

# BIG BODY PLAY

WHY SOMETHING

SO SCARY

IS

SO GOOD

FOR CHILDREN

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"Look at this room! I've warned you kids about roughhousing. Where's Tommy?"

**TAKE A TRIP DOWN MEMORY  
LANE....**



## AT YOUR TABLES:

On the sheet of paper, write down a time you've observed children playing roughly – either by themselves or with other children.

For each instance, describe:

- how the children looked (*what were their facial expressions*),
- How the children acted (*were they there willingly, or did they try to run away?*), and
- how long the play lasted (*did the children keep returning for more?*).

## WHAT IS IT?

Big body play is the very physical

running,

*\*rolling,*

jumping,

*\*leaping,*

tagging,

*\*swinging,*

wrestling,

chasing,

*\*twirling*

*\*spinning*

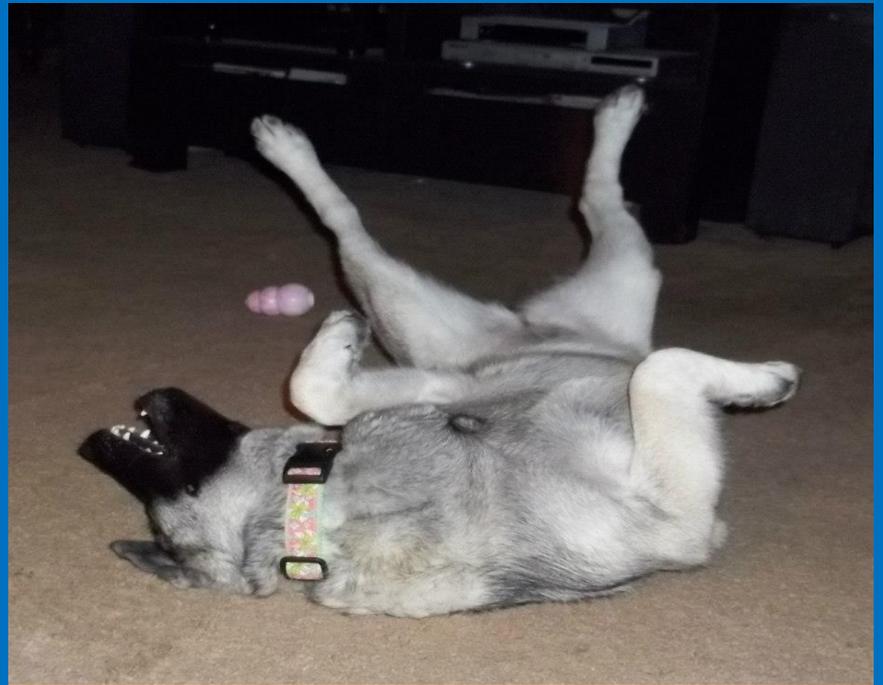
Fleeing

*\*bouncing*

*that all animal young – including  
children – do.*



\* Terms are Big Body Play outside of conventional Rough & Tumble Play



## TYPES OF BIG BODY PLAY

- Individual/Solitary
- With/on another child
  - Group Games

# DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESSION OF BBP



**BIG BODY PLAY FOLLOWS THE SAME DEVELOPMENTAL PATTERNS AS OTHER FORMS OF CHILDREN'S PLAY (PARTEN'S PLAY STYLES) BECAUSE IT IS AN INHERENT PART OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT.**

**Individual/Solitary**



Solitary (independent) play – *when the child is alone and maintains focus on its activity. Such a child is uninterested in or is unaware of what others are doing. More common in younger children (age 2–3) as opposed to older ones.*

**With/on another child**



Parallel play - *when the child plays separately from others but close to them and mimicking their actions*

Associative play – *when the child is interested in the people playing but not in coordinating their activities with those people, or when there is no organized activity at all. There is a substantial amount of interaction involved, but the activities are not in sync.*

**Group Games**



Cooperative play – *when a child is interested both in the people playing and in the activity they are doing. In cooperative play, the activity is organized, and participants have assigned roles.*

# SOLITARY



**WITH/ON ANOTHER CHILD  
BIG BODY PLAY**



## GROUP GAMES BIG BODY PLAY



## SIGNIFICANCE OF BIG BODY PLAY

Rough & tumble play has considerable merit in a young child's overall development (Pellegrini, 1987; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998; Pellis & Pellis, 2007).

*What do you think  
some of the  
benefits are?*



## SOCIAL BENEFITS

- ▶ Signaling and detecting
- ▶ Alternating and changing roles.
- ▶ Turn-taking and reciprocity.



