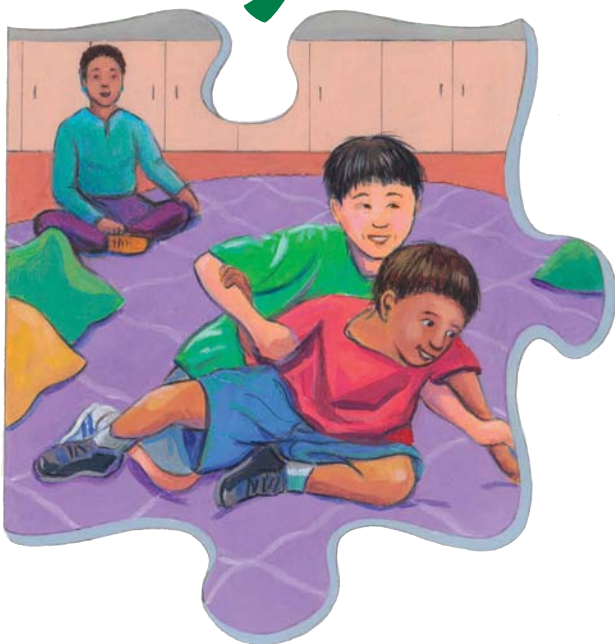


Rough Play

One of the Most Challenging Behaviors



Frances M. Carlson

Young children enjoy very physical play;

all animal young do. This play is often vigorous, intense, and rough. You may know this “big body play” as *rough-and-tumble play*, *roughhousing*, *horseplay*, or *play fighting*. In its organized play forms with older children, we call it many names: King of the Mountain, Red Rover, Freeze Tag, Steal the Bacon, Duck-Duck-Goose, and so on.

From infancy, children use their bodies to learn. They roll back and forth, kick their legs, and wave their arms, sometimes alone and sometimes alongside another infant. They crawl on top of each other. They use adults’ bodies to stand up, push off, and launch themselves forward and backward.

Frances M. Carlson, MEd, is the lead instructor for the Early Childhood Care & Education department at Chattahoochee Technical College in Marietta, Georgia. She is the author of a book from NAEYC, *Big Body Play: Why Boisterous, Vigorous, and Very Physical Play Is Essential to Children’s Development and Learning* (2011). francescarlson@bellsouth.net

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As toddlers, they pull each other, hug each other tightly, and push each other down. As children approach the preschool years, these very physical ways of interacting and learning begin to follow a predictable pattern of unique characteristics: running, chasing, fleeing, wrestling, open-palm tagging, swinging around, and falling to the ground—often on top of each other.

Sometimes young children’s big body play is solitary. Preschoolers run around, dancing and swirling, rolling on the floor or on the ground, or hopping and skipping along. Children’s rough play can include the use of objects. For example, early primary children might climb up structures and then leap off, roll their bodies on large yoga balls, and sometimes tag objects as “base” for an organized game. More often, this play includes children playing with other children, especially with school-age children who often make rules to accompany their rough play.

Children’s big body play may resemble, but does not usually involve, real fighting (Schafer & Smith 1996). Because it may at times closely resemble actual fighting, some adults find it to be one of the most challenging of children’s behaviors. In spite of its bad reputation, rough play is a valuable and viable play style from infancy through the early primary years—one teachers and families need to understand and support.

Misconceptions about rough play

Teachers and parents often mistake this play style for real fighting that can lead to injury, so they prohibit it (Gartrell & Sonsteng 2008). This play style has also been neglected and sometimes criticized at both state and national levels.

The Child Development Associate (CDA) *Assessment Observation Instrument*, which is used to observe and evaluate a CDA candidate’s classroom practices, states, “Rough play is minimized. Example: defuses rough play before it

becomes a problem; makes superhero play more manageable by limiting time and place” (Council for Professional Recognition 2007, 31). In Georgia, a 2010 statewide licensing standards revision includes a rule change that states, “Staff shall not engage in, or allow children or other adults to engage in, activities that could be detrimental to a child’s health or well-being, such as, but not limited to, horse play, rough play, wrestling” (Bright from the Start 2010, 25). Standards or expectations like these are based on the assumption that play fighting typically escalates or that children are often injured while playing this way. Neither assumption is true (Smith, Smees, & Pellegrini 2004).

Play fighting escalates to real fighting less than one percent of the time (Schafer & Smith 1996). And when it does, escalation typically occurs when participants include children who have been rejected (Schafer & Smith 1996; Smith, Smees, & Pellegrini 2004). (Children who are rejected are those “actively avoided by peers, who are named often as undesirable playmates” [Trawick-Smith 2010, 301].)

Attempts to ban or control children’s big body play are intended to protect children, but such attempts are ill placed because children’s rough play has different components and consequences from real fighting (Smith, Smees, & Pellegrini 2004). Rather than forbidding rough-and-tumble play, which can aid in increasing a child’s social skills, teachers’ and parents’ efforts are better directed toward

supporting and supervising this type of play, so that young children’s social skills and friendship-making skills can develop (Schafer & Smith 1996).

What it is and what it is not

Big body play is distinctly different from fighting (Humphreys & Smith 1987). Fighting includes physical acts used to coerce or control another person, either through inflicting pain or through the threat of pain. Real fighting involves tears instead of laughter and closed fists instead of open palms (Fry 2005). When open palms are used in real fighting, it is for a slap instead of a tag. When two children are fighting, one usually runs away as soon as possible and does not voluntarily return for more. With some practice, teachers and parents can learn to discern



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In appropriate rough play, children’s faces are free and easy, their muscle tone is relaxed, and they are usually smiling and laughing.

children's appropriate big body play from inappropriate real fighting.

In appropriate rough play, children's faces are free and easy, their muscle tone is relaxed, and they are usually smiling and laughing. In real fighting, the facial movements are rigid, controlled, stressed, and the jaw is usually clenched (Fry 2005). In rough play, children initiate the play and sustain it by taking turns. In real fighting, one child usually dominates another child (or children) and the other child may be in the situation against his or her will. In rough play, the children return for more even if it seems too rough to adult onlookers. In real fighting, children run away, sometimes in tears, and often ask the teacher or another adult for help.



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Why it matters

Rough-and-tumble play is just that: play. According to Garvey, all types of play

- are enjoyable to the players;
- have no extrinsic goals, the goal being intrinsic (i.e., pursuit of enjoyment);
- are spontaneous and voluntary; and
- involve active engagement by the players (1977, 10).

Rough-and-tumble play, this universal children's activity, is adaptive, evolutionarily useful, and linked to normal brain development.

Rough play shares these characteristics; as in all appropriate play, when children involve their bodies in this vigorous, interactive, very physical kind of play, they build a range of skills representing every developmental domain. Children learn physical skills—how their bodies move and how to control their movements. They also develop language skills through signals and nonverbal communication, including the ability to perceive, infer, and decode. Children develop social skills through turn taking, playing dominant and subordinate roles, negotiating, and developing and maintaining friendships (Smith, Smees, & Pelligrini 2004; Tannock 2008). With boys especially, rough play provides a venue for showing care and concern for each other as they often hug and pat each other on the back during and after the play (Reed 2005). Rough play also allows young children to have their physical touch needs met in age- and individually appropriate ways (Reed 2005; Carlson 2006), and provides an opportunity for children to take healthy risks.

From an evolutionary developmental perspective, play-fighting allows children to practice adult roles (Bjorklund & Pellegrini 2001). That is, big body play helps prepare children for the complex social aspects of adult life (Bjorklund & Pellegrini 2001). Other researchers speculate that it is practice for future self-defense, providing vital practice and the development of critical pathways in the brain for adaptive responses to aggression and dominance (Pellis & Pellis 2007). There is a known connection between the development of movement and the development of cognition (Diamond 2000), and researchers believe there is a connection between this very physical, rowdy play style and critical periods of brain development (Byers 1998). Rough play between peers appears to be critical for learning how to calibrate movements and orient oneself physically in appropriate and adaptive ways (Pellis, Field, & Whishaw 1999). There is evidence that rough-and-tumble play leads to the release of chemicals affecting the mid-brain, lower forebrain, and the cortex, including areas responsible for decision making and social discrimination; growth chemicals positively affect development of these brain areas (Pellis & Pellis 2007). In other words, rough-and-tumble play, this universal children's activity, is adaptive, evolutionarily useful, and linked to normal brain development.

