

Learning through unstructured play helps kids develop

August 19 2011, By Julie Deardorff

Roughhousing, or tossing your children around on purpose, can be a hard sell to many parents. We worry our kids will get hurt. We don't want rowdy behavior carrying over into the classroom, especially in schools with no-touching policies. And many of us aren't really even sure how to physically interact with our kids.

But good, old-fashioned horseplay is a critical part of a child's development and comes with a surprising number of [health benefits](#), according to some [psychologists](#) and experts in childhood [play](#).

Though schools are banning physical contact between students, some research has shown that the freedom to engage in rough-and-tumble play improves everything from [test scores](#) to [friendships](#). Today's kids live increasingly structured lives; as a result, "we've lost the culture of childhood, where they play their own games, have their own fights and resolve them," said David Elkind, a professor emeritus of [child development](#) at Tufts University and the author of "The Power of Play." "A lot of the bullying that goes on in schools is largely a result that children no longer have this culture of spontaneous play."

Roughhousing, however, can teach children how to manage their own emotions and read the feelings of others, making them more likable, advocates say. It can help children build a moral compass because "when we roughhouse with our kids, we model for them how someone bigger and stronger holds back," wrote Anthony DeBenedet and Larry Cohen in "The Art of Roughhousing."

Interactive, free-form play can improve [physical fitness](#). It can foster confidence and trust. But DeBenedet and Cohen argue that the ultimate benefit of wild play is joy, love and a deeper connection, largely because it requires tuning into your child's emotions and needs.

TRY IT OUT

Here's how DeBenedet and Cohen suggest getting started:

Create the right tone: Begin and end all roughhousing sessions with hugs and high-fives.

Don't tickle. Laughter is an involuntary reaction. "Children can feel overpowered and out of control but look like they're enjoying it," Cohen said. A light touch is OK, but tune into your child to see if they're enjoying it. "If you must tickle, try a fake one - almost touch your child in ticklish spots, but not quite."

Roughhouse earlier in the day. There's a natural arc of active physical play; it starts with calmness, rises into activation, reaches a peak of super-excitement and then winds down. If you interrupt this flow - say it's right before bedtime - you're asking for a meltdown. Figure out your child's cycle - it's usually between 30 and 60 minutes - and leave that much time plus a little cushion.

Freeze the action. If things feel like they're getting out of control, make up a silly code word that means "stop" and freeze like a statue when you say it, encouraging your child to freeze too. Keep the breaks short unless there's an injury or you need time to review the guidelines. Use a different silly word for "go."

When in doubt, fall over. "This is always good for a laugh and helps your child feel more confident, because it means they are not always the one

who is smaller, weaker and more helpless," DeBenedet and Cohen wrote.

(c) 2011, Chicago Tribune.

Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

Citation: Learning through unstructured play helps kids develop (2011, August 19) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-08-unstructured-kids.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.