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Differences between play fighting and real fighting as a function of children's age, gender and status

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Researchers like Aldis (1975), Smith (1997), Humphreys (1987) or Pellegrini & Blatchford (2000) have observed children's play in particular play fighting and rough-and-tumble play. Dimensions like behaviour, affectivity, ecology, number of participants among others have been used in order to allow looking children's rough play and decide if they are playing or having a real fight. For many educators is still very hard to decide what is happening and make the right decisions when they observe children in physical contact interactions.

Using peer nomination questionnaires 83 primary school children were selected from 304, in the categories Aggressor, Victim, Aggressive Victim, Withdrawal, Conflict Management and Observer. We observe and videotape the children during their recess time, and after each recess time we identified with participants help the incidents of Real Fight and Play Fight. The different situations were discussed in group with all the participants in the incident. This allowed us to understand the Real Fighting situations. The children nominated as aggressive (aggressor and aggressor victim) were involved in more play fight and real fight situations.

The careful observation of the videos allowed us to identify observable differences between Real Fight and Play Fight in dimensions like action plans, body parts, contact distance and occupied space. In Play Fight the children look for proximity, try to keep the game going on for long time, use their whole body, don't mind going to the floor. In Real Fight the children try to keep distance, make more use of hands and feet and avoid going to the floor. The children from different groups, ages and genders make different use of their bodies during play fight and real fight situations.

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