Supporting rough play

One of the best ways teachers can support rough play is by modeling it for children. When adults model high levels of vigorous activity, the children in their care are more likely to play this way. Children also play more vigorously and more productively when their teachers have formal education or training in the importance of this type of play (Bower et al. 2008; Cardon et al. 2008).

Besides modeling, teachers can do three specific things to provide for and support rough play while minimizing the potential for injury: prepare both the indoor and outdoor environment, develop and implement policies and rules for rough play, and supervise rough play so they can intervene when appropriate.

Environments that support big body play

The learning environment should provide rich opportunities for children to use their bodies both indoors and outdoors (Curtis & Carter 2005). When planning for big, rough, vigorous body play, give keen, thoughtful attention to potential safety hazards. Children need to play vigorously with their bodies, but they should do so in a safe setting.

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To support rough play with infants during floor time, provide safe, mouthable objects in a variety of shapes, colors, and textures. Place the items near to and away from the baby to encourage reaching and stretching. Also provide a variety of large items—inclined hollow blocks, large rubber balls, sturdy tubes, exercise mats—so infants can roll on, around, over, and on top of these items. Get on the floor, too, so infants can crawl around and lie on you. Allow babies to be near each other so that they can play with each other's bodies. Supervise their play to allow for safe exploration.

Indoor environments encourage big body play when there is ample space for children to move around freely. Cramped or restricted areas hamper children's vigorous play. When usable space is less than 25 square feet per child, children tend to be more aggressive (Pellegrini 1987). Boys, especially, play more actively when more space is available (Fry 2005; Cardon et al. 2008).

Some teachers find it helpful to draw or mark off a particular section of the room and dedicate it to big body play. One teacher shares the way she established a "wrestling zone" in her preschool classroom:

First, I cleared the area of any furniture or equipment. Next, I defined the area with a thick, heavy comforter and pillows. After setting up the area, I posted guidelines for the children's rough play on the wall near the wrestling zone.

Designate an area for rough play where there is no nearby furniture or equipment with sharp points and corners. Firmly anchor furniture so that it doesn't upturn if a child pushes against it. All flooring should be skid-free, with safety surfaces like thick mats to absorb the shock of any potential impact.

Policies and rules for rough play

Programs need policies about rough play. Policies should define this type of play, explain rules that accompany it, specify the level of supervision it requires, and include specific types of staff development or training early childhood teachers need to support it. In addition,

policies can address how to include it in the schedule and how to make sure all children—especially children with developmental disabilities and children who are socially rejected—have access to it. Clear policies about supervision are vital, as this play style requires constant adult supervision—meaning the children are both seen and heard at all times by supervising adults (Peterson, Ewigman, & Kivlahan 1993).

Even with its friendly nature and ability to build and increase children's social skills, this play style is more productive and manageable when guidelines and rules are in place (Flanders et al. 2009).



Children can help create the rules. By preschool age, children are learning about and are able to begin participating in games with rules. Involving the children in creating rules for their play supports this emerging ability.

The rules should apply to children's roughhousing as well as to big body play with equipment and play materials. Wrestling, for example, may have rules such as wrestling only while kneeling, and arms around shoulders to waists but not around necks or heads. For big body play with equipment, the rules may state that the slide can be used for climbing on alternate days with sliding,



or that a child can climb up only after checking to make sure no one is sliding down, and that jumping can be from stationary structures only and never from swings. Other rules may say that tumbling indoors always requires a mat and cannot be done on a bare floor, and that children may only roll down hills that are fenced or away from streets and traffic.

Some general rules for big body play might be

- No hitting
- No pinching
- Hands below the neck and above the waist
- Stop as soon as the other person says or signals stop
- No rough play while standing—kneeling only
- Rough play is optional—stop and leave when you want (A Place of Our Own, n.d.)

Write the rules on white poster board, and mount them near the designated rough play area.

Supervise and intervene

Teachers should enforce the rules and step in to ensure all children are safe, physically and emotionally. It's important to pay attention to children's language during rough play and help them use words to express some of the nonverbal communication. For example, if two boys are playing and one is on top of the other, say,

"He is pushing against your chest! He wants you to get up!" Help the larger boy get up if he needs assistance. Instead of scolding, simply point out, "Because you are larger than he is, I think he felt uncomfortable with you on top of him." Allow the smaller boy to say these words, too. Help children problem solve about ways to accommodate their size differences if they are unable to do so unassisted. Say, "How else can you wrestle so that one of you isn't pinned under the other one?"

Children who are rejected. When supervising children with less developed social skills, remember that for these children, big body play can more easily turn into real fighting. Many children who are socially rejected lack the

language skills needed to correctly interpret body signals and body language, which makes rough play difficult for them. The children often lack the social skill of turn taking or reciprocity. A child may feel challenged or threatened by another child's movement or action instead of understanding that rough play involves give-and-take and that he or she will also get a turn.

Although more difficult for them, engaging in big body play can help such children build social skills. When supervising these children, remain closer to them than you would to other children. If you see or sense that a child may be misunderstanding cues or turn taking, intervene. Help clarify the child's understanding of the play so it can continue. Strategies like coaching, helping the child reflect on cues and responses, and explaining and modeling sharing and reciprocity help a child remain in the play and ultimately support his or her language and social competence.

Communicating with families

Some children already feel that their rough body play is watched too closely by their early childhood teachers (Tannock 2008). Not all parents, though, find children's rough play unacceptable. Several mothers, when interviewed, stated that rough play is empowering for their daughters and that they appreciate how this play style makes their girls feel strong ("Rough and Tumble Play" 2008). In industrialized countries, rough play is probably the most commonly used play style between parents and their children after the children are at least 2 years old (Paquette et al. 2003).

If children learn that rough play is acceptable at home but not at school, it may be difficult for them to understand and comply with school rules. Children are better positioned to reap the benefits of rough play when both home and school have consistent rules and messages. Children thrive in early childhood programs where administrators, teachers, and family members work together in partnerships (Keyser 2006). Partnership is crucial for children to feel supported in their big body play.

Teachers who decide to offer big body play must make sure that families are aware of and understand why rough play is included. Communicate program components to families when they first express interest in the program

Several mothers, when interviewed, stated that rough play is empowering for their daughters and that they appreciate how this play style makes their girls feel strong.

Sample Handbook Policies for Big Body Play

Big body play for preschool and school-age children

Here at [name of school or program], we believe in the value of exuberant, boisterous, rough-and-tumble play to a child's overall development. This vigorous body play allows children opportunities to use language—both verbal and nonverbal—and learn how to negotiate, take turns, wait, compromise, sometimes dominate and sometimes hold back, and make and follow rules. They are learning about cause and effect and developing empathy. Big body play also supports optimum physical development because it is so vigorous and because children—since they enjoy it so much—tend to engage in it for an extended amount of time.

To support the use of big body play, we do the following:

- Provide training to all staff on the importance of big body play and how to supervise it
- Prepare both indoor and outdoor environments for this play style
- Establish classroom and playground rules with the children to keep them safe and help them know what to expect
- Encourage staff to use big body games with the children
- Supervise the play constantly, which means ensuring an adult is watching and listening at all times
- Model appropriate play; coach children as they play so that they are able to interact comfortably with each other in this way

The following indoor and outdoor environmental features of our program support big body play:

- At least 50 square feet of usable indoor play space per child, free from furniture and equipment so that children can tumble and wrestle (for example, a wrestling area for two children would consist of at least 100 square feet with no furnishings in the area)
- At least 100 square feet of usable outdoor play space per child, free from fixed equipment so that children can run, jump, tag, roll, wrestle, twirl, fall down, and chase each other (for example, a group of six children playing tag would have at least 600 square feet in which to play)
- Safety surfaces indoors under and around climbers, and furniture that children might use as climbers (a loveseat, for example)
- Safety surfaces outdoors under and around climbers, slides, balance beams, and other elevated surfaces from which children might jump

From F.M. Carlson, *Big Body Play: Why Boisterous, Vigorous, and Very Physical Play Is Essential to Children's Development and Learning* (Washington, DC: NAEYC 2011), 87–88. © 2011 by NAEYC.

or at events such as an open house before the first day of school. Explain the use of and support for big body play in a variety of ways:

- Include in your family handbook a policy on big body play—and how it is supported and supervised in the program or school (see “Sample Handbook Policies for Big Body Play”).
- Send a letter to families that explains big body play and its many benefits.
- Show photographs of children engaged in big body play
 - in newsletters
 - in documentation panels
 - in promotional literature, like brochures and flyers
 - on bulletin boards at entryways

Going forward

Most children engage in rough play, and research demonstrates its physical, social, emotional, and cognitive value. Early childhood education settings have the responsibility to provide children with what best serves their developmental needs. When children successfully participate in big body play, it is “a measure of the children's social well-being and is marked by the ability of children to . . . cooperate, to lead, and to follow” (Burdette & Whitaker 2005, 48). These abilities don't just support big body play; these skills are necessary for lifelong success in relationships.

