

## #Episode Four: Playful Aggression in Primary Schools

With Dr Jennifer Hart

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My guest today is Dr Jennifer Hart an Associate Lecturer in Early Childhood Education at the University of the Sunshine Coast. Dr Hart has 10 years of teaching experience within American early childhood settings and has coordinated courses on a rich array of early childhood topics at universities in the United States and Australia.

She is an early career researcher who has captured the interest of local and national media as her topic continues to be controversial within early childhood settings. The focus of her current research is on aggressive play behaviour - a major component of various types of young children's socio-dramatic play such as rough-and-tumble play, superhero play, fantasy play, "bad guy" play, play fighting and gun play.

Dr Hart is interested in the perceptions and benefits of all types of aggressive play behaviour, the developmental impact this play behaviour has on young children- particularly boys- and the needed reform of state and national policies that ban such play.

Well, it is a glorious day here on the Sunshine Coast and I have travelled to the University to conduct my interview with Dr **Jennifer** Hart.

**Tracy:** Dr Hart, thanks for joining me today.

**Jennifer:** Well thank you for having me today.

**Tracy:** What prompted your research into 'Playful Aggression in Early Childhood Settings'?

**Jennifer:** A mentor of mine, Michelle Tannock, conducted a research project about young boys' rough-and-tumble play at an early childhood centre I was working in. After a brief training and allowing my boys to rough-and-tumble play in my classroom I was pleasantly surprised to see the positive behavioural changes in the children, particularly the boys. My boys were more patient and cooperative. They participated in group activities for longer periods of time. And, they were tired. They slept at naptime and parents informed me that they fell asleep at night when expected to.

**Tracy:** So can you explain the difference between 'serious aggression' and 'playful aggression' because there is quite a difference isn't there?

**Jennifer:** Serious aggression is behaviour that explicitly intends to injure or cause harm to another person, either physically or emotionally. Playful aggression lacks intent to harm. Although players may sustain injuries, it is due to the nature of the play and not its purpose.

**Tracy:** You talk about purpose there. How can parents and teachers tell the difference between the two types of play?

**Jennifer:** There are several differences that parents can easily identify if they know about them;

### Intent

- Serious aggression – Intent
- Playful aggression - No intent

### Level of Friendship

- Between non-friends; tend to have conflict, argue, fight
- Between friends; conflicts are often quickly resolved

### Actions

- Physical actions are not restrained; wrestling is uncommon
- Physical actions are restrained and includes wrestling (remember, the children want to have fun, not hurt one another)

### Chase and Flee

- Child fleeing runs fast and straight; rarely looks back (fearful expression)
- Child fleeing runs at half speed; looks back often (happy expression)

### Verbal Expressions

- Negative threats and tone (e.g. verbal threats, angry expression is ongoing)
- Positive facial expressions and tone (e.g. smiling and laughing; negative facial expressions align with the roles of the character and are brief)

### Body Language

- Tense, closed body as if in defensive mode or ready to attack full force
- Relaxed muscle tone, open body stance as if to say 'come and get me; positive expression and come get me

### Role Reversal

- Roles are not exchanged; goal is to dominate
- Roles are exchanged - take turns being the good guy and the bad guy

### Group Size

- Tends to be two children
- Usually more than two

### Duration

- Brief
- Long

### Onlookers

- Draws a crowd
- Does not draw a crowd

**Tracy:** I think it is really fascinating because, as educators we often bunch the two together. I am not sure if it has ever been brought to my attention if they are different types of aggression. I find your research very interesting. You have used the term 'aggressive socio-dramatic play', can you please explain that for us?

**Jennifer:** It is play fighting, rough-and-tumble, super hero play, 'bad guy' play; zombies. It is whatever the children are engaging in. It is a type of dramatic play and socio-dramatic meaning it is more than one child. So it is children pretending to play. Dr Michelle Tannock and I define it as Playful aggression, which is verbally and physically cooperative play behaviour that involves at least two children, where all participants enjoyably and voluntarily engage in reciprocal role-playing that includes aggressive make-believe these, actions, and words: yet lacks intent to harm either emotionally or physically.

