





Introduction

How I Came to Revise This Book . . . and Why It Is Needed

Young children play vigorously and even roughly with their bodies and other children's bodies. I was recently reminded of this while spending time with my great-niece and my four great-nephews, who range in age from 1 to 5½ years old. They ran, bounced, tumbled, and climbed the entire time I was with them. While watching the youngest explore her grandmother's living room, periodically tumbling to the floor, her dad commented, "You must let them play this way. It's risky, but it's important."

As a child who grew up in the 1960s, rarely was the word *risk* attached to this rowdy way we played. No one encouraged us to be less big and boisterous with our bodies or forbade our rough play. The one obstacle I faced was having to wear dresses to school and constantly getting in trouble for hanging upside down from the monkey bars. My mother solved that problem by having me put on shorts underneath my dresses. Fast-forward to the current play climate and how often the word *risk* is attached to young children's play. Listen and you'll hear young children consistently being warned to "be careful" in their big body play. When did running, jumping, climbing, swinging, wrestling, tumbling, chasing, and fleeing become risky? And when did the role of adults in children's lives become less about accepting and managing the inherent risk in play and more about eliminating that risk? I fear, as many others do, that our anxieties are becoming our young children's anxieties.

In addition to fearing injury itself, many worry about litigation if a child is injured. Because of that fear, this big, boisterous play is often forbidden in many early childhood programs throughout the United States (Jerebine et al. 2022). In programs that still offer recess, there are often more rules about what the children cannot do than there are allowed forms of play. Examples of such rules include "Haphazard running, chasing, and tag games are not permitted" and "Children are not to bounce objects on school walls, wrestle on the ground, climb trees, or hit one another (even playfully)." One of my husband's and my favorite camping spots has a playground rule of "No rough play." In Georgia, my home state, rough play is not allowed in licensed early childhood education centers.

When the risk in play is limited, play begins to be limited. And when we limit play, we limit learning.

I was not always a big body play advocate, but I came to learn the value of this kind of play. I began by reflecting on my own experiences with it—as a young child playing with my brother and our next-door neighbor, Danny; as a center director for more than 20 years; and as a mother to three now-adult children who rough played at their grandmama's house every Sunday afternoon—and on early childhood educators' shared commitment to ensuring that children are kept as safe as

necessary while in our care. I also needed to know others' experiences with rough play. Though these experiences and common wisdom seemed to support the benefits of big body play, I believe in evidence-based practice. Before I could fully integrate the idea that big body play is good for children, I had to understand the research behind this play style. Sherlock Holmes reminds us of the importance of research in *The Adventures of the Copper Beeches* when he cries impatiently, "Data! Data! Data! I can't make bricks without clay." The data supporting big body play is rich and varied, and it consistently underscores the vital role that rough and rowdy play holds in young children's lives.

In the 15 years since the first edition of *Big Body Play* was published, I've presented this information to audiences across the United States and the world. From those presentations and the meaningful conversations with practitioners who attended them, I have learned so much more about this valuable play style and the continued controversy and questions that surround it. This new edition reflects that shared learning, my personal growth about this important topic, the expanded available research, the breadth and depth of my understanding of this play and its significance, and many of the perspectives of the colleagues I've met along the way.

About This Book

The scope of this book has grown substantially since its first edition.

Chapter 1 defines what big body play is and what it looks like for children from birth through age 8. It also discusses risk and its role in children's play. The chapter closes out by making the case for why learning about this play style is essential.

Chapter 2 defines play in general, discusses the role of physical activity and movement in play, and delves into big body play specifically. This includes taking a closer look at big body play behaviors and its categorization as both a standalone play style and a part of sociodramatic play.

Chapter 3 explores the many benefits of big body play, explaining why young children are healthier, happier, calmer, smarter, and better communicators when they play this way.

Chapter 4 touches on many of the myths and misperceptions surrounding big body play, debunking each one.

Chapter 5 acknowledges biases about big body play and how to combat them.

Chapter 6 goes into the teacher's role in implementing big body play, including establishing policies, outlining boundaries and expectations, creating effective and safe environments, and providing support, guidance, and active supervision.

Chapter 7 discusses how to adapt big body play for all children. It features information on working with children with a range of some of the more common delays, disabilities, and disorders, such as challenges with coordination, mobility, sensory processing, spatial processing, and communication.

Finally, Chapter 8 shows how educators and families can work together to create and implement a successful big body play program.

In each chapter are one to two recurring features titled “Playful Perspectives.” These are essays written by contributors who were chosen for their expertise in their respective fields and their passion for big body play. Their words serve as records of their lived experiences and feelings, adding authentic, personal accounts to the research contained in this resource.

At the end of the book, you’ll find a list of appendices that complement the information and strategies discussed in the core chapters. The appendices are available online at NAEYC.org/big-body-play-second-edition.



To develop to their full potential, children need to experience proper risks and challenges. Acknowledging both the contributions and the risks of big body play allows early childhood educators to plan for it and supervise it intentionally and enthusiastically. We know that young children learn best through play and that physical movement impacts brain development throughout early childhood. At the intersection of what young children want and what we want for young children is big body play. It is the most organic way for young children to grow and learn. If you have ever voiced, or heard voiced, a concern about children’s big body play, this book is for you.