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Playful Aggression in Early Childhood Settings

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Aggressive behaviour, more often observed in young boys, is a relatively common factor of sociodramatic play recognised in literature to be beneficial for child development. While educators are often uncomfortable with this form of play, it may be argued that the omission of aggressive play in early childhood programmes fosters the underdevelopment of social, emotional, physical, cognitive and communicative abilities in young children. This is particularly relevant for preschool-aged boys because they engage in aggressive sociodramatic play more often than girls. This article serves to clarify definitions of serious aggression and playful aggression, conceptualise the importance of various forms of sociodramatic play in child development, and provide strategies for educators when confronted with aggressive sociodramatic play in their classrooms.

■ **Keywords:** aggressive behaviour, sociodramatic, rough-and-tumble, symbolic play

Strategies for supporting playful aggressive behaviour in early childhood

A play-based approach to learning cohesively supports the inclusion of multiple developmental domains, which are stimulated because children are active participants in their learning. Research has supported play as the most effective method for fostering the progression of normative child development (Parten, 1932; Piaget, 1951). Research further supports pretend play as a novel curricular component suggesting that play, particularly sociodramatic play, is a critical component in early childhood education programmes (Bredekamp, 2004; Clements, 2004; DiPietro, 1981; Jarvis, 2007; Logue & Detour, 2011; Parten, 1932; Pellegrini, 1987; Pellis & Pellis, 2007; Piaget, 1951; Smilansky, 1990; Sutton-Smith, 1975).

Play-based pedagogy allows teachers to implement cross-curricular learning activities that cater to multiple learning domains rather than focus on isolated skill development. However, in an effort to give young children in America a head start and ensure academic excellence contemporary public educational programmes have become work-driven to the demise of play (Elkind, 1990). National efforts to improve the quality of early childhood programmes and education emphasise the importance of play; however, national curricula frameworks such as Australia's Early Years Learning Framework (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009) and The United States' Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) provide only broad terminology regarding various types of play; leaving state and community educational authorities to implement their own interpretation of the guiding principles. Therefore, the value of playful aggressive behaviour is neither recognised nor supported.

While there are external threats to play based learning, academic literature has recognised play as the most natural, efficient and effective way for children to learn (Bredekamp, 2004; Parten, 1932, Piaget, 1951; Smilansky, 1990; Vygotsky, 1966). Play is an important venue for developing self-regulation and promoting language, cognition and social competence. Play also appears to promote school success by supporting the abilities that underlie children's learning (NAEYC, 2009).

In developmentally appropriate practice (NAEYC, 2009) play promotes the progression of normative child development and is recognised as essential for the development of young children's self-regulation, language, cognition and social competence. Research suggests that play, particularly sociodramatic play, is a critical component in early childhood education programmes because of its powerful influence on social, emotional, physical, cognitive and

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communicative development (Bauer & Dettore, 1997; Bredekamp, 2004; Calabrese, 2003; Jarvis, 2007; Logue & Harvey, 2010; NAEYC, 2009; Pellegrini, 1988; Pellis & Pellis, 2007; Scott & Panksepp, 2003; Smilansky, 1990). Modern preschool curriculums (i.e., The Creative Curriculum, HighScope, HighReach) have made efforts to include child-directed sociodramatic play opportunities in centre-based early childhood programmes. However, despite current literature, the promotion of developmentally appropriate practice, and advocating for the optimal education and development of children worldwide as set forth by organisations such as The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), The Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI), the National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators (NAECTE), and the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), teachers are continually pressured to disregard the benefits of aggressive sociodramatic play by banning its various forms; particularly play fighting (Carlson, 2011; Logue & Harvey, 2010).

The elimination of aggressive sociodramatic play, such as play fighting, may have a significant impact on academic performance. Research suggests that the optimal education and development of young children, particularly boys, is not being met when playful aggressive tendencies are forbidden (DiPietro, 1981; Jarvis, 2007; Logue & Harvey, 2010; Pellegrini, 2010). Sutton-Smith (1975) suggests that any educational programme that restricts play types will foster play deficits, which inadvertently will leave children unprepared for future experiences. He argues that children must be prepared to appropriately react to a world of constant information explosions and role shifting. Information explosions and role shifting, key elements in sociodramatic play, are prevalent as children cooperatively exchange assigned roles and continuously react to the new information as play progresses. Further, by omitting playful aggressive sociodramatic play, teachers limit the extent of development in young children. However, without a full understanding of the distinct difference between serious and symbolic aggression teachers may react with concern and send conflicting messages to young children regarding the appropriateness and rules of engaging in aggressive sociodramatic play.

