the warmth and closeness of family and the isolation and indifference of the adult masculine world.
Reed and Brown (2000)

- “Boys and girls have different perspectives on intimate relations and different interpretations with regard to connection and expression of care” (p. 105)
- Rough and tumble play may be one of the few socially acceptable ways for males to
  - “Express care and intimacy for another male”
  - “A camouflage for expressions of intimacy and care.” (p. 114).
Differences Among Children

- Children are selective in what they choose to play.
- Play styles vary.
- Temperament.
- Sense of security.
- Social and cultural backgrounds.
- Gender differences.
Play Skills of Children with Disabilities

- Children with Disabilities often:
  - Demonstrate lower rates of social interaction.
  - Less reciprocal interactions.
  - Mismatched social skills (Peterson & McConnell, 1993).
Children with disabilities often:

- Engage in fewer play behaviors.
- Demonstrate less variety in play.
- Frequently have “pretend play” listed as a functional goal on their IEP (Barton & Wolery, 2008).
Apprehensions

- Someone might get hurt.
- Rough and tumble play is aggressive.
- Leads to bullying.
- Safety and liability.
- Really not needed, children can interact with one another in a more gentle way.
Benefits of Rough and Tumble Play

- Cognitive
  - creativity
  - imagination
  - problem-solving
  - social cognition
  - empathy, perspective-taking
Benefits of Rough and Tumble Play

- Emotional
  - enjoyment, fun, love of life
  - release of energy, tension reduction
  - self-expression
Benefits of Rough and Tumble Play

- Social
  - cooperation
  - sharing
  - turn-taking
  - conflict resolution
  - leadership skill development
  - control of impulses and aggressive behavior
Benefits of Rough and Tumble Play

- Physical
  - gross motor development
  - fine motor development
  - physical challenges
Benefits of Rough and Tumble Play

- Educational
  - experimentation and risk taking
  - practice of skills
  - self-confidence
  - self-esteem
  - communication skills
  - attention regulation
  - persistence
Social Competency and Rats

- Study of the impact of a lack of R&T play among young rats in connection with the development of social cognition. (Pellis & Pellis, 2007)
- The lack of R&T resulted in organizational changes in the brains of young rats that were denied opportunities for R&T social play experiences.
- Relating findings to young children:
  - “it may not be the case that the more socially competent children engage in more play fighting, but rather that the play fighting may promote the development of social competency” (Pellis & Pellis, 2007, p. 97).
Information on Rough and Tumble Play

Where do we find information?

- Textbooks
- Journals
- Parenting Books
- Children’s Storybooks
- Internet Resources
- Newspapers

- Rough and tumble play is included in the section, “Issues in Play” and is described as *controversial* due to concerns about the play becoming aggressive.

- The text also details that, “rough and tumble play is playful, non-aggressive, and normal” (p. 296).
Hendrick, J. (2001). *The whole child: Developmental education for the early years* (7th ed.).

- “It’s difficult sometimes to decide when it’s rough-and-tumble and when someone’s likely to get hurt” (p.307)
- Under a photo of two boys engaging in what may be interpreted as rough and tumble play or aggression; the facial expressions are not visible in the photo.

- Roughhousing and aggression have distinctly different patterns of behavior and should be recognized as such” (p.448).
- Distinctions between the patterns of behaviour are not detailed within the text.
Journals

- Canadian Child Care Federation
  - No articles on rough and tumble play
  - Articles that address aggressive behaviour
Canadian Children
- No articles on rough and tumble play
- Focus on positive play experiences
Young Children

- No articles on rough and tumble play
- One submitted, reflecting strategies for educators seeking methods for managing the play.

- Included comments on roughhousing in a section on aggression.
- “there may be arguments and roughhousing, but real fights are relatively infrequent” (p. 498).

- Rough and tumble play serves as a means for fathers and sons to connect.

