

The values of play; rough and tumble play

Book Review:

Children, Play, and Development

By Fergus P. Hughes

Third Edition, Allyn and Bacon, 271 pages

In my Spatial Dynamics training with Jaimen McMillan and Maureen Curran, I was inspired to begin a career as a collector and teacher of the most varied childhood games: games from every corner of the world, games that have been played throughout the ages. The virtues of these games are proven to me every day, by the healthy way in which students take them up and play them.

In my opinion, the shouldering aside of the old-time childhood games by organized team sports, and by reductions to phys ed budgets and the elimination of recess time,

is indeed a loss. However, America may be reawakening to the importance of play; a recent New York Times Magazine article (Taking Play Seriously, Feb. 17, 2008) is one recent ray of hope.

Permit me to recommend Fergus Hughes' "Children, Play, and Development" as a most thorough, well-researched and well-written resource for those who wish to enhance their understanding of this topic in a scientific manner. Stressing the developmental and psychological importance of play, the book discusses the relationship of play to the physical, social, intellectual and emotional growth of the child. Increased attention is paid to educational issues in this edition, and numerous vignettes are included throughout the book to illustrate the value of play. Topics include gender differences in play, intellectual

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development and play, and play in special populations, amongst others.

Rough-and-Tumble Play

In the light of continuing growth of "attention deficit" and "hyperactivity" diagnoses, one of the most important topics in this book is rough and tumble play as a necessary developmental activity, perhaps especially for boys.

"Children, Play, and Development" has inspired me to continue building, guiding and evolving a games curriculum with lots of respectful but energetic contact games. The book incorporates an earlier article by Hughes that I would like to excerpt below. This material is available on the web by searching for Fergus Hughes and spontaneous play, or at www.uwgb.edu/hughesf/Spontaneous%20Play%20.htm.

Excerpt:

Rough-and-tumble play, a form of social engagement consisting of activities such as play fighting, hitting, wrestling, and chasing with the intent of fighting, is believed to constitute approximately 15% of all the vigorous physical play observed in children. While it is not known why immature organisms engage in such play, its primary function might be to allow children, and particularly boys, to establish their status within a dominance hierarchy.

This appears to be the function of rough and tumble in other mammals, such as chimpanzees; it is a relatively safe way to establish one's status within the group without the risk of injury that may occur during genuine aggressive acts. There is a correlation between the appearance of this activity and the maturity of the frontal lobes of the brain.

The executive functions of the frontal lobes include reflection, imagination, empathy, and play/creativity, and when these develop, they allow for greater behavioral flexibility and foresight, for well-focused, goal-directed behavior. As the frontal lobes mature, the frequency of rough and tumble play goes down, and damage to the frontal lobes is associated with a higher level of playfulness. In fact, surgical reduction of the frontal lobes of young rats results in an increased level of playfulness and hyperactivity.

However, when these surgically altered rats are given ample opportunity to engage in rough and tumble activity, the decline in such play with maturity is even more dramatic than the decline that occurs in the normal rat, leading to the speculation that rough and tumble play is not only correlated with frontal lobe development but may actually promote it.

Spontaneous rough and tumble play may be increasingly seen as a sign of pathology rather than as an ordinary childhood activity. A growing intolerance corresponds with one of the more intriguing trends in the diagnosis of childhood psychological problems: the dramatic increase in the diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorders in the late 20th century.

It has been estimated that in the year 2000, 15% of American children (about 8 million) were so diagnosed, up from 1% at the beginning of the century and 5% at the beginning of this decade [1990s]. It seems unlikely that there really has been an increased prevalence of genuine neurological disorders in the United States; a more likely interpretation is that we have redefined what we consider to be “normal” childhood behaviors, and spontaneous energetic physical play is sometimes interpreted as a form of pathology. There is evidence that genuine attention deficits in children are correlated with reduced frontal lobe size and activity, although Brain-imaging data is obviously not a prerequisite for a diagnosis of ADHD.

Whether or not a neural disorder is present, however, findings from animal research suggest that rough and tumble play not only reflects frontal lobe development but also promotes it. In other words, active, energetic, spontaneous physical play may facilitate neurological development.

If this is the case, the inhibition of play through the use of behavioral restrictions or medication might actually contribute to developmental abnormalities. Indeed, while psycho stimulant medications such as Ritalin are quite effective in focusing children’s attention, another of their major effects is to reduce the urge of young organisms to engage in rough and tumble play. [emphasis added]

Since learning requires attention and focus, vigorous physical play may appear to be antithetical to the educational process. Teachers may believe that opportunities for physical play may make children, and particularly those diagnosed with attention disorders, even more difficult to teach. Panksepp maintained that, as is true of other appetites, the need for rough and tumble is a self-regulating process. Once the need is satisfied, the organism will return to a relatively quiet state. In fact, there is evidence to

suggest that if children are deprived of physical play, they will play with even greater vigor when given the opportunity to do so. If there is an appetite for rough and tumble play, and if such play not only reflects but also promotes neurological maturity, it seems that it would be counterproductive and possibly harmful to try to prevent it.