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When Landry flipped Taylor over onto his back, Taylor stopped laughing and scrunched his face in a grimace. Landry let go of Taylor and Taylor got up. I asked Landry, "How did you know to let go?" Landry replied, "I could just tell."

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Superheroes

An Opportunity for Prosocial Play

Desalyn De-Souza and Jacqueline Radell



Superhero play has long been thought of as violent, aggressive, and disruptive. Some argue that aggressive play should not be allowed because it exposes children to inappropriate concepts and attitudes and sends the message that the use of aggression can achieve a desired goal (Carlsson-Paige & Levin 1995; Bauer & Dettore 1997). However, educators know that pretend play is an avenue for healthy emotional development.

Pretend play builds children's understanding of emotion, which helps them regulate their feelings (Bodrova & Leong 2003). Acting out themes and stories in pretend play lets children practice communicating their emotions and leads toward emotional regulation. Teachers can further promote children's social-emotional skills by supporting and scaffolding pretend play, expanding on children's themes and roles. Using these strategies, all types of pretend play, including superhero play, can have a positive impact.

Desalyn De-Souza, MS Ed, is assistant professor of community and human services and human development at the Central New York Center of Empire State College, State University of New York. Desalyn is a doctoral candidate in child and family studies at Syracuse University, where she is writing her dissertation on continuity of care. desalyn.de-souza@esc.edu

Jacqueline Radell, NNEB, is center director and classroom teacher in a Head Start classroom in Williamstown, New York. She studied early childhood education in the United Kingdom and is enrolled in a bachelor's degree program at Empire State College, State University of New York. Jacqueline has over 30 years of experience working with young children. eubeudb@aol.com

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Early educators have grappled with banning superhero play for decades, only to discover that children are strongly drawn to it and find ways to engage in it regardless of the adult-imposed rules (Gronlund 1992; Fonville & Afflerbach 1995; Bauer & Dettore 1997; Boyd 1997; Levin 2003; Barnes 2008; Logue & Shelton 2008). The controversy surrounding superhero play, and aggressive play in general, continues. Carlsson-Paige and Levin (1995) concluded that a perfect approach to the dilemma does not exist.

Before radio, television, and other forms of media, children created superheroes based on storybook characters and their imagination. Time spent by very young children viewing television and videos has increased dramatically from just one generation ago, with 9 months the average age when young children begin to regularly watch television (Zimmerman 2008). It's time to encourage today's children to create superheroes from their own imaginative and creative play rather than from the media.

This article shares the experience of a preschool teacher, author Jacqueline Radell, who integrated prosocial superhero play in her Head Start classroom. She offers strategies for implementing prosocial superhero play. Early childhood educators can use these strategies to address all aggressive behavior, not just superhero play.

Rethinking superhero play

As a preschool teacher for over 20 years, I have repeatedly banned toy weapons and discouraged superhero play in my classroom. In my experience such play quickly develops into aggression and violence.

With a little bit of optimism and some pessimism, I decided to introduce superhero play to the preschoolers in my classroom.

My reconsideration of superhero play was the result of attending a one-day seminar for early childhood professionals at the Empire State College, State University of New York. The Strong National Museum of Play, in Rochester, New York, hosted the seminar. The topic, Superheroes and Child's Play, focused on the museum's exhibit "American Comic Book Heroes: The Battle of Good vs. Evil." Museum education staff led participants and Empire State College faculty in sessions, including hands-on experiences using the museum exhibit.

The American Comic Book Heroes exhibit at the museum included images of superheroes from the past through the present. Clearly, children have engaged in superhero play in one form or another for generations. During the seminar, participants explored the purpose of superhero play for young children, the possibilities of intentionally incorporating this type of play in the classroom, and the critical role of teachers in guiding children's pretend play themes and roles. The seminar encouraged me to think critically about the role of the teacher in creating learning opportunities.

Combining superhero play with the characteristics of kindness and caring and with negotiation and problem-solving skills—my primary focus in promoting children's social-emotional development—always seemed impossible. But although superhero play had never been acceptable in my classroom, I was willing to give it another try. With a little

bit of optimism and some pessimism, I decided to introduce superhero play to the preschoolers in my classroom.

Implementing prosocial superhero play

The seminar was in April, so the children in my classroom had spent much of the school year practicing social skills and building relationships with peers and teachers before the introduction of superhero play. Timing of the introduction is an important factor—it is optimum when the children show signs of self-regulation and are ready to begin building social skills.

I pondered ways to introduce superhero play in a positive manner. Would noncommercial superheroes, like everyday people who do good deeds, encourage positive social interactions among the children? I decided not to read aloud books or show pictures of superheroes to the children when I introduced the theme. I wanted the play to be "new," without adding preconceived ideas about superheroes.

I began by asking the children informally what superheroes do. They responded that superheroes "save people," "find your pet," "clean your house," "help you," and "save cats, like firefighters do." I asked the children how a superhero could be identified. They said, "You need a cape," "We can wear hearts," "a collar," "like a firefighter," "be invisible," and "'cause we're gonna help kids." We did some problem solving together about what superheroes do and look like and discussed the possibilities for our caped crusaders.

I used circle time to formally introduce superhero play. For three or four days, the children discussed different superhero traits during circle time and focused on words like *kind*, *caring*, and *helpful*. The children responded with ideas such as "We can help our friends," "clean up toys," and "give someone a hug when they are sad." Maybe because we had gone through many similar guided conversations away from violence and aggression, the children didn't suggest any negative traits. They brainstormed unique names for their superheroes and thought about insignias. I made lists of their ideas: "We can be hearts," "a bird saver," "a superhero baby saver," and more.

During a follow-up small group activity, the children created their individual superhero insignias. I explained that insignias are a sort of symbol or badge. At first, they referred to commercial superhero characters like Batman



and to the stereotypical imagery of the battles against extreme evil. Using statements such as “We are going to make our own superheroes” and “Let’s think up some new names,” they were easily guided and encouraged to create new themes and roles. The children imaginatively decorated paper plates with items from the art shelf. They created their own symbols, using letters from their name and shapes and numbers that had personal meaning for them. This task helped them establish the characteristics of their superhero persona, transforming them into Cat Saver, Super Allison, Green Eyed, Smiley, and Heart Girl, among others.

During circle times we talked about safety as well. We referred to the classroom rules established and posted earlier in the school year: “Hands to our own bodies,” “Walking feet,” and “Inside voices.” I reminded the children that the classroom was a weapons-free zone, and we reviewed their ideas about kind, caring, and helpful superheroes.

Providing open-ended props allowed all the children to participate simultaneously. With inexpensive, shiny fabric in every color available, I quickly and easily fashioned seven superhero capes. I placed a prop box with the capes and other materials on the floor near the dramatic play area, so that it was visible to the children. The box contained equipment intended for both genders, including toy cell phones, flashlights, sunglasses, goggles, maps, magnifying glasses, pencils, pens, notebooks, stickers, binoculars, compasses, crowns, and visors. I introduced the props after the children had created their insignias and understood the safety guidelines. The children engaged in superhero play throughout free play times and in learning centers beyond the dramatic play area, including the block and computer centers.

Children’s and teacher’s responses to superhero play

The children were all very excited about the new classroom props. They embraced the ideas about helping, caring, and being kind they had come up with, and their play was creative, cooperative, and organized. Both boys and girls actively participated and were aware of each other’s needs. They shared capes and compromised on cape colors. They negotiated the use of the big wooden building blocks, which were particularly in demand for building houses and castles in which the superheroes would reside. The children worked together lining up chairs to create cars, snowmobiles, motorcycles, buses, and helicopters for transportation. They used the play plates from the family area as steering wheels. When they encountered difficulty with the design of a vehicle, they pulled in blankets and pillows and emptied toys out of crates and boxes to make extra seating to accommodate more children.

