

# Rambunctious Play:

## A Trademark of Active Boys

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Dear Barry,

My boy is in Grade 3 and recently got in trouble for play fighting at recess. I had hoped that he would grow out of rough play last summer but find that he, his friends, as well as his younger brother still engage in a lot of aggressive play. Mostly, it seems all right, but every now and then one of the boys crosses the line and someone gets hurt. Usually I can see it coming.

Don't get me wrong – they are caring and smart boys, but the playground supervisor says that there is no rough play allowed whatsoever. As a parent, I feel stuck between being my son's advocate and supporting school staff in their educational role. My son is a great kid, very social and with a wonderful personality which I do not want to alter or squash. Any ideas?

Germeet, Surrey

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Dear Germeet,

While boisterous active play – chasing, yelling, and charging around – is common among children, rough and aggressive play is widespread among many boys well into their teen years. Although you likely don't want your son or any of the other children to get hurt, it would be wise to consider the legitimate role that rough-and-tumble play has in his world.

You will be hard-pressed to find a pediatrician or child development specialist who will disagree with the notion that rambunctious play actually helps children to develop – boys in particular. They will tell you that through spontaneous play-fighting boys can learn to control their emotions, bodies, expression and anger; as well as acquire



**...observe, supervise & intervene when appropriate...**

problem solving, negotiating, and a great variety of social skills. They learn their own limits and those of others so that they don't lose control and hurt themselves or others. Allowing children time and space where they can just let rip is crucial – especially after they have been sitting and concentrating at a desk.

As long as no one is getting hurt, observe and supervise boys' energetic play, and intervene when appropriate. Of course it is to be expected that boys will cross the line of decorum at times, but with appropriate supervision, parents and teachers can intervene and utilize these moments to teach constructive behaviour.

I have also found that it is typical for boys to connect socially with other boys within the conventions and constraints of the *boy-code* – be tough, be strong, and don't cry (see Guideline 14 in *Boy Smarts* for more information). This code prevents boys from open displays of affection, so that teasing and rough physical play may become a way of bonding. Perhaps this roughness is not the ideal way of relating, but we must not read it as the certain sign of a troubled boy either.

## Should *Zero Tolerance* toward violence and harassment also apply to rough-and-tumble behaviour on the playground?

Whereas girls tend to set limits with other girls through social exclusion, there is ample evidence to indicate that boys draw lines in the sand non-verbally through aggressive behaviour that is not intended to harm. For girls the conflict can span several days while for boys the conflict is more commonly a momentary flair.

Certainly codes of safety around playground behaviour are necessary, but many parents and teachers have in-

dedicated to me that school regulations of recent years which are too inflexible can typically constrict and oppose non-threatening playground behaviour. A *Zero Tolerance* fighting policy means that boys who are very energetic during their recess break and participate in ritualistic play fighting, along with pushing and shoving, are often reprimanded or disciplined. But should *Zero Tolerance* toward violence and harassment also apply to rough-and-tumble behaviour on the playground?

Wouldn't children be better served if we considered when is rambunctious play acceptable and when is it inappropriate? Perhaps a group of concerned individuals from your Parent Advisory Council could meet with school staff and consider how your school community could provide playground opportunities for boys (and girls) to express themselves through vigorous play that is varied and safe. Rather than banning certain playground behaviours such as tag, physical touching, and snowball throwing, the parents and school staff might reflect on more imaginative and effective ways to structure play-time while also providing some scope for rough-and-tumble energetic play.

Characterizing rambunctious play as potential violence or bullying is shortsighted and doesn't consider healthy developmental needs. Guideline 15 in *Boy Smarts* encourages us to become more responsive to boys' needs

and provide opportunities for them to express themselves in the varied ways they are capable of. Rather than simply outlaw snowball throwing or banning tag, for example, adults can help most by providing rules, supervising play and teaching children how to throw snow in a manner that keeps everyone safe. Besides, providing a safe space for energetic, lively play could just help you get some peace and quiet later on! • • • • •



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