

This book is dedicated to my parents, Jack and Hazel, in recognition of the loving start they gave to my life; and to Mary, the best parenting partner imaginable, who offered unstinting support during every aspect of the writing process.

The Dad Factor

**How the father-baby bond
helps a child for life**

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The many benefits of fathers' play

If children could advertise for their ideal father on one of the job-search websites, they would probably want someone who is loving, reliable, kind, and generous with gifts. But that is not all: they would also want a man who is light-hearted, who can join in games with enthusiasm, who plays fair and who laughs a lot. These playful qualities are found not only among fathers, but fathers have a particular way of relating to children that accentuates the playful connection. Up until recently, play was thought of as 'time out' from the serious business of parenting, so when fathers 'played' with their children it was not as important as when fathers changed their children's clothes or drove them to the childcare centre. As far as children were concerned, 'playing' was believed to be for relaxation, not for learning. We now understand that both



these ideas were wrong. Fathers' play is parenting: it makes up a key part of father-infant bonding, and is important for children's development. As for children, we now see that play is not separate from learning, but is actually one of the key ways that children come to master the most complex and important lessons of life – how to understand what people are thinking and how to get on with others. Fathers' play with children not only cements the loving connection between father and child, it also boosts the child's development in thinking, managing emotions and problem-solving.

Babies know about fathers and play ...

By six weeks of age, most babies are smiling and showing their pleasure and excitement at the funny looks from their father. This is when many fathers become more involved, as there are clearer signals from 'the little bundle in the cot' that she wants to interact and play a game. It is from this point that fathers will often have a different style from mothers in subtle but important ways. A prominent paediatrician describes the responses of an infant with her mother and with her father:

In front of her mother, her movements are smooth and cyclical. Her hands, feet, fingers, and toes extend toward the mother and withdraw at a rate of four times a minute, in smooth cycles. Her face brightens softly ... With her father, every part of her body reacts differently. Her body gets tense and jerky. Her face brightens;

her eyebrows go up, her mouth opens in a grin; and her fingers, toes, arms and legs jerk out towards the fathers as if she expects a playful interaction from him.

You can see how this expectation of playfulness will reinforce any playful tendencies in the father. If his energetic swinging-around of the infant can produce a gurgle of delight (rather than the other sort of gurgle, which leads to cleaning up a mess), he is very likely to do it again, and he is also likely to see this sort of play as an effective way to be involved with his baby.

... and so do toddlers

A fully mobile toddler can make her wish for father interaction very clear. Fathers with two-year-olds will be familiar with the 'wrap around the legs' welcome they receive when they arrive home. Often this welcome will be at the front door, before they have had a chance to put down the shopping, pocket the mobile, or even get properly inside the house. And there is something irresistible about a father lying on the carpet or on a low couch: it draws young children to launch themselves onto him, with little regard for their elbow in his eye or their knee in his groin. If the reckless enthusiasm of your not-so-tiny tot reminds you of young puppies pouncing on each other, you are on the right track. The scientific understanding of play has been slow to get started, but it's now making us rethink how children develop and how the way that fathers play can have a crucial role in children's learning, social abilities and brain development.

Rough-and-tumble play

Most fathers will have a special role in what we call rough-and-tumble play; play that is like wrestling, but more creative and more fun. Children play with each other in this style almost as soon as they can run and jump – it seems to be part of toddler programming. Children launch themselves into it, not because they have seen it on TV, but because they enjoy it. Tests show that young laboratory animals will work (running a treadmill) just for the reward of being able to rough-house with other juveniles. Rough-and-tumble play is more than enjoyment, it is needed for development. This type of play peaks at about nine or ten years of age, then trails off as children become teenagers. Within the family, depending on the number of brothers and sisters, the main rough-and-tumble playmate will be the father. That means dads have a chance to help their youngsters' development simply by playing games.

What is it exactly?

Rough-and-tumble play is physical, that's essential. You can have a high-energy and playful game of cards, but that will not qualify as rough-and-tumble. It must involve physical contact, and there must be enjoyment. Everyone has seen kittens pounce on each other, bite, chase each other and knock one another over. We all understand they are 'attacking', but they are also enjoying themselves. Rough-and-tumble play usually has few rules, so it is different to sports where everyone must follow the rules (even if they argue over decisions). But while rough-housing is usually free-

flowing and creative, those involved do have to cooperate to give everyone a chance to be 'on top'. If one player is much stronger or bigger than the other players, she will let herself be overpowered or slow down enough to be caught so that the weaker or smaller players can have a turn at 'winning'. Rough-and-tumble play among children leads to friendships being maintained or made stronger, since the key emotion is enjoyment. Fighting, where the key emotion is anger, rarely builds friendships.

