

# Young children's rough and tumble play

## Developing effective policies for educators of pre-schoolers

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*This article outlines rough and tumble play of young children in early childhood settings and strategies for educators seeking to manage the play. Descriptions and a categorization of the elements of rough and tumble play observed as part of a research study are presented which serve as a foundation to interpret and manage the play. An example of effective policy development is presented in support of educators developing effective strategies to successfully incorporate rough and tumble play in their early childhood settings.*

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The rough and tumble play of young children in early childhood settings can be difficult to interpret and effectively manage. As Pellegrini (1987) noted, rough and tumble play is subtle in manifestation which may lead to this form of play being difficult to interpret. Educators can gain a clearer understanding of what constitutes rough and tumble play and how to effectively manage the play through observations as they learn to successfully interpret the various forms of the play. With clarity on the forms of rough and tumble play, educators can move to implement strategies to effectively manage the play in their settings. This article presents results from a study on young children's rough and tumble play which serves to support educators seeking understanding through classification of various forms of this type of play.

### CRITERIA FOR INCLUSION OF ROUGH AND TUMBLE PLAY

According to Pellegrini and Smith (1998), rough and tumble play includes, 'wrestling, grappling, kicking, and tumbling' (p. 579). From this categorisation of the play, the elements of rough and tumble play have been further defined by Reed and Brown (2000) to include fleeing, wrestling, falling and open-handed slaps. One common element of recent descriptions and definitions of rough and tumble play is the inclusion of a 'play face', where participants are smiling and laughing (Reed & Brown 2000), and an open body stance. The play face and body stance are important characteristics in distinguishing rough and tumble play from aggression. According to Reed and Brown, and supported by DiPietro (1981), aggressive behaviour involves anger and a determination to cause harm to another, unlike the playful nature of rough and tumble play.

### YOUNG CHILDREN'S ROUGH AND TUMBLE PLAY

A research study on the rough and tumble play of young children was conducted at two early childhood settings in western Canada. Ten ninety-minute observations of children and educators were conducted over differing times of the day and on a variety of days at these early childhood settings. Each setting was observed during the daily routines, structured activities, transitions and free-play time. Observations involved written recordings of the rough and tumble play behaviours of the children concurrently with the responses of educators to this form of play. The play

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behaviours of 17 children (7 female and 10 male) and the responses of six educators (5 female and one male) were observed and recorded. Free-play was of particular interest based on the work of Smith and Connolly (1980) who noted that the frequency of rough and tumble play in pre-school settings was greatest during free-play sessions.

### OBSERVED ROUGH AND TUMBLE PLAY BEHAVIOURS

A total of 116 demonstrations of rough and tumble play behaviours were recorded during this study. The recorded behaviours were grouped into three categories that had common actions: (1) physical contact between players, (2) play behaviours in which an object was an instrumental component, and (3) independent physical play behaviours (see Table 1).

Each of the behaviours within the first category involved direct physical contact between players. This category included the most commonly and least commonly observed behaviours during this study. The most commonly observed behaviours were chasing and the children's use of their voice to make loud roars at one another. The least common behaviours observed were crashing the body into an object and wrestling. Examples of physical contact between players included: grabbing the body of another player; children banging their bodies into one another; pushing and pulling one another with both hands and feet; holding hands; and open handed slaps.

The second category involved those play behaviours in which an object was an instrumental component. Some examples of using objects in rough and tumble play

included: jumping on an object such as a chair; kicking an object such as balls or buckets; throwing objects; crashing motions with a held object such as crashing toy cars; and using an object to hit another player. It is important for educators to recognise that some of the rough and tumble play behaviours listed, such as kicking balls, can and will be observed within other contexts, such as sporting events. In the case of rough and tumble play, kicking objects such as balls was observed as children also grabbed one another and crashed into objects. Where ball kicks in sporting activities are often limited to the kicking action, kicking in rough and tumble play is notable as it is also accompanied by additional rough and tumble play behaviours. The distinguishing element for individual play behaviours is the context in which they occur.

