

All about ...

Rough and tumble

Why does rough and tumble play benefit children and how can practitioners enable it in a positive and safe way? **Meredith Jones Russell** reports



Vigorous play helps children understand their physical limits and social boundaries, among other things

Rough and tumble play provides a myriad of benefits for young children. In his book *A Playworker's Taxonomy of Play Types*, Bob Hughes defines rough and tumble as 'close encounter play which is less to do with fighting and more to do with touching, tickling, gauging relative strength'. He adds that it allows children to participate in physical contact that does not result in anyone being hurt, and should use up a significant amount of energy.

Rough and tumble activities can include combinations of full-body movements such as chasing, wrestling, climbing, rolling, spinning and falling, and often involve contact with other objects or people.

Director of Active Matters Lala Manners says rough and tumble has a natural place in children's development. 'All young mammals have a primal need to move and be active with each other when, where and how they like,' she explains.

'Think of all the wildlife documentaries where you see puppies and cubs. Vigorous physical play takes up most of their waking time. It ensures optimum muscle tone, stamina, co-ordination and reaction time to ensure survival, embed group responsibility and determine individual boundaries.'

'Vigorous physical play or rough and tumble plays a similar role in the lives of young children. Left to their own devices, babies would probably spend 40 per cent of waking time kicking, waving and wriggling.'

BENEFITS

Rough and tumble play has a variety of benefits for children, helping them:

- understand the limits of their own strength
- explore their changing positions in space
- work out their social relationships with others and their own personal and physical boundaries
- work out the personal and physical boundaries of others, and how to respond appropriately.

Physical development expert Carol Archer explains rough and tumble play can aid children's development in a variety of ways. 'Neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp would say it reduces depressive symptoms and increases psychological resilience,' she says. 'Play is

case study: Hargrave Park

As part of a cluster project with Early Excellence, Carla Jones, EYFS phase lead and Reception teacher, nursery teacher Rachna Joshi and Reception teacher Georgina Stormfield from Hargrave Park School in Islington, north London, created an action research question that aimed to ascertain whether rough and tumble play has a positive impact on children's ability to manage their feelings and behaviour.

There is often a perception that rough and tumble play can encourage aggression or violence, **writes EYFS phase lead and Reception teacher Carla Jones**. We identified 12 children from our nursery and Reception classes who were finding it difficult to manage physical-based games, which led to disputes and physical reactions. We were concerned that an inability to regulate these feelings and behaviours would prevent these children from developing positive relationships.

Children in the Foundation Stage at Hargrave Park are able to free-flow from inside into the garden. We often found when we opened the doors that children wanted to run and experiment with different gross motor movements. Using these movements as a way of interacting with their peers often resulted in disagreements and fights because children didn't yet know how to negotiate situations which ensued. Some of our children found expressing their unhappiness with these situations difficult, resulting in physical reactions.

The realities of living in an urban setting in Islington, London can mean that children might not always have outdoor access or opportunities for outdoor play.

Some of the issues we found were:

- Reacting physically and aggressively to social situations.
- Seeking aggressive physical activities.
- Expressing unhappiness through physical reactions.
- English as an additional language or low levels of communication and language.

Shared expectations

The group was made up of 11 boys and one girl. It did seem to be predominately boys who displayed this type of behaviour. We found girls were more confident negotiating situations they were unhappy with verbally or seeking adult support. We believe



The only resource usually needed for rough and tumble is plenty of space

the lifeblood of children, and they learn so much about societal bonds during these spontaneous human interactions.'

As a result of the energy used up in effective rough and tumble play, Panksepp also suggested that allowing particularly hyperactive children time for this style of play could help them calm their behaviour.

Ms Archer agrees that allowing rough and tumble can improve behaviour organically, rather than a more formal approach such as awarding stars or stickers.

'There is a lot of play deprivation among young children at the moment, and without enough naturally generated play, Panksepp has suggested children could be more likely to show symptoms of things like ADHD and require medication. This is very scary and something we need to take on board.

'It worries me when we return to a behaviourist approach, and learning and development get lost in favour of a focus on behaviour.

'When you watch the interaction in rough and tumble, how children learn from each other about social interaction and what is acceptable and what isn't, you see how it strengthens bonds.

Children walk away with their arms around each other. It's not just about

behaviour but about emotions, well-being and mental health.

'If you let children stop, look, listen and feel what is going on around them and what the social parameters are, which is what rough and tumble allows them to do, they learn so much more about the subtleness of human behaviour.'

IN PRACTICE

Rough and tumble play does not have to require much more than a large space to be effective. Dr Manners suggests Forest School and Beach School could be particularly suitable settings for this reason. Simply putting mats and cushions down on the floor can also provide an attractive and safe area for children to lead their own activities.

However, it seems many adults, mindful of potential risks and dangers, are reluctant to introduce rough play, either at home or within settings. Dr Manners explains, 'I

think practitioners are very scared of rough and tumble tipping over into aggressive behaviour or injury and that parents will disapprove. And the consequences of this may be significant.

