

active adult play

Improving children's health and behavior while having fun

by Bryan G. Nelson and Gregory Uba

When we think of active, physical play with children, an enthusiastic young, male teacher comes to mind. We'll call him Riley. Riley would run around and around, the children laughing gleefully while chasing him, until he collapsed from exhaustion. After resting a few minutes, with the children piling on top of him, he would get up and do it all over again. The children loved it! Unfortunately, most of his co-workers, all women, did not. Most felt that he was 'riling' the children up — making them, especially the boys — too excited. Except for Phoebe, an experienced teacher who grew up with several brothers. She:

- encouraged Riley's enthusiastic, active play with the children
- offered encouragement to continue with the active play
- challenged him to explore other less-exhausting activities, like reading, block building, and art so that he "could rest up for more active outdoor fun."

While the other teachers had made a judgment — that an excited, 'physically active' child was somehow not ready to learn, Phoebe knew how important it was for the children to have daily, active play and she recognized Riley's willingness to engage in that kind of activity with the children.

Active play

There are many ways adults in early care and education can play with children in their program. Running around is one of the easier ways. It requires no special equipment or training. The authors remember, as boys, running just for the joy of moving our bodies faster and faster. We are often surprised to hear about teachers going to the gym to get a workout when running around with the children can be the best form of exercise! And active play usually comes quite naturally to children, un-

less they are inhibited or restricted in some way.

We're going to describe the benefits of active play and offer some encouragement that will get you and your coworkers to run around with the children, knowing that adults who value active play were often children that valued active play. And knowing that the children are watching you — learning about play, experiencing and sharing joyful kinesthetic activity, and learning about their teachers as well.

Active play is good for you!

In an interview on National Public Radio (NPR), Jane McGonigal from the Institute for the Future, talked about how "Games make people happy" (Blair, 2009). We also know that active play is good for people's health. There has been a three-decade increase in childhood and adult obesity that prompted the government to declare an 'epidemic,' and although that increase has leveled off, the rate is still more than three times higher than it was in the 1970s (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). In addition to obesity, we find diabetes and poor cardiovascular health in younger and younger children.



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But that's not all. A study involving 163 overweight children in Augusta, Georgia, reported in *Education Week* (February 13, 2008; www.edweek.org) supports the cognitive benefits of exercise. In this study, a research team randomly assigned children to one of three groups:

- One group received 20 minutes of physical activity every day after school
- The second group got a 40-minute daily workout; and
- The third group got no special exercise sessions.

The findings showed that after 14 weeks, the children who made the greatest improvement as measured by a standardized academic test and a test that measured their level of executive function — thinking processes that involve planning, organizing, abstract thought, or self-control — were those who spent 40 minutes a day playing tag and taking part in other active games designed by the researchers. The cognitive and academic gains for the 20-minute-a-day group were half as large.

Another study, of 539 children in 24 preschools, found that 89% of the children's play could be considered sedentary. The report goes on to say that even with outdoor play, 56% of the activities were sedentary, 27% were light physical activity, and only 17% were moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (Pate, 2009). So, whether the value is measured as emotional well-being, physical health, or cognitive development, active play is good for you!

Improving behavior in children and adults

We have all worked with young children who exhibit challenging behavior. In many instances the problem may be our own attitude about their active play:

- Do we welcome active play (and it is usually the boys who want to be most active) in our programs?
- Do we run with the children and engage with them in their active play?
- When we see boys 'running helter skelter,' do we simply redirect them towards a quieter activity or do we model a less disruptive, but just as enjoyable, vigorous activity?

According to Nancy Baptiste (1995), "As adults we may not play enough." She also notes that adults do not take the opportunity to play either. Baptiste writes:

[Some] early care and education professionals . . . (1) do not fully understand the importance of play in children's lives, (2) do not fully understand their role in children's play, (3) do not enjoy playing, or (4) do not know how to play (p. 33).

According to Baptiste (1995), active play actually helps to decrease acting out, ". . . from the boundless research on children's play we know that play is a significant activity and experience for children" (p. 33). We believe that many of the behavior problems in the classroom, particularly for many boys, could be prevented by having the adults actively play with the children. In Walter Gilliam's study (2005) of more than 4,000 preschools, we learn that "boys were more than four and a half times more likely to be expelled than girls" (p. 2). We need to get the children moving in order to improve their behavior. Getting the children riled up can help to calm them down for your quieter activities.

In our own experiences in training and support groups, fathers and other male family members describe feeling more welcome and valued when active play occurs at arrival and departure times of the day, and when active play is a planned part of family participation

activities. Fathers may feel that they have disrupted the teacher's plans when they show up during quieter activities and the children (not necessarily their own) rush to greet them and regale them with stories. You may find that these fathers show themselves sheepishly, quickly sign their child out, and as quietly as possible exit the school. Surely this is an impediment to the family involvement, home-school relationships, and the anti-bias principles we hold dear.

How to get yourself moving again

In our own workshops, we have started with active games. One of the games is called 'Amoeba' (see sidebar for description). When the adults first start the game, there is hesitation. But once the game begins, the room explodes with squeals of laughter as people try to avoid getting caught. When the game is over, the group is alive with conversation. We meet in small groups to talk about our experiences with active play:

- What was it like for you to play this active game?
- Did your parents allow you to play active games?
- What about the school where you attended? Did you play active games there?
- What was the attitude about active play in the community where you grew up?