**Tracy:** In a research paper you co-authored for the publication Children Australia, you said that 'sociodramatic play is a critical component in early childhood education programs' - why is that?

**Jennifer:** Because it influences young children's, specifically boys, social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and communicative development. Children benefit in numerous ways such as learning concepts of right and wrong, practicing negotiation and cooperation, gaining the perspectives of others, learning restraint, building trust, and developing self-regulation.

**Tracy:** In the same publication you said 'the elimination of aggressive sociodramatic play, such as play fighting, may have a significant impact on academic performance'. How so?

**Jennifer:** Boys are over-represented in school behavioural referrals for behaviour support plans. They are also more often diagnosed as having a behavioural disorder as compared to girls. A traditional primary classroom expects all children to sit and be on-task for lengthy periods of time. This style of learning is not developmentally appropriate for young girls or boys, however, many girls can live up to this expectation. Unfortunately, the majority of boys cannot. Boys have an innate tendency to move. Playful aggression allows boys to freely move with their friends for long durations in ways that physical education programs do not allow. It allows boys to freely interact with peers to develop social skills that cannot be replicated in formal instruction. Aggressive play opportunities also allow children to release pent-up energy, which prepares them for sitting and focussing for lengthy periods of time, which is what brought me to this research. I was noticing that my young boys were releasing their energy and were exhausted by the middle of the afternoon.

**Tracy:** Why do you believe that 'aggressive socio-dramatic play' should be included in Early Childhood Education?

**Jennifer:** We have two decades of international research demonstrating the benefits of playful aggression, yet this research is being ignored due to adults' perceptions of aggressive play being inappropriate, dangerous, and violent, too violent. Decisions regarding educational policy and practice should be supported by evidence-based research, not personal preference or misconceptions.

**Tracy:** Many schools adopt a 'no hands on friends' rule - probably to avoid kids accidentally hurting each other. So if Early Childhood educators were to allow aggressive play, how can they make sure the play is a safe and positive experience for the children involved?

**Jennifer:** As with all learning opportunities it is a teacher's responsibility to provide a safe and supportive environment. This can be done by:

- designating a play space with ample room for large movement, providing an area with a soft surface (e.g. grass or tumbling mat)

- supervising the play

- establishing safety rules with the children (e.g. soft hitting and pushing, no touching above the shoulders, use words, and stop the play if a player is injured, unhappy, scared, or angry).

**Tracy:** I suppose the concern from parents and educators would be that by allowing this type of play someone is going to get hurt?

**Jennifer:** Most parents and teachers that I have spoken with have said, "Someone always gets hurt." This is a valid concern as this play does have a higher risk for accidental injury than other types of play. However, if someone is always getting hurt in any activity then some element of that activity needs to be changed. For example, if someone is always slipping and falling near the water table, then a mat or a towel needs to be placed around the water table to ensure a safe environment. Removing the water table altogether eliminates valuable learning opportunities for children which contradicts providing a supportive environment. In regards to playful aggression, a change in the play space, supervision or the rules may be needed. A particular player may need to be excluded from the play for a period of time if he is identified as causing accidental injury on a regular basis. With this being said, although many boys may enjoy this type of play, some boys may not engage in it appropriately. For some, it may be viewed as an opportunity to be seriously aggressive. Adults can easily identify this when his peers complain that he isn't playing correctly and/or that he is not their friend. Remember, as with any activity, friends play together. When a non-friend enters the play, it is important to anticipate a conflict.

**Tracy:** Why do some boys engage in serious aggression, yet others are quite happy just 'play fighting' with no intent to harm?

