

# Why roughhousing is good for kids—and their parents

by Lylah M. Alphonse, Senior Editor, Manage Your Life, on Wed Jun 1, 2011 1:56pm PDT

Forget about letting the kids run around unsupervised; we don't even let them jump on the beds anymore. Between helicopter parents who hover, Tiger Moms who are obsessed with academic success, and curling parents who sweep a perfectly clear path for their kids to follow, we're so worried about keeping our kids safe that we end up limiting their activity levels along with their independence.

But a little horsing around could do kids a world of good, two experts suggest—and they encourage parents to roughhouse right along with their children.

"Play looks a lot different than it did 30 years ago," says Dr. Anthony DeBenedet, who co-wrote "The Art of Roughhousing: Good, Old-Fashioned Horseplay and Why Every Kid Needs It" with Lawrence J. Cohen, PhD. "I think it's time for us to kind of cut the strings a little bit. Let kids go—and play with them."

"We want to get a throwback to the good stuff," he adds. "The good stuff is play. And the holy grail is roughhousing."

Roughhousing does more than keep kids physically active. "There are clear signs showing that it helps kids' academic success, it's associated with being more flexible behaviorally, being better able to deal with unpredictability," DeBenedet says. "Play—especially active physical play, like roughhousing—makes kids smart, emotionally intelligent, lovable and likable, ethical, physically fit, and joyful," they write in their book.

So what is roughhousing, exactly? "You kind of know it when you see it," explains DeBenedet, the father of 5, 2, and 6-month-old girls. (Yes, girls can roughhouse, too.) There are two main types, he says: Improvisational free-form roughhousing, which can include everything from wrestling to jumping on the couch to pillow fights, and set moves that are "almost like physical challenges with your kid."

At a recent roughhousing workshop in New York, parents rolled around on mats with their children, hoisted them in the air, and took part in an energetic pillow fight:

At another event, DeBenedet demonstrated one of his favorite roughhousing moves: The Houdini. "You have to be really connected with them to do it properly," he says.

If The Houdini looks tame to you, that may be because roughhousing is more about bonding than blowing off steam. "The bottom line is really the joy of it, the love and closeness that it fosters," says Cohen, who has an almost 21-year-old daughter and a 18-year-old stepson. "There's a special kind of tuning in that parents and kids have learn to do some of these moves. You have to really get on the same wavelength and be connected."

"You're saying that your power is welcome here. You're safe with me. And we're going to be more connected than ever," DeBenedet adds.

Roughhousing and safety are not mutually exclusive. "Safety comes more from knowledge," says DeBenedet. Take jumping on the bed, for example. "When is bed-jumping dangerous? When you have more than one person on the bed," he points out. "If you only have one kid jumping on the bed, it's actually very safe."

Still, kids can get carried away, and it's up to parents to draw the line between roughhousing and aggression. "Stop for any injury, even if it's imaginary," DeBenedet advises. "What's really happening is that kids are opening up, expressing their feelings even with just an imaginary injury. That's a great time for Mom and Dad to stop and reassure them, hold them, cuddle them, and put on Band Aids even if they're not bleeding."