Aggression

Understandably, educators often voice concern over displays of aggressive behaviour in early childhood settings. However, aggression can be considered within a normative developmental framework through consideration of theories of child development.

Social Learning Theory and Aggression

Bandura's (1978) Social Learning Theory suggests that children learn to be aggressive through direct or indirect (e.g., observation) experiences. Bandura states that nearly all knowledge resulting from direct experience may also be learned vicariously, such as by watching television or observing the behaviour of others. Through indirect learning children have the opportunity to obtain behaviour patterns without directly constructing knowledge. Family members, subculture and mass media are three sources that Bandura identifies for observing and learning aggressive behaviour. Children observe their parents' and society's methods for resolving conflict. Modeling and reinforcement work in tandem in a child's acquisition of an aggressive skill set (Burgess & Akers, 1966). Various styles of aggression may be learned through modeling and reinforced practice. Daily aggressive encounters, for example, may include a verbal dispute between family members and media footage of national and international affairs (e.g., civil war or violent protests). When considering aggressive television shows or movies, Bandura (1978) identifies four effects of viewing: 1) children learn aggressive styles of conduct, 2) children's restraint on aggressive behaviour is altered, 3) children become desensitised to violence, and 4) it shapes children's images of reality, which influences their actions. Researchers have identified common contextual components and various types of serious aggression, which has evolved into a cohesive definition of the behaviour.

Serious Aggression Defined

Serious aggression is defined as behaviour that explicitly intends to injure or destroy (Bandura, 1978), behaviour directed towards another with the intent to harm (Roberton, Daffern, & Bucks, 2011), or any behaviour directed toward another person with immediate intent to cause harm (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Each definition is founded on one clear guideline; intent to harm is evident in all types of serious aggression. This foundation of intent to harm serves to distinguish serious aggression from playful aggression because the two are distinctly different in their motivation (Fry, 1987). In playful aggression there is no intent to harm participants.

Aggressive sociodramatic play lacks intent to harm. Participants may sustain injuries, but they are due to the nature of play, any play, and not its purpose. This is an important distinction. For example, rough-and-tumble play involves a risk of injury because of the contextual factors (i.e., chasing, wrestling, pushing and play fighting); however, it should not be considered serious aggression because it does not involve pretence and the players do not intend to harm one another (Pellegrini, 1987). As with playful aggression, serious aggression continues to be studied and its various dimensions categorised.

Playful Symbolic Aggression

Sociodramatic Play Theory

Research supports dramatic and sociodramatic play as important to child development (Bauer & Dettore, 1997; Parsons & Howe, 2006; Smilansky, 1990). Dramatic play, a form of solitary play, encompasses role-playing in which children

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pretend to be someone or something else. Dramatic play that involves cooperation among two or more children is considered sociodramatic play. Six elements of dramatic and sociodramatic play have been identified in the literature as: 1) role play by imitation, 2) make-believe with objects, 3) make-believe with actions and situations, 4) persistence in the role play, 5) interaction, and 6) verbal communication (Smilansky, 1990). For play to be considered sociodramatic (as opposed to merely dramatic play), Smilansky emphasises the importance of interaction and verbal communication. Children use their imagination to engage in unrealistic situations, which is commonly observed during sociodramatic play such as superhero play (Bauer & Dettore, 1997) and 'bad guy' play (Logue & Detour, 2011).

