

Please Stop the Raucous!

Taming the bedtime battles

Really!? It's 8:30 p.m. on a school night and my husband is wrestling with my son and at the same time having a pillow fight with my daughter. I guess I should be happy that they are having so much fun giggling and screaming. Couldn't this have happened two hours earlier rather than at bedtime? At 8:30 I am tired and ready for some quiet time of my own. With all this horsing around I'm afraid that a child may get hurt and I will have to spend the next hour or more comforting the wounded and overstimulated casualty. If this occasionally happened, I wouldn't mind, but it's almost a nightly occurrence. If I say something, my husband and children look at me like I am the Wicked Witch of the East (or was it the West?). Help...what do I do? I am at my wits end!

This is a great question. It opens up three different important topics to discuss: 1) When is the best time for a parent to engage in rough-and-tumble play? 2) What are the benefits to rough-and-tumble type of play, and 3) how can you set bedtime rules?

When is the best time for a parent to engage in rough-and-tumble play?

First, dads are known for this pre-bedtime ritual whether your child is a toddler, in preschool or school age! If parents work late hours, they often feel the need to spend time with their child before bedtime. Unlike the quiet nurturing type of play mom's often engage in, Dad's engage in more active rough-and-tumble type of play that often includes a lot of screaming, giggling, tickling, running around, and wrestling. Is bedtime the best time to do this? Short answer: Not really but under the right circumstances, maybe. Generally speaking, active play just before bedtime may leave the child excited and overstimulated, making it harder for them to settle and fall asleep.

According to behavior and sleep experts including Elizabeth Pantley and Marc Weissbluth, M.D., children go to sleep well when they have a consistent routine that includes enough time to wind down. When you follow a bedtime routine consistently, each step signals the brain that it is almost time to sleep. A regular routine that includes wind down time can set you up for a successful bedtime. The chances of getting a revved up child to sleep right after high energy play is very hard and not a fair expectation for the child. They need time to wind down from the rough-and-tumble play as well as from their day.

When should you begin to wind down? When children begin to fuss, whine, or emphatically say stop, then it is time to wrap things up. This is often where conflict between parents comes in. Wrapping things up is frequently pushed further than it should, someone gets hurt and/or begins to cry and the other parent (usually mom) is left to comfort him. Mom is then mad at dad for not stopping before things got out of hand and conflict arises. Many parents never take the time to discuss when rough-and-tumble play is appropriate and when it needs to end. Having this conversation will help ease those nighttime transitions and keep the household from unraveling at 8:00 p.m. – when the kids should be slumbering away and the two of you enjoying husband and wife time together.

So no rough-and-tumble play at night? Research actually supports the many benefits to rough-and-tumble play just as long as there is adequate time to wind down. You're setting your children up for failure if you expect them to stop when you say so and go right to bed. Twenty to thirty minutes of quiet wind down after rough-and-tumble play is ideal as it give the mind and body a chance to come down from the high energy activity and prepare the body for sleep. Quiet time might include reading a story together, independent reading, listening to soft music, or talking about the highs and lows of the day. Even discussing plans for the next day can create a wonderful break before bed, not to mention a nice connection with your child.

Are there benefits of rough-and-tumble play?

While bedtime is not the ideal time to engage in rough-and-tumble play, experts agree there are many benefits to this fun-filled, high energy raucous. Listed below are some of the benefits and what experts have to say about each.

- 1) **Supports a child's neurological development and emotional and social skills:** Recent research by Dr. Richard Fletcher, a researcher on child development at Newcastle University, on rough-and-tumble play concludes that this time honored past time is beneficial to children. Even though this type of play can appear rough, it is a great way to support your children's neurological development and build on their emotional and social skills. When done well, rough play teaches kids about boundaries, how to be sensitive to others and when to pull back and regain self-control. Fathers need to take the lead when it comes to halting rough play when it gets out of hand (and it will)!! "It is the child's development of this awareness, or overstepping the fine line between what constitutes a game and someone getting hurt that has lifelong benefits."
- 2) **Gives children the ability to control impulses:** According to John Gottman, Ph.D..., "the rough-and-tumble play that dads engage in with infants predicts the ability of the infants to control their own impulses." The differences in the way mom and dad play are very important in child development. Study after study shows that "father involvement and warmth and emotional availability to the young child, predict intellectual functioning and emotional functioning in both sons and daughters," says Gottman.
- 3) **Creates deep parent-child connections and helps to reduce discipline problems:** "Play is the place where children live" says Psychologist Lawrence Cohen. "If we want to have a deep connection with them, we have to go where they are. We won't get to know children very well if we don't play with them some of the time." One of the perks of playful parenting is that it tends to reduce discipline problems by fulfilling children's need for attention, comfort and limit-testing. Humor and silliness can diffuse power struggles. When we play with children, it's one of the best ways we have of filling their cup.
- 4) **Teaches children how to calm and comfort themselves:** There is a special value in rough-housing says Cohen. All Children –boys and girls, dynamos and shrinking violets alike – need rough-and-tumble play, and most kids don't get nearly enough. Besides blowing off steam, the cycles of escalation and cool-down inherent in physical play teach children how to calm and comfort themselves. Psychologists call this "self-soothing." Rough-and-tumble play helps kids work through anxiety and frustration that can disrupt attention and focus.

Physical play also teaches impulse control and what skill therapists call “motor-planning and sequencing”—the ability to handle step-by-step activities such as putting on socks or planning a project.

How can you set bedtime rules?

Fathers nurture children in ways that are different than, but not better or worse than, how mothers nurture. Many parents – especially mothers – say’s Dr. Cohen, worry that rough-and-tumble play will unleash a whirlwind. They are right! What parents need to do is support the fun but also agree on some ground rules.

Talk about the rules of the house, not just between each other but also with your child and make sure they are treated and respected consistently. A bended rule (yes parents do as much bending as children) becomes a problem when one parent’s action causes child behavior difficulties for the other parent. If your child is revved up before bed and making going to bed difficult, explain the problem using “I” terms rather than “you” terms. For example, “I’m having a hard time getting Noah to relax before going to bed. It takes an extra hour for him to wind down and fall asleep after you wrestle with him. Can we agree to allow for at least 30 minutes of wind down/quiet play by 7:00 so that he has a better chance of going to sleep by our agreed on 8:00 bedtime?” This conversation works better than “you always....” which can make another person defensive. It’s a very good idea to work together to find solutions that work for everyone before the situation gets out of control and resentment begins to build.

When parents disagree on household rules, it is usually children who are at the losing end, says Brian Orr, M.D. These inconsistencies, besides being the source of conflict, cause much confusion in a young child. Good communication skills require both honesty and the ability to listen well. As in all relationships, communication with your partner is key. If both feel accepted and heard, it’s more likely they will be able to work together to handle the realities of family life.

Don’t let your relationship as parents take over your relationship as lovers, partners, and friends. Both of your roles are important, and their success is interdependent.

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Further Readings and Resources:

Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child, Dr. John Gottman,
Playful Parenting, Dr. Lawrence Cohen
Healthy Sleep Habits, Healthy Child, Marc Weissbluth, M.D.
The No-Cry Sleep Solutions, Elizabeth Pantley
The No-Cry Sleep Solutions for Toddlers and Preschoolers, Elizabeth Pantley
The Everything Guide to Raising a One-Year-Old, Brian Orr, M.D. and Donna Raskin