



What Is Big Body Play?

Children are born moving. As newborns, they scrunch up their legs and wave their hands through space randomly. With more muscle control, they kick their feet and wave their arms with intention, stretch to reach for objects, and rock back and forth. As they grow, they push up with their arms and begin to roll over. Infants love to swing, whether in a hammock, on a blanket, or in another person's arms. They use others' bodies to push themselves up or stand. They crawl, then begin to walk. Adults delight in the spontaneous ways children move their bodies when they reach toddlerhood: swaying, stomping, dancing, twirling. They push and pull toys—and each other. But they also hug each other tightly. They begin to run more fluidly and play simple chase games. As children enter their preschool years, they climb higher and leap farther; roll around on the ground with friends; swing, chase, and flee with more intention; and play physical games with rules. By kindergarten, children display more coordination in their running, jumping, and throwing. They skip and gallop with greater finesse. In first, second, and third grade, this improved coordination and motor control allows children to participate in more complex games and sports both individually and in groups. All of these skills and more are put to use as they toss or kick balls, play tag, and even wrestle.

Together, these very physical gross motor (or large muscle) movements and interactions comprise *big body play*. The term was coined by the author of this book to describe the vigorous, boisterous, and exuberant ways that children use their bodies in play. You might also have heard of this play style by other names, such as *rough-and-tumble play*, *rowdy play*, *rough play*, *roughhousing*, or *horseplay*.

Big body play is more than just joyous fun, though there's plenty of that involved. It's a critical part of children's development and learning. This chapter overviews the various types of big body play and what it can look like as children grow and develop from birth through age 8. It also discusses roughness and risk in this kind of play. Finally, it explains why it is essential to know more about big body play.

REFLECTIONS ON BIG BODY PLAY

“While I was at the airport, I saw a child—maybe 5 or 6 years old—drop his toy. While bent over to retrieve it, he spun around on one knee, then spun around on alternating arms. He tumbled three or four times back and forth on the floor, and then he picked up his toy and stood up. I remember doing things like that as a kid. It made my day seeing him tumbling around on the floor.”

Types of Big Body Play

Sometimes big body play for young children is solitary with just their own body movements, such as when a child runs around, twirls, rolls on the ground, or skips as they play alone. More often, however, this kind of play includes other children. It is often the result of a friend saying to another friend, “Hey, let’s run to the fence. First one there wins!” They wrestle each other to the ground, swing each other around, chase and tag each other, wrap their arms around each other and roll down a hill, and crawl on top of each other. They engage in this kind of play most often with children they consider friends (Eig 2017). In their play, children smile and laugh, join the activity voluntarily, and—if they enjoy it—repeatedly return for more. The children’s faces are carefree, and their muscle tone is relaxed. This expression is commonly termed the *play face* by researchers (Pellegrini 2009; Reed & Brown 2000).



Big body play can also include an object or structure, both of which can be used in a wide range of ways. For example, children may use large yoga balls to roll their bodies on and off them. Alternately, children can pass yoga balls back and forth with a partner or among several children using their hands and feet. Slides and mounted playground equipment are favorite structures that children can climb and then fling themselves off of to the ground below. They sometimes tag objects and structures as a base for an organized game (e.g., tag). Sometimes these games are teacher led, while other times children lead the play. Children will often use traditional play objects and structures unconventionally or engage in big body play with unconventional objects. They will, for example, climb a slide to reach the top of a structure instead of walking up the stairs, or climb on and leap off landscape timbers and boulders. Table 1.1 organizes some, though certainly not all, ways children might play into these category types.

Table 1.1. Types of Big Body Play

Solitary	With Objects and Structures	With Other Children
› Running	› Climbing an object or structure (e.g., playground equipment, tree)	› Chasing, catching, and fleeing from another child › Climbing an object or structure with another child
› Making tagging, hitting, or kicking motions	› Batting at or kicking an object (e.g., ball, pine cone)	› Tagging or lightly slapping another child › Batting at or kicking an object with another child
› Dancing, skipping, and twirling	› Dancing and twirling with an object (e.g., ribbon, Hula-Hoop)	› Dancing with another child › Banging into another child
› Rolling and crawling around on the ground	› Rolling on and off an object (e.g., yoga ball) › Sliding down an object or crawling up a structure (e.g., slide) › Wrestling and rolling around with an object (e.g., body pillow)	› Rolling on and off an object with another child › Crawling on top of another child › Sliding down an object or a structure with another child › Wrestling and rolling around on the ground with another child
› Jumping	› Jumping on and off an object or structure (e.g., stump, boulder, sofa)	› Jumping on and off an object or structure with another child
› Stomping	› Pushing and pulling an object up an incline (e.g., ball, wagon)	› Pushing and pulling another child › Pushing and pulling an object up an incline with another child