The benefits of rough-and-tumble play

As an aerobic exercise, whereby the heart and lungs supply oxygen-rich blood to muscles, rough-and-tumble play has straightforward health benefits. In fact, due to the nature of the running, pushing, twisting and holding involved, it can build flexibility and muscle strength. But the most important benefits arising from this type of play are social. In studies with rats, for example, which have similar brain systems to humans, when youngsters were prevented from engaging in rough-and-tumble play with others, they had problems with social interactions as adults. Rats usually live in colonies where one male is dominant, and junior male rats learn how to join the colony without being attacked by the dominant male. Young males who were reared without being able to rough-and-tumble with others as they were growing up had trouble learning how to avoid being attacked. Youngsters who had played before being put into the colony quickly learnt that by freezing, they avoided being a target, while youngsters who had been reared only with adults

who did not play kept moving and attracting the attention of the dominant male. In a laboratory experiment where there was a safe platform for the youngsters to go to avoid danger, the young males who had played together found the safe platform, while those with no practice at rough-and-tumble did not learn how to get to the platform. Studies of monkey colonies have recorded similar effects for juveniles raised without being able to play with others – these monkeys could not read the social messages from other monkeys, and so ended up in more fights and suffered more injuries.

Improved problem-solving

If rough-and-tumble play related only to fighting, it would be an important but minor part of parenting. What can be seen from the tests with young rats, however, is that depriving them of the chance to 'mix it up' with other youngsters affects their ability to think. To try to isolate the key factors in their rearing, some young rats were housed in pairs with mesh partitions between them so that they could see, smell and lean against each other, but not play. When these rats were adults, their thinking was slower (from solving maze problems to getting food) than that of their litter-mates that had been allowed to play. The same result was found when juvenile rats were reared in the same cage as an adult (adult rats will allow physical contact but do not play-fight). Just one hour a day of playing with another juvenile was enough to remove any differences in brain power.

Human children also need to be able to read social signals – not just to avoid fights, but also to get along with other children and

with adults. There is also evidence that when children – boys and girls alike – engage in play wrestling or rough-and-tumble play, it can improve problem-solving in areas not restricted to avoiding fights. Researchers counted how many times boys in the junior grades participated in rough-and-tumble play during recess over one school year. They then showed the boys pictures of a child trying to get a toy from another child and pictures of a child trying to avoid being reprimanded by his mother. The boys were asked to come up with as many possible solutions to each social problem as possible. Those who played the most rough-and-tumble came up with the most solutions to the problems in the photographs.

Better social skills

Children need social skills to be successful at just about anything, and the cost of poor social skills can be devastating. Any father who has heard his child's unhappy story of not being liked by other children, or being shut out of a group, will know how painful this can be. If fathers' play can increase the social skills of their children and help them join in with others, it is certainly worthwhile. Exploratory studies have linked the popularity of boys and girls at school to how often their father played with them at home, and there is evidence that three particular skills are learnt via rough-and-tumble play.

Managing excitement

The first skill is to keep the excitement within limits that the child can manage. This is a particular challenge for very young children.

Managing strong feelings, even if they are pleasurable, is a major effort for tiny tots. Many father-toddler games mix activity and achievement with a dose of fear or apprehension. The child does not know exactly what will happen, even if she is 'almost' certain that it will be okay. This fear is what gives many games their exciting, pleasurable edge, and is a different emotion to terror.

This process can begin with a baby watching her father hide behind a book while playing 'peek-a-boo': she knows the game and has a good idea when his face will pop up with a loud but cheerful 'Boo' and a smile. But the sudden increase in her heart rate and blood pressure, rapid breathing and a possible surge of adrenaline are all physiological processes that she is learning to manage. Playing peek-a-boo will give her opportunities to practise managing these physiological reactions in a safe environment.

Deciphering emotions

Two further skills that are important for managing social situations are: reading the emotions of others, and conveying emotions to others. Infants begin to learn these skills by watching and interacting with their parents. By the time they are toddlers, they will begin to apply what they learn with their parents to other children – potential playmates and friends, who will have a big impact on their happiness and confidence as they grow. For toddlers, developing an awareness of other people's emotional states is learnt not just by watching, but by doing. In rough-and-tumble play, they can learn the meaning of facial expressions

and also how to interpret body tension and body position. This learning goes outward towards others and inward into themselves: as well as recognising emotions in others, your child can also begin to recognise the different emotions they are experiencing. The beauty of rough-and-tumble is that the learning can take place moment by moment in the fun experience of play.

The learning that happens

Imagine that a three-year-old (let's call him Jason) has spotted his father lying on the carpet in front of the TV. He runs over and hurls himself onto his (almost) unsuspecting father's back. If the father gives play signals, such as a soft tone in his voice or a gentle push, then Jason will know that the game is on. But even though it is clearly a game – and there will be giggles, smiles and laughter at some points – there will also be moments of very serious concentration and learning. When Jason is exerting every ounce of his strength holding his 90-kilo father down on the floor, he will probably not be smiling: he will be concentrating on his torso muscles, holding his body rigid to maximise the force on his father's back or chest. In this game Jason will be learning several skills at once: how to use the large muscles in his arms and legs; how to balance and arrange his weight to achieve downward pressure; how to interpret his opponent's mock cries for help; or, if he goes too far, how to respond to a real reprimand from his father conveyed with a serious tone.