**Jennifer:** It really doesn't come down to a difference in children seriously fighting vs playfully fighting. Playful aggression is just one type of play. The differences lie in children's development; particularly social-emotional development skills such as conflict resolution, cooperation, negotiation, the ability to sympathise or empathise with others, and the ability to self-regulate behaviour.

**Tracy:** Are young boys innately aggressive or is this learned behaviour - nature vs nurture?

**Jennifer:** It is innate. We see playful aggressive behaviour in many animal species such as young rats, dogs, tigers, monkeys and bears. The males engage in aggressive play behaviour to develop critical survival skills.

**Tracy:** Is violence part of the evolutionary makeup of male humans?

**Jennifer:** Yes, prehistoric male engaged in violent behaviour for survival. For example, young men killed animals for food, clothing and protection. Today, men exert their aggression in socially acceptable forms such as sport like boxing and rugby. It is enjoyable for them and it fills a physical need.

**Tracy:** At an early age, boys are bombarded with aggressive marketing through toys, clothing and

books - toy aisles are loaded with aggressive male super heroes, villains, war toys, 'bad boy' clothing and so on - must boys be stereotyped in this way?

**Jennifer:** Stereotypes are discerning for many adults; however, research demonstrates that the majority of young girls will gravitate towards pink and purple, and dolls and housekeeping toys; while boys are more interested in trucks, superheroes and toy weapons. Many girls enjoy nurturing and crafting type toys. Boys enjoy building and destroying. For example, a young boy will build a tall tower for the purpose of kicking it down and watching it explode into pieces. It is the destruction of the tower that is most appealing.

**Tracy:** There are always differences though Dr Hart. Some girls would probably prefer to knock the tower down and some boys may prefer to play with a doll. How do you explain that?

**Jennifer:** Every child is different. What I am talking about are the majority of children. So the majority of the boys will engage in playful aggression and knock down towers and the majority of the girls will not engage in playful aggression and knock down towers. We will see that some boys do not have any interest in such play and they are more of what we call gentle boys as opposed to more physical boys, and we will see some rough girls as opposed to those very gentle girls.

**Tracy:** Boys are playing aggressive video games at a young age - Is this increasing their tendency towards serious aggression?

**Jennifer:** It is my understanding that ample research supports the notion of gaming contributing to children engaging in serious violent behaviour, while research also supports the opposing argument. It is my understanding that the outcome is dependent on the type of violence depicted within the game. However, I cannot comment further as this is not my area of expertise.

**Tracy:** Given the media and toy marketing, it seems impossible to raise a non-aggressive boy or a boy who isn't brought up to believe that he 'should be' violent.

**Jennifer:** Research demonstrates that playful aggression offers opportunities to develop many social and emotional skills necessary to become a non-violent adult. Again, the benefits include conflict resolution, cooperation, negotiation, the ability to sympathise or empathise with others, and the ability to self-regulate behaviour.

**Tracy:** Male violence is a major problem in western society and indeed, Australian society - we need only to look at the statistics - so shouldn't we be discouraging male aggression - not supporting it?

**Jennifer:** It depends on what type of aggression you are referring to. Yes, I agree that serious violence should not be supported. However, given the distinct differences, I support children's pretend violence. When children pretend to be a superhero or villain, a police officer trying to catch a criminal, they are learning valuable social skills such as trust, empathy, and self-regulation; skills that are needed to suppress seriously violent tendencies.

**Tracy:** So by allowing and supporting 'aggressive sociodramatic play' in Early Childhood' we're not necessarily creating a more violent child who may develop 'real aggression' further down the track?

**Jennifer:** I am unaware of any research that demonstrates a casual relationship between real violence and pretend violence. I am confident that many of us have men (and women) in our lives that engaged in some type of aggressive play as a child yet have never acted seriously violently because of it.

**Tracy:** What about young girls -do they display the need to play in this way?

**Jennifer:** Yes, some girls play this way. It is an individual's choice. Just as some boys don't enjoy rough play, some girls don't enjoy playing with baby dolls. All children have different personalities and interests.

