How to Bring “Big Body Play” Into a Kid’s School Day

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Many teachers, parents, and other caregivers think of outside time as a chance for kids to “burn off some energy” or “get their wiggles out.” But those phrases overlook the benefits children get from active, energetic play.

“Big body play”—play that involves actively and energetically using your whole body—isn’t just something you let kids do so they can concentrate on learning afterwards. Big body play is a treasure-trove of learning experiences in and of itself.

In big body play, children learn to…

- manage their bodies, their senses, and their feelings;
- cooperate with peers, and take responsibility for themselves;
- recover from physical and emotional bumps and scrapes; and
- stretch their brains by taking risks and trying new things.

It’s easy to talk about “burning off energy”—after active play children tend to be calmer and better-regulated for a while. But “burn off energy” implies that physical energy is a bad thing that needs to be disposed of. Instead, imagine that using physical energy is like eating food. All kids need to eat. Some kids need to eat a lot, some only eat a little. Some kids like lots of different foods, some only like a few. Some do better when they snack through the day, some eat just a few big meals. But nobody can do good work when they’re hungry, and if you don’t get enough food, or get the food that’s right for your body, you’ll be grumpy and fidgety and distracted. The same is true of big body play. Kids may have different needs in terms of quantity and type and frequency of active play, but all kids need SOME active play. Finding the right big body play “diet” will help each child be healthy, happy, and self-regulated.

Some children are naturally inclined to run and climb, and don’t need input from adults. But many children benefit from access to a wide variety of options for big body play (so that they can choose what fits them) and the support of an involved adult (so they can feel comfortable taking risks).

Here are some creative big body play activities that an adult can play with groups of children or individuals. These are activities that I have collected and adapted from friends, colleagues, and schools over the years, and have used in many classrooms with children ages 2 to 5.

1. Crash Mat. One of the all-time biggest hits. Fold up a tumbling mat and stand it on end. One at a time children run as fast as they can and slam their bodies into the mat, knocking it to the

ground with a terrific bang! To add some variation, you can call out body parts ("Hit it with your head!") or styles ("Run backwards!").
**Pro-tip: 4 and 5 year olds may be able to stand in line; younger children may just need a clearly-defined area to stand in. A second adult can help regulate the kids who are waiting, if the group is large.*

2. Tiger Stripe Races. For a game that takes less exertion for the adult, grab one black marker and one orange one (washable, please), and find yourself a nice open place to sit. Any child who runs all the way around, say, the whole climbing structure gets a stripe on their arm. (Roaring is optional.) Occasional calls of "Faster, tigers!" will keep everyone moving. Some kids will do so many laps, there'll be no more room on their arms!
**Pro-tip: It's easiest to give a black and orange stripe simultaneously by just holding both markers side-by-side. It's easiest to give the stripes at all if kids are wearing short sleeves.*

3. Tickle Tree. "I am the tickle tree! If you come near, I will tickle you, with my tickling leaves, and my tickling branches!" Kids will gigglingly zoom by as you reach your waving arms to tickle. It's like tag, but you don't have to run! And it's a great one for self-regulation: if children don't want to be tickled, they just don't come within arm's reach.
**Pro-tip: Choose your spot strategically. If you plant yourself (pun intended) in an open space, kids will just gather in a ring around you, which is no fun. Choose a narrow passage somewhere, with just enough clearance for kids to scoot by out of your reach. They'll run by every time.*

4. Rope Games. The classic, of course, is Tug-o-War. You can get a bunch of children on each side, but it works surprisingly well to have a teacher on one side and all the kids on the other. Calling something like, "Don't you pull me to the fence! I'm gonna pull you all to the slide!" will help them stay organized. Younger children (2's and 3's) have a hard time pulling in the same direction as each other, so for them it works well to tie one end somewhere solid. You hold the other end, and the kids hang on in the middle and pull every which-way. I like to shake the rope while shouting, "You kids you! You give me back my rope!" Be careful not to let the rope get too close to the ground—any kids who get on top can get flipped off it. Ropes can also be used to climb up slides, to haul heavy things (see below), and to construct ad hoc swings.
**Pro-tip: A long, cotton-fiber rope is the most versatile and comfortable to use with children. Synthetic-fiber climbing ropes are excellent, but expensive. Hemp-fiber ropes are a good sensory experience, but difficult to tie knots in. Don't use cheap plastic ropes from the hardware store; they can injure hands.*