It's not practice fighting

Someone watching Jason exerting all his strength to force his father's arm toward the floor might see the whole of rough-and-tumble play as preparation for real combat. However, a closer look shows that what is being learnt is not how to hurt or disable your opponent more effectively, but how to judge the intentions of others and how to manage a physical interaction so you can continue the enjoyment. Popular children (i.e. those judged more popular by their peers) play more rough-and-tumble with other children not because they can force others to do exactly what they want, but because they can manage the social aspects of play to engage and have fun with many other children. Watching animals at play and then seeing them in deadly serious combat, the differences between fighting and rough-and-tumble play are clear.

Male deer, for example, do fight each other, banging their antlers and heads together with terrific force, which can cause serious injury. When they are play-fighting, however, the contest is arranged so that neither buck is injured – they butt heads by locking horns and pushing each other. In rats, the target of biting in play-fighting is the nape of your opponents' neck; in real fighting, they aim for the leg or rump. In dolphins, which have sensitive skin and sharp teeth, play-fighting is signalled by emitting a special call to make sure that the collisions and hits stay safe. Jason's practice at using his muscles while wrestling with his father will encourage him to trust his body, but equally important will be the social learning that is happening while his father is pretending to push him away.

If you think about it, how else do you learn what's fair (no gouging, for example) or how it feels to be physically in control (if only briefly) of a much bigger opponent? Or how to decipher what someone is trying to communicate with a hard push to your stomach? This type of learning would be difficult to do by reading a book or through being told what to do. For toddlers, the physical involvement, straining muscles and mental effort required creates a rich learning environment for skills that may be important for the whole society.

Learning not to be aggressive

Children do not learn to be aggressive, they learn *not* to be. From about the second year, when toddlers can stand upright and move around without help, they can also coordinate their arms and legs to hit, kick and push. We like to think of children as cooperative, agreeable, 'nice' individuals who only learn to be aggressive from watching aggressive people around them, or watching too much TV. But when we follow children from the first year of life through to adulthood, counting the acts of physical aggression – such as the number of times a person hits or kicks another – a surprising pattern emerges: the peak time for physical aggression is around two years of age. This seems to be true for the vast majority of children, not just those who watch a lot of television. After this time, most children use less physical aggression as they come up to school age, and the rate drops steadily after that. Of course, a punch from a three-year-old is different to a punch from a 23-year-old. But rather than look for villains who taught the 23-year-old to

lash out when he was young, the research suggests that we should ask how other 23-year-olds learnt not to punch; how did they learn that there are better ways than punching to get what you want?

As infants become toddlers, they are able to use force to get what they want; they develop the physical coordination to effectively hurt others who are frustrating them, so they do. What they learn in the family is how to manage the impulse to whack another child who won't give up a toy. This is exactly where rough-and-tumble play with fathers comes into the picture. Fathers' physical play offers a place for young children to learn how to manage the aggressive sparks that are ignited in rough, unstructured, mock-battle play. For the play to be effective in helping the youngster learn this, the father will have to make sure the whole play routine is safe.

Making rough-and-tumble play safe

It seems obvious that if you want rough-and-tumble play to be positive, the whole event has to be safe. But there are different types of 'safe' – physical safety is not the same as emotional safety – and deciding just how safe to make the game is not as easy as it first appears.

Most fathers will have heard about the nifty gadgets to child-proof the home. Many fathers will have bought plastic protectors that can be placed over sharp corners, or covers for power points to protect inquisitive youngsters as they explore the room. Safety works best if you give it a bit of thought before the event and, since children's capabilities are always developing, this is an ongoing task.

You are pleased to see little Emily roll herself over without your help. However, that means she can roll off the change table onto the floor if you're distracted. You all congratulate Felix for pulling himself up on the edge of the coffee table, but now that he can pull himself upright he can reach the coffee cup on the table. What creates the danger is not just the sharp edge or the cup of hot coffee, it is also the gap between what a young child can do and what they can understand that puts them at risk. Babies presenting to hospital emergency departments for injury are most likely to have been hurt in a fall. But it is mainly the six-month to one-year-old who falls from furniture or stairs. This is the age when they are strong enough to climb but not coordinated enough to stay upright. It is not until most youngsters are in their second year that they can reach windows and climb over banisters, and this is the peak age for falls from buildings. And by the time they are three, traffic accidents are the most common, as a three-year-old can move quickly – darting onto a road or running behind a reversing car – without being able to gauge distances and speeds, and without understanding that a reversing driver may not see her in time. Looking out for your youngster's physical safety in rough-and-tumble play usually involves choosing a soft landing spot for the tussle, moving sharp objects out of the way, limiting the impact of bodies on each other, and intercepting blows. However, there is much more to rough-and-tumble play than physical safety. Fathers' play with their new infants, toddlers, preschoolers and older children is all about emotional safety as well.