The third category was independent physical play behaviours including making hitting motions, running, chasing, falling, and rolling around on the ground. One frequently observed independent physical play behaviour was roaring. In the use of their voices, children will imitate an animal sound or will often yell as they call to another player. Similar to the use of a loud voice, children will also use a 'loud body', or large body motions. The large body motion was recognised when children made large arm movements (arms outstretched) while also making large leg movements such as when making karate motions without any physical contact with one another.

The display of the play face (Reed & Brown 2000) was the most common element within the rough and tumble play observed within this study. The children in all incidents of rough and tumble play were displaying the play face of a cheerful expression. Children would laugh and smile when engaging in the rough and tumble play events observed as part of this study.

Observing and documenting the varied forms of rough and tumble play demonstrated that this type of play included a wide range of play behaviours. This incorporated what appears to be 'practice' of the more integral forms of rough and tumble play observed in research. For example, Reed and Brown (2000) and Pellegrini (1991) conducted observations of school aged children and noted sophisticated coordination of play behaviour and unique social rules associated with rough and tumble play. However, the pre-school aged children included in this study lacked the coordinated sophistication of older children although they displayed, or practised, individual components of rough and tumble play. This 'practice' form of rough and tumble play lends itself to the classifications of the play (direct physical contact between players, objects as instrumental components, and independent physical play) which may assist educators seeking support for developing policies directed at managing the play within their setting.

**Table 1. Categories of rough and tumble play**

<p>1. <i>Physical contact between players</i> 40% (n = 45)</p> <p>grabbing body of other player; grabbing and moving body of other player; banging body into body of other player; rolling around on ground with other player; pushing other player; open handed slaps; holding hands; pulling other player; wrestling</p>
<p>2. <i>Object and rough and tumble play</i> 14% (n = 17)</p> <p>jumping on object; kicking object; making crashing motions with held object; throwing object; banging body into fixed object; making hitting motions while holding an object; crashing body into object</p>
<p>3. <i>Independent physical play</i> 46% (n = 54)</p> <p>use of voice – roaring; chasing; falling; hitting motions; kicking motions; running; large body motions; hitting self; rolling around on ground on own; use of a loud voice; fleeing</p>

## INCLUSION OF ROUGH AND TUMBLE PLAY IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTING

An example of the utilisation of the rough and tumble play classifications was demonstrated in an early childhood setting. The educators were concerned about the tendency of a group of children to fight with one another rather than engage in more constructive activities. Several of the children would rough and tumble play at home with their family and did not realise, or accept, that it was actively discouraged in their early childhood program. The educators implemented a set time for rough and tumble play with acceptance of two of the classifications involving physical contact. When one of the rules was incorporated to disallow rough and tumble play with objects as instrumental components, the children accepted and abided by this rule directing their play. In addition, children were required to care for one another throughout rough and tumble play by 'checking in' with play partners to ensure that each was having fun and that no one was hurt. When the children have had time to rough and tumble, and when their built up steam is released, they head off to do other things. As a result, the educators recognised that there had been a dramatic decrease in the constant guidance and discipline required by a group of children who are high energy, physical learners.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

Given that young children, both boys and girls, engage in physical play in the form of rough and tumble play, educators need to be prepared to effectively manage this type of play. An outright ban on the play would be a difficult path to take as this would limit the developmental growth occurring and lead to frustration for physical children. The need for educators to understand and effectively manage rough and tumble play can be a challenge, leading to the need for supportive guidelines. However, through understanding of the forms of rough and tumble play, educators can begin to develop guidelines for managing the play within individual settings.

## FORMULATION OF GUIDELINES

During the observational study on rough and tumble play in early childhood settings, educators recognised a lack of knowledge and preparation gained through training programs and professional development workshops to manage this form of play through the development of effective policies and procedures (Tannock 2008). Typically, educators would respond to rough and tumble play through redirection, stopping the play, or, in a very few situations, joining in the play. Educators participating in the study recognised that the formulation of guidelines would support their efforts to effectively, and knowledgeably, manage the play of young children (Tannock 2008).