Symbolic Aggressive Behaviour in Sociodramatic Play

By focusing on behavioural indicators of relaxed muscle tone, smiling faces and restrained body movements, rough-and-tumble can be distinguished from the serious aggression it emulates (Jarvis, 2007). Nevertheless, teachers typically perceive symbolically aggressive play, including rough and tumble play, as serious, dangerous and inappropriate because of the misconception that all aggressive actions, serious or symbolic, are dangerous and lead to violence. This overgeneralisation of aggressive play may be misguided. For example, Fry (1987) noted that play fighting and serious fighting can be categorised into separate types of behaviour in young children. Additionally, in their study of play and aggression in kindergarten children, Hellendoorn and Harinck (1997) differentiated play fighting as make-believe-aggression and rough-and-tumble since playful aggression is not real aggression. These researchers further classify fantasy aggression, imitation of aggression and rough-and-tumble as three distinct types of playful aggression. Real aggression contained behaviour such as bodily threat, physical assault, verbal aggression, intentionally damaging play material and snatching a toy away. This suggests that teachers may discourage or ban such play because they perceive it as detrimental to child development rather than beneficial, as supported by researchers (Logue & Detour, 2011; Logue & Harvey, 2010; Tannock, 2008).

Defining Symbolic Aggression

Researchers recognise the importance of sociodramatic play for child development, yet types of sociodramatic play that include playful aggressive behaviour are typically not permitted by teachers and parents because they are interpreted to be inappropriate, anti-social or dangerous (Bauer & Dettore, 1997; Clements, 2004; Jarvis, 2007; Little, Wyver, & Gibson, 2011; Logue & Harvey, 2010; Parsons & Howe, 2006; Pellegrini, 1989; Pellis & Pellis, 2007; Sandseter, 2009; Tannock, 2008). Playful aggressive behaviour is often discouraged and young children who engage in aggressive play will likely experience consequences that range from redirection to school suspension.

Several play types reside in the category of dramatic or sociodramatic playful aggressive behaviour including superhero play (Bauer & Dettore, 1997), 'bad guy' play (Logue & Detour, 2011), active pretend play (Logue & Harvey, 2010), play fighting (Pellis & Pellis, 2007), physically active and imaginative play (Parsons & Howe, 2006), and rough-and-tumble play (Jarvis, 2007; Pellegrini, 1987; Tannock, 2008). The terms of these play types are sometimes used interchangeably because of their common contextual components. For example, Jarvis (2007) defines rough-and-tumble as a set of enjoyable, physically, vigorous, and reciprocal behaviours that include chasing, jumping and play fighting. Alternatively, Pellis and Pellis (2007) describe rough-and-tumble play as play fighting; while Logue and Harvey (2011) define it as active pretend play that encompasses rough-and-tumble, superhero play, play fighting, chase games and protect/rescue games. Still Sandseter (2009, 2007) classifies rough-and-tumble play as risky play, defined as a thrilling and exciting form of play that involves the risk of physical harm. Finally, Smilansky (1990) suggests sociodramatic play involves the cooperative interaction of at least two children, who act out roles both verbally and physically, with two key elements: imitation and make-believe.

For the purposes of this article aggressive sociodramatic play is defined as verbally and physically cooperative play behaviour involving at least two children, where all participants enjoyably and voluntarily engage in reciprocal role-playing that includes aggressive make-believe themes, actions and words; yet lacks intent to harm either emotionally or physically. The lack of an agreed upon definition of playful aggressive behaviour and its role in early childhood education contribute to teachers' struggle to recognise its benefits and support children's engagement in aggressive sociodramatic play. Table 1 provides support for educators seeking understanding through the differentiation of the characteristics of serious aggressive behaviour from playful aggressive behaviour (aggressive sociodramatic play). Table 2 provides an overview of the various aggressive play types and their corresponding behavioural characteristics as described by researchers. Both Table 1 and Table 3 serve as guides for teachers to better understand and identify the behavioural characteristics and developmental benefits of aggressive sociodramatic play. The tables are valuable resources to include in staff training and parent handbooks. They provide a basis for teachers to communicate to staff and families the importance of not only tolerating aggressive sociodramatic play, but also supporting it in early childhood programmes.

Benefits of Playful Aggressive Behaviour

Parents and teachers believe play to be a natural part of childhood (Clements, 2004), yet they do not view all play as equally beneficial to child development (Bauer & Dettore, 1997; Clements, 2004; Jarvis, 2007; Little, Wyver, & Gibson, 2011; Logue & Detour, 2011; Logue & Harvey, 2010; Parsons & Howe, 2006; Pellegrini, 1989, 1988; Pellis, 2007;

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TABLE 1

Differentiating serious aggression from symbolic aggression.

