

# Kids learn valuable life skills through rough-and-tumble play with their dads

5 September 2019, by Emily Freeman



Dads tend to engage in more active, physical play activities with their young children. Credit: Shutterstock/pyrozhenka

Play is an important way for children to [learn about the world](#) around them.

Through [play](#), they learn cultural norms, socialisation guidelines and experiment with different ways to interact with their environment.

But play between a father and their child or [children](#) can offer a different type of play. It's often boisterous, physical and competitive, and this all has an equally important role to play in a child's development.

## The rough-and-tumble play

Dads tend to engage in more active, physical play activities with their young children—rough-and-tumble play.

Dads often engage in activities such as play wrestling and throwing their child into the air.

This type of play is full of excitement and challenge, and if it weren't for the clear enjoyment of both parties, it might sometimes seem a little aggressive to an outsider.

But this play isn't just fun. Research has shown it's also important for healthy child development.

Of course, rough-and-tumble play doesn't have to be exclusive to dads. Mums can also engage in such play with their kids and, although that's not been the subject of research to date, there's no reason the results can't be just the same.

## Rough-and-tumble play improves social skills

In one [study](#) we looked at the quality of father-child rough-and-tumble play, and children's [emotional](#) and behavioral problems.

High-quality rough-and-tumble play was defined as being warm and sensitive, dominance-sharing and playful in nature.

We found high-quality play was related to higher levels of what's termed [prosocial behavior](#). Prosocial behavior includes things like being considerate of other people's feelings and sharing well with others.

In other words, high-quality rough-and-tumble play is linked to nice children who are probably going to have an easier time making friends with their peers.

## Rough-and-tumble play improves emotion regulation

Play that's active, physical and competitive has also been [linked](#) to better emotion regulation.

Dads have a tendency to push their kids to the limit, to set goals that are just a bit beyond their reach, and to rough-and-tumble play in a way that gets the kids worked up.

Good rough-and-tumble play is play where the kids don't just get worked up and potentially frustrated, but where the child learns how to handle these emotions—how to regulate them.

This is important as better emotion regulation allows children to understand and manage their own behavior and reactions.

### **Rough-and-tumble play reduces injury risk**

Now this one might seem a bit counter-intuitive.

In one of the [studies](#) we conducted, we looked at the relationship between father-child rough-and-tumble play and childhood injury rates in 46 families.

What we found was the more dads engaged in rough-and-tumble play with their kids, the fewer injuries those kids sustained.

We think the rough-and-tumble play is teaching kids about their limits—how far they can physically push themselves.

### **Winners and losers**

One of the important lessons from any rough-and-tumble play, though, is about the balance between winning and losing. It's important parents don't dominate.

One of my favorite rough-and-tumble games is the sock wrestle. Each player puts on just one sock. The aim of the game is to get your opponent's sock off their foot. Give it a try. It's simple, but a lot of fun!

When you're playing this with your kid (or kids if you want an extra challenge!), make sure you share the winning and losing.

It's important for your child to both win and lose, as without the losing and the frustration that comes with that, you're not helping to teach them how to regulate their emotions.

So it seems as though the rough-and-tumble play with kids isn't just enjoyable, it's also an important part of a child's development.

It's teaching children how to regulate their emotions, how to safely push and extend their limits, how to assess risky situations, and how to

get along well with others.

Not only that, but [physical activity](#) has multiple health benefits too. Rough-and-tumble [play](#) is the sort of thing we should be encouraging parents to do regularly.

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