

BIG BODY PLAY

Why Boisterous, Vigorous,
& Very Physical Play Is
Essential to Children's
Development & Learning

SECOND EDITION



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PLAYFUL PERSPECTIVES

A Man in Early Childhood Education Getting the Kids All Riled Up

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In the 1970s, I was laid off as a construction laborer and looking for work. I saw a job advertisement for an early childhood educator and thought, "I can do that. How hard could it be to work with young children?" I was enthusiastic, had a lot of energy, and had previously done some coaching for children in elementary and high school sports, so I thought I understood working with children from that aspect. They hired me.

My first week, I ran and ran with the children. I would fall down, and they would pile on top of me. The children loved me, but as I found out later, the other teachers did not. To them, it looked like all I knew how to do was to "rile the kids up." One teacher, though, saw something more. I suspect it might have been because she had many brothers, but she took a liking to me and decided to help me. We're still good friends to this day.

At the end of one week, that teacher said to me, "You are doing a great job!" Being a proud young man, smiling and with a big ego, I replied, "Yep, I know!" The following week, she remarked, "If you read to the children every day, they would love your voice." Again, I smiled, having my ego boosted. She added, "Then you can *rest* from all that running!" Well, that made sense. So, I started to dramatically read to the children every day, and my enthusiasm helped engage them. Another week, that teacher commented, "The children love your voice. How about building with some blocks in the corner? Just don't let them build the structures too high as it could be dangerous." That also made sense to me. I took her advice, but I let the children take the lead; after all, I had been a coach. Each week, she would offer another observation, often to add some fine motor skills work, and they all made sense to me. Finally, I figured out what she was doing: she was mentoring me. Without her welcoming me and accepting my approach to working with children—including getting them "all riled up"—I would not be here in early childhood education today.

I went on to get my Child Development Associate credential, a bachelor's degree in education, and a master's degree in public health and education. My career over the years has included working with infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in roles ranging from after-school care professional to the director of health, nutrition, and transportation at a Head Start program. In 1979, I founded MenTeach, an organization dedicated to providing information and resources about recruiting and retaining men as part of the early childhood education workforce. I was the first man to serve as president of the Minnesota Association for the Education of Young Children (MnAEYC), and I served on the boards of directors for several organizations. Currently, I teach educators at a university.

Over time, I came to understand something important about those early days of running, tumbling, and laughing with children. Although some adults saw my interactions with the children as just riling them up, something much deeper was actually happening. The children were connecting, both with me and with each other. They were testing trust, strength, and boundaries through their bodies. What we were doing had a name that I would only learn later: big body play. When educators see someone engaging with children through big body play, look closely before you judge. What may appear chaotic on the surface is often highly relational. Through this style of play, children are learning about cooperation, power, safety, and self-regulation. When done thoughtfully, big body play does not mean losing control of a classroom; rather, it is a way to build relationships that are strong enough for children to feel safe to explore and express themselves, which makes teaching more meaningful.

Looking back, I wish that more of my colleagues at my first teaching role had seen me not just as a man running around with children but a teacher building connections in the language many young children understand best: movement and play. The children who piled on top of me when I fell down were not being wild, they were expressing trust and joy. They were saying, in their own way, "You are one of us." That connection became the foundation for everything else I would later learn to do as a teacher, including reading stories, guiding block play, supporting fine motor development, and helping children learn to work together. It also gave context for the professionalized language teachers use, like *developmentally appropriate practice*, *positive guidance*, and *proximal learning*.

One of the most important skills I developed through big body play was learning to read children's cues. This play style only works when adults stay highly attentive to children. I watched faces, listened to laughter, and noticed when a child leaned in for more or stepped back for space. A child who is laughing, making eye contact, and returning to the play is telling you, "This is just enough." On the other hand, a child who turns away, stiffens, or grows quiet may be saying, "This is too much." Learning to recognize and interpret those signals helped me adjust the intensity of play so that it remained joyful and safe for everyone. When I reflect back, I think my mentor noticed that responsiveness in me before I did. She saw that I was not simply stirring up the children, I was paying attention to them and their needs. That responsiveness was something she chose to nurture rather than shut down.

These experiences shaped the way I have mentored men entering early childhood education. Many men arrive with energy, humor, and a comfort with vigorous, physical play that children often respond to immediately. Unfortunately, they sometimes encounter skepticism or uncertainty from colleagues who are not sure how to interpret that style of engagement. I try to do for them what my mentor did for me. I start by welcoming what they naturally bring to the work. Then, instead of telling them what not to do, I help them expand their repertoire. We talk about safety, observation, emotional awareness, and the many ways relationships can grow from play. In other words, we build on their strengths rather than asking them to leave those strengths at the door.

My advice is not that every educator must wrestle on the floor or run across the playground with the children they teach the way I did. However, everyone should recognize big body play as an essential way children learn and find ways to support it. Help children invent movement challenges. Create safe spaces where children can jump, tumble, and laugh together. And if you are up to it, join a game of chase. When educators participate in big body play, even briefly, they communicate that children's energy, enthusiasm, and joy are welcome in the early learning environment.

My career in early childhood education began with running, falling down, and children piling on top of me in laughter. It could easily have ended in that first week if one teacher had only seen chaos instead of potential. Her mentorship helped me transform enthusiasm into effective teaching practice. It also taught me an important lesson that I have carried with me ever since: when we recognize and support the different ways adults connect with children—including through big body play—we strengthen the entire field of early childhood education.