	Aggressive Behaviour	
Categories	Serious	Playful
Motivation	Intent to injure (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Bandura, 1978; Roberton, Daffer, & Bucks, 2011) Intentionally damaging play material (Hellendoorn & Harinck, 1997) Child is willing to inflict pain on another (Gomes, 2007)	The target is motivated to avoid the behaviour (Anderson & Bushman, 2002) Accidental injury (Pellegrini, 1987; Sandseter, 2007) Cooperative (Smilansky, 1990) Voluntary (Pellis & Pellis, 2007) Does not involve pretense (Pellegrini, 1987)
Duration	Brief (Fry, 1987)	Long (Fry, 1987)
Chase & Flee	The child fleeing runs faster, straighter and rarely looks over shoulder (Fry, 1987; Humphreys & Smith, 1984)	The child fleeing runs at half-speed and frequently looks over shoulder at chaser (Fry, 1987)
Actions (i.e. hitting)	Physical actions are not restrained (Fry, 1987) Physical assault/Snatching toy away (Hellendoorn & Harinck, 1997) Wresting is uncommon (Fry, 1987)	Physical actions are restrained (Fry, 1987) Includes wrestling (Fry, 1987; Scott & Panksepp, 2003)
Body Language	Bodily threat (Hellendoorn & Harinck, 1997)	Relaxed muscle tone (Fry 1987) Smiling and/or laughing (Fry, 1987) Play face indicates enjoyment (Tannock, 2008) Imitation of aggression, Fantasy aggression, Rough-and-tumble (Hellendoorn & Harinck, 1997) Self-handicapping (Fry, 1987)
Emotional	Child lacks empathy, child needs a sense of control, torment is evident (Gomes, 2007) Anger is an underlying role in aggression (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Roberton, Daffern & Bucks, 2011) Antisocial (Scott & Panksepp, 2003)	Engage with friends (Fry, 1987) Prosocial (Scott & Panksepp, 2003)
Expressive	Verbal aggression (Hellendoorn & Harinck, 1997)	High-pitched happy sounds (Fry, 1987)
Role Reversal	Roles are not exchanged (Fry, 1987)	Role reversal (Fry, 1987; Pellegrini, 1992)
Control	Power imbalance (Gomes, 2007), Dominance (Fry, 1987)	
Group Size	Rarely more than two children involved (Fry, 1987)	Involves two or more children (Smilansky, 1990; Parten, 1932; Pellegrini, 1988)
Climate	Draws a crowd of onlookers (Fry, 1987)	Does not draw a crowd (Fry, 1987)

Sandseter, 2009; Tannock, 2008). Parents and teachers often misinterpret, or are uncomfortable with, playful aggression, for example rough-and-tumble play and superhero play, due to its resemblance to serious aggression and an inability to recognise subtle differences between the two (Logue & Detour, 2011; Pellegrini, 1987). Playful aggression is a common component in sociodramatic play – typically among boys (DiPietro, 1981; Humphreys & Smith, 1987; Jarvis, 2007; Pellegrini, 1989) – and if supported is highly beneficial to child development (Logue & Detour, 2011).

Supporting sociodramatic play fosters emotional, social and cognitive development in young children (Smilansky, 1990), which are skills kindergarten teachers deem necessary for school readiness (a set of skills acquired by a young child prior to entering kindergarten) (Bredekamp, 2004). Kindergarten teachers perceive language skills, enthusiasm for learning and behaviour self-regulation as skills that highly influence school readiness (Bredekamp, 2004). Sociodramatic play offers young children opportunities to practice and master these skills. As outlined in Table 2 the benefits of sociodramatic play are clear, yet additional guidance is needed as outlined in Table 3 to provide teachers, and parents, with clear strategies for supporting playful aggression.

Supporting Playful Aggressive Behaviour

Although there is abundant literature supporting sociodramatic play that is commonly perceived as appropriate (i.e., housekeeping, community helpers) little is known of how to support aggressive sociodramatic play such as superhero play (Bauer & Dettore, 1997), 'bad guy' play (Logue & Detour, 2011), active pretend play (Logue & Harvey, 2010), play fighting (Pellis & Pellis, 2007), physically active and imaginative play (Parson & Howe, 2006), and rough-and-tumble play (Jarvis, 2007; Pellegrini, 1987; Tannock, 2008). Research findings support the inclusion of aggressive sociodramatic play in early childhood education, yet minimal practical guidance for teachers is offered to thoroughly support children's playful aggression.

