

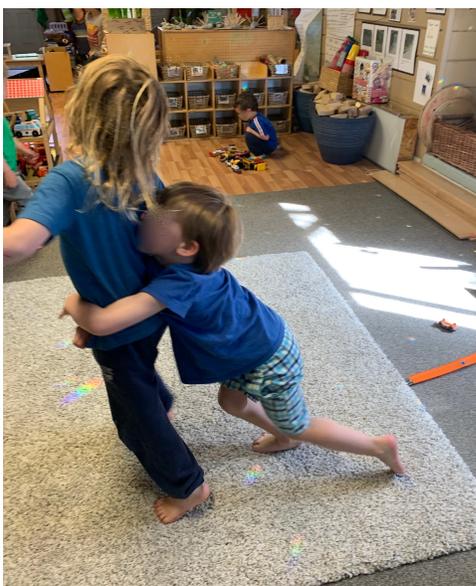
# Close but not too close.

## The adults' role in play.

Almost every morning for several months, two boys eagerly found each other and then located the animal playing cards. After choosing a space on the carpet, the two boys agreed to split up the cards by dealing them into two equal piles. Much like the classic card game of war, the boys each flipped over a card from their pile and looked to see which card (in this case which animal) was more powerful. Each boy then took on the characteristics of the animal on the card. A short dramatic expression of the power dynamic ensued which looked a lot like wrestling or fighting; we call it “rough and tumble” play. At some point the display would be over, the more powerful character would “win” the card and it was put into the winner’s pile. This game play would be repeated over and over and over.



If an observer does not watch carefully, the play might be uncomfortable to allow. After all, two kids would be rolling on top of each other, sometimes making loud roaring or squawking noises in the middle of a classroom setting, while other children would be building block towers, connecting train tracks or tending to pretend “babies” nearby. But a closer look exposes an intricate dance



of power, cognition, motor skills, and social discovery. The children were exploring predator and prey, limits of their bodies in space, cause and effect, not to mention the notion of empathy (if I push too hard it will hurt my friend). All happening in the same physical space as other equally engaging play scenarios where different children are creating their own meaning and understanding.

To be fair the game has had its share of physical limits being taken too far when one or both of the boys got carried away with the scene. At which point one child will give direct

feedback to the other. “Stop!” or “Ow! That hurt!” Resulting in a pause in the game and a renegotiation of the rules before beginning again, sometimes with a teacher’s support but often without it. Considering that this play continued to happen and almost daily, communicates to me that the children found a way to agree to be safe in their game.

I recently listened to a podcast called Childcare Bar and Grill (by Jeff Johnson and Lisa Murphy [https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/ccbag-0487-balanced-and-barefoot-with-angela-hanscom-part-2/id593710633?](https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/ccbag-0487-balanced-and-barefoot-with-angela-hanscom-part-2/id593710633?i=1000434239677)

[i=1000434239677](https://www.timbernook.com/?v=7516fd43adaa) ) where Angela Hanscom (Author of Barefoot and Balanced and creator of Timbernook <https://www.timbernook.com/?v=7516fd43adaa> ) was a guest. I was struck once again by the research that supports the kind of unrestricted play described above. During the podcast Hanscom puts words to such a useful tool for adults in early learning- “step back and tune in.” I love this. The way I see it, stepping back and tuning in means to become an active but unobtrusive observer. Put your body close enough to step in if needed for safety, but far enough that the children’s play is not impacted by your presence. Then watch what is happening, really watch and listen, think about what learning is taking place, and perhaps how you might tell this story. If we adults could just take a moment to really see (and hear) all that is happening before stepping in, I think we would understand that kids are much more controlled in their play than we give them credit. The crocodile will unhinge his powerful jaws just before the antelope is eaten alive; and then with the flipping of the cards new animals will be assigned and the meaning-making will continue.



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