The process of policy development can follow three steps:

1. observation of the rough and tumble play of the children
2. educators then construct and implement policies and procedures for managing the play, and
3. an evaluation of the impact of the newly developed policies on the children and overall climate of the setting.

Utilising the categories presented in Table 1, educators can carefully observe and record the behaviour of rough and tumble players. An effective period of time would be approximately two weeks. However, changes to routines such as the elimination of outdoor play due to unfavourable weather might result in variations to the form and extent of rough and tumble play displayed by the children. As a result, observations should be made during typical and atypical events in the centre.

Educators recording their observations of the rough and tumble play of children according to the criteria in Table 1 should also be sure to include the duration of the play and which children are participating. These areas of information will provide the foundation for development of policies and procedures to guide educators in managing the play.

Once the team of educators has gathered the data on the forms and frequency of rough and tumble play in their setting, they need to discuss the results of their observations. It might be that educators will find that rough and tumble play is actually occurring a great deal less, or a great deal more, than they had thought. It might be that the children are engaging in rough and tumble play from one of the areas of the categorisation but not the others.

The results of the observations might also lead to a realisation that educators are comfortable with the rough and tumble play occurring in the setting and may not want to proceed with developing formal guidelines. However, if the discussion reveals that educators are concerned about the play and need to develop consistent responses, the development of new policies is needed.

Policies for guiding rough and tumble play typically fall into three categories: to allow the play; to modify the play; or to ban the play. To ban the play is likely to be a difficult choice to make as developmentally children need, and will find opportunities, to be physically active. Rough and tumble play is not the only way children can engage in physical activity. However, with the addition of a friend, physical play is soon likely to involve contact which can be viewed as rough and tumble. Therefore, a more effective strategy, through the development of procedures, is to allow some forms and conditions of rough and tumble play with plans to modify the play if it becomes either too rough or harmful to others. Modification of rough and tumble play can include redirection to a more appropriate version, as demonstrated in the setting described earlier, where objects as instrumental

component forms of play were eliminated from acceptable forms of the play.

Ultimately, educators need to assess the play behaviours of the individual children in their care and determine the most effective way to ensure the safety of each child while also allowing for physical, expressive play by the children. In some cases, educators might be able to designate an appropriate space for the play such as a grassy area outdoors. In this way, as with many early childhood experiences, the play is permitted, but only in specific areas of the child care setting and allowing children the freedom to choose if they want to participate in the play. Equally, educators might determine that some forms of rough and tumble play such as chasing, jumping and falling are acceptable, but are not prepared to permit outright wrestling. Such a position would certainly be understandable not only to the educators, but also to the parents and children, and can be incorporated into the policy. In this case, the policy might state that wrestling is not allowed and the procedure would outline the need for educators to stop this form of play.

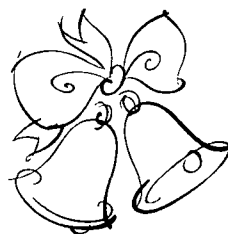
Any new policies and procedures should be re-examined by the educators to ensure that the purpose for the policy is still valid and that the purpose is being addressed. A second set of observations can be conducted to determine subsequent levels of rough and tumble play and educators can review and discuss the impact of policies on this form of play. With varying staff members, children, and parental expectations, changes to policies can be expected. However, through a repetition of the process presented here, educators can make informed decisions on the role of rough and tumble play in their settings.

## CONCLUSION

Young children are developing physically and socially within a context of play. As such, rough and tumble play often becomes part of an expansive repertoire of play experiences. For educators, an active approach of observation, policy development, and evaluation can serve to support common goals and expectations for play within an early childhood setting. Through this active approach to managing rough and tumble play, educators can authenticate their support of developmentally appropriate practice. ■

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*With warmest wishes to all our readers for  
a safe and happy holiday season  
and all the best in 2010*