The children reprised their usual dramatic play themes in their superhero roles. They incorporated the beauty parlor, doctor’s office, post office, coffee shop, and wood-working bench in their superhero play. The integrated roles and play themes allowed the children to recreate daily life experiences, role-play, and build ideas about the world by seeing it through a different lens.

The classroom dynamics changed. For example, Megan exclaimed, “That’s my house; you are wrecking my house!” Angry retorts flew back and forth between Megan and Lydia. Then Lydia suggested, “Let’s build it back just the way it was, okay?” Tommy said, “I wanna help, ‘cause I’m a good fixer.” Jack came by carrying a toy hammer to help rebuild the house. The level of cooperative play increased, and children problem solved without adult intervention. This surprised me; it was exactly the opposite of what I had anticipated.

I joined in the children’s superhero play daily and was repeatedly rescued and saved from terrible catastrophes! It is important for teachers to support children while maintaining a balance between encouraging cooperative play and refraining from interfering unless necessary. I helped the children rephrase their complaints, drawing attention to their feelings and distress (“You look upset because you want the phone right now; do you have an idea for how we can fix this?”), offered ideas for redirection (“Maybe you could use the other phone to call for help”), and reinforced turn taking (“You really want the phone right now; let’s ask Megan if you can play with it when she is finished”). My role felt no different during superhero play than during any other classroom play activity.

Allowing the play to proceed in a controlled and nonaggressive environment set the tone for the classroom. The children required very little assistance to orchestrate different scenarios. Some dressed up and participated in other classroom activities—using the computer, exploring the sensory table, or creating with play dough—while wearing their superhero attire.

Every day, the children resumed their play where they had left off the day before. Creative superhero play schemes evolved throughout the week. The children created games that included rescuing kittens, flying around the room, and jumping off big blocks (one block high). A small group devised a game where they swooped up their capes and became invisible. The play in the classroom was not aggressive or combative. One of the girls, Bird Saver, thought out loud, “It’s kinda weird when someone who is a superhero is being mean.” The images of superheroes the children created were nonaggressive and kind.

The children’s play was intense yet very prosocial. They used words to negotiate their play mostly without the assistance of adults. A group of four children acted out the following play scenario:



Explore possibilities that are in your comfort zone. Discuss your ideas with your coteachers so that implementing the play is a team effort.



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children? What are your preconceived ideas about superhero play? To incorporate superhero play into your classroom, explore possibilities that are in your comfort zone. Discuss your ideas with your coteachers so that implementing the play is a team effort.

Be prepared. Preparation and organization are extremely important. Identify the children's current interests and play scenarios. Prepare superhero prop boxes with a variety of materials that build on children's interests, such as flashlights, magnifying glasses, toy cell phones, watches, binoculars, cameras, colored capes, and hats. Define the teacher's role in superhero play. Allow yourself time to gather props and to reflect before implementing it.

Introduce the new play activity with a positive approach.

Use group times like circle time to introduce the theme. Identify superheroes the children are familiar with. Be prepared for the children to mention violent superheroes. Use this as an opportunity to discuss positive attributes of nonviolent superheroes. Have the children make lists about what superheroes do, and post them around the classroom. Provide art materials for children to draw representations of their superhero. Unveil the prop boxes during group time, and discuss the creation of new, caring, helpful superheroes.



Ryan: I'm almost set up.

Brian: I found the oil.

Ryan: Look, I am riding the motorcycle.

Brian: Yeah, me too.

Tommy: I saw you, but I got flipped over—aaahhhhh!

Ryan: We're superhero life savers.

Luke: Who's with me? Teamwork!

Brian: I am the right guy; I'm your fairy godparent.

Reflections and tips for prosocial superhero play

The following are some key strategies for implementing prosocial superhero play that limits aggressive behavior:

Set goals. Where do you want this activity to lead? What are the expected learning outcomes for you and/or the

The teacher's positive approach is paramount. Children can sense the teacher's confidence in how well this play will work, setting the tone for the classroom environment. Hyson (2004) notes that "one of the reasons that children learn through play may be that play generally occurs in such a positive emotional climate, fostering attention, memory, and creative problem solving" (113).

Establish clear boundaries. Build on the existing classroom rules that reflect safety and respect for others, like "Hands to your own body" and "Walking feet." Through classroom conversations at circle time, encourage the children to establish boundaries that will make them feel safe. Identify and discuss acceptable versus unacceptable parameters for play. Write down ideas the discussion generates and post them in the classroom. This allows children to take ownership of the play and feel a sense of power and control. After all, this is what superhero play is all about.

Allow for exploration. Now it is time to allow the children to explore the new type of play. Join in the play and take on a role that allows them the opportunity to "rescue" you. Listen closely to their choice of words and pay attention to their body language as they act out a play scenario. What messages are they sending, and how can you expand on the messages through your role in the play? Effective teachers allow opportunities for uninterrupted play and act as facilitator, participant, and guide during playtime. Hyson (2004) says, "The emotion-centered teacher knows that classroom play can help children learn to monitor, heighten, dampen, redirect, and otherwise regulate their expressive behavior. Many of the best activities allow children to represent their experiences, encouraging feelings of efficacy or control" (91).

Avoid stereotypes. Superhero play does not have to follow the stereotype of aggressive play with weapons. Introduce props and story lines (if the children need your assistance) that are gender neutral and promote cooperative play. Use children's literature—for example, the Ladybug Girl series, by Jacky Davis and David Soman. Watch for releases like *The Amazing Adventures of Bumblebee Boy*, based on a character in the Ladybug Girl books. Display pictures and books around the classroom of boys and girls engaged in gender-neutral pretend play.



With guidance and freedom of exploration, children create their own play and devise imaginative prosocial characters, as I saw for myself.

Conclusions

As a child, I watched the superheroes Batman and Robin on television in black and white. I tied my mother's tea towels around my shoulders and swooped around the yard performing imaginary feats of heroism. Although the superheroes of today are depicted in very different ways, with vivid special effects that seem all too real, imaginative play remains an essential part of a child's development.

Dramatic play areas are often too structured and may be preplanned to fit the theme of the curriculum rather than children's interests and needs (Hyson 2004). Hyson notes that "these efforts often result in play that, while pleasing to adults and easy to manage, is emotionally flat, allowing few opportunities for children to express, experience,

Although the superheroes of today are depicted in very different ways, with vivid special effects that seem all too real, imaginative play remains an essential part of a child's development.

and construct a genuine understanding of the rich tapestry of human emotion" (58). Allowing young children to explore the possibilities of heroism while feeling safe and not intimidating others is both healthy and fun. Just as we provide theme-based play opportunities around grocery stores, doctors, and veterinarians, early educators need to acknowledge and respect the needs of young children to feel invincible and powerful through superhero play.

Before this experience, I was unaware that the children in my classroom were seasoned experts at portraying prosocial superheroes:

Brian (*speaking to John*): I like the way you hold your cape over your face.

Tommy (*joining in*): You are like a vampire when you do this (*mimics the motion of the cape*).

John: I have a headband too; it makes me visible (*means to say "invisible"*).

Tommy: You can't even see my feet or you can't hear me. I'm here to save the day. All of us, look, this is how (*demonstrates for the group*).

When a teacher implements a new activity in a classroom of active preschoolers, she may feel uncertain. The experience is like implementing a new music-and-movement activity in the hope of inspiring the children to get up and dance enthusiastically. Either the children joyfully take part in the dance, or they send a clear message that it was a flop. If the latter, the educator says to herself, "Never again." In imple-

menting kind, caring, and helpful superhero play, I felt an overwhelming sense of achievement.

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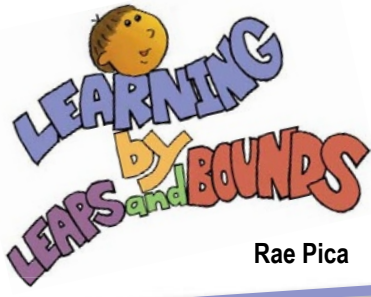
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Rae Pica

Taking Movement Education Outdoors

A teacher circulates among the children on the playground. She's checking for safety issues, but she also stops occasionally to ask the children questions: "Kara, I see you're tiptoeing on the balance beam. What's another way you might move along it?" "José, you're jumping forward and backward over that stick! How about trying it sideways?" The teacher then holds a hoop upright so some of the children can crawl through it. She is acting as a play leader.