Emotional safety

While there are no off-the-shelf kits for emotional safety, the basic ideas are not all that different from the safety principles applying to sharp edges and falls. For your youngster, there will often be a gap between the emotions brought out in rough-and-tumble play and what they are used to managing. It is in this gap that fathers have a major role in providing safety. An inevitable part of the physical tussle is frustration. When Louise is trying with all her might to pull her father's leg over, only to have it stubbornly resist, she comes face to face with her limitations. She can react by trying a new angle, giving up, trying to hurt her father, or dissolving into tears. Which of these is more likely will depend on her personality, but also on the way the father (you) sets the tone of the game and how you react to her frustration.

Physically, you are the stronger, more experienced, more coordinated one, and you know more about dangers and how accidents occur. It's much the same with emotions: you are stronger emotionally, you have many more years' experience (in dealing with frustration, for example) and you will have a better understanding of what will help Louise develop her potential. Just as you might put a cushion in the way of a wild swing of her arm, on the emotional level you might allow Louise to pull your leg over, just to take the pressure off her trying repeatedly and failing; or you might tell her how strong she is and encourage her to 'really try'. Another difference between you and Louise is that, as an adult, you have a clear separation between imagination and reality. But for

children, being willing to pretend is an important way of learning about reality, and imagining you can do something is an important step in really being able to do it. Fathers can underestimate how important it can be for a youngster to get the experience of being powerful in a physical contest, even if it is only because you, the father, pretended to be weak. You might be surprised to hear Louise triumphantly tell her mother, 'I beat Dad at wrestling!' It may be perfectly clear to you that you allowed her to win, but her satisfaction and confident tone sound as if she believes you really were overpowered. If you think of this process from Louise's point of view, she has attempted something at (or beyond) the limit of her abilities and succeeded. Her ability to 'force' her father down may have given her a glimpse of the way that she may be able to achieve what seemed to be impossible. No wonder she is exhilarated!

Managing dangerous emotions

There is another parallel between helping with physical skills and helping with emotional skills. The father's role as a solid base in protecting children from physical harm is very similar to his role as a secure base in the emotional world. At a certain stage of mobility, youngsters will want to try walking along a fence or narrow rail or ledge, even if the consequences of falling off will clearly be painful. At the start they won't be able to manage without holding your hand for balance. But over time, as their muscles strengthen and their developing brain learns to coordinate balance information from the inner ear with the messages it is sending to the trunk,

arms and legs, they will manage to navigate narrower and more uneven surfaces.

It's the same for emotions. There are plenty of dangerous emotions hovering around a rough-and-tumble session: frustration, anger, humiliation and rage, to name a few. Learning how to manage these as a two-year-old is every bit as important as learning how to stand on one leg without tipping over. When you are steadying your toddler as she picks her way along a fence, you do not allow her lack of balance to pull you over. You, the father, are the strong, stable one. You adjust your stance to remain a solid base while she is pulling and pushing to keep upright. In the emotional realm it's the same: you are the solid base of emotion while your child flips between enthusiasm and giving up. Staying positive when she is failing and getting frustrated is part of the job of fathering. So is staying calm in the face of anger. Reacting to her anger by becoming angry, for example, is the same as being tipped off-balance when you are helping your child along a fence. It's up to you, the father, to stay upright emotionally and give your toddler a secure base to hold on to.

Showing her that it's safe

Fathers act as a secure base by managing the emotional and physical risks so that the game is fun and builds the relationship between you. Talking is part of it, but communication also happens through touch and pressure and looks and grimaces. When Louise launches her next attempt to win back the cushion with a bony knee heading for your face, you probably won't be discussing feelings,

but grabbing her leg and shifting her aim toward a less sensitive part of your anatomy. The way that you do this can give her two important messages. The first is that even though this is a free-for-all game, you are still in charge and you will make sure neither of you is hurt. This is giving her permission to try out those actions which bring feelings of real effort and giving it all she has got (not to deliberately hurt, but to 'go for it' even though someone might be hurt). The second message is that even if she accidentally does hurt or nearly hurts you, you won't be angry, resentful or blaming her, just as you wouldn't blame her for falling from the fence. The safety of a strong father who plays, but keeps it safe for you both, is just the sort of secure base that children need.

Fathers' creativity on show

When fathers describe how they play physically with their children, the range of animal and monster characters is truly impressive. So is the obvious care that fathers take to show their young 'warriors' how to play hard without anyone getting too damaged. The different ways that fathers play with their kids give some hints for fathers, and the following stories also make it plain that there is no one, 'official' type of rough-and-tumble play. If it uses energy, involves body contact and is fun, then you are probably doing it just right.