'I don't think practitioners fully understand the role of rough and tumble play in children's lives ▶

I think practitioners are very scared of rough and tumble tipping over into aggressive behaviour or injury and that parents will disapprove

School, North London

children of all ages would benefit from this type of activity to support gross movement development and social interactions.

Although initially we felt apprehensive contacting families, parents were all on board and agreed to sign consent forms.

We ran three ten-minute sessions a week for seven weeks outside the classroom; in a large space either in the school hall or outdoors. Sometimes the sessions would run slightly longer, but with a mix of nursery and Reception children we were conscious of the need to maintain focus, and we faced some time and ratio constraints.

While it was hard to find the time, staff and space to allow the sessions to run, we found sharing the responsibility between three members of staff helped. We kept a running email dialogue throughout, detailing what had worked and what should be continued and reinforced in the next sessions.

We worked hard to be flexible and tried to time sessions to pre-empt behaviour at challenging times, e.g. Friday afternoon. We shared our expectations with the children before each session to ensure the children were successful.

For the activities, we took ideas from Helen Tovey's research, including:

- tangling
- playing leap frog
- tickling
- playing 'row row your boat'
- tug of war
- pencil rolls (with arms outstretched above head)
- chasing each other up the stairs
- 'Jam Sandwich', when one child lies on the bottom and all the others pile on top.

While lots of the children were often keen to role-play as superheroes, some found regulating that play challenging. Often children were unsure when to stop, not recognising when someone was hurt. The aim of the intervention was to practise the movements and exercises, such as pencil rolls and tug of war, without aggression.

One of the most important things we wanted to teach the children was whenever anyone involved vocalised unhappiness with what was happening or expressed pain, everyone had to stop straight away. The children became better at spotting this, compared with our initial observations.

At the start of every session we reiterated our basic rules 'look, listen, think and talk'. A number of the children found understanding boundaries

challenging, so there was emphasis placed on playing in a physical way but safely. The project gave them the space and time to experiment and express these behaviours and allowed us to explicitly teach these boundaries.

The children responded very positively to the sessions. We observed them using the language we had encouraged, noticing and responding to signals from others and respecting each other in their play.

As a result of the project, all children's levels for managing feelings and behaviour improved – 100 per cent of the children made accelerated progress (gaining three or more points) in this area of *Development Matters*.

All the children's levels of well-being and involvement on the Leuven scale improved, with two children moving from red to green, one child moving from red to amber, and other children moving from amber to green.

Rough and tumble behaviour could easily have been quashed if this intervention had not been put in place and the profile of this type of behaviour had not had been reconsidered in our setting.

We will now look to carry on the project for another year, looking again at which children would most benefit. We will also look to incorporate aspects of the project into our PE sessions and outdoor play for all children.

We have shared the project and some of the literature with other staff in training sessions. It's very important to help staff feel confident enough to run rough and tumble sessions without feeling that they need to say 'stop' to children.

PLAY TIPS With children

- Establish clear ground rules before beginning your first session. Recap these at the beginning of future sessions – for example, 'Look, listen...'
- Establish clear boundaries. What is the strategy if children are unable to manage the session and are disrupting other children's focus? Consider ideas like a two-minute break.
- Make it a positive experience. Ensure the activities are posing the right level of challenge and managed risk to reduce disruptive behaviour. Ensure the behaviours you want to see are encouraged and reinforced positively.

For staff

- Establish when rough and tumble would work well within existing commitments.
- Share the responsibility. Take turns with other staff to run sessions.
- Ensure all staff are trained. If other adults are to run sessions, make sure you have explained clearly the purpose of the sessions.
- Communicate with staff after their sessions, in conversation or by email.
- Have a back-up plan! If using a shared space, plan a back-up area in case it is unexpectedly occupied.



EYFS best practice

and why it is important for them to experience it, not just to support their physical health but also for what they learn in terms of communication, setting boundaries and establishing friendships.'

Ms Archer agrees and suggests more training on the topic would help. She says, 'With our risk-averse culture and fear of litigation, children are often discouraged from being playful.'

'Rough and tumble is an area that managers of settings and local authorities often don't feel people need training in, or they put it at the bottom of the pile. Writing or reading are seen as more important. With current Government policies, the *Bold Beginnings* report and top-down ideas of formalising education, such as phonics, we have taken our children away from so much that is important. It's terribly worrying.'

'Practitioners considering rough and tumble want to know whether they should watch or provide resources or get involved themselves, and if so what they should do. Training makes them much more open to the possibility of rough and tumble, as once they understand what it is and get ideas for activities, they have the confidence to implement it.'

Some PVI settings do, however, continue to promote this form of play, while there are examples of schools that are trying to overcome the restrictions of the school timetable and curriculum to explore the potential of rough and tumble play for the children in their care (see case studies).

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

While rough and tumble play involves physically vigorous behaviours, one of its key identifiers is that it should be accompanied by positive feelings between participants. Ms Archer says there is a very big difference between fighting and rough and tumble. 'Certain adults are so remote



Rough and tumble is more associated with boys, but shouldn't necessarily be so

from playful behaviours they can no longer tell the difference between fighting and rough and tumble.