**Tracy:** At present we are seeing an increase in the representation of female super heroes in film and television, Wonder woman is finally coming to the screen; females are achieving in aggressive sports such as the Rugby 7s and winning Olympic medals; we have female police officers, soldiers and boxers....perhaps we will see this change reflected in the toy aisle, which at present is an endless sea of pink?

**Jennifer:** I think the pink will remain. Nerf has been the leader in foam darts guns for years. In 2013, Nerf launched their Rebelle line of weapons targeting girls. The weapons are aqua, pink, and purple. One particular weapon is disguised as a purse. The Nerf's Secret Agent Messenger which allows girls to write secret messages on their darts and shoot it to their friends to read using a special decoder. It's what girls are attracted to. They want to be tough, but feminine. And they want to send their friends nice messages, not kill them.

**Tracy:** You spoke there, Dr Hart about children using war toys. Parents and educators often balk at guns and knives, or bows and arrows. What are your thoughts on children using war toys?

**Jennifer:** It is completely understandable that many parents are afraid of allowing their children to have swords or guns or bows and arrows. For many of those weapons the reality is that the purpose is to shoot or kill or injure something. Again this is play and children are experimenting with their surrounding and their environment and what they see in the world. Our boys know that weapons exist and they are mimicking violence to make sense of the world and make sense of what these weapons are all about. So allowing these children to have sword fights or light sabre fights or Nerf gun fights is within the realm of pretend play or socio-dramatic play. The developmental benefits that I have mentioned before will have opportunities to gain these valuable skills regardless if they are using a gun a sword or if they are just wrestling.

**Tracy:** And again it is not going to encourage boys to as an adult to take up arms?

**Jennifer:** There is no research to support that as far as I know and I will continue to keep looking. I engaged in a lot of gun play with my brother and types of play that would be considered aggression. I know many of other adults as well and so I think many adults know at least one person in their life, who played in such ways, even experimented with BB guns or cap guns or things like that and have not acted serious violent due to their play as a young child with weapons.

**Tracy:** Well, Dr Hart it is a fascinating area of research that you are engaged in. I would just like to finish today on your thoughts towards education policy and the future of curriculum in Queensland and indeed Australia. How would you like to see your research implemented within the classroom?

**Jennifer:** I would absolutely love to see playful aggression supported in schools in some capacity. Every school has its individual preferences and culture so the suggestion that I am giving today with supervision and play space and rules may or may not apply to those individual settings. So it is up to those educators to really define what is appropriate within their physical setting in addition to within their community with their families. First and foremost, I would love to see a very clear differentiation between play aggression and serious aggression within school behaviour policies. The vast majority of policies across Australia have lumped characteristics of playful aggression such as rough and tumble play or wrestling or play fighting with sticks into the category of serious aggressive and violent behaviour. So unfortunately our boys are being penalised and having severe consequences at times, to the point of expulsion for picking up a stick and pretending that it is a light sabre.

**Tracy:** You speak about the rights of children and that you are an advocate for their right to play in the way that they would like to. Can you just finish today by telling us your feelings towards being an advocate for children?

**Jennifer:** I would like to make it clear that I don't necessary encourage any child to play with weapons or pounce on their mates. It is an individual preference. It is a play choice. If I identify a desire, or a child expresses an interest and comes to me as an educator, I support them entering into the play, developing rules and being safe with this type of play. I support children's rights to play and advocate on their behalf for engaging in playful aggression.

**Tracy:** Dr Hart it has been a fascinating interview and thanks for joining me today.

And I hope that you have enjoyed my interview today with Dr **Jennifer** Hart from the University of the Sunshine Coast. If you would like to read Dr Hart's research papers visit the University website and follow the links. This podcast was produced by **Tracy** Burton featuring music by Paul Cusick. Thanks for listening.