'I know he wants to wrestle when he gets that gleam in his eye. I chase him into the bedroom and he throws

himself on our big bed. I play the bulldozer. I put my head down and push and push until he falls off the bed onto the carpet. Other times we do World Wrestling. I push him down on the bed, where I am going to slam him, but I do it really slowly, so that he has time to roll away before I crash down on the bed. There's lots of tickling, too.'

'I am Tyrannosaurus Rex. I walk in big, heavy, stomping steps and hold my hands like paws while I make fierce growling sounds. (I usually get a sore throat if we play this game too long.) The children are my prey, but only if they move. If they move, I lumber towards them. They freeze and I bump into them, since when they are still they are invisible. I try to be rough enough to knock them over without hurting them. When they break into giggles, I grab them clumsily as if to bite them. When they freeze again, I lose interest and push them aside. They regulate the scariness by staying further away or freezing quickly.'

'My kids and me are on the same level in Tae Kwon Do, about halfway to a black belt. This means that we actually get to spar with each other, and my kids will often team up against me. We use hand and shin pads, which helps to prevent most of the pain. As we do more of this, the kids are appreciating the etiquette of sparring in recognising when somebody else has scored on you, and understanding how to fight hard but still pull your

punches and kicks so nobody gets hurt. This is like an evolution of the rough-housing play that we did when they were younger and which they really enjoyed.'

'They say, "Be a bear, Daddy", and I have to chase them. But I let them get past me and then chase them again. They ask for it all the time.'

'Our rough-and-tumble play is almost like World Championship Wrestling, with a booked bout, a cleared room, and an agreed number of rounds and rules. There is no biting, no kicking, and no hitting in sensitive areas. There is an understanding that it's not fair if Dad always wins, but it is almost always Dad who has to assert his authority in calling full time, and this is usually best achieved by having some other thing that we have to move onto. I understand that I can't win more than half the time.'

'When we are wrestling, I pretend that he pushed a button and set off a "tickle bomb". Holding him with one arm, my other hand goes up in a closed fist and starts to fall slowly towards his belly as I whistle. Halfway down, my fist bursts open into wiggling fingers threatening him with an imminent tickle. Sometimes he will grab my arm and direct those fingers to tickle myself, other times he'll let me give him a small tickle.'

'I have a ten-year-old stepdaughter who I have cared for

since she was two. We wriggle around on the floor, kind of intertwining our bodies, and I have to find a way to get away from her. Usually she wins, because she has "knees and elbows of death". I think that rough-and-tumble is important, particularly for girls. I want her to view herself as a physical being who is strong, resilient and resourceful.'

'Both of the girls loved to jump up on my back, shouting, "Give me a piggy back" or "I want a piggy back" or simply whammo – they would leap up and try to link their hands around my neck and wrap their legs around my waist. We had seen tigers in the zoo lying along branches in the heat with their legs hanging down. I would yell out "Sleepy tiger" and bend forward until my back was parallel to the ground. From this point, with them lying flat along my back, I could give them a bumpy jolt by dropping down a little and then pushing up quickly. It bounced them up and down, with my back pushing up onto their stomach. I held their hands, which were around my neck, to stop them falling off. After one or two bounces they were laughing, but complaining loudly. Come to think of it, there was nothing sleepy about it, but that's what popped into my head and the name stuck. As they got older, they started to ask for "Sleepy tiger" rides without the bumping, just lying on my back for a while, so in the end the name suited.'

'In the pool, she clings onto my back with her hands around my neck. I am the dolphin-man. I dive slowly under and swim along so that her head is just out of the water. Then I tell her, "There are sharks – we have to dive." She takes a big breath and I dive deeper, taking her all the way under. If I get it right she is just gasping a little when we surface. If I stay down too long, she lets go and floats to the surface.'

Some mothers' views

'Help – I'm a girl trying to raise sons! I need some help playing with my four-year-old son. I find the role-playing pretend games mind-numbing – especially since (with me at least) it consists of, "You say ...", "No, say ...!" and it usually involves super-heroes, pirates, etc., and much conflict and sometimes violence. I love his imagination and celebrate his play and pretend, but I find it hard to participate. I need to learn to play like a four- or five-year-old boy and gently inject my lessons and values into the play.'

'As a mum, I quite enjoy watching rough-and-tumble play, but I don't really enjoy participating in it! My children like to use their dad as a climbing frame, and will climb up and over him, flipping onto the floor, sliding down his back

as if it is a slippery dip. One child will start, and then the other will drop what they are doing and rush over to join in the fun. There is always a lot of laughter and giggles, and thumps and bumps on the floor and on Dad. However, it always seems to end in tears. The children will get over-zealous and start being a little too aggressive and Dad will try to bring the play to an end, but the kids don't want it to end – they are hyped up now ... it's always difficult to bring this type of play to a steady finish.'