CHILDREN'S FREE-PLAY TIME OUTDOORS

has traditionally been considered a break from the classroom—a chance for them to play without interference from adults and for teachers to relax a bit while also supervising. More and more early childhood professionals, however, recognize the potential of the outdoors as a classroom extension and time outdoors as an opportunity to promote children's development. They maintain that outdoor space should be used not only for the enhancement of physical skills but also for the development of children's social, emotional, creative, and cognitive abilities (Isenberg & Jalongo 2000; Essa 2010; Gordon & Browne 2010).

This is not to say that teachers must prepare structured lessons for every outdoor session. But teachers can continue and extend outdoors many activities begun indoors, especially movement activities. For example, battery-operated CD and MP3 players and handheld instruments like guitars, recorders, and autoharps allow music to be part of outdoor movement expe-

riences. During outdoor time, adults can interact informally with children, offering guidance and suggestions that extend children's play.

The teacher's role in supporting outdoor play is *play leader*—someone who interacts with children by asking leading questions and providing guidance for certain skills, like hopping, cooperating, and taking turns. According to play expert Joe Frost, a play leader helps children plan where they will play, discusses their play with them, and assists with any problems with their play that may arise. A play leader does all of this without taking charge.

The play leader's role is critical because static playgrounds, with traditional swings and slides and their typical uses do not always stimulate children's physical, cognitive, or creative development. Because the

equipment does not change, there are fewer challenges immediately obvious to children. For example, traditional swings and slides do not typically encourage the exploration of such movement concepts as time (moving slowly or quickly), force (moving lightly or strongly), or space (moving in different directions, at different levels, and along different pathways). Play equipment associated with activities performed in one prescribed way limits children's natural, imaginative play. A child is unlikely to look at the jungle gym and decide to pretend to be clothes hanging on the line to dry; but a play leader can suggest such an activity.

Although some modern, multiple-function, playground structures (wooden or modular plastic), like platforms with swinging bridges, rope ladders, and sometimes a firehouse pole, lend themselves to divergent play experiences, not every playground has such equipment. And on playgrounds that do have it, children may view the equipment as having circumscribed uses, such as merely climbing to the tower or platform and then returning to the ground. Thus children benefit from adult assistance in discovering more creative possibilities. What locomotor or nonlocomotor skills might the children perform on the platform? If teachers bring a portable CD or MP3 player outdoors, the children can play Statues, moving on the equipment until the music is paused and then "freezing" until the music begins again.

TO DO MORE

The playground is the obvious venue for many facets of early childhood physical activity. Unless your classroom has the necessary equipment indoors, such as climbing apparatus and balance beams, children can best perform

Rae Pica is the author of numerous books on movement in early childhood and is cofounder and host of "BAM! Body, Mind, and Child" (www.bamradionetwork.com) and cofounder and cohost of NAEYC Radio. You can contact Rae at raepica@movingandlearning.com.

This column is available in an online archive at www.naeyc.org/yc/columns.

gymnastic skills like climbing, hanging, swinging, and balancing on outdoor equipment. The playground is the appropriate place for practicing manipulative skills like ball handling—throwing, catching, and kicking. On the playground, children can push a friend on a swing, pull a wagon, and lift and carry objects. Of course, children outdoors can fully and freely perform gross motor skills like running, leaping, and jumping (including jumping off things such as a low balance beam or the edge of the sandbox).

Look for atypical ways children can use the playground space and static playground equipment (some examples follow). Use the open areas of the playground for large group movement activities that are inconvenient or impossible to do indoors. Suggest games like Follow the Leader, which is more challenging and appealing when there is a lot of space to explore and obstacles like trees and jungle gyms that have an impact on the course taken. If the children decide to play Simon Says, suggest forming two lines or circles so that children who are eliminated can instead go to the other line or circle and continue playing. This is easily done in the large, open outdoor space.

Parachute, hoop, and ribbon activities are often more practical outdoors (ribbon activities are certainly safer in a large, open area, because there is often less risk that the children will accidentally hit one another with them). And the possibilities for obstacle courses using small and large obstacles and equipment are endless. Encourage the children to work with you to set up an inviting obstacle course. Start small and change the course often (even daily). Ask the children to design or improve the course themselves. Children will look forward to creating and tackling gradually increasing challenges. The course should give young children experience with concepts such as *over*, *under*, *through*, *around*, and *between*.

If tires are available, consider the many possibilities beyond their use as swings. Help children lay them out in creative and challenging ways. Placed upright in rows, they create tunnels. They can also be stacked, rolled,

crawled through, or used as targets to throw balls and beanbags through. When laid flat, tires can be grouped in different patterns (in a single-file line or in a hopscotch pattern). Invite children to explore possible configurations and ways to move from one end of the tire route to the other—crawling, stepping inside the tires, or stepping on top of them.

Even static equipment has new uses when you look at it differently. If the playground has a low balance beam (four inches off the ground), suggest imaginative ways the children can travel on it—like tightrope walkers, gymnasts, butterflies, inchworms, cats stalking their prey, or elephants. Have the children think up their own ways. How would a circus clown move from one end to the other? A ballet dancer? A giant or an elf?

To make swings more interesting and challenging, encourage preschoolers to swing sitting with one leg bent and the other straight, with both legs straight, with both legs bent, as slowly (or quickly) as possible, gradually increasing speed and then gradually slowing down or stopping on cue and starting again.

Freishtat, Frost, and Holecko (n.d.) tell us that adults who maintain their distance from children's play are missing chances to engage with and learn from the children. Adults who enrich children's outdoor experiences offer new opportunities for children to express themselves creatively, stretch their imaginations, and be continually challenged. Teachers who interact

with children on the playground can make the outdoors an extension of the indoors and encourage movement learning in both settings.

TO LEARN MORE

For additional ideas, refer to *Learning Outdoors: Improving the Quality of Young Children's Play Outdoors*, edited by Helen Bilton (David Fulton Publishers, 2005) and *Outdoor Play Every Day: Innovative Play Concepts for Early Childhood*, by Karyn Wellhausen (Wadsworth, 2001). Also check out *Big Body Play: Why Boisterous, Vigorous, and Very Physical Play Is Essential to Children's Development and Learning*, by Frances M. Carlson (NAEYC, 2011).

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dren's development. The research shows how specific early experiences may help children gain essential prosocial skills. We hope the evidence will encourage teachers, researchers, and policy makers to be at least as intentional in this domain as they are in early literacy and mathematics. The suggestions that follow, the examples of prosocial curricula and resources, and the checklist of recommended teaching practices may jump-start this process.

Program-level actions. A good starting point for an intentional approach to prosocial development is to examine and enhance the overall quality of the early childhood program. Children who attend higher quality family child care and center-based programs seem to show more empathy and positive behavior toward other children (Spinrad & Eisenberg 2009; Romano, Kohen, & Findlay 2010). This is not surprising, as many of the features associated with overall program quality are also likely to support the development of prosocial skills. Such features include professionally prepared staff who are grounded in early childhood development and pedagogy; a program environment that encourages children to work and play together; discipline strategies that encourage collaborative problem-solving; an emphasis on teachers' knowledge of holistic child development; and supports for close adult-child and peer relationships.

As suggested earlier, teachers can reexamine everyday routines and activities to see if the prosocial potential of the activities is being fully tapped (see "Research into Action"). In addition, teachers can implement various specialized curricula and other resources (see "Examples of Curricula and Other Resources for Supporting Prosocial Development") that target positive social behavior and character education. A few cautions, however: such materials should be used to strengthen—but not replace—an across-the-board emphasis on prosocial development. And when deciding to adopt any curriculum or other resource, early childhood professionals should think about whether the resource is consistent with the research on prosocial development as well as whether there is evidence that the resource has been

Research into Action: A Checklist of Everyday Strategies to Promote Prosocial Development

Early childhood program staff can intentionally implement these and other research-based strategies, using them in ways that respond to children's culture and other individual characteristics. Many of the references in this article may help guide implementation.

