

Is Good Old-Fashioned Horseplay Worth the Occasional Black Eye?

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By Laura Hudgens



Last week while I was at work, I glanced down at my phone and saw that I had a missed call from a number that I both recognized and dreaded – my son's school.

My first thought was that Johnny was sick – probably a stomach bug. (Why is it always a stomach bug?) I called back, and while I waited for the school secretary to pick up, I began doing a mental review of the last four days. Where had he been (besides school) that was particularly germey, and when was the last time I drank after him?

Just as I was beginning to feel a bit queasy myself, a text came in from Johnny's teacher. False alarm. He did not have a stomach bug. He had a black eye – a bad one.

Immediately my own nausea subsided. I was relieved. Once his teacher assured me that he was fine and that his injury was not the result of a fight, I was thrilled! (I was also relieved that I did not have 24 gruesome stomach bug hours ahead of me.)

I was happy that my son was not seriously injured. But I was thrilled because Johnny got his black eye on the playground. On the playground! That could only mean two things: 1) It was recess, and 2) there was horseplay. Yes!

For the most part, school has been a positive experience for my kids. They have had great teachers and made wonderful friends. But one thing I have worried about is how little time the children get for recess and how many restrictions there are on that time. Most days, if they are lucky, the kids at my son's school get one 20-minute recess. That is precious little time for energetic 9-, 10- and 11-year-olds to run, play, and socialize. Of course if it's raining or below 40 degrees, that 20 minutes is spent indoors.

Still, Johnny's black eye is a good sign for the kids at his school. While some schools are banning balls and limiting or prohibiting things like tag and cartwheels, Johnny got his black eye while playing football with his buddies – a very physical game (even the touch version) but something boys have played on playgrounds and empty lots across the country for generations.

Were Johnny and his friends playing rougher than school rules technically allow? Maybe. I don't know exactly how it happened, but I do know that they were playing rough enough for Johnny to get a pretty good shiner. And I know that that kind of play is good for him. I also know, despite recent trends to make recess "safer," that black eyes, broken bones, bruises, and stitches are all a part of growing up – or at least they should be. Of course no one likes to see their kids hurt, but as my mother used to say, "That's what you get when you play rough."

I say it to my kids, too, but it's not a warning. It's just a fact. The truth is, rough play is actually good for kids for a lot of reasons. It helps burn off energy. It can build physical fitness. And it's fun. But rough play also teaches kids three very important lessons – bravery, toughness, and healthy fear. It takes bravery to attempt a running cartwheel, to jump off something high, or to risk being "it" to "unfreeze" a friend in a game of tag. It's true that any one of these activities can result in injury. That's why it takes guts to attempt them – a willingness to take a risk. And when kids succeed in these minor acts of bravery, they are emboldened to try other things. They gain confidence to succeed in other ways.

Rough play also teaches toughness. Scraped knees, bloody noses, and black eyes are all "job hazards" of childhood. Through these minor injuries kids learn that some things are simply worth the pain. That's true on the playground, and it's true in life. Whether it's running a 5K, having a baby, or being king of the mountain, some things are worth the pain. And some aren't...

Johnny was proud of his black eye. We sent pictures to his cousins and to his brother in college. It was a badge of honor at school. But if he had broken an arm and been sidelined for the rest of baseball season, he might not have been quite so pleased with himself. He would have learned the hard way that his actions can sometimes have unpleasant consequences. And that, too, would have been a good lesson. Sometimes a childhood injury is just the thing to instill a little healthy fear into a child and to teach him both to test and respect his own limitations.

In a perfect world our kids would never get hurt. But this world is far from perfect. Hovering over our children and sheltering them from some of childhood's favorite pastimes, might prevent a few black eyes, but it won't keep them from getting hurt – not in the long run.

So, yes. I was thrilled when my son came home with a black eye because it meant that he goes to a school where kids are still allowed to get a little wild – to be kids and to play games that are fun, physical, and character-building. To me, that's worth a black eye every now and then.