'I was in my house, at the sink, when two of my three sons rushed in the back door. My middle son, who's ten, yelled, "He's gonna pummel us, he's gonna pummel us!" He was grinning and running, and so was his brother. Then, in ran my husband, with a snowball in his hand. The boys and their father had been throwing snowballs, and the boys, covered in snow, couldn't wait to be "pummelled". All my "boys" ran out the front door, throwing snowballs and making a huge mess.

I remember thinking, do they have to use the word "pummelled"? In fact, I've often wished they could play without violence – this "pummelling" is alien to my upbringing, my way of doing things. It scares me still, even though I have a husband and three sons. But there they all were in the front yard, throwing each other around, hurting each other even, having such fun. What could I do? They loved it.'

Two important issues

The role of rough-and-tumble playmate comes with lots of benefits but also a few dilemmas. One challenge is how roughly to play with daughters compared to sons; another is how to make sure the rough-and-tumble is helping your child develop in the way that you want. These two challenges sound simple enough to be put as: 'Do I rough-house with my daughter?' and 'Can we have too much rough-and-tumble play?' But both are complicated issues because they involve many forces from inside and outside the home. The energy and drive of children to be physical is one important force. A father's own history of being played with as a child is another.

No experience necessary

After watching a group of dads play with their children, and do a fine job of managing the play, I asked about their own fathers. To my surprise, some of these men recounted stories of their upbringing where play was not in the frame at all. Some had no experience of loving, rough play with any men as they were growing up, but they still managed to enjoy this type of play with their own young children. When I asked how they learnt to play like this, they pointed to their children – the teachers! These men had responded to their children's cry to 'Come on, Dadi' and, without any training whatsoever, joined in the wrestling. They had enough hard wiring to respond in the right way, and they had wonderful coaches to guide them. Other men learn, when they get a slight nudge, to change their approach.

Rough-and-tumble play was a key part of a weight-loss program for overweight fathers and their young children. In one session, the fathers, some of whom were big men, and their children, some as young as six years, were in the gym with their mats.

I asked the fathers to lie down on the mats, and explained the task: the father's aim was to stand up, while the child's aim was to keep him down. A couple of fathers pushed their child aside enthusiastically and stood up. When they saw all around them that other fathers were pretending to struggle with their squealing, panting, determined-to-win children, the penny dropped. After this incident, a discussion on 'How often should your children win?' was included in the program.

Rough play with girls

Many fathers (and mothers) of boys say they do not have a choice about rough-and-tumble play: their boys demand it, push for it, and throw themselves into it no matter what the parent wants! With girls, there seems to be more room for fathers to decide how often to play and how roughly, as the pressure coming from their daughter is not as strong. As discussed in Chapter 3, there are biological differences between boys and girls. However, it is also true that experiences and relationships shape how our brains develop, and so you, as the father, have an important influence on how physical your boys and girls will be and how they will enjoy being physical.

For most fathers, the problem with rough-and-tumble play is not in the play itself. A girl who gets hurt easily is no different to a boy who does: they both need encouragement to try again. A girl who hits recklessly has to be reminded about limits, just like a boy. No, the problem is not usually the physical activity, but other people's reaction to the physical activity. Many separated fathers with daughters are self-conscious about physical play with their daughters in case their play is misinterpreted as inappropriate. Other fathers worry that it will lead to their daughters (and their sons, in some cases) to be too rough. What is not so often appreciated by fathers, however, is that rough-and-tumble play might be particularly beneficial to girls.

The benefits for girls

The most obvious area of benefit to girls is that they become physically active. The physical exertion of the playing adds to their health, and they will also be more likely to see physical activity as a way of enjoying themselves as they grow up. Playing rough physical games, with shrieking, running, giggling, catching and laughter, can cement the attractiveness of physical activity in girls' thinking. Of course, it will help if you continue to be physical with her – drive her to her sports events and suggest energetic father-daughter activities to show her that you also enjoy being physical. But it starts with your play with her. This is a time she needs a chance to practise using all her strength and agility trying to defeat you.

But there's more. When it comes to girls' physical and social health, there are extra benefits to rough-and-tumble. Of course, your

daughter's muscles will strengthen with exercise. What is less well known is that bones also get stronger from exercise, especially from weight-bearing exercise such as jumping. If physical play with your daughter leads her to enjoy being physically active – not simply doing stretching exercise (which is common for females), but taking up more high-impact activities – she is likely to have fewer bone fractures as a child and, as an adult, will be protected from bone weakness, which can be serious for older women. The impact of jumping onto the ground (not from two-storey buildings, but from a low fence, for example) helps girls' bones become thicker and stronger.

The second way that rough-and-tumble play might benefit your daughter is through its influence on her self-image. Your physical and affectionate play is important for her because it is not sexual and does not rely on her 'beauty' or looking attractive. Of course, when she looks at you with those shining, excited eyes as she waits for you to chase her, then she does look truly beautiful. But your appreciation of her is a far cry from the appreciation that she sees everywhere on billboards and in magazines, films, etc. Rough-and-tumble play is one key area for you to build up your daughter's sense of herself as a capable, strong person who is fun to be with.