In their study of superhero toys and imaginative play, Parsons and Howe (2006) provide strategies that offer a starting point for teachers' inclusion of aggressive sociodramatic play. Including superhero play allows children the

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TABLE 2

Benefits of symbolic aggression.

	Types of Aggressive Sociodramatic Play	
Play Type	Characteristics of Behaviour	Developmental Benefit
Superhero play	Running, jumping, wrestling, and shouting (Bauer & Dettore, 1997)	Social-Emotional: develop concepts of right and wrong, good and bad; cooperation Aesthetic Development: fosters creative expression Cognitive Development: children engage in higher level thinking and creativity to sustain a role and cooperatively develop a play theme; practice problem-solving
"Bad guy" play	Superhero play, war & stealing (Logue & Detour, 2011)	Language: opportunities for teachers to foster language development Social-Emotional: opportunities for teachers to support confidence; children practice negotiation & cooperation skills, share ideas, and are more inclusive with peers. Cognitive: opportunities to experience others' perspectives; repetition allows for role-playing changes and experience different outcomes; develop conflict resolution skills
Active pretend play	Superhero play, play fighting, (including wrestling), chase games, and protect/rescue games (Logue & Harvey, 2010)	Social: explore social boundaries, determine social placement in a group Physical: practice and test level of strength, determine agility, develop and practice restraint as they pretend to be aggressive
Play fighting	Voluntary social play Competitive rough-and-tumble play or play fighting Playful attack by one partner coupled with playful defense by the other Attack and defense roles alternate (Pellis & Pellis, 2007)	Social: development of typical social behaviour patterns, improved social competence later in life Physical: develops coordination of appropriate body movements Cognitive: produces experiences with immediate feedback for some brain areas that regulate social behaviour and general cognition
Physically active and imaginative play	Children pretending to be superheroes Engaged in a pretend adventurous theme such as battling, capture & rescue, attack & flee, submission & defeat. May include physical activity such as running, swinging, wrestling, tumbling, zooming, kicking, hoping, & sliding (Parsons & Howe, 2006)	Social-Emotional: allows children the freedom to explore their world with a sense of empowerment and control; opportunities for perspective-taking; cooperation Cognitive: fosters creativity, increases cognitive flexibility; capture and sustain the child's attention throughout the play session; object transformation, role-play Language: theme development Physical: Develop more refined gross motor skills; release pent-up energy
Rough and tumble play	An enjoyable play-fighting and chasing activity played among friends (Smith & Lewis, 1984) Contact or Mock contact mimicking aggression Hold/grab/restrain other child, hit and run, hit/kick, wrestle/pin, trip, shoot, boxing, light blow (Jarvis, 2007)	Social: coordination of activities and allocation/alteration of roles Social: practice spontaneous and autonomous competitive and cooperative interactions simultaneously Language: fosters linguistic responses & create shared narratives among peers Physical & Cognitive: Spontaneous interactions within the social 'classroom' of the playground; practice controlled and motivated behaviour related to both competition and cooperation; test and recalibrate interaction skills after receiving immediate feedback; improve physical movements

freedom to explore their world through their imagination, while fostering their creativity, empowerment and control (Parsons & Howe, 2006). In support of children's interest in superhero play the researchers' recommendations include incorporating superhero toys and props in a specific area of the classroom (i.e., capes and masks), encouraging collaboration for constructing structures related to superheros (i.e., a cave for Batman), and extending superhero play to outdoors. They further recommend the development of specific guidelines, rules and supervision regarding superhero play. Finally, Parsons and Howe argue that encouraging superhero play in a safe environment ensures positive and rewarding experiences for the participating children.

