

A male teacher's perspective on rough and tumble play



by Ernie Belk

Being a male, I have always engaged in rough and tumble play. I used to swing my two young daughters up in the air and down again, as well as wrestling with them. They used to love this and had big smiles on their faces. When I made the decision to become an early childhood educator two acquaintances said to me, 'Well you cannot be rough with the children like you are to your daughters because you are not allowed to do that'. As a result of this opinion I have assumed that there was no place for rough and tumble play in early childhood centres.

I grew up in New Plymouth in a neighbourhood where we always had rough and tumble play happening. This could be anything from rugby to a game of bull-rush. One of our favourite TV programmes was 'On The Mat', and, after it had finished, all the boys would meet out on the street to try out all the new wrestling moves.

My concern with the very high percentage of female teachers in the early childhood profession is that they do not understand the importance of rough and tumble play for boys. As a father of two daughters I am the first to put my hand up and say I do not understand girls' play. Farquhar (1997, p. 5) also states that "boys' interests and needs, such as for more boisterous play, are respected and catered for in a way that is difficult to achieve when the staff group is all female". When I have asked whether boys get a fair deal with play as most of the teachers are female, a majority of those who respond are of the opinion that it does not matter what sex you are to understand different types of play.

Personally, I feel that rough and tumble play is more suited to males than it is to females so I feel that the boys attending early childhood centres are missing out on a very important aspect of play. "Early childhood teaching is one of the most gender-segregated occupations in New Zealand society - it is an almost exclusively female occupation" (Farquhar, 1997, p. 1).

I believe that if you were to stand back and observe the difference between the way boys play compared to girls it would become very obvious in a short period of time. A common stereotype is that girls generally take on more caring roles whereas boys like chasing and a domineering type of play. An empirical example of the gender differences in play can be found in a study by Marsh (2000), who invited children in an early childhood setting to undertake an activity in fantasy play where they could be Batman or Batwoman. The study showed that Batwomen were most likely to rescue the victims, while maintaining good relationships with their fellow Batwomen friends. The boys' Batman play was completely different with Batman chasing the villains, having a status and being dominant. This also compares with

a study done on animals which showed the difference between young male and female play. Researchers suggested that young male primates rely heavily on rough and tumble play to develop network building within their peer group, while the young female primates approach their social networking through grooming behaviour (Jarvis, 2006). It appears that rough and tumble play seems to be built into boys and it is just a seemingly natural process for social networking and physical development.

While sitting in a cafe talking to some of my colleagues one of them mentioned that they were putting nail polish on the children's fingernails in their early childhood centre. This is not something that I would do in my practice, as I believe that the children are far too young to have nail polish. Reflecting on this I am wondering whether my reaction is due to my values as a person with a particular upbringing or whether it is a female type of play; perhaps as a male, I do not understand it? At the cafe I was thinking that this could be gender related, so I asked the question, 'Would you allow play fighting in your early childhood centre?' and the answer was, 'No'. The problem as I see it then is that early childhood education is governed by the female perspective, so pushing, hitting, shoving and chasing games, which are a common factor in rough and tumble play, are deemed to be inappropriate behaviour (Reed & Brown, 2000). The male perspective on this is, commonly, that they are just playing.

The problem that arises from a lack of certainty about rough and tumble play is the worry that a child is going to get hurt or that it will spiral out of control. An example of this is seen in a game of rugby for the children who wanted to play with a ball at an early childhood centre which was on a slope, very small and right next

to a driveway, which was concrete. The boys who were playing rugby kept running onto the concrete, which was dangerous as they were tackling the person with the ball. Even though I was observing their play and directing them, when they ran onto the concrete to go back on the grass, one boy bumped his head on the concrete. This made me reflect on the situation, as the accident happened right beside me and I was powerless to do anything about it. There was no malice involved - it was an accident.

This incident prompted me to think about how many of the early childhood centres do not cater for an environment that allows for rough and tumble play to happen safely. Many of the early childhood centres now have very small outside areas, which do not allow for running and chasing games. Some of these outside areas do not even have a grass area for the children to play on. Other concerns that may arise through rough and tumble play are that teachers do not know that children are play fighting and think that it is real. There is also the misconception that if the teacher is aware that the children are play fighting it will turn into a real fight.

During the primary school years there is some evidence that only 1% of rough and tumble play leads to a real fighting. Smith (2005, p. 133) explains: "Many teachers and lunchtime supervisors think it is more, about 30 per cent". With misconceptions like this, boys in our early childhood centres could be missing out on important learning and social development skills.

Children who engage in rough and tumble play learn about social skills as well as bonding with other children. When educators deny the opportunity for rough and tumble play, they are denying the children the opportunity to care for one another. Reed and Brown (2000) provide an example of the caring that can take place during rough and tumble play, describing how when Perry lost his glasses while being tackled, Zach stopped, picked up the glasses, dusted them off and gave them back to Perry.

Children make up their own rules when it comes to rough and tumble play. If two children are wrestling and one of them is stronger than the other, the stronger child will let the weaker child have a turn to be on top so he or she can be dominant. This

practice is called 'handicapping' (Reed & Brown, 2000) and is another example of how children care for one another.

If teachers do not allow rough and tumble play in their early childhood centres, how can they be meeting the New Zealand Teachers Council standards? For example, the second standard of the Graduating Teacher Standards states "graduating teachers know about learners and how they learn" (New Zealand Teachers Council, 2007, p. 1). Rough and tumble play is a way for children to learn about caring, empathy, fair play and friendship. In her comment identifying equity in power relations, Ailwood (2003) notes that: "Along with the institutional space of early childhood settings come relations of power between teachers and children, and between children and other children" (p. 291). The provision of rough and tumble play may be an instance of adults being empathetic towards what children might prefer.

I believe that a male teacher in early childhood education has advantages and disadvantages with respect to rough and tumble play. For me, one advantage is that I understand the importance of rough and tumble play. Growing up, I participated in rough and tumble play without thinking about it, and it seemed a natural way to socialise with my friends. A disadvantage for me as a teacher is that being male, I feel vulnerable. As it is rare for males to be in early childhood education I keep thinking that I have to be very careful and that I cannot encourage rough and tumble play because of my male status. I look forward to becoming part of a team, and encouraging rough and tumble play. I realise that I will have to debate my views with my colleagues and ask them to reflect upon their practice. I agree with Holland (2003, p. 9) when she says, "I believe we must be prepared to examine our own stories and to interrogate those most deeply held moral convictions which can make us deaf to the needs and understandings of children".

There is also the issue that I am naturally a playful person who likes interacting with children. I have had good relationships with boys in early childhood settings and they have been very comfortable around me. I had one boy jump on top of me while I was sitting down, and he started to wrestle me. Within seconds I had about four boys on

top of me. While the boys were having a great time, all I could think about was how unprofessional this must look and how I must put an end to it. This comes down to conduct as a professional that relates to "Conduct in the hope of producing certain desired effects and averting certain undesired events" (Ailwood, 2003, p. 287).

One has to wonder if boys are getting a fair deal in our early childhood centres. With the majority of teachers being female I do wonder if they really understand rough and tumble play. I firmly believe boys need rough and tumble play for their social networking and their physical development. I support Bergen's (1998) ideas, when she writes that "there are also times (e.g., under adult or peer pressure) when they learn in play to narrow their perspectives and to deny who they really are because of what society wants them to be" (p. 132). In my view, children learn about care, empathy, fair play, and friendship through rough and tumble play. This is why, as an early childhood teacher, I will be advocating for and promoting the benefits of rough and tumble play for our children.

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