## PHYSICAL BENEFITS

- Intense physical exertion
- Access to appropriate physical contact



## PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS

- BBP gives children a chance to blow off steam.
- After 15 minutes of intense physical activity, children are calmer for a longer period of time.
- The longer children go without any BBP, the more rowdy and aggressive they are when they finally get to do it.



## COGNITIVE BENEFITS

- *Dynamic Systems Theory:* Development of movement is linked to the development of cognition.
- Rough play leads to the release of chemicals that affect the brain areas responsible for decision-making and for social discrimination.
- Connection between rough play and critical periods of brain development. *Children who didn't roughhouse don't have the same brain development.*
- Recent research is examining the link between insufficient rough play and a later diagnosis of ADHD (Leuzinger-Bohleber, 2010).



## LANGUAGE BENEFITS

Because successful big body play is dependent on

- ✓ Gesturing, and
- ✓ Signaling

Children gain the ability to:

- ✓ Perceive
- ✓ Infer
- ✓ Decode

James Borg (2010) states that human communication consists of 93 percent body language while only 7% of communication consists of words themselves.

Borg, James. *Body Language: 7 Easy Lessons to Master the Silent Language*. FT Press, 2010, [ISBN 978-0-13-700260-3](https://www.ftpress.com/9780137002603)



Landry and Taylor are outside on the playground.

Landry says to Taylor, "Wanna wrestle?" Taylor nods his head up and down, indicating, "Yes!"



Landry put his arms around Taylor's back and pulled him backwards onto the ground. He and Taylor were both laughing.



When Landry flipped Taylor over onto his back, Taylor stopped laughing and scrunched his face in a grimace.

Landry let go of Taylor and Taylor got up. I asked Landry, "How did you know to let go?"

Landry replied, "I could just tell."

## ***WHAT CHILDREN LEARN THROUGH WRESTLING***

According to Bright From the Start – Georgia Pre-K's governing entity – a child is "ready" for Kindergarten when :

**... feelings of both self and others are recognized**

Feelings will be identified and expressed appropriately.

Feelings of others will be understood and accepted.

An increasing capacity for self-control will be evident.

**... social and interpersonal skills are emerging**

Ability to work or play cooperatively with others will be evident.

Ability to form appropriate relationships with children and adults will be demonstrated.

Emerging conflict resolution skills will be evident.

Increasing capacity to follow rules and routines will be evident.

**... communication with others is effective**

Listening skills will be evident.

Ability to follow simple directions will be evident.

Expressing needs and wants will be demonstrated.

Use of language to interact socially with others will be demonstrated.

## MEETING STANDARDS WITH BIG BODY PLAY

Think of a particular big body activity that children might engage in—for example, wrestling. At first glance, wrestling may not seem to support many state standards for students. But let's look at first grade in a Georgia elementary school. Here are some of the state standards for first-graders:

- Demonstration of both speaking and listening skills (e.g., following a three-part direction)
- Beginning to understand the principles of writing
- Measuring attributes of concrete objects
- Understanding the measurement of time
- Demonstrating competency in motor skills and movement patterns needed to perform a variety of activities

A supervised wrestling match can help first-graders develop mastery of these standards. For example, you could involve students in creating the wrestling ring, using rulers and tape measures to determine the size. Have students develop the rules for the game and write them down on poster-board. Appoint a timekeeper to watch the clock and let participants know when the bout is over.

## FEARS & MISPERCEPTIONS

Is rough & tumble play the same as real fighting?



Will rough & tumble play become real fighting if allowed to continue?

Isn't somebody going to get hurt?



Aren't boys the only ones who play this way?

## ROUGH PLAY:



- ▶ By definition, rough and tumble play in which children *willingly* do the following:
  - Laugh
  - Run
  - Jump
  - Open beat (tag)
  - Wrestle
  - Chase, and
  - Flee

## FIGHTING:

But when children are **fighting**, they typically do the following:

Fixate

Frown

Hit

Push, and

Take-and-Grab

Rough and tumble play may resemble fighting, but it is *distinctly different* from fighting (Humphreys & Smith, 1984).

## ROUGH PLAY:

1. Children's expressions are often characterized by *smiles*; they are often *laughing*.
2. Children involved are also *willing participants*.
3. Children *keep returning* for more.



## FIGHTING:



1. Children's expressions are characterized by *frowns* as well as *tears*.
2. One participant is usually *dominating* another one.
3. As soon as an episode resolves, the *unwilling participants often flee*.