'What is interesting is watching how children interact. They laugh and make positive noises while rolling, plopping, spinning, tumbling. They have fun, and while they do so they learn from each other's facial expressions.'

She adds that one of the main results of rough and tumble play is 'learning to resolve conflict without getting into conflict.'

'I have observed a child who was not happy with what another child did during rough and tumble, and she didn't say anything, but just carefully removed herself and walked away. They are able to physically get out of a situation with very few words.'

case study: Pebbles Childcare, West Sussex

I'm aware that in a nursery background, rough and tumble play can be frowned upon, but in home-based childcare everything can be a little bit more informal and relaxed, **writes Chloe Webster, a childminder at Pebbles Childcare** in Worthing, West Sussex.

As a small setting, we are all very close and promote family values. Parents understand that the children are like siblings and appreciate that having a small altercation is part of children's learning. As we are big on risky play, parents trust our judgement and never say they don't want their children involved in rough and tumble.

No matter how much you try to ban rough and tumble, children will still try

to explore it. Cuddles can quickly turn into not letting go and rolling around on the floor. When children are very excited, things can escalate quickly, so we put a lot of emphasis on checking everyone is happy when rough and tumble occurs. We encourage children to be aware of each other's cues, like talking about what different noises mean and asking, 'Does it sound like they are enjoying that?'

When it looks like it may be getting too much or someone might get hurt, we can adapt rough and tumble to something within the children's capabilities and more suitable. This keeps it within a controlled environment that everyone is happy with.

If children are throwing themselves on the floor and jumping all over each other, we will immediately bring out soft-play equipment, whether inside or outside. We also use things like box play to allow children to jump on boxes, squash them, get inside them and push them over.

Our approach focuses on enabling children to explore rough and tumble, so they can learn what is acceptable, and on giving them opportunities and facilitating play depending on their level of need. We also adjust the approach to take account of children's ages.

We used to have a lot of three- and four-year-olds, but then introduced several children aged one and under, so



GENDER

Rough or violent play has traditionally been associated more with boys than girls. Dr Manners says there is an early cause of this.

‘In the first 24 hours of life there is a

marked difference in the way male and female babies are managed. Boys will be held firmly, swung in the air and passed around happily, while girls will be held closely with lots of eye contact and soft voices. These are quite different approaches.

‘This gender difference carries on, with parents generally tolerating vigorous play in boys because that’s just “what they do”, but find it strange if girls want to join in, and they are immediately labelled “tomboys”.

Perhaps in a similar vein, rough and tumble play can be assumed to be the domain of a father rather than a mother, Dr Manners says.

‘Fathers are often encouraged by mothers to engage in this type of play, but with many children growing up without any male influence, not experiencing the joys of rough and tumble play with a safe adult is obviously an issue.’

Ms Archer observed a research project that investigated rough and tumble activities with fathers and children, but says even they were hesitant to engage with rough play.

‘Even the dads often didn’t realise it was important; they thought they should be sitting with their child and a book or a pen, learning to read rather than rolling around on the floor.’

As for adults’ role in rough and tumble, Ms Archer says while they can join in, activities should ultimately be child-led for best results. ‘Adults can get involved too, but need to understand that the way children play with them is very different. Children want to climb on them and get on their backs, whereas when they are allowed to play alone, the experience is different.

‘In the past, children tended to have a lot of freedom to play in an energised and risky way, away from adults’ eyes and ears.

Children should still have free time to play where adults do not structure it.

‘We have the chance in the early years to

we had to help children adapt and learn to be more careful around the babies. They are now very mindful of taking themselves off to a suitable place and know where those suitable places are.

Boys and girls

For a long time we were a very boy-dominated setting and rough and tumble occurred a lot more frequently. We have now half the number of boys and the approach has changed too.

Our oldest boy, at four years old, is very aware of asking the girls to play. The girls are very into superheroes like Moana, but with the boys everything ends in fighting games. Farm-themed small-world play can all of a sudden turn

into the cows and pigs fighting, and then the boys decide to become the cows and pigs. It does seem often to be how they express themselves. While girls argue or talk it out, boys often show anger through rough play. We tell them it is OK to feel this way, but we also adapt the environment to allow them to express their feelings safely.

Where their go-to response to anger and frustration might be to lash out, we clear the garden so they can run, jump or roll around unrestricted instead, or we take them out to nearby Sussex Downs to walk up to the top of a big hill and roll down. This allows them to use a controlled, acceptable environment as an outlet for their feelings.



FURTHER READING

- DiCarlo C *et al* (2017) ‘Preschool teachers’ perceptions of rough and tumble play vs aggression in preschool-aged boys’, *Early Child Development and Care*. 185 (5) pp779-790
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- Pellegrini AD and Smith PK (1998) ‘Physical activity play: The nature and function of a neglected aspect of play’, *Child Development*. 69 (3) pp577-598
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- Smart Carrie L (2013) ‘The dilemma of response among early childhood educators to rough and tumble play in educational settings: Moving beyond expectations and rediscovering play’. University of New Hampshire

provide children with the opportunities they need. If we allow rough and tumble play for all children, it is likely they will thrive.’ ■