



10 ROUGH AND TUMBLE PLAY

What is rough and tumble play?

Rough and tumble play was named by anthropologist Karl Groos in his books “Play of Animals” (1898) and “Play of Man” (1901). It is also one of around 16 Play Types that Bob Hughes lists in ‘A Playworker’s Taxonomy of Play Types’ (2002).

Rough and Tumble is a vigorous type of play that can involve chasing and play fighting but can be any type of activity that involves physical interactions, where children are gauging their own strengths and discovering boundaries between themselves and others. Examples could include wrestling, tickling, spinning, or being thrown in the air. The important thing to note is whether everyone is enjoying the play as it is not about hurting each other. This can sometimes be hard to spot, as there could be lots of laughing and smiling but at times it could also look aggressive as children become involved in the play.

This type of play is enjoyed by all ages of children, with babies and toddlers often enjoying being bounced on someone’s knee or flown about in the air. Toddlers enjoy spinning around, chasing and dancing. Then, as they grow older they may start to play fight, pin each other down, or wrestle. In teenagers, it could be seen as ‘horseplay’ or mucking about.

Why do Children do it?

Rough and tumble play is a part of nature. For humans as with animals, engaging in it is a vital tool for development and understanding of interactions. Research shows that aggression naturally occurs in children and diminishes as they learn about themselves during rough and tumble play (Kevin Klein, 2010).

Children learn about their own bodies through this type of play, its strength and abilities, as well as understanding boundaries with others. For example, it allows children to begin to read and understand the body language of others, take turns, become compassionate, as well as learning to switch roles as they go from the chaser to the chased. These are skills that they will continue to use in their lives.

This type of play is often very energetic and can benefit their cardio-vascular health, as well as developing their gross motor skills and muscle strength.

Difficulties adults have with rough and tumble play

Adults often find it difficult to allow rough and tumble play as they worry about children getting hurt, or they aren’t sure whether it is play or fighting. Some settings even see rough and tumble play as a ‘problem’ that needs to be stopped.

Children can get hurt during all types of play and activities, and it happens less than 1% of the time during pre-schoolers rough and tumble play (Scott and Panksepp, 2003). Children are also very adept at identifying the difference between rough and tumble play, and real fighting (Boulton, 1996). When children get hurt during play, they will normally stop and make sure that everyone is okay before resuming.

An important thing for adults to observe is whether the children are laughing and smiling, or whether they are frowning, pushing or hitting. Sometimes it can escalate quickly from playfulness to fighting if children do not read signals and body language very well. This should be when adults intervene and speak to the children.

Practitioners could complete a Risk Benefit Assessment to help them understand the play, as well as support conversations with parents and carers if there are any concerns.

How can adults facilitate / support it?

To help support this type of play we should make sure there are environments that are available for children to use. Provide open spaces without trip hazards for them to play tag and chase, mats available for them to roll about on, and you could even put out foam sticks to allow play sword fighting.

If the children are older you might want to discuss some rules or policies with them that highlight anything that isn’t allowed, or remind them what to do when people stop smiling or get hurt. You could also agree signals or words they can use if they want to stop or are uncomfortable at any time.

Smart Play Network Members Support

Member you have access to telephone and email support. For more information about the topics covered in this guidance sheet, or any other queries you may have about your project, please contact us using: 0131 554 2620 or admin@smartplaynetwork.org