- ☐ Is each child—especially any child who may be struggling with behavioral challenges—involved in frequent, friendly, individual interactions with teachers? (Even a few minutes a day help build a secure relationship, the foundation for prosocial competence.)
- ☐ Are classroom jobs used to build prosocial skills and a sense of community? (Invite a few children to pitch in and help open boxes that have been delivered, or ask a child for help in rearranging the books so that others can find them more easily.)
- ☐ Does the physical environment promote cooperation and community participation? (Set up interest areas and materials to invite small groups to work together, share supplies, and interact.)
- ☐ Are photos displayed that show children working and playing together, and that show children as members of their class and of their families?
- ☐ Do adults model prosocial behavior by showing empathy and kindness to coworkers as well as to children by using respectful language such as *thank you* and *please*?
- ☐ Do teachers specifically, sincerely acknowledge children's prosocial behavior? ("I see that the two of you have started cleaning up the art area together. That's real cooperation!")
- ☐ Do teachers explain the reasons behind rules and help children understand the effects of their behavior on others? This kind of inductive discipline seems to encourage children to be kind and helpful.
- ☐ Do classroom rules include positive, prosocial expectations—the *dos*, not just the *don'ts*? ("We are kind to our friends.")
- ☐ Do teachers scaffold children's efforts to be helpful and kind by giving them words to use or offering suggestions about what to do? ("Polly, I think Adriana looks worried about getting a turn with that doll. What if you say 'It's OK, you will have it in just a few minutes'? Or maybe you can say, 'Adriana, how about if we play together?'")
- ☐ Do teachers prompt children to help them learn prosocial behavior? ("Mary, would you show our new friend where to put the blocks when everyone is finished playing with them?")
- ☐ Do families receive practical, culturally relevant tips during home visits or at parent meetings to encourage prosocial behavior at home? (Avoid rewards for niceness. Instead, set clear expectations and foster warm relationships.)

Play across the Life Cycle

From Initiative to Integrity to Transcendence

Courtesy of Suzanne Duarte Jones



In this autobiographical journey through life-span developmental theory, I reflect on my life as a player, embedding it in the context of Erik Erikson and Joan Erikson's stages of human development. I build on these basic ideas—theory, storytelling, play, and development—and define them as simply as possible.

Definitions and reflections

Theory. Theories are generalized principles based on experienced data. They are logical and sequential, like “if this, then that . . .” In human development, life stories are our most important data. All of us construct theories by which we live. Whether or not we put those theories into words, we act on them every day. They are

our efforts to identify the patterns in our lives.

Storytelling. Stories are representations of our day-to-day experiences, caught in words and music, images and constructions, and dance and drama. Stories are what we remember. I'm telling my story with the hope you will connect and remember. But *your* story is even more important if you're

checking out a theory's usefulness for you. So the challenge to you is to keep asking yourself, “Does the theory fit you too?” “Are there connections between my story and yours?”

Play. In our book *Playing to Get Smart*, Renatta Cooper and I define play as “choosing what to do, doing it, and enjoying it” (2005, viii). That is perhaps oversimplified, but it makes the basic point: Play is intrinsically motivated. Play happens in the context of being human, where we have the privilege of making conscious choices. We are unlike beetles and starfish and other simpler critters; our lives are not limited to pure survival. We get to act—and to *observe, think, remember, and reflect*.

We construct representations of our experience—words, images, stories—so we can go back to them in our minds and share them with other members of our group of social animals, discover our differences, think and talk, and construct some more. A child mastering play—constructive play, dramatic play—is practicing storytelling: re-creating plot, motive, character, and setting.

Elizabeth (Betty) Jones, PhD, Faculty Emerita at Pacific Oaks College, in Pasadena, California, is the coauthor of three books on play: *The Play's the Thing: Teachers' Roles in Children's Play*, *Master Players: Learning from Children at Play*, and *Playing to Get Smart*. Betty's NAEYC books include *Teaching Adults Revisited: Active Learning for Early Childhood Educators*, and with coauthors, *Emergent Curriculum* and *The Lively Kindergarten: Emergent Curriculum in Action*. bjones@pacificoaks.edu

This article is adapted from the 2010 Burgess Lecture Betty delivered honoring Evangeline Burgess, early leader in early childhood education and Pacific Oaks College's first president. Mentor and friend, Evangeline offered Betty the opportunity to play at work.



We tell stories for their own sake and for shared delight. They connect children with what has gone before and remind elders of their accumulated wisdom. They help us remember. We remember our play.

Play begins with the question, “What will happen if I/we . . . ?” With experience, it becomes a hypothesis: “If I/we do that, this will happen.” Making credible hypotheses—and, eventually, building theories—is learned through mastering play. The early years, especially ages 3–5, are the critical developmental stage at which children first achieve this mastery.

In infancy (before play), sensory-motor exploration is largely unintentional. It is simply wired in us. In toddlerhood, the practice of motor skills becomes more deliberate, accompanied by the assertion of budding identity: “Mine!” “Me do it!” “No!” Adults may view toddlers who start taking initiative as “being bad.” Being “bad” may seem dangerous. But resisting authority is essential in the development of human intelligence.

Play is one of several different behaviors in which people can engage. In *Dimensions of Teaching-Learning Environments: Handbook for Teachers*, Liz Prescott and I (1984) construct a scheme to distinguish among four

possible variants of human behavior, which we call Play, Work, Games, and Labor. All of them are necessary to get through the day (see “Human Behaviors Necessary for Living Life”). These brief definitions are useful in thinking about (1) a child’s experience in settings defined as educational and (2) your experience throughout your life story.

Development. Development is a pattern for thinking about the growth in living things, especially people. Developmental theory is an outcome of mental pattern making; it is constructed through play.

I got hooked on developmental theory when I went off to graduate school in 1952 and was introduced to Erik Erikson’s Eight Stages of the Life Cycle. His book *Childhood and Society* ([1950] 1963) was newly published. I’ve added other theorists to my understanding of development, but Erik Erikson still provides my basic framework. His wife Joan uses weaving as a metaphor for the persistence of all the stages throughout our lives.

Human Behaviors Necessary for Living Life

Play. In open-ended play, the individual is free to explore a wide range of possibilities, with no preestablished rules of procedure or outcomes. Being competent in play means being self-directed and able to find something to do, get absorbed in it, discover things in the process, and go on to more elaborated play or to self-structured tasks.

Work. We undertake work to achieve a significant product. It is real work only when the worker experiences it as significant, as demonstrating his or her competence, and as having personal social importance.

Two other categories of behavior (Games and Labor), are variants of play and work and also take place in schools and other settings.

Games. Any meaningful task that tests one’s competence and has a beginning and a point of completion is a game, in this sense, within the limits of a preestablished structure. A game requires conformity to a set of rules,

an understanding of the underlying consensus. Individuals who are good at games can follow the rules and win a reasonable proportion of the time. Games are a point of connection between play and work. Work differs from games only in having a clearer product and in being perceived as more serious in purpose.

Labor. Another response to a preestablished structure, labor, lacks the sense of optimism, challenge, and joyful completion experienced in a good game. It may be socially useful in some contexts, but unlike work it yields no significant product. External rewards or penalties are typically necessary to keep the worker at it. The learning that accompanies labor is extraneous, having only to do with the acquisition of survival skills in a setting that lacks personal meaning.

Adapted with permission from Elizabeth Jones and Elizabeth Prescott, *Dimensions of Teaching-Learning Environments: Handbook for Teachers* (Pasadena, CA: Pacific Oaks College, 1984), 84–85.

Each stage is part of the warp through which the rest of life's threads are woven (J.M. Erikson 1991).

Play across the life cycle

So here I am, storytelling about my personal experience of play across the life cycle, all the way through the first seven stages and working on the transition from generativity to integrity to transcendence. I recently chose semiretirement at Pacific Oaks College and am actively learning about letting go, maybe. But Pacific Oaks has been my play place my whole adult life, and I haven't used it up yet. Liz Prescott and I were colleagues for many years; we shared an office and child care, collaborated on research, and taught and played together.

Liz had taught Pacific Oaks's basic Human Development: Life Cycle class for some years when one morning in our shared office she announced happily, "I've just figured out what the

In each stage a child is intrinsically motivated, building on motor and brain development in the context of human relationships.

Human Development class is about." "What?" I asked. "Development!" she said. It wasn't a tease; it was a genuine *aha* moment for her, and for me. Others' theories can be studied and memorized, but making a theory your own can take a long time. It took me some years of reading and rereading Erikson to figure out what the Initiative stage is really about. (It's about play. Silly me!)

