

## **Rough Play**

*The University of Pittsburgh  
Office of Child Development*

Five-year-old Joey and his friend love to wrestle. But twice in the past week his friend ended up crying.

Even Joey's father has noticed that when he and Joey wrestle, Joey can become too aggressive and not know when to quit. On the other hand, his father doesn't want to forbid Joey from wrestling with the other boys.

He doesn't have to. What he needs to do is to teach Joey how to play rough in a way that is safe.

Children like to pretend to fight, wrestle, and rough-house. They are just beginning to realize they have physical power and strength. Rough and tumble play helps them understand their strength and learn what they can and cannot do physically.

Dads often "play fight" and "take it" when a child hits – sometimes even boasting, "Go ahead, hit me harder." The problem is that young children might not understand that it's okay to hit Dad like that, but not young friends.

So, parents need to set a few rules about rough play.

Start with rules for you and your child to follow. Before starting a wrestling match, for example, ask your child, "Is this a safe place to wrestle?" Have your child help look for things you might bump into, such as sharp corners on furniture or breakable objects. Check each one and ask, "Is this safe? Can we get hurt by this?"

Then, agree on a word that will signal the end of rough play. "Stop," is simple and direct. Practice using the word and then stop the action immediately. Make sure your child knows you won't play anymore if he or she can't obey this rule.

You may need to stop play once in awhile if your child gets too wound up or begins to lose control. Simply say, "Stop – we need to rest a minute." Explain that you are tired, get a drink of water, and rest a moment before resuming play. And if the child hits, shout "stop." Halt playing immediately, and say that it hurt and that the playing has gotten too rough.

Also, point out other dangerous behaviors. Joey's father learned this first hand when Joey jumped on his stomach. He told Joey that it hurt him and was dangerous. In doing so, he might have spared the neighbor boy injury in the future and himself a few more aching ribs.

*This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.*