## STORIES FROM THE FIELD

### Rough/Big Body Play

Three children in the Pre-K classroom were outside on the playground. They stood each one behind the other, like they were making a train. They each had their hands flat on the child in front's back. With all hands on the back of a child in front, the children would push. The kids would fall down. Laughing, they all got up, faced the opposite direction, and repeated the whole process. They pushed, fell down, laughed, got back up and did it again for fifteen or twenty minutes

### Fighting

I was outside with my young preschool class – three and four year olds. While I was talking with two children, I saw a child walk over to another child and, using his open hand, struck the child on the side of his head. The other child then reached up with a closed fist and hit the first child three or four times on the side of his head. Both children burst into tears and ran away

THE **FEAR** IS THAT IT WILL  
BECOME FIGHTING...

- From the CDA *Assessment Observation Instrument*:

“Rough play is minimized. Example: defuses rough play before it becomes a problem; makes superhero play more manageable by limiting time and place.”

- From *Georgia’s* Bright from the Start Rules and Regulations for Child Care Learning centers:

“Staff shall not engage in, or allow children or other adults to engage in, activities that could be detrimental to a child’s health or well-being, such as, but not limited to, horse play, rough play, wrestling...”

## WILL IT BECOME FIGHTING?

- *Play fighting escalates to real fighting less than 1% of the time.*
- When it does escalate, the escalation typically occurs when participants include children who have been rejected (A sociometric categorisation).
- The term “rejected” refers to children who are “actively avoided by peers, who are named often as undesirable playmates.”
- Rather than forbid rough play, focus on supervising it so that children can gain the social, emotional, cognitive – especially language – development it offers.
- It’s not the child with good social skills who is good at rough play, it is children who have had a lot of rough play then have good social skills.

## CAN WE TELL THE DIFFERENCE?

- Most children are quite adept at recognizing that the play is big body play and not real fighting.
- Actually, children are better at discerning rough and tumble from real fighting than many of their teachers are (Boulton, 1996).



## EVALUATING OUR OWN STORIES

Look back at the play memories you wrote down at the beginning of this session.

Are they big body play?

Are they real fighting?

How do you know now?

# NOW IT'S YOUR TURN

We are going to divide up into twelve groups. Each group has one finger play to turn into a Big Body Game. You have 10 minutes to make up big body movements for the finger play and to learn them as a group.

When the ten minutes are up, each group will demonstrate and teach their big body game to the whole group. Go!



## INDOOR ENVIRONMENTS THAT SUPPORT R & T

Look for and offer the following environmental features *indoors*:

- hard edges rounded or beveled instead of pointed
  - rugs skid-free
  - area free of tripping hazards
- enough space for the children to move around comfortably
- an indoor safety surface to absorb the shock of falling if children are more than two feet off the ground
- the walls and/or sides of surrounding equipment padded or covered with padding

# INDOOR ENVIRONMENTS THAT SUPPORT BIG BODY PLAY



## OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENTS THAT SUPPORT BIG BODY PLAY



*Less* play equipment means *more* big body play:

- Natural landscapes with hills and logs encourage and allow children to climb, run up, run down, roll down, roll up, balance on, jump off, jump across, and so much more.
- Embankment slides allow children to climb up or slide down, as well as sit side-by-side and slide down in tandem.



## SUPERVISING AND COACHING BBP

- Environments that support BBP
  - Rules that support BBP
    - Coaching BBP
    - Role-Playing BBP



Childhood happens once.  
Climb the slide.

## SUPERVISING BIG BODY PLAY

- ▶ Help children interpret body gestures and signals - develop the body language or body code - that will allow them to better communicate with their playmates.
- ▶ Model appropriate physical contact, especially for children with poor social skills and/or poor non-verbal communication skills.
- ▶ For example, if two children are wrestling and the play starts to hurt, help the child say, “That hurts. Please let go” or “Too tight; I can’t move.”
  - ▶ Allowing big body play does not mean allowing it unsupervised. The best accident prevention for young children comes from adequate adult supervision.

## STORIES FROM THE FIELD:

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 formalized 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.

## POLICIES & RULES FOR R & T

- ▶ Help the children develop rules or policies to guide the play.
- ▶ For example, when playing “Duck, Duck, Goose,” make sure children understand that all tags are with an open hand and can only be made on the arms and shoulders and not on the head.
- ▶ Post a prominent sign with both pictures and words to remind children how to keep the play appropriate. The sign might list these rules:
  - No kicking
  - Tags with open hands only
  - No choking
  - Keep hands away from hair and heads
  - Smiles stop – Play stops

## REFERENCES

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A book about roughhousing for parents:

The Art of Roughhousing. (2010). by Anthony T. DeBenedet, M.D., and Lawrence J. Cohen, Ph.D. Available at all major booksellers.