In their study of superhero play, Bauer and Dettore (1997) recognised children's increased exposure to violence and aggression with superhero television programmes being a significant contributor to aggressive behaviour. They suggest superhero play has developmental benefits and teachers who support it encounter numerous teaching opportunities to redirect antisocial behaviour by modeling prosocial behaviour. In Bauer and Dettore's study, reference to superheros was used to help young children develop concepts of right and wrong or good and bad, develop cooperation, model specific behaviours, encourage creative expression and experiment with various role playing. Of most importance in their view is the teacher's role of assisting children in developing strategies for conflict resolution as an alternative to aggression and violence. It is also necessary for the teacher to prepare the environment to eliminate excessive conflicts due to overcrowding and inadvertent contact.

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TABLE 3

Strategies for supporting symbolic aggression.

	Aggressive Play	
Categories	Strategy	Support
Designate a play space	Large, soft floor area • A minimum of 25 sq. ft. is suggested (Pellegrini, 2010)	Indoors • Tumble mats • Create a wrestling centre
	Uninterrupted area • Free from non-participating peers • Free from learning activities	Outdoors • Tumble mats • Grassy area
Supervision	3-year-olds	Close proximity. Stand or sit to support and facilitate the play. Avoid engaging in the play.
	4 years and older	Distant proximity. Stand or sit close enough to hear and see. Avoid eye contact. Children may relocate each time they know you are watching. Avoid engaging in the play.
Accessories	Throw pillows, Sqüsh therapy pillows Foam weapons, toy guns, & small beanbags Capes, masks, costumes, wands, walkie talkies, and plastic handcuffs	Pillow fights Sword fights, blasters, & beanbag bombs Superhero or Fantasy play: Batman, Cops & Robbers, Harry Potter, & Star Wars
Group Size	3-year-olds	Two children (rotate participants)
	4 years and older	Two or more children Smaller groups express more positive affect: creativity, cooperation, communication
Children's rights	Involve children in discussion and decision-making that may affect them	Collaborate with children to develop a behaviour chart: play vs. non-play
Safety Rules	Be Safe • No touching or aiming at head & neck • Soft hitting, kicking, punching • Soft pushing, pulling, tackling, wrestling Build Trust • Stop the play if friend is not happy • Stop the play if friend is injured • Stop the play if friend is scared • Stop the play if friend is angry Use Words • 'Stop!' • 'I don't like that!' • 'It's my turn to be the good guy.'	Discuss rules daily Add rules as needed Anticipate conflicts and support resolutions • A participating child is not considered to be a friend of other participants • A participating child often exerts serious aggression elsewhere • Participants are not following the rules • Participants cannot agree on their assigned roles

A common subtle strategy across rough-and-tumble literature suggests that children be provided a space conducive to the behaviour. Playful aggressive behaviour, specifically rough-and-tumble, predominantly occurs in spacious environments with soft surfaces and minimal adult interference (Humphreys & Smith, 1987; Pellegrini, 1987). Typically, free-play opportunities in outdoor grassy areas encourage playful aggressive behaviour. It is also typical for teachers to provide more unstructured play or free-play experiences in outdoor environments rather than the classroom. Unstructured environments provide children the opportunity to participate in play activities that include rough-and-tumble play (Scott & Panksepp, 2003). However, the literature does not elaborate, leaving teachers uncertain of how to support playful aggressive behaviour.

With ten guidelines for creating quality sociodramatic play, Calabrese (2003) offers the most extensive support strategies: 1) choose themes of interest to children (e.g., hospital), 2) ensure the availability of a variety of distinct roles (e.g., nurse, doctor, and patient), 3) create a print rich environment (e.g., label clothing and objects used in play), 4) design a safe, attractive and inviting centre (e.g. create a doorway with a painted cardboard box and label it 'Hospital'), 5) provide a variety of realistic manipulatives and imaginative possibilities (e.g., toy medical supply kit, Band-aids, athletic bandages, lab coat and scrubs), 6) rotate materials and roles on a regular basis (e.g., exchange doctor and nurse materials for emergency medical team supplies and exchange the hospital doorway for an ambulance), 7) do not interfere in the story (i.e., observe from a distance), 8) introduce vocabulary in the centre in a variety of ways such as storybooks or songs pertaining to the play theme (e.g., hospital), 9) create rules or guidelines (e.g., place a limit for the amount of children that may play in the centre at one time) and 10) have a grand opening for the centre such as a ribbon cutting or inviting a special guest (i.e., the preschool director). These guidelines exclude sociodramatic play that involves large motor physical activity, which is the essence of rough-and-tumble play, symbolic aggressive play and active play. Two of the guidelines recommend choosing themes that are of interest and familiarity to children, and provide a variety of manipulatives in the centre. Both recommendations coincide with the suggestions of Parsons and Howe (2006) for educators to incorporate a variety of play toys and props to encourage children's social dramatic play creativity.

