



Why Not Tickle My Child?

by Patty Wipfler

Tickling is one of those customary kinds of play that is handed down from generation to generation through our families. It is rarely questioned, but deserves to be thought about more carefully, as it's a form of play that can, despite good intentions, hurt a child.

To put tickling in a broader framework, it's one of the ways to play that puts people in touch with each other. It also is a dependable way to get lots of laughter rolling. So tickling looks, on the surface, like a kind of play that children enjoy, and that is good for them. And indeed, some children ask their parents for tickling games. We are glad to be asked—it feels great to have an instant way to laugh and be playful together.

But in my many years of listening to adults talk about the emotional challenges of their lives as children, tickling comes up again and again as an experience that has been hurtful. I've listened to a number of adults who can't relax when others are in close proximity to them. They can't sleep close to a trusted partner, for instance, or are internally on guard any time there's more than casual touching between them and someone they love.

When asked what they are afraid of, their memories go straight to times when they were tickled as children, and couldn't get the tickler to stop.

The foundations of healthy play

I don't think that most tickling in families is pursued to the level of abuse, but I do think that tickling can be replaced with healthier options. In healthy play, these ground rules are usually operating. These guidelines insure the fun. They make play an intelligence-building activity.

- Each child is respected.
- Each child has a way to succeed.
- Each child's contributions are acknowledged.
- Each child knows she is safe from criticism and belittlement.
- Each child can say what she thinks and wants. Her ideas may not be workable, and limits may need to be set, but the thoughts are welcome as a worthy contribution.
- No child is coerced into a powerless or subservient role in the guise of play.
- An adult is present or nearby, to insure that the play stays safe and inclusive.

- To promote laughter, the adults in the situation play the less powerful role, leaving the role of "the swift, the strong, the smart and the informed" to the children.

Where tickling falls short

The main thing that makes tickling problematic is that children may not be able to say when they want it to stop.

Laughter is an automatic response to being touched by a tickler—it's not a response that the child can opt out of. This puts the tickler in charge of how much or how long the child laughs. Most of us remember unpleasant or frightening times when we wanted a tickler to stop, but were laughing so hard we couldn't say it, or worse, we said, "Stop!" or tried to escape, and the tickler continued.

We adults don't read children's minds, but we often imagine that we can. So we usually think we're aware of what's too much tickling and when to stop. But it is possible to trap our children without knowing it.

We want to play and be close

Parents and children crave times together when there's lots of free-flowing laughter and playful contact. It's *so* good for us to play, *so* good for us to be in touch with each other. We parents become attached to tickling because it seems to be a handy shortcut to laughter. We long to know that our children are happy and love us, and tickling becomes our shortcut to this reassurance.

Rather than forcing laughter in this way, we can build our children's confidence if we will get down on the floor and invite them to be in playful physical contact with us. If we find ways to give them much of the power, our children will laugh and laugh. Games like "I have a hundred hugs for you!" or "Where's Jared? I know he's around here somewhere," or "Oh, no! I can't get this horsy rider off my back!" let children laugh and laugh as we try to catch them, or try to find them, or try to bounce them off our backs, and fail over and over. It requires more creativity than tickling, but allows us to tumble around, to burrow our heads in their tummies for a second here and there, and to manage a cuddle before they make another daring escape. We get our affection across without trapping our children. And we give them a chance to be inventive as they figure out a hundred ways to outsmart us.

But my child asks to be tickled

When tickling has been one of the main options for being playfully close in a family, children will ask for it. Their need to be close and to feel your enjoyment beaming toward them is stronger than their fear of being trapped by tickling. So they want it. When his Mom began to play without tickling him, one four-year-old I know told her, "I didn't really like it very much, but it was the only way you would play with me!"

One way to transition from tickling to tussling and playful contact that allows the child to be in charge is to pretend to tickle when tickling is requested. Wiggle your fingers close to your child's tummy or sides, and make your usual playful threats, but keep your hands an inch or two away from her body, letting her laugh

and laugh without taking the chance of trapping her. If your child tickles you in return, you can playfully writhe and try to get away—she's making you the victim in a role-reversal that lets her offload any tension she may feel about tickling. It's not fair, but she gets to really tickle, and you don't!

Other kinds of playful physical contact are great, if you offer your child the initiative

Our children do need us to be affectionate with them, and to be playfully persistent with our affection at times. It's one way to communicate that we're in love with them. Blowing raspberries on your child's tummy, nuzzling into her armpit, giving bucking bronco rides and nibbling fingers or toes are all affectionate moves that might bring a ticklish reaction. These kinds of play are fine as long as you let the play "breathe" after each affectionate move. You kiss your child's toes, and then let go and see what response she has. If she gets up and runs away, you can lumber after her on hands and knees, trying for a long time before you finally kiss a toe again, with lots of laughter in the chase. Or you bury your head in her tummy, then pull back and grin as she decides what she wants to do. If she laughs and lies there, waiting, you can try it again. Children love us to come close, to play games and to be playful. We just need to keep giving them chances to guide the play, so we don't become overbearing without knowing it.

Thoughtfulness about play with our children doesn't mean being extremely careful. It does mean putting in just a few guidelines that help us to balance the power between our children and ourselves while play proceeds. When we phase out tickling, we're able to phase in play that our children will invent, play that works better to expand their sense that we love and support them.