

## Rough and Tumble Play at SYC

At SYC many children have enjoyed wrestling and boxing with other children and sometimes even teachers. Our staff has always supported wrestling and boxing as a way to allow children to feel powerful and to learn how to control their physical impulses. When teachers see children grabbing and pulling at each other in the classrooms, we will often say “It looks like you two would like to wrestle. I’ll get you a mat in the running room so you can really wrestle.” Then the teacher asks each child to tell each other your rules. For instance, if someone says stop the other has to stop and if someone steps off the mat, the other has to stop or no hitting my nose. The teacher stays right by the mat to watch carefully and make suggestions. We might say “Do you want him to pull your shirt? or Do you need to take break? or Remember to say STOP if you don’t like it!”

We think there are many benefits in this type of play. As two children wrestle together, they begin to understand how hard a touch is, when it is too hard, and how to deliberately move their body in a way that keeps the play going. They learn that some friends like to wrestle a little more gently while others want to be tough. Daniel Goleman in the book *Emotional Intelligence* recognizes that part of learning to control impulsive behavior is learning to interpret physical body signals. “One of the key skills for anger control [is] monitoring their feelings —becoming aware of their body’s sensations, such as flushing or muscle tensing, as they [are] getting angry, and to take those feelings as a cue to stop and consider what to do next rather than strike out impulsively.” We at SYC believe that body contact during wrestling and boxing helps kids practice interpreting these signals.

Early childhood experts call this rough and tumble play. In his article, “The Nature of Children’s Play,” David Fernie, co-author of *Early Childhood Classroom Processes* and former OSU professor, says that “a kind of play with motion, rough and tumble play, is popular in preschool years. In this play, groups of children run, jump, and wrestle. Action patterns call for these behaviors to be performed at a high pitch. Adults often worry that such play will become aggressive, and of course, it must be monitored. Children who participate in this play become very skilled in their movements, distinguish between real and feigned aggression, and learn to regulate each other’s activity.

Typically children between ages 3 and 6 should become more pro-social and less aggressive. Rough-and-tumble play: play such as wrestling, chasing, and hitting that mimics aggression but actually occurs purely in fun, with no intent to harm is clearly pro-social, teaching children how to enter a relationship, assert themselves, and respond to actions of someone else while exercising gross motor skills.”

Pollack, in his book, *Real Boys* reminds us “Little boys may seek emotional bonds in indirect ways. With other boys, these bonds may be forged through exuberant, rough-and-tumble play.”

As teachers, we see so much value in rough and tumble play that we are willing to do the necessary supervision to make sure children are respecting each others limits. We watch the faces of the participants and sometimes ask, “Do you still want to play this now or do you want to stop?” If one becomes angry or more aggressive, we will help the child stop and think about what is happening that he or she doesn’t like. In general, we find that children enjoy this activity so much that they try very hard to follow the rules and limits of the game in order to participate.

...Stephanie Rottmayer, SYC Director