*“Research shows that such father play, or enthrallment, has many developmental benefits because it forces children – and this is especially significant for young boys – to learn to regulate and tolerate their feelings . . . to identify these feelings more clearly, and to adapt to a variety of complex social situations”* (p. 114)
Children’s Storybooks

- Munsch (2001)
  - included a young girl who climbs a variety of items including a refrigerator, chest of drawers, and a tree
  - the is shown falling from each to which the father or mother instructs her, “Be careful! Don’t climb!” (p. 4).
• Reid (1997)
  • includes boys and girls engaging in rough and tumble play as they run, chase, jump, and spin.
  • storyline includes phrases such as, “the night air invites us to enter the race – a galloping wide-open heart-thumping chase! Lopsided cartwheels collide in the air. We all fall down giddy with grass in our hair” (p. 26).
Jonell (2000) illustrates a father and son rough and tumble playing as they pretend to be bears.

- At one point in the story, the boy asks his father to stop which the father does with, “we’ll stop. Let’s have a hug” (p. 21).
- After a hug, the young boy then initiates a continuation of the rough and tumble play at the conclusion of the story.
Internet Resources

- Canadian Child Care Federation
  - included an article which focuses on a discussion by educators on differences in the play of boys and girls
    - educators identified rough and tumble play as boy play
    - recommended that educators refrain from utilizing gender-biased resource books
    - follow the play of children when developing curriculum.
- Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI)
- National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)
  - referred educators to research that was not accessible via the website.
School bans playground tag

ATTLEBORO, Mass. (AP) — Tag, you’re out! Officials at an elementary school south of Boston have banned kids from playing tag, touch football or any other unsupervised chase games during recess for fear they’ll get hurt and sue the school.

Recess is “a time when accidents can happen,” said Willett Elementary principal Gaylene Heppe, who approved the ban.

While there is no districtwide ban on contact sports during recess, local rules have been cropping up. Several school administrators around Attleboro, a city of about 45,000 residents, took aim at dodgeball a few years ago, saying it was dangerous.

“I think that it’s unfortunate that kids’ lives are micromanaged and there are social skills they’ll never develop on their own,” said Debbie Laferriere, who has two children at Willett, about 65 kilometres south of Boston. “Playing tag is just part of being a kid.”
Kids want most in their community is their friends

also want places where they can play together, trees to climb, safe streets, recreational activities

BY JOANNE HATHERLY
Times Colonist staff

Kids want colour, trees to climb and street hockey-friendly roads. But can they have these things inside the reaches of a city?

It’s a question that Eric Nielsen, 66, an advisory housing committee member for the City of Victoria, thinks is going to elbow its way to the urban planning table.

Nielsen said that the increasing densification of urban cores across the Capital Region will add pressure to the need to create spaces where children can meet, play and interact, especially as families are pressed into condominiums.

“We ought to be looking for ways to provide these spaces for them,” said Nielsen.

The search was on last week when city planners and staff gathered to hear Cherie Enns, community planning consultant and instructor at University College of the Fraser Valley, and Jessica Lam, planning technician for City of Langford, speak about creating child-friendly spaces inside city boundaries.

While working on the City of Langley’s Child-Friendly City Project, Enns put the fundamental question to children: “We asked them, what do they want in a community,” said Enns.

One girl perhaps answered the question best when she described what she liked most in her community park. “She said, ‘My friends,’” said Enns.

The audience laughed appreciatively, but the child’s response was not lost on Enns, who used the statement as a launch pad for what makes a place likely to draw children outdoors. Enns said children want places that are safe, places that give them access to nature and places where they feel they belong.

Noting that children are acutely aware of their environment, Enns said youngsters can easily name where drug-related activity takes place in their community. They feel safe in cul-de-sacs, where they can play without cars speeding past. Many don’t feel safe in skateboard parks. They don’t feel welcome inside stores, where owners eye them suspiciously.

Pointing to a slide of a condominium’s play-space that was set next to a busy road, Enns noted that some child-friendly precautions in planning are self-evident and too often overlooked.

“We call it ‘SLAB’ development—that’s space-leftover-after-building,” said Enns. She said the need to integrate child-friendly space, rather than segregate it, is essential to building communities where children are welcome. “Otherwise, we are setting ourselves up for failure.”
BEEP, BEEP. Prime Minister Stephen Harper winces as six-month-old Solomon Bratty Sitar grabs his nose during a visit to the Wellington Heights Community Centre in Burnaby yesterday. Harper held a roundtable meeting with parents to discuss his government’s child care plan.
Why should we allow young children to engage in rough and tumble play?
Children learn as they play. Most importantly, in play children learn how to learn.

O. Fred Donaldson
Thank-you

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