

PRINT- How rough play shapes stronger, smarter kids

First-time moms can be a little leery of dad wrestling with a little one, but [research shows](#) rough housing, or better put, active play actually helps with physical development, social skills and emotional regulation.

Kyle Boerke, PsyD, a clinical child psychologist and the director of Outpatient Behavioral Health services at OSF HealthCare, says it might be surprising but aggressive physical play between parents and their children results in less aggressive kids.

"During physical play, fathers especially who exert some levels of dominance actually have more well-adjusted kiddos; more socially adjusted and more confident kiddos whereas with more passive fathers, we actually get children who engage in more physical aggression. So, it's kind of opposite of what some people who are hesitant might think."

Active play also helps children learn to regulate their emotions Dr. Boerke says.

"I might be starting to get frustrated but I'm learning how to deal with that frustration. I'm learning how to be assertive and say, 'I would like to stop or please stop.' And if it's high-quality interaction the parent is going to stop and now I'm learning that if I advocate for myself, then things are going to turn out the right way."

What does active play look like? It can be playing tag, wrestling, flying a kid like an airplane on your raised legs and feet, even spinning a child around. During a walk, it could be mom and dad swinging them with each holding a hand.

Dr. Boerke says rough-and-tumble play has so many benefits. For example, he says it provides opportunities for children to learn about social cues and helps build confidence as they test their limits. It positively impacts the brain, improving cognition, attention and academic achievement.

For parents it has positive side effects because the interactions activate pleasure hormones.

"One of the most fascinating parts of research on this rough-and-tumble play is we actually get equal, if not higher, levels of this hormone oxytocin at the end of a rough- and-tumble play session than we do when we simply sit on the couch and cuddle with our kiddos. So it actually strengthens the bond with my child."

Active play also promotes development of gross motor skills, balance, coordination and spatial awareness. But parents need to make sure it doesn't cause harm or that the parent always has dominance. Dr. Boerke suggests letting the child win as much as you do and setting limits when it goes on too long.

He emphasizes that when it comes to tickling, don't hold a child down and make sure to stop when a child says they've had enough or seem worn out by it.

There is no age limit for rough-and-tumble play. Dr. Boerke explains the type of active play just morphs a bit as a child ages.

“What was wrestling or chase and flee, what was tickling and throwing them in the air when they were little turned into we're going to play a one-on-one game of basketball, you know, at a park. Or if I have a hoop at my house, there's rough-and-tumble play in that too, right?”

For more introverted parents, Dr. Boerke suggests easing into active play and it will eventually come naturally. Enthusiasm is important. He stresses that a child needs to feel a parent is really engaged and interested, not just going through the motions. He says if parents are too passive about play, their children tend to be more aggressive in the long run.