

EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY SERVICE INFORMATION FOR EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONERS

The Importance of Physical Play for Young Children

Why encourage 'rough' play?

Rough-and-tumble play is universal (appearing in all cultures) and linked to normal brain development.

Rough play is often discouraged as adults fear it will turn in to real fighting or children will be injured. However, play fighting becomes real fighting less than 1% of the time.

Rough play allows children (particularly boys) to practice showing care for each other.

Physical touch needs are met in age appropriate ways.

Children learn a wide variety of skills:

- Physical skills – how they can move and movement control.
- Language and communication skills – sharing stories and non-verbal communication.
- Social skills – competition and cooperation, turn taking, playing roles, negotiating and friendship skills.
- Attention skills – children will encourage each other to keep the game going, particularly in chasing games.

How to tell if children are playing or showing genuine aggression

Play

- Children's faces are free and easy, their muscles are relaxed and they are smiling/laughing.
- Children keep play going by turn taking.
- Children alternate roles (e.g. chaser and chased)
- Lots can join in.
- No spectators.

Fighting

- Children frown, stare, cry and get red faced.
- One child usually dominates and roles do not change.
- Children separate after the incident and usually only 2 are involved.
- Draws a crowd of onlookers.

Supporting rough play

- Mark off and prepare an area for rough play.
- Develop a set of rules and clearly explain these to the children (e.g. No hitting, Stop if the other person says stop, hands only below the neck and above the waist, open hands only).
- Supervise and intervene, help children use language – e.g. '*he's pushing against you, he wants you to get up!*', this can also lead to problem solving without telling children off – e.g. '*I think he felt uncomfortable because you're bigger than him, how can we play so that no one is pinned down?*'.
- Help children develop 'stories' around their play. These might be stories about caring, protecting, rescuing or strength.
- Recognise and praise children for calming down following rough play.