5. Newspaper Crash. You know how the superhero The Hulk just smashes straight through walls? You can give kids that sense of power too! Two adults hold a sheet of newspaper tight, vertically like a wall, and kids take turns running straight through it! It's a little scary the first time or two, but soon they realize it feels AMAZING. Of course, at the end of the game you'll have accumulated a huge pile of torn up paper. Give the kids one minute to make newspaper balls, and then everyone gets to throw them at each other—snowball fight! Finally, bring out a trash-can and have everyone play newspaper basketball until you're all cleaned up.

**Pro-tip: You'll go through newspaper faster than you can believe. Lay all the sheets out flat before you begin, and start with a pile that strikes you as absurdly large.*

6. "Hard Labor." It surprises many people, but children love to work. Really! The trick is, the work has to be actually hard, and it has to actually be helpful. The easiest way is to give them heavy things to carry. Have the kids carry all the books you own outside for a "reading picnic," then carry them all back in when you're done. Have them fill buckets of water and carry them around to water all the trees and bushes. Have them carry gallons of milk from the car to the kitchen. Have them move large rocks or tree-stumps or tires to a new configuration on the playground. Once I asked the five-year-olds to move an adult-sized punching bag from one classroom to another; it took six of them fifteen minutes, but man did they feel good when they were done!
**Pro-tip: Success here relies on the children's perception of the usefulness of their work. Don't try to fool them with fake jobs—it can backfire. Find opportunities for genuine help, and then show them genuine gratitude.*

7. Ring Around the Rosie. It's a classic for a reason! This one involves surprisingly sophisticated coordination: walking sideways, holding hands, matching timing with other children. But the falling down and the camaraderie are so fun that everyone stays motivated.
**Pro-tip: Do you know the second half? "The cows are in the meadow/Eating buttercups/Thunder! Lightning!/We all jump UP!"*

8. Steamroller. Have all the kids lay down on their tummies side-by-side, as close together as they can. Then help the child on the end roll sideways right over the top of everyone else, smooshing them all underneath. Repeat with each child down the line. This is a great one for kids who want that physical touch with other children, but lack the social skills to pull it off (think of that child who is always hugging kids who don't want to be hugged).
**Pro-tip: You can help turn the "implied consent" of this game into "explicit consent." Make sure you let kids know, "If you lay down here, that means you want someone to roll over you."*

9. Go Away Come Back! A child is sitting in your lap. "Go away, you! Get out of here!" you say. They stand up and take a step away. You pull them back to your lap, shouting, "No, come back, come back!" Repeat until you're sick of it. This game is, needless to say, hilarious.
**Pro-tip: This is a great game for children to learn the intricacies of social interactions and irony in verbal communication. To help, make sure you are explicit about when you are and are not playing. Use an exaggerated voice when the game is going on, and give a clear "One more time and then we're stopping" before you finish.*

10. Jiggles. Have a child stand facing you, hold them with one hand under each armpit, and jiggle them forward and back as fast as you can. Start with brief, gentle jiggles, and ask if you should jiggle harder or longer—kids will tell you exactly what the right level is for them.
**Pro-tip: This works best at about three years old. With younger children you have to be more careful of injuring them; older children are too big to jiggle without wearing yourself out!*

11. The Knock-Down Mat. For advanced players only! “This is the knock-down mat! If you come on the mat, I will knock you down!” Pretty self-explanatory. Don’t worry, you’re not body-slamming kids. You’ll naturally modulate it for each child—some you can bump pretty hard; others you’ll almost hold their torso and lay them down—depending on their needs. It’s a great activity for self-regulation—if they don’t want to be knocked down, they simply step off the mat. But some really DO want to be knocked down, and will come back over and over.
**Pro-tip: Make it clear that this is not wrestling—the grown-up is the only one knocking people down. Also, you probably want to limit the number of kids who can play at a time, until you get comfortable regulating their falls.*

Good preschool teachers know that outside time isn’t recess, and it isn’t a time for teachers to stop attending to children. **Use creative big body play as an opportunity for learning and interaction, and you and the children will both get the most out of it!**