Storytelling: My stages of development

In case you've not studied Erik and Joan Erikson, or did but have forgotten, I'll remind you of the stages all the way through my story. Understanding human development has been basic to the history of Pacific Oaks over the last 65 years. In a new era, I don't want this understanding of stages to go away.

Early childhood—Ages 0–5

Infancy is the occasion to build basic *trust* and to develop the strength of *hope*.

Toddlerhood is the opportunity to practice *autonomy* and to develop the strength of *will*.

Preschool age is the play age, the time to master *initiative* and to develop the strength of *purpose*.

In each stage a child is intrinsically motivated, building on motor and brain

development in the context of human relationships. The human infant is completely dependent on care from others, and trust is essential to survival. The urge for autonomy arises along with the ability to walk—and run away! *Initiative* is built on both those strengths; developed consciousness makes purposeful behavior possible.

As a young child, I was good at trust and autonomy and initiative. I was the only child of a 40-year-old mother, which wasn't as common then as it is now. (She had been the youngest of eight children and didn't want to repeat that experience.) She was delighted to become a stay-at-home mother and play with me. My parents lived in the same house for over 50 years; their parents had all gotten on ships and come to America from Europe. I've done almost the same as my parents—different house, same settled pattern. I appreciate a steady base from which to go away and to come back to—just like a toddler.

My parents cared for me, and I trusted them. They indulged my demands for "Mine!" and "Me do it!" as I practiced autonomy (it took peers, later in my life cycle, to deal with my spoiled-brat side). I played in the house and the backyard, and my mother took me on walks, sang to me, and read me poems and "The Elephant's Child" from Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*. The elephant's child was full of "satiating curiosity," which means he asked ever so many questions. I have been following his example and quoting him all my life. I practiced initiative; I became a devoted, imaginative player. I liked being an only child (except on vacations). I'm still an introvert deep



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I have never outgrown the need for mountains in my life or the capacity for playing with pinecones and stones along streams.

down, a preference that surfaces increasingly as I age.

I was born in San Francisco, and my mother used to take me to “the city” from our East Bay home, first by ferry and later by train after the Bay Bridge was built. My parents had been backpackers, predating the aluminum and nylon era (their packs were made of wood and canvas). They belonged to a hiking club on Mount Tamalpais, and every summer we went horse packing in the Sierra with other families from the club. I have never outgrown the need for mountains in my life or the capacity for playing with pinecones and stones along streams.

Later childhood

School age offers time for *industry*, leading to the strength of *competence*.

I taught myself to read through play before I went to kindergarten. But I was shy with strangers and short on social skills. I cried when my mommy left me on my first day of kindergarten and was teased about it for at least a year afterward. School was best, I remember, in fourth grade with Mrs. O’Neill, who wore pink pin-

afores and jumped rope with us and let us color world maps with Mongol pencils.

I had girlfriends, and we played all over the neighborhood—on the train tracks, in the cemetery, in all the vacant lots. And we were mean to each other, as little girls often are. I invented the We Hate Bobbie club (of brief duration) in fifth grade. I will never forgive my teacher, Mrs. Roberts, for taking off my desk the constitution I was drafting for the club during class and sending me to the principal for punishment.

More often I was the one being teased (we took turns at that). Girl Scout meetings were boring, but collecting badges was fun. I liked schoolwork, and we had wonderful music and drama teachers. I got to be Susanna Foster in a musical about Stephen Foster and to wear a full-length dotted swiss party dress, yellow with brown dots; but Faye got to be

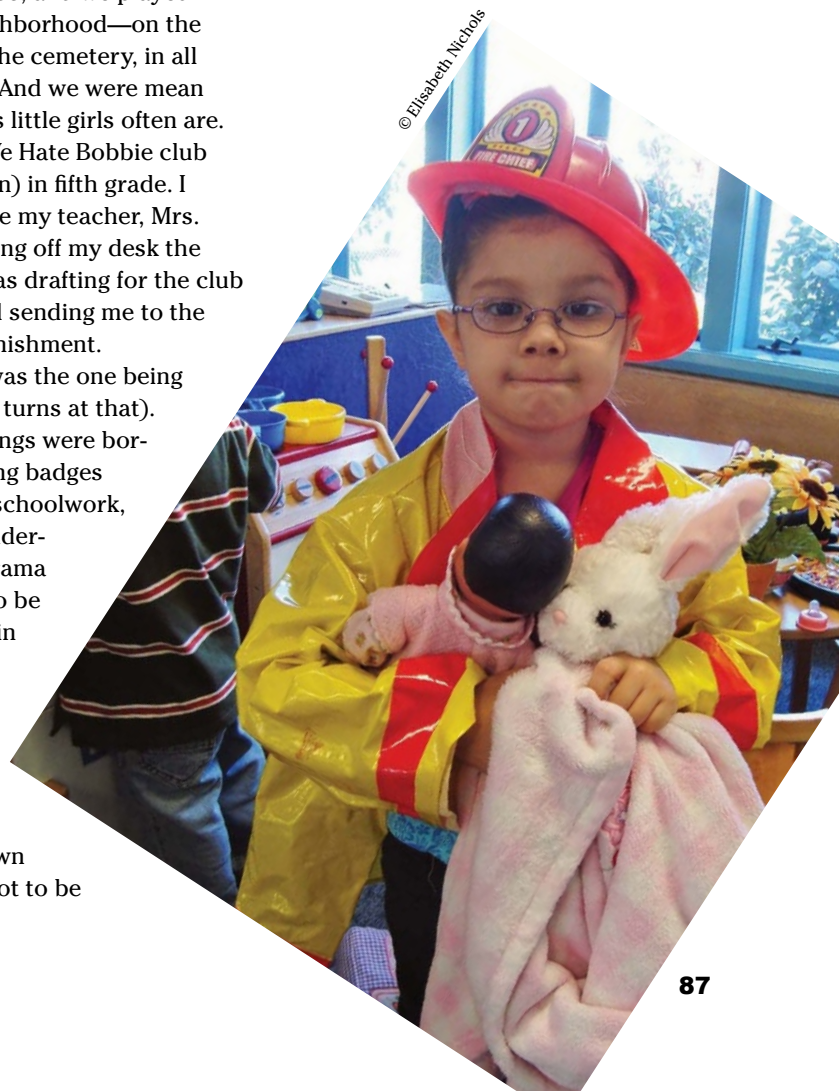
Jeannie with the light brown hair. She graduated from high school a semester early so she could marry our high school music teacher. She was just 18. (Silly girl.)

Youth

Adolescence is the opportunity to develop *identity* and experience the strength of *fidelity*.

Young adulthood is the opportunity to develop *intimacy* and the strength of *love*.

I’ve put *identity* and *intimacy* together here because there has been considerable theoretical disagreement on whether the sequence is different for boys than for girls. I haven’t sorted that out for myself. Certainly, high school and college were times of great interest in boys! For me, the youth group I went to at my best friend’s church offered both boys and ideals, and the challenge of a commitment



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to service that has stayed with me. Counselor Helen Flegal was the first adult mentor I recognized in my life.

College brought a wonderful intellectual adventure. I went to every performance of every play and concert on campus, played the organ and sang in the a cappella choir, worked in the library and the bookstore, and read everything in sight. I was playing, big-time! I had always played by reading books, and so I majored in English. But I didn't want to *work* at reading books, as graduate work in English would require. In my senior year, when I started to wonder what I would be when I grew up, I switched to psychology and the possibility of working with people. I couldn't imagine being a teacher, in front of a class—that would be too scary.

When dating got boring, I got married at age 20. This distressed my mother, who as a prefeminism feminist had chosen to marry later at age 36. That summer my husband Gil and I house-sat for my choir director, his two Siamese cats, and his wandering German shepherd Jenny, and hiked in Yosemite's Tuolumne Meadows. Then we finished our last year of college



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in Stockton and went off to graduate school in Wisconsin, deciding that it was time for two Californians to experience winter (two years turned out to be enough, and there were no mountains). I enrolled in the interdisciplinary child development program at the University of Wisconsin—Madison, where I was introduced to preschool by a master teacher, Sue Maxfield, who was wonderful at helping students see the details of children's behavior. I was hooked on watching and learning about children for the rest of my life. Preschool felt quite different from being a teacher in front of a class. It was play.

