



Rough and Tumble Play by Jasmine Pasch

Children are "full of it". From the moment they are born, they are skilled communicators, competent beings who leave us in no doubt that we need a lot of energy to keep up with them as they grow and develop. They just don't stop moving: wriggling and squirming when tiny, reaching and claspings, pushing and pulling. Then, as they become more mobile, creeping and crawling, rolling, tipping and tumbling, climbing and jumping, just to list a few.

Youngsters cue us to join them as playmates to support that critical development, and sometimes we choose to ignore this or to shut it down as it is exhausting, and we want them to sit still and be quiet. The things they like doing best of all, like noisy, boisterous, rough and tumble play, are the things that adults find the most trying. Adults may rush to put a stop to what they regard as something of a nuisance, or even a potentially dangerous activity.

Adult bodies move differently, and we may have gotten out of practice with playing, out of touch with moving spontaneously from our inner impulses, or just shy and embarrassed! A bit inept at all of this, in fact.

Do we know enough about why children seem driven to seek out opportunities for rough and tumble play?

Could there be benefits for their overall development? And do males and females respond differently to it?

Research suggests that adults tend to confuse aggression and play fighting in children. In order to intervene effectively in bullying, and support play activities, adults need to be able to discriminate one from the other.

Here are some guidelines taken from the Committee for Children's Steps to Respect® Program.

- Positive and neutral facial expressions are more typical of rough and
- Children are free to choose to participate in rough and tumble play, but they are often forced or challenged to participate in aggression.
- Children tend not to use full force in rough and tumble play, whereas full force is seen in aggression.
- Children are more likely to alternate roles, for example chaser and chased, in rough and tumble play, whereas aggression generally involves unilateral roles.
- Children tend to stay together after a bout of play fighting, while they often separate following aggression.

Youngsters seem driven to indulge in rough and tumble play, and it's not just the boys. Girls are just as keen. The experience seems to serve multiple developmental needs, which I shall now



describe. In the words of one small boy who had been told off by an adult who did not understand what was happening, "My body made me do it!" Exactly!

So what might the benefits be?

- On an immediate level, it helps youngsters to become physically strong, and develop motor skill and mastery, as well as providing aerobic exercise. They work very hard at it and get puffed.
- It teaches the rules of social behavior, and where youngsters fit into the hierarchy.
- It helps form social bonds and friendships.
- It helps youngsters to learn limits, what is right, or too hard, and helps them learn to resolve conflict.
- It helps prepare for the unexpected, and for flexible, adaptable thinking through continuous improvisation.
- It helps children to regulate emotions and read social cues. They will reach an emotional edge, run to an adult in tears and soon be back for more!
- Through taking risks, youngsters learn about success, which raises self esteem, and pride in achievement. Failure teaches how to do things differently next time.
- At a sensory and motor level, it brings together the tactile, vestibular and proprioceptive senses, together with whole body movement. These are the hidden senses of touch, balance, and the dynamics and mechanics of movement, pushing, and pulling. This is a sensory feast, a "neuro tonic" that may have anti stress, health-promoting effects according to Panksepp.
- It supports brain maturation in the frontal lobe. The work of Jaak Panksepp suggests that there is a connection between rough and tumble play and ADHD. Play regulates impulsivity and helps self-control to develop, and so more of it, not less, is indicated to help such children. Could it be that they are driven to seek out what they need to develop fully? I can think of examples of such children who are regulars in my sessions.
- It is a source of joy, fun, and laughter. This supports brain growth, secure attachment, and the development of empathy.

Richard Bowlby talks about rough and tumble play between children and parents as “heightened bonding”.

We perhaps need to have a closer look at rough and tumble play, and make opportunities for it at home and at school, particularly with the longer school days, as it might get missed out and some important developmental work not done.

Of course, we need to set some boundaries to keep children safe and not hurt anyone else. In my view, keeping youngsters safe is not about stopping them from enjoying rough and tumble play. It is just the opposite, given the benefits described above. At the school where I am working with children on the autistic spectrum, we have devised a series of playful physical encounters, which we have called “Gentle Giants”. Persistence, strategy, tactics learned through observation of one

another, fair play, winning, and losing are all part of the game which is thoroughly enjoyed and the movement is beautiful to watch.

Children need the freedom *to experiment, make judgments, choose activities, take responsibilities, and express ideas* (Elaine Ablett on Autonomy). We may need to step in and sort out *conflict, be clear about the rules and behavioural issues, and encourage children to share in developing, applying, and negotiating these rules.*

Finally, some thoughts on gender. It seems that children view mothers as providers of basic needs: food, comfort, security and love, while they view fathers as providers of fun, excitement, and boisterous physical play. Children need both, and it is likely that in early childhood settings they may only be exposed to more female interaction styles as there are usually more female staff. Some children may not have fathers at home either. Youngsters may be missing out, and this kind of experience is something we need to think about, especially with the longer nursery and school days.

It is also suggested that boys develop more slowly than girls, and that rough and tumble play may play a significant part in their overall development. Penny Holland, at London Metropolitan University, suggests that it is unhelpful to talk about boys and girls needs, but to think of them all as children. I take her point, and I think that all children need plenty of physical activity, plenty of space to move indoors and outdoors. They are kinesthetic learners who learn through movement, they like hands on learning and lots of play.

In joining with children, listening to them and talking in their first language -which is movement - adults will be supporting children to build firm foundations for the future, and become adept as playmates themselves.

George Bernard Shaw reminds us, “ We don’t stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing.”

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Biog: Jasmine Pasch Director of phew!!! arts company is a versatile and experienced community dance artist, choreographer and educator. Trained as a professional dancer, teacher and counsellor, Jasmine Pasch is a highly experienced movement practitioner who has worked in education, arts and health settings for the last twenty-five years. Her most recent project was as the Senior Practitioner on the Jabadao Thriving Child research project exploring the value of spontaneous movement play and developmental movement patterns in early years settings. She is an exceptionally playful person herself.

Jasmine is now working as Artist in Residence at Heathermount the Learning Centre in Berkshire with children on the autistic spectrum, and as a consultant for the London Borough of Barnet and Camden.

Jasmine Pasch 2007