

Tip Sheets

Supporting Big Body Play



Big body play is characterized by physical activity such as running, jumping, and rolling.

Because this type of play is often loud and boisterous, it can be perceived as misbehavior. As a result, children's opportunities to engage in big body play are often restricted. Understanding the benefits of play can help caregivers develop attitudes that support this play instead of stop it.

Big body play is essential to children's development. In addition to the benefits for children's physical health, it supports:

- The development of self-regulation skills.
- Problem solving abilities.
- Resilience.

Engaging in big body play with peers and adults is also important for building social skills, such as reading facial cues and non-verbal communication.

Strategies to Support Big Body Play

Indoors and out, children are on the move and seeking playful physical challenges. Finding ways to say "yes" to big body play fosters positive relationships and reduces children's frustration as they seek to meet their physical needs.

As children seek to engage in big body play, caregivers should assess the environment and modify it as necessary. For example, if a child creates a game of jumping off a block, check the

landing area for hazards and clear them away. If a superhero needs to chase a villain, help them find a space where they will not disturb others. Involve children in risk assessment as much as possible.

Step closer and watch before stopping big body play. Play that seems unsafe or disruptive from afar may look different after observing for a moment.

Rough and Tumble Play

Rough and tumble play is a highly social form of big body play. This play often involves pretend fighting or wrestling and has a high level of physical contact between players.

Caregivers may prohibit rough and tumble play because they mistake the play for aggression or worry that it will get "out of control." However, this type of play is essential to a child's social development and should be supported rather than discouraged.

Play vs Aggression

- Watch for non-verbal cues that children are engaging in play and not aggression. This may include smiles, laughter, and eye contact between players.
- If someone gets hurt, do the players separate or come back together? Children are motivated to resume play and are therefore more likely to leave a situation that involves aggression.

Establish Safety Rules

- Designate areas that are safe for wrestling and rough and tumble play.
- Collaborate with children to develop a short list of rules, such as getting consent before

starting, standing on your knees, and stopping if someone says “stop.”

- If children get hurt (as happens with all kinds of play), see it as an opportunity to practice empathy and caregiving towards their peers.

There may be children who have difficulty regulating their bodies and/or reading non-verbal cues during rough and tumble play. These children benefit from more chances to practice with support from caregivers. Try narrating the non-verbal cues of their play partner, such as saying “She’s not smiling any more. Take a break and check on her.”

Caregivers who are able can join in as a rough and tumble play partner to help scaffold the child’s development of these play skills.

Additional Big Body Play Ideas

For those who are not yet ready to support pretend fighting and wrestling, consider other play activities that offer a high level of physical contact and social interaction. This could include pillow fights, wrapping children up like “burritos” in a blanket, or piling on couch cushions.

Calm Down Strategies

Be ready to help children transition out of big body play. Have children take five deep breaths and pretend to blow out birthday candles. Or, stop for a drink at the water fountain. This teaches children strategies they can use when they need to calm their bodies and emotions.

Additional Resources

Embracing Rough-and-Tumble Play
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jQqoGZu_DFU

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