Generativity

Adulthood offers the opportunity to practice *generativity* and experience the strength of *care*. In this stage, we're responsible for making the world work.

Generativity can extend a long time. If you look back through the stages, the first stage is about a year long; those that follow are in focus for only two years to perhaps half a dozen. I plunged into

generativity in my early twenties and I am still at it many decades later. I still experience my work as play, what I choose to do, and I enjoy it.

At the end of graduate school, my life became different—responding as a grown-up, as a human services professional, and as a parent to the opportunity to care for others. We finished our MAs and planned our return to California. My advisor showed me a job notice for a preschool teacher at Pacific Oaks Friends School; she thought it might be a good fit. Husband Gil was admitted to a doctoral program at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), so we moved to Pasadena. We were invited to live upstairs above the children's school and feed the rabbits and lock the doors.

I was expecting a December baby, so I didn't end up in the planned job in the Adventure Yard with 4-year-olds. However, Evangeline Burgess, Pacific Oaks College president, negotiated with me a collection of part-time positions, including children's music specialist and substitute teacher. With my new MA, I was full of ideas. Whenever I came up with a fine new one, Evangeline said, "Go for it." She didn't do it *for* me, but she gave me permission to play and work and often scaffolded my ideas. If something



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worked, she generally scouted around for ways to keep it alive. For me it was an extraordinary play environment that let me be active in the creation of Pacific Oaks College.

I was also extraordinarily fortunate in the creation of a large family. It was the baby boomer generation. We had six children, so they weren't alone on our street in Eagle Rock. As an only child, I sought the chaotic contrast of a big family; it offered me play opportunities, discovery of what the next child would be like, and daily reading to them all. Whenever possible we threw the children into the back of the truck and went off camping all over the West. As they grew older, the children began backpacking. One night in Mineral King, California, a young black bear showed up, very interested in the backpacks ready for the next morning's hike. (Not wanting to have to mend the backpack in the morning, I leaped out of my sleeping bag and chased him away.)

When we first arrived at Pacific Oaks, the college was just being created. I got pulled in to teach adults and keep inventing new programs. Teaching adults was a challenge. I spent years figuring out how to construct a coherent theory and practice and how to structure environments where adults, like young children, could learn through play. Other opportunities came along beyond my work at Pacific Oaks, such as research projects in public school classrooms. At age 50 I got a passport for the first time and traveled to Japan, Australia, and all over the world, playing and learning.

The later years

Aging, Erikson's eighth stage, asks for *integrity* and offers the strength of *wisdom*.

**I still experience my work as play,
what I choose to do, and I enjoy it.**

Old age is the stage I haven't properly tackled yet, being resistant to letting go of the joys of generativity. My children have been moving into middle age; my grandchildren range from 23 years to 30 months, and I am cherishing empty-nesting. I'm back to the joys I recall from my years as an only child. I've heard several people my age and older describe themselves as "flunking retirement." Until last year, I've simply avoided taking the risk. Letting go of a job is hard when there's so much to be done.

Moving into the eighth stage, I need to start collecting stories and building theory yet again. When it comes to genuine understanding of the later years, I'm no longer a wise elder. Instead, I'm

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back to exploring the unknown, just as I was at 4, at 14, and at 24. Joan Erikson offers me reassurance, when she writes, “To grow old is a great privilege. It allows feedback on a long life that can be lived in retrospect” (E.H. Erikson with J.M. Erikson 1997, 128).

Elder play

If play is choosing what to do, doing it, and enjoying it, how do elders play? “How old is old?” is of course the question. With an average life span of 80 years or so in many countries, including our own, some of us just go sailing on well past traditional retirement age. “Why slow down if the going is good?”

In infancy and toddlerhood, play is sensory-motor exploration: “What will my body do?” By adulthood, sensory-motor competence is such a given that it’s automatic. But by middle age, a few things start to break down and force us to pay some attention

to the question, “What can’t I do any longer?”

Memory loss may create some senior moments, but, except when it becomes disabling, most of us can just pause and wait for the missing fact or word to come back along at its own slower speed. I think brain space gets crowded after all those years of memorable experience. Slowing down can be an asset, not only a liability.

With age, there are losses. Loss of connection, of energy, and of physical ability and strength all reduce pace and engagement. With age there are also gains: wisdom, stillness, a slower pace to savor things previously rushed through.

Observers of children’s play describe it as solitary, parallel, or social. Those forms are found in elder play

too. The choice among them mirrors one’s physical condition, temperament, opportunity, and needs that perhaps were previously unmet.

More active elder play may include recreation and caregiving, such as travel, walking, volunteering, and grandparenting. There is time as well for less active play: contemplation and reminiscence. Contemplation—paying real attention to something—might take the form of relaxed gardening, bird-watching or surf-watching, listening to music, or taking quiet walks with an awareness of trees and clouds and ups and downs.

When most of life is behind, not ahead, playing with one’s memories by reminiscing can bring both delight and pain and sharing and closure. The often-remarked

increase in long-term memory in the later years is a remarkable phenomenon. I find myself remembering the last names of most of the kids in my kindergarten class! Short-term memory generally kicks in with patience. Joan Erikson offers a new ninth stage, *transcendence*, in her addition to *The Life Cycle Completed: Extended Version with New Chapters on the Ninth Stage of Development*. She writes,

Perhaps the really old find a safe place to consider their states of being only in privacy and solitude. After all, how else can one find peace and acceptance of the changes that time imposes on mind and body?

When Erik was 91, he and I had been married for 64 years. Following hip surgery, he became withdrawn, and he serenely retired. He was neither depressed nor bewildered but remained consistently observing and quietly appreciative of his caretakers. We should all be so wise, gracious, and accepting of old age when it comes our way. I am now 93 years old and have experienced more of the inevitable complications of *slowly* growing old. I am not



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I think the life cycle is a circle. It begins and ends with play—playing with possibilities and impossibilities, grasping and letting go.

retired, serene, and gracious. In fact I am eager to finish this revision of the final stage before it is too late and too demanding an undertaking. (E.H. Erikson with J.M. Erikson 1997, 4)

I think Joan Erikson is my role model. But I'm not there yet. For now, I'm still playing. I think the life cycle is a circle. It begins and ends with play—playing with possibilities and impossibilities, grasping and letting go. "What's this? "What can I do with it?" I'm grateful that Pacific Oaks has been my extraordinary play place for these many years. It still is.

Here and now

For those of us who are alive and alert, the challenge is still with us. The point of studying and constructing theory lies in the power of naming. When we play with names for things, we have greater power for understanding our lives and for building relationships. As social animals, we must relate to others to survive and to learn that human knowledge is socially constructed. At Pacific Oaks, both the children's school and the college require their learners to engage in dialogue—to speak, listen, reflect, and create and name patterns in human development.

As we tried to decide, in the 1950s, what to call the degree to be offered by our new college, our president, Evangeline, was clear: This needs to be a liberal studies degree, not a professional training degree. In liberal studies, learners are encouraged to explore, play with ideas, and become critical thinkers.

At Pacific Oaks we considered Early Childhood Education as the degree major; we considered Child Development. And we agreed on Human Development, encompassing the whole life span. Human-services professionals, whatever age groups they serve in whatever settings, need life-span understanding. They need to collect stories from their own and others' lives. They need to remain genuinely curious: "Who am I?" "Who are you?" "Will you play with me?" These are the questions pursued by 4-year-olds. They are questions we never outgrow. At Pacific Oaks our master's students are expected to begin their thesis with a personal statement: "This is my story. This is where my passion for my thesis topic comes from."

If I understand you in the context of your life, I may be able to live gener-

ously with you. We take seriously the study of life-span human development, which gives us names, patterns, questions, and skills for respectful, caring interaction with our fellow human beings. If we can understand each other deeply enough, we may be able to keep moving toward the hope of the Quaker founders of Pacific Oaks: To create a more peaceful world—and it all begins with little children.

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Governing Board

Meeting agenda. NAEYC members may submit recommendations in writing to the Governing Board at any time. For recommendations to be placed on the September 2011 meeting agenda, they must be submitted to NAEYC Headquarters by **July 30, 2011**. All recommendations should include a statement of concern and possible ways to address that concern.

Minutes of the January 2011 Governing Board meeting are officially approved and will be available online at Members Only (www.naeyc.org/members) or to members upon written request.