



## Brief report: Play fighting to curb self-reported aggression in young adolescents



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### ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effects of play fighting on aggressive behaviors. It was hypothesized that the teaching of play fighting during physical education lessons could reduce self-reported aggression in a group of adolescents to a greater extent than playing volleyball (a low physical contact activity). Participants were 210 young adolescents (mean age = 13.27, SD = 0.48 years) from 10 classrooms that were randomly assigned to an 8-lesson play fighting session or to traditional volleyball lessons. They filled in the 12-item short version of the Aggression Questionnaire (AQ-12) pre- and post-interventions. The play fighting group showed a significant reduction in all the four subscales of the AQ-12 (Cohen *d* ranging from 0.61 to 0.67), while participants in the volleyball group did not. Results suggest that play fighting might provide useful contents in a physical education curriculum, with possible reduction in aggressive behavior.

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There are numerous definitions of aggression, but generally it is interpreted as disruptive behavior which involves the intent to inflict harm on others (Archer & Coyne, 2005) and that can be either impulsive (reacting to a trigger) or proactive (premeditated) (Zahat & Melzer-Lange, 2011).

Aggression is one of the most common antisocial behaviors in school (Craig & Harel, 2004). School aggression requires great attention, and peer aggression among adolescents is associated with a wide range of problems, impacting negatively on well-being and on the health-related quality of life both for victims and perpetrators (Schlack, Ravens-Sieberer, & Petermann, 2013), and for witnesses (Rivers, Poteat, Noret, & Ashurst, 2009). Teachers struggle with the question of how to cope with and to treat aggressive behavior patterns, pointing to a need for innovative, cost-effective interventions (Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008; Shechtman & Ifargan, 2009). Prevention programs directed at all the students, not only to the more problematic individuals, has been recognized as being the most effective (Hahn et al., 2007), and there is the call for interventions that are able to identify theory-driven constructs that can reduce aggressive and violent behaviors (Domino, 2013).

Positive Youth Development (PYD) programs are examples from the social-emotional learning theory designed to promote healthy outcomes by strengthening intellectual, social, physical and emotional competencies (Damon, 2004). Holt (2008) identified physical activity and sport participation as useful experiences for PYD, both in the traditional form and in structured programs specifically aimed at developing different components of youth wellbeing. Positive results on different psychological and social aspects have been reported in previous studies on physical activity and sport participation among adolescents (Brunelle, Danish, & Forneris, 2007; Ullrich-French & McDonough, 2013).

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Play fighting is a particular form of physical activity that is often vigorous, intense and rough, which requires very physical ways of interacting and learning by means of patterns with unique characteristics, such as running and chasing, fleeing, grappling, kicking, wrestling, open-palm tagging, swinging around and falling to the ground, often on the top of each other (Carlson, 2011). Play fighting may resemble, but does not generally involve, real fighting (Humphreys & Smith, 1987; Schafer & Smith, 1996). To play fight, players have to assume inherently fair behavior: they can play rough without injury only when they are able to control excessive physical aggression, and to respect the opponent and the rules of the game (Olivier, 1993). Moreover, play fighting requires participants to establish bodily contacts and to constantly touch one other. Here, physical contact has been seen to positively influence mood, reduce stress (Field, 2001) and to facilitate cooperative behaviors (Bohm & Hendricks, 1997).

Play fighting could be considered as the structured form of the spontaneous Rough-and-Tumble (R&T) play that characterized childhood (Lillard et al., 2013) and has been considered as a part of “lessons in life” (Jarvis, 2006). The distinct functional significance of R&T play is suggested by two arguments (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998): it peaks during the middle childhood period, and it is a distinctive form of behavior, similar to real fighting, but it is not correlated with and does not escalate to a level of aggression for most children.

Whereas in childhood R&T play represents a dimension of social play composed of physically vigorous behaviors in a friendly context and related to popularity, in young adolescents it may be related more readily to aggression and dominance struggles (Pellegrini, 1995). In particular for boys, it is related to physical aggression and may be used as a way of establishing peer status in the form of dominance, whereas girls play rough with boys in the form of an early relatively low-risk form of heterosexual interaction (Pellegrini, 2003). For this reason, physically vigorous episodes in young adolescents may be associated with a slightly socially flexible attitude due to a lack of adequate social play opportunities during childhood.

Increasing the opportunities for collaborative and opposition play in the school environment respond to concerns about a perceived deterioration in the socialization and mental health of youth (Jarvis, 2006). Due to its peculiar physical and psychological features and its behavioral antecedents, play fighting in structured and supervised settings may be an effective activity to promote social and emotional skills, which can in turn be helpful in preventing self-perceived aggression among young adolescents, thereby meeting the aims of PYD programs.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effects of a short physical education program based on play fighting on self-reported aggression in a group of young adolescents, considering possible gender differences. Since play fighting could be a structured and supervised form of the spontaneous R&T play, and considering its relevant characteristics as predictors of social competence (Pellegrini, 1995), we hypothesized that teaching play fighting could reduce self-reported aggression more than other traditional physical education contents.

## Method

### Participants

The participants were 8th grade students from 10 classrooms of two similar suburban junior high schools in North-East Italy. The sample consisted of 210 students (89 girls, 121 boys) aged between 13 and 15 years (159 students were 13-year-olds, 50 were 14 and 3 were 15;  $M = 13.27$ ,  $SD = 0.48$  years).

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the schools involved prior to data collection. Students and parents provided their written consent in order for students to participate in the study. Participation was voluntary and students' responses were kept anonymous and confidential.

## Materials

The 12-item short version of the Aggression Questionnaire (AQ-12) proposed by Bryant and Smith (2001) was used. This derives from the 29-item AQ (Buss & Perry, 1992; Buss & Warren, 2000) which is one of the most popular self-report measures of aggression, widely used and extensively validated with different samples and in different countries (Gerevich, Bácskai, & Czobor, 2007). The short version consists of three items for each scale: physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger, and hostility, with physical and verbal aggression representing the instrumental or motor component; anger representing the affective or emotional component; and hostility representing the cognitive component. The AQ-12 was chosen because it does not contain negative items. This is more appropriate when respondents are young and may not have a sufficient level of verbal reasoning to be able to invoke a double negative logic (Marsh, 1986, 1996).

The order of items adopted by Bryant and Smith (2001) was used, and corresponding questions from the Italian version of the 29-item AQ (Fossati, Maffei, Acquarini, & Di Ceglie, 2003), were selected. Participants were asked to rate each item on a scale from 1 (*Not at all like me*) to 5 (*Completely like me*) according to Ang (2007).

### Procedure

The activities were conducted by two trained researchers during the scheduled school time of physical education lessons. Physical education teachers responsible for the classrooms were also present during the intervention. Assessments were conducted between 3 and 5 days pre- and post-intervention.

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