Managing their moods

Some sons also need building-up and encouragement to be strong. Finding the right balance between protecting them from harm and pushing them to be brave, even when they are nervous, is not always easy. With sons, the most common issue for fathers is how to give them enough physical play, and then how to calm them

down after a fierce, exciting chase and rumble. You may have heard this complaint from a boy's mother: 'Now he is all wound up and I am trying to get him into bed!' It's a fair complaint if getting them into a 'going to bed' mood is difficult. There is a degree of skill in ending these rough sessions, and it is a skill that fathers can get better at with practice and a bit of thinking.

So there are two common ways for play to end badly: with the children too fired up to get into the bath, or to eat their dinner, or go to bed; and when someone ends up crying because they are hurt. The first situation is really about timing, since it can be appropriate to have some full-on exercise before bedtime, but it needs to be wound down in time for the cleaning-teeth and getting-into-pyjamas routine, not just as they climb into bed. Since there is only one 'boss' in the game – and that is you – it really is up to you to change the tone of the game and shift it into a quieter mode, or use your authority to say, 'It's time to finish up'. Regarding the second common hassle, dealing with children who get hurt (and dealing with other adults' opinions about you letting them get hurt), it is not possible to play lots of physical wrestling or chasing games without occasionally bumping or colliding with someone or something. Once the tears are dry, the game can start again. But if your child thinks the bump or push was unfair, this can sour the ending of what was fun and enjoyable. In many cases the question of whether it was unfair or just reckless is not easily answered, so you may have to take some time to deal with the feelings. There are two ways to look at this: you could see it as an opportunity for your child to learn how to deal with resentment and strong

feelings (and you get a chance to practise listening and helping her through the anger or resentment). In this case you will encourage her to recognise and express feelings as a way of processing the turmoil occurring on an emotional level. Or you could see it as a time for your child to learn that life includes bumps and scrapes, and that spending time complaining (or blaming someone) is not as satisfying as playing the game.

Using words to name emotions is a life skill

There is support for each of these options from the science we have available. We do know that developing language, including the language that describes feelings, is a key task for children. Around the age of three, children become able to tell others their thoughts, and putting a word to the feeling is an important step in managing that feeling. It may seem obvious to you that they are feeling angry, but young children (and some not so young) can be overwhelmed by the strength of feelings, and find it impossible to think at all. This is when they might lash out or collapse in helpless tears. Assisting them to work out 'what that feeling is' by using words to name it is an important part of their life skills. By you saying, 'You look really disappointed', you are helping them figure out what that heavy feeling in their stomach and the sudden loss of energy means. By trying to name it, you are helping them have more control over their reactions. Likewise, you can encourage persistence in effort. Being able to focus on goals, such as wanting to enjoy the game, and not

being diverted into resentment about the bump or bruise is also an important life skill.

Similarly, there are specific ways to assist your child learn socially useful skills through language. You can help infants from early on put words to the feelings that are bubbling up inside them. In many cases what is happening inside is clearly reflected on the outside: expressions like 'You're feeling a bit miserable' or 'You're feeling really pleased now that you have picked up the block' can start to link the sound pattern of the words to a feeling state that your tiny tot is probably experiencing. Linking words to feelings is exactly what your one-year-old will have to do as she starts to recognise her emotions and then tell you about them, instead of simply crying. By providing the words, even before your child has enough language to talk back, your language builds a scaffold in her mind which will help her put together knowledge about feelings and the words that go with them. It builds her store of words at the same time. We have good evidence that the more you talk to your baby during infancy, the better her vocabulary will be when she is ready to start school, and the extra words she understands will influence how well she does at school. The evidence is based on mothers' talk to infants, but there is no reason to suppose that father's talk (while it may be different in other ways) would not help to increase a child's range of words. However, it is important to understand that this suggestion of talking to your new baby and your toddler is not a prompt to get flash cards and drill them

through repetition. Talking to your baby while she tries to touch your face or reach for a block is not the same as hot-housing your ten-month-old by drilling her with dozens of new words every day to make her a genius. Talking about what is happening moment by moment, as in rough-and-tumble play, for example, is not a 'program' or a 'new product'. Talking to infants and toddlers is what fathers and mothers do naturally. The scientific evidence adds to our understanding of how a father's talking can help a toddler build her word knowledge, which will assist her learning, particularly in school.

Not all sons want rough play

Some sons do not fit the standard pattern of wanting more and more vigorous play and rougher and rougher activity. Fathers of these sons are presented with a set of problems very different from managing hyper-excitement and avoiding being too physical. Here is a conversation related to me by a father who was concerned about his son - not because he was too physical, but because of the way that he expressed his feelings:

Dario gets into the car after preschool. He is obviously upset.

Dad: 'What happened?'

Dario: 'Luke hit me ... hard.'

Dad: 'What did you do to him?'