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However, teachers' perceptions of appropriate themes and props usually exclude those used in aggressive sociodramatic play such as superhero toys and props as recommended by Parsons and Howe (2006). Calabrese's guidelines are valuable for developing early childhood sociodramatic play centres, yet fail to address the environmental needs and the role of the teacher in supporting aggressive sociodramatic play. In contrast to Calabrese (2003), Parsons and Howe (2006) recommend that educators intervene in children's sociodramatic play to expand and elaborate the play in an effort to encourage young children's divergent thinking and foster communication skills among peers. Research has demonstrated the importance of playful aggressive behaviour in early childhood education by delineating its differences to serious aggression (Anderson & Bushman, 2002; Bandura, 1978; Fry, 1987; Gomes, 2007; Hellendoorn & Harinck, 1997; Humphreys & Smith, 1984; Pellegrini, 1987; Pellis & Pellis, 1987; Roberton, Daffer, & Bucks, 2011; Scott & Panksepp, 2003; Smilansky, 1990; Tannock, 2008) and demonstrating its benefits to all developmental domains (Bauer & Dettore, 1997; Jarvis, 2007; Logue & Detour, 2011; Logue & Harvey, 2010; Parsons & Howe, 2006; Pellis & Pellis, 2007; Smith & Lewis, 1984). Yet, despite its numerous benefits to child development and school readiness skills, research lacks the detailed components necessary for its acceptance and inclusion. With such limited and generalised support strategies it remains unclear as to how and when an adult should interact and intervene, when confronted with aggressive sociodramatic play. Table 3 provides specific teaching and support strategies for promoting prosocial behaviour during aggressive play within both indoor and outdoor early childhood educational environments.

Play space. Teachers must first prepare an environment conducive to the various types of aggressive sociodramatic play. Rough-and-tumble play requires a large space with soft flooring and free from interruption. Pellegini (2010) recommends a minimum of 25 square feet. Superhero play (Bauer & Dettore, 1997), 'bad guy' play (Logue & Detour, 2011), active pretend play (Logue & Harvey, 2010), play fighting (Pellis & Pellis, 2007), physically active and imaginative play (Parsons & Howe, 2006), and rough-and-tumble play (Jarvis, 2007; Pellegrini, 1987; Tannock, 2008) require ample space for children to run, jump, kick, punch, wrestle and perform other pretend actions typical of symbolic aggression. Pretend centres may be created both indoors and outdoors. Teachers can define an outdoor pretend centre in a large grassy area or by placing several tumbling mats together. Placing orange cones on the perimeter of the play area defines the space and optimises safety and supervision. Indoors, a teacher may create the pretend centre by placing at least two tumbling mats in an area away from the flow of other children. Applying a label such as *pretend centre* may serve as a reminder to teachers and children of appropriate behaviour during aggressive sociodramatic play.

Play supervision. Constant supervision is necessary to maintain a safe climate for all participating children. The supervising teacher is encouraged to continually redirect inappropriate behaviour (i.e., 'Ellis, you may hold his shoulder, not his neck'.) and reinforce acceptable behaviour (i.e., 'Good, Josilynn! You kept him safe by pushing lightly'.). One key indicator of the intent of the play is the facial expression of the children. Those who are smiling, laughing and have an open body position are enjoying their experiences. In contrast, children who are scowling and verbalising fear or anger require teacher intervention to stop the play.

Play accessories. Play accessories pertaining to children's play themes may be included in both the indoor and outdoor pretend centre. Capes, masks, wands, small beanbags, throw pillows, foam swords and shields, plastic handcuffs, and a set of two-way radios are examples of accessories that support symbolic aggressive play. These accessories may be used to play good guys and bad guys, superheros, pillow fights, cops and robbers, and witches and wizards. The inclusion of aggressive play accessories supports playful aggressive behaviour, which, in turn, supports child development.

