



AMH physical therapy column

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Let the Children Play!

By Sue Walker

As the mother of three boys, I must admit that rough-and-tumble play has often been an understatement in our household. Laughing, screeching and apparent mass chaos can have its downside, of course, but is rough-and-tumble play important in childhood development and learning? Many experts say it is -- particularly if this play is outside.

Rough-and-tumble play consists of movement, socialization and touch. All three are considered critical in childhood learning and development by many experts. In addition, a child's exposure to nature through outdoor play is also considered particularly helpful in childhood learning and development.

Let's break it down.

Movement builds muscle strength and motor coordination. Movement challenges a child's balance and core stabilization. Movement also burns energy and has been shown in numerous studies to improve attention, learning and behavior. While movement certainly may be accomplished during indoor activities, it is suggested that even better movement is achieved through outdoor play with a large variety of equipment promoting running, chasing, climbing, swinging etc.

This may be in our own back yards or supervised in our local playgrounds and parks. Socialization amongst children is critical for developing lifelong social skills. While one-on-one and small group socialization certainly may be accomplished inside, it is suggested the opportunity to interact with a larger group of friends in play or pretend activities can be even better outside.

Touch lowers anxiety by decreasing cortisol and adrenalin. Touch helps children learn how to self-regulate, control themselves, attain body awareness and learn boundaries. Experts report that sensory input promotes the normal development of posture, coordination and optimal arousal states necessary for learning.

Nature settings in a park, playground or yard have been calming and restorative to a child's attention. Rarely must you convince children to play outside. Children gravitate toward the outdoors. I asked my own panel of 10-year-old experts, "Why do you like to play outside?" Interestingly, all five initially responded with, "It's fun." I guess it is just that plain and simple.

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