Dario: 'Nothing.'

Dad: 'You didn't take anything from him?'

Dario: 'Nope.'

Dad: 'Did you hit him first?'

Dario: 'No.'

Dad: 'Did you call him names?'

Dario: 'No, nothing.'

Dad: 'Well you must have done something ...'

Dario: 'Well ... I kissed him.'

Learning what is acceptable to other boys (and girls) is part of the preschool curriculum for all children. The years before school are crucial for discovering the social rules and ways of doing things in a group. As far as academic success goes, social skills will win out over reading and writing every time. If you can't understand what the teacher and other students want you to do, or not to do, succeeding in the classroom learning environment is going to be very difficult, no matter how smart you are at counting or reading words.

But in cases like Dario's, there is more to learn than just the rule about uninvited kissing. By age three, most children have a fairly good idea that there are boys and girls and that they are one or the other, not both. Knowing you are a boy, however, does not automatically tell you what to do if you like someone. Nor does it tell you which clothes to wear or what toys to play with, or how hard to push when playing with other boys in the playground.

If your son is different

For many fathers, the tricky part comes if their boy seems to be 'different' from other boys. He may like frilly dress-ups, he may want to play with dolls, or cook, and may be totally uninterested in the usual boy toys or sports. In these cases, fathers can find it difficult to be consistently encouraging and to put aside fears for what might happen to him. While many fathers are comfortable with their son exploring feminine clothing and toys, some are not. Fathers worry that their son will be gay or that he will be so different from other boys that his life will be full of problems.

A father explained to me how he tries to give his son the courage to be himself, but also how he wants to protect him from negative feedback and victimisation.

Ramon likes pink. He comes home upset, saying that the boys tell him that it's a girl's colour, and laugh at him and tease him for liking it. I don't want him to change to fit in with other kids' ideas. I want him to have his own ideas and preferences. So what if he likes pink? I tell him he can like any colour, and that I like pink, too. Am I convincing? I don't really know. I am pleased when he doesn't change to fit in with their prejudices, but I am also a bit nervous about what he is going to bring down on his head.

When we are getting him ready to go to preschool, he has been wearing his sister's tutu. It's time to go, and I show him two shirts to choose from. I take the tutu and put it out of sight while he chooses because I don't want to stop him, but I am afraid of the reaction from other kids.

Sometimes you may need to steer your boy away from actions that will provoke trouble for him, however unfair and unjust the trouble may be. It's a judgement for fathers to make. Giving your son courage by your support is something that will probably count, in the long run, more than anything else you can do. It is also true, however, that the further you are away from the scene of the action, the less you understand about what options your son might have had. This father might have a better idea about what Ramon might do if he spent some time at the preschool. Simply having a father in the building may change the dynamics between the boys. Attending the preschool may also mean having to deal with the views of other parents and professionals, but that is part of being a father, too. (In Chapter 5, the role of the father outside the family home is covered.)

Giving him the right start in life

A father who sees that his son may be heading for difficulty in the future will often work hard to give him the best start. Some fathers will take their sons to watch team sports, or even insist that they try out a sport for a while, to see if they develop an interest. Some coach them in boxing or karate to give them confidence in their body. Others try to give their son some perspective to forearm him for possible negative situations. As the father of a gentle boy explained it, 'We talk about why people might say things, sort of personality profiles; we talk about what might make someone say something spiteful like that. So he has a sort of insight into what may be happening for them, and doesn't take it too hard.' At the same time,

this father was aware that removing every difficulty from his son's path was not a real solution: 'Although I do try to steer him a bit away from things that are going to be difficult, I also think that he needs to go through these things. That's how you grow up. You don't want to avoid everything difficult.' In the end, no matter how smart he is, a father cannot anticipate every problem and certainly cannot prevent them all. Inside the family home, a father can be ready to listen and respond when his child is struggling with friendships or incidents outside of the home. A father can 'be there' for his son by giving him the physical and emotional messages that he still cuts the mustard so far as his father is concerned.

S U M M I N G U P

- You can probably safely assume that your child, however young, would like to play with you. So you don't have to wait to start playing.
- If your interaction is flexible, energetic and fun, with physical contact, it probably qualifies as rough-and-tumble play.
- Your rough-housing with young children can improve the way they deal with excitement, understand what other children are feeling, and begin to manage their own emotions.
- Children learn how not to be aggressive from such family interactions. Fathers can teach children a lot about anger and frustration through rough play.
- Not all fathers had practice at rough-and-tumble play when they were small. Children can be excellent teachers, too.

- There are health benefits for girls in having a father who plays 'rough', to help them grow up strong and physically confident. A father's encouragement of his daughter's physical strength can build her mental strength and her self-image.
- Many sons are energetic, mini-warriors, who are keen on rough play, and fathers can provide the safety to manage this energy.
- With gentle sons, fathers can encourage physical development while helping them develop strategies to stay clear of trouble.