

# DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICES

## Rough-and-Tumble Play Themes in Early Childhood



Rough-and-tumble (R&T) play emerges as early as 18 months of age. It peaks again around preschool, typically progressing into early or middle childhood.

### LOOKS LIKE

- Wrestling
- Running
- Jumping
- Weapon or tool play
- Chasing/fleeing
- Open-handed hitting
- Laughing
- Superhero play
- War play, etc.
- Power roles



### BENEFITS OF R&T PLAY

- Social cognition (Pellegrini, 1987; Pellis & Pellis, 2007)
- Emotion regulation (Flanders et al., 2010)



Play themes involving the use of real or imagined weapons or tools, can be a combination of many play skills, including dramatic, functional-relational, and rough-and-tumble play, depending on how they are used.

### EXPAND THE PLAY

Help the child explore play-related roles, such as medical professionals, police officers, firefighters, and more. This will also support empathy building.



### TOOLS & WEAPONS

Guns, swords, and other weapons are commonly used tools employed by children across the developmental continuum to act out imaginary play themes.



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Examine the cultural and ecological factors that might influence a child's beliefs and understanding of tools when deciding if it is developmentally appropriate for them or not.  
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### ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS:

- What does your gun do?
- Why do you like it?
- Tell me about what happened.
- What other tools can we use to solve this problem?
- Who else can help us?

Certainly, there are times when adults should intervene with R&T play. Be mindful of the following behaviors that might put a student at an elevated risk of harm related to R&T play.

- Scowling or crying during the play
- Difficulty recognizing play partners' signs of agitation, which escalates the play into a conflict
- Frequently breaking established norms/rules related to R&T play
- Inability to take responsibility when mistakes are made or play crosses the line; Difficulty repairing harm/making amends
- Tactually defensive children (heavy work, firmer touch, and warnings before being touched can be beneficial for these learners)

Watch for reactions produced by students observing R&T play. Ensure all children, even those not directly engaged in the play, feel safe.

Prevent unexpected behaviors related to R&T play by establishing classroom or school-wide practices that are developmentally appropriate. Reinforce PBIS practices at recess related to good sportsmanship.