Play group size. The size of the group is an important social and safety aspect of aggressive sociodramatic play. As play matures into cooperative play (Parten, 1932) young children's aggressive sociodramatic play may be better supported with a single partner rather than in a small group. Teachers find it beneficial to foster the establishment of children's social competence and adherence to the pretend centre rules between pairs of young children before allowing small group participation. As with other learning activities it is important for teachers to individualise instruction and progress and monitor aggressive sociodramatic play to ensure normative development among participants.

It is important to note that some children will not engage in aggressive sociodramatic play, perhaps due to the nature of the play. Because young children have different interests and play preferences aggressive play may or may not be a part of their play repertoire. Aggressive play is typically described as a high-energy, fast-paced and active play that is observed predominantly in young boys; therefore, children with passive personalities may decline to participate.

Children's rights. It is important to recognise that children have the right to play. As set forth by the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) the best interest of the child must be the primary focus in making decisions that may affect them (UN General Assembly, 1989). Too often, educational policies and practices are developed solely from the perspectives of adults without consideration to the rights of the child. Article 29 of the CRC framework states that education should develop each child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest, while Article 31 states that children have the right to engage in play (UN General Assembly, 1989). Given the adoption of such principles by numerous countries – such as

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New Zealand, Australia, United Kingdom, Canada, Ireland and Iran – worldwide support for the inclusion of playful aggression into early childhood pedagogy and policy should be commonplace. Because children learn and benefit from various experiences teachers need to advocate young children's right and choice to engage in aggressive sociodramatic play for the optimal development of young children worldwide. In support of playful aggression teachers should collaborate with children to determine what actions constitute playful aggression and serious aggression by creating a chart that lists the behaviours under two headings: play vs. non-play. This chart will serve as a premise to developing play safety rules.

Play safety rules. The establishment of rules is necessary for consistency among participants and supervising teachers. Rules serve as the foundation for building trusting and safe relationships among children. Rules also assist children and adults with deciphering differences between pretend aggression and serious aggression because rules establish acceptable behaviour. Rules give children a voice, when the play becomes uncomfortable. For example a participating child may say, 'Stop! You're pushing me too hard!' This signals to the child's peer that a rule is being broken and the play is no longer enjoyable. Through repeated engagement children learn that aggressive sociodramatic play styles vary among participants as relationships strengthen or weaken. When children follow the rules, effectively communicate, enjoy playing together, and trust one another, their relationship strengthens. However, when a participant consistently ignores the rules of playful aggression or violates the personal preferences of their peers their relationships may be negatively affected by resulting in decreased trust. Children will recognise acceptable actions, preferred play themes, levels of trust, and assigned roles that vary among participants.

When indoor and outdoor pretend centres are utilised, teachers experience a decrease in students' serious aggression, behaviour challenges and energy level. In turn, peers' and teachers' behaviour is positively affected because the classroom climate improves with children being more cooperative, peaceful and attentive. Less time dedicated to behaviour management results in more opportunities for teachers to engage children with learning opportunities. Teachers who support aggressive play will experience an increase in positive behaviour within their students, and will provide a more effective and efficient learning environment.

Conclusion

Research demonstrates distinct differences between serious aggressive behaviour and playful aggressive behaviour with intent to harm being the major factor of serious aggression. Research further demonstrates playful aggressive behaviour as a neglected, yet important element of sociodramatic play, especially for young boys. By implementing support strategies early childhood programme curricula can include varied types of playful aggressive sociodramatic play including superhero play, 'bad guy' play, active pretend play, play fighting, physically active and imaginative play, and rough-and-tumble play.

The key component for supporting aggressive play is adult supervision. As with learning to cut with scissors, writing with a sharp pencil and climbing on playground equipment, young children need clear directions, the establishment of rules, and reinforcement or redirection from teachers to ensure their developmental growth and safety. This article provides early childhood teachers with specific strategies to manage aggressive play as it relates to space, supervision, accessories, group size and rules. These strategies serve as a starting point for early childhood programmes; therefore, teachers are encouraged to make strategy and support adjustments based on their specific learning environment and student population. Aggressive play support strategies offer early childhood teachers a foundation for including indoor and outdoor pretend centres which will afford young children, particularly young boys, valuable experiences for growth and development in all domains of learning.

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