When we explore the topic of active play, we find that males (especially those from the 'Boomer' and 'X' generations) tend to have more memories of being involved in active play. Although teachers and parents were always trying to calm them down and discourage them from getting too active or 'riled up.' Outdoor play and recess was a particularly important period of the day. But it doesn't have to be. We can build active play into our daily routine. We've included some games with this

article so that you can try them yourself or with your coworkers at your next staff meeting.

Rough and tumble play

Rough and tumble play, also known as 'rough-housing,' has been a part of children's play for as long as there have been children. This type of play has important developmental significance in a number of areas. Often adults mistake this sort of play as violent, aggressive, or intimidating play or equate it with fighting. Yet to the child, this type of play has real value for their physical and social development. Rough-housing play can take the form of tumbling, wrestling, jumping from high places, mock-fighting, digging, throwing, banging objects, crashing toys, and knocking down blocks. The noise, sensory stimulation, as well as the motor skills required and the social interactions involved drive this play.

A child practices important gross motor skills and demonstrates competence to himself and to others when he wrestles, climbs, digs, and jumps. Oftentimes this is her or his first attempt at what adults would consider sports or exercise. And we know that children are motivated by their desire to demonstrate their physical competence.

Another factor in this discussion is the fact that in our society men have few socially accepted opportunities to touch other people. Often, it is primarily through active play that men are 'allowed' to touch other people. This would explain why sports are so important to boys and men. For boys and men alike, active play often serves as the 'gateway' to social friendships. It is also through playing with their children that men are able to enjoy physical touch that is considered nurturing and appropriate.

Active play makes a difference

In her *Exchange* article, "The Spirit of Adult Play," Bonnie Neugebauer (1993)

Some Active Games Adults Can Play

Amoeba: The goal of the game is to have the Amoeba grow. First, decide how large of a space you want to play in and set the boundaries. People cannot leave the designated space. Two people start by holding hands to form a team or an Amoeba. They begin by chanting: "A-moe-ba! A-moe-ba!" and chase the closest person. Only the free hands of the team can tag people. Once someone is tagged, they join the Amoeba and the chanting. The middle person continues to hold onto the new member and keeps holding the hand of their original teammate. The three-celled or three-person team continues adding people. The challenge begins when the Amoeba chain gets really long and the team has to work together trapping and tagging additional members while continuing to chant, "A-moe-ba!" The game is over when everyone is part of the team.

Smaug's (dragon's) Jewels: The goal of this game is to capture the 'jewel' or bean bag without being tagged. One person is in the middle with a bean bag or other object (e.g., rolled up socks) that won't roll away. People gather around the person, and try to take the 'jewel' without being tagged. Once a person is tagged, he or she is frozen until the round is over. The round is over when someone grabs the bean bag without being touched. *Hint:* Work as a team to distract the person in the middle. The person who takes the jewels is now in the middle as the dragon, Smaug.

'Can't Touch This' Tag: People pair up and hold hands. There are two other people who don't hold hands (or if the group is uneven there can be three people) with one person being 'It.' That person tries to catch or tag the other free people. To get away from 'It' the free person(s) run around the other people holding hands. When they want to rest, they grab onto one of the pairs. As soon as that person is holding the hands of a pair (three people holding hands) the person at the opposite side has to let go and run away. The person who is 'It' can now tag or catch them, unless of course they grab someone else's hand in a pair and the cascade of grabbing a hand and the person not in the middle has to let go and run. As soon as the person who is 'It' tags someone, then the new person becomes 'It' and the person who was 'It' grabs someone's hand and the chasing begins.

observes that many of us must relearn the joys of play. She suggests that adults be willing to spend freely, to squander, to waste (if you will), to be extravagant with their: Time, sense of self, sense of order, and joy. She writes that play, "... demands a certain amount of chaos. There must be room for using things and doing things in new ways. Play equipment and space must be flexible to meet the changing needs of the players. There must be storage for uncompleted play, and respect for unfinished spaces. Players require a degree of uncertainty and support for taking risks."

Recognizing the diversity of active play

Finally, it is important to recognize that people approach play in a variety of ways. Although not always, there is a tendency for boys, men, and younger teachers to be more active and to use large motor activities with the children. But it doesn't have to be that way. Recognizing the stereotypes that influence your thinking in this area allows you to challenge these 'isms':

- Where are you when you are at your

'best teaching self'?

- When you are in 'the Zone'?
- What activities are you engaged in, demonstrating, encouraging, documenting, supporting?
- What have you spent your time planning and preparing?
- Which children are around you when you are at your best?

If every time you catch yourself in 'the Zone,' you find yourself surrounded by the same attentive, focused, quiet, fine-motor engaged children, realize that you are sending a message to those children who do not know 'this teacher':

- Have they received a biased message from you about the times of day and the curriculum that they love most?
- Do they feel as much a part of the program as the other children?
- Are their achievements, accomplishments, conquests, and competencies as valuable or valued by you?
- How long will it be before they join the ranks of active children who feel disconnected from school, or worse, who view themselves as failures?

Conclusion

All teachers can be supportive of children's active play by running, jumping, and playing with them and by reducing the time spent simply standing around 'supervising' their play. After reading this article, consider getting up and running around for the fun of it. Be free and alive with active play. Keep in mind that we are not advocating throwing out your curriculum or your fine motor, literacy, or cognitive activities. We just want you to be more active with the children and have fun doing it. Try some of the games, and your children will notice and will love your participation; and you may find that you love it too.

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