

Rough-and-Tumble Play: A Way to Tackle Socially Constructed Norms

by Nick Terrones

Last May, I had the honor and privilege to present a workshop about rough-and-tumble play with toddlers at the World Forum on Early Care and Education in Auckland, New Zealand. The session I shared with a new colleague was about *play*. However, my new friend and I decided that we would focus on children's right to play, and more specifically on the question, "What kind of rights are we really supporting?"

I spoke about how rough-and-tumble play is generally perceived in young children, and specifically, why it is important for adults to embrace this kind of play as a mode for teachable moments in social justice. After our session, I walked out feeling confident and like I had made an impact on other educators' thinking. Then a colleague from Canada approached me and said she had shared a live Facebook feed of the sessions she had attended. Apparently my views and talk about rough-and-tumble play had rubbed her colleagues back home the wrong way!

"My colleagues back at my center reacted strongly to your presentation on rough-and-tumble play as I posted some of your key points to our Facebook feed. They reacted with things like, 'He's promoting violence at an early age!' 'All he's doing is giving young children the perception that aggression is okay!' 'It sounds like he doesn't model what respect for adults should look like.'" My colleague peered up from the screen of her phone and asked, "Could you elaborate a little more on what you said? What could I quickly respond to them, and maybe we can follow up again later, too?"

My confidence began to deflate. I knew that what I said in my presentation would be provocative, and it appeared to be well received by the live audience present, but the ethos of my message had been blurred, and unknowingly I had put myself at risk. Was I not clear about the gender



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piece? Or could they only hear that I was allowing young children to safely and joyfully fight their friends... and me? I felt like I had to defend my pedagogy, practice, and articulation around the subject! I responded with many umms and uhhhs, while sprinkling elaborated tidbits of my presentation in. I managed somehow to give an answer by



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staying anchored in my overall presentation message.

During the presentation itself, in a little under 15 minutes, I talked about the risk in seeing this play as beneficial to children from a perception of gender norms, and pondered how equity and equality shape our perspective and approach to the participants involved. I made the point that when I wrestled and tossed around my toddlers, I had begun to think about how adults treat young boys and girls* differently in this type of play. Not only does the engagement seem to differ, but also our language often backs up those actions. I explained that I carried in my educator subconscious the desire to treat all children the same according to their comfort and capability level, but I began to see, like many things in our early childhood realm, that rough-and-tumble play is multifaceted and infused with social norms, invisible layers that need peeling back to reveal their value and place at our schools and in children's lives.

It is well documented that boys tend to engage in rough-and-tumble play more than girls. Surely, there is mixed-gender rough-and-tumble play, but it can often lead to an all boys' activity, and it is usually initiated by them while young girls draw away from it (Carlson, 2011). This is where risk as an educator comes into play: How many layers are we willing to pull back for girls to feel empowered to rough and tumble, and for boys to be encouraged to see their opposite gender counterparts as equally resilient and powerful as them? Can we educators take the risk of becoming proactive participants by embracing this kind of play so that we can share with children the possibility of experiencing different perspectives and different ways of being? This not only happens in our conscious actions, but also in the language we use.

Not long ago, my center hired a new substitute who possesses all the natural abilities to work with young children. His gentle and fun spirit garners attention from the toddlers in my classroom, and they seem to adapt well to each classroom's culture. At the same time, his lack of real-time experience in the classroom led to a weaker Image of the Child (Malaguzzi, 1994). He was in shock about how rough I was being with my two-year-olds, and I'm sure your eyes would widen and your jaw would drop to see me in action. I was tossing toddlers onto large cushions by their arms and legs, throwing and rolling large exercise balls at them in an activity I like to call "Bowling for Children." (Just



imagine a little one trying to escape a giant ball coming to smooch them, as in the movie "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom"! I would also get on my hands and knees and let the children slap and kick my body as I would lightly palm them in the head causing them to fall over in a fit of laughter.

"Aren't you afraid you're going to hurt them? They're just babies," the new substitute called out wide-eyed. I began to notice that the substitute raised concerns more often when I was engaging with girls than the boys, as his voice rose a couple of octaves and it showed a more genuine concern.

His concern and perspective opened the opportunity for us to have a conversation about how my Image of the Child played a crucial role in these interactions. My belief that *all children of any gender*—including and most certainly toddlers—are competent and capable; they carry a tremendous capacity for the potential to be resilient, powerful and brave, and these qualities will only grow as far and as much as we adults allow. What can appear as out of control, chaotic, or even violent behavior that seems to condone a lack of respect for others, I see as an opportunity for practicing life skills such as empathy, courage and resilience, as well as learning how and when to slow oneself down.

Even in rough-and-tumble play, children will pick up on adult biases about who gets to be rough and powerful, who is able to do so and who isn't. Children are given these seeds from society, and through their lives these seeds are nurtured and cultivated into dispositions that later affect how they perceive and treat one another.

There seems to be a time frame in which society sees children as precious cargo to be treated overly safe, sanitized, and supervised. Interestingly enough, this seems to last longer for girls than it does for boys. While not true for everyone, girls seem to be treated like fragile items and are expected to act as such for longer periods in their lives. As they grow older, they are expected to abide by passive-aggressive socially constructed norms such as “being ladylike,” and when they do display powerful, rough and tough, assertive, and resilient behaviors, they are dismissively categorized as “tomboy” or “bossy.”

Conversely, boys are expected to be powerful, rough and tough, and resilient. At the same time, their natural rowdy behavior is often dismissed as “boys being boys,” or even mislabeled as aggressive or related to attention deficit. Boys, too, must face socially constructed norms such as, “big boys don’t cry,” “that’s not what a big boy does,” and similar clichés. Without realizing it, we guide young children into stereotypes and subconsciously deny them the freedom to explore who they feel they really are.

Rough-and-tumble play can combat these biases through an educator’s mindful action, reflective thought, and intentional language. It’s not necessarily about physical empowerment or the notion of being powerful over someone; it’s about how you are in relationship with the people you’re engaging with. As I have wrestled and battled toddlers, I have begun to realize that by being intentional and reflective with rough-and-tumble play, I can give young girls the experience of being empowered with a powerful voice. When they say stop and/or no to something, it needs to be heard and respected. They need to know and experience that even at this young of an age, only a couple years into lives, their words matter and their voice is effective and powerful. Likewise, young boys need to experience the receiving end of this; they see and learn to expect that girls are just as powerful as they are. However, they too need to experience that it is okay to be vulnerable, that it is okay to cry, and that there is more than one way to be a “big boy.”

These days it is risky being an early childhood educator, with the constant reminder of how quickly and how much our society is evolving. Children and their families bring with them experiences of the world into our classrooms, and whether we like it or not, children will play them out. When we allow ourselves to remain unsettled and carry a willingness to be disturbed, to pull back as many layers as we can, we open a floodgate of possibilities to address societal issues that arise in our work with families and children everyday, even through rough-and-tumble play.

**In this article I talk about gender and rough-and-tumble play. I refer to the binary forms of gender (boys and girls) in respect to their development as toddlers, individuals whose sense of self is just beginning to bloom. It is not my intention to exclude any other gender or to assign children’s identity.*

References

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