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# Risky Play Research Report

BECKY GATES CHILDREN'S CENTER



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# A Brief Message from the Research Team

Texas A&M University student researchers Paige Williams and Jennifer Daly joined Dr. Steven Woltering in the Neurobiological Lab for Learning and Development (NLD) on a 2021 CEHD Catapult Seed Grant Program. We wanted to explore the importance of play behavior in the development of self-regulation across cultural and socioeconomic contexts. As the team explored ideas, we pondered rough play, its risks, and its benefits which sparked a mission-driven project on risky play that set the tone for the remaining research. In the report, we share our vision, strategy, and commitment to helping move the needle on the importance of taking risks in play in early childhood.

This report demonstrates the NLD lab's understanding of the impact of kids and their play. Importantly, it also builds the parents' and practitioners' confidence in exploring risky play.



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# Research Goals

## **Parent perspectives on play behavior during early childhood: views and attitudes toward children's risky play with an emphasis on rough-and-tumble play (RTP).**



This research report investigates parents with children attending Becky Gates Children Center (BGCC) located in College Station, Texas on their perspectives on children's risky play. The problem with the risky play is it can bring questions and worries from parents, especially for programs or child centers that encourage children to engage in such behaviors. This study aims to understand parents' stance on risky play with an emphasis on rough and tumble play behaviors during children's play interactions. To the best of our knowledge, a limited number of studies have examined specific influences on parents' attitudes towards RTP as a form of risky play between children. This report centers on the key demographic information from parents and children, risk tolerance, specific domains of risk, and key themes/ideas from the selected open-ended responses on risks and rough and tumble play.

The BGCC Report goal is to cater to a variety of audiences, so it's best to read it accordingly. For example, the information gathered can assist in action plans for childcare centers looking to explore outside play or risky play activities that are in the interest of their beneficiaries. It can also benefit the parents of children who might prefer details of other parents' perceptions, while researchers might be more interested in the impact of the activities on their child's development, or the challenges they encountered and the lessons they learned from them.

We hope the information in this report provides a general understanding of parents' perspectives of risks and tolerance towards specific categories of risk play, We thank BGCC and Erica Ritter for their support and role in this study.

# Risky Play Background

"Risky play is defined as thrilling and challenging form of play where there is a risk of physical injury" (Sandeseter 2009; Obee et al., 2020). "

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Research has shown children experience several benefits from engaging in risk during play such as problem-solving skills and risk management (Sandseter 2009; Sandeseter & Kennair, 2011). Risk in the context of play is defined as "the challenges and uncertainties within the environment that a child can recognize and learn to manage by choosing to encounter them while determining their own limits" (Stone et al., 2020). Rough and tumble play (RTP) is described as a form of physical or social play characterized by vigorous behaviors of tumbling, wrestling, play fighting, and running that appear to be aggressive out of play contexts (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998), and is a type of risky play activity.



"Evolutionary benefits and functions of risky play include practicing and enhancing motor skills, improving complex social competencies and communication, and skill exploration (Sandester & Kennair, 2011)." Recent debates on play safety not only focused on the potentially harmful and injurious outcomes of risky play but also the beneficial effects of such play beyond enjoyable experiences. Risky play primarily takes place outdoors and children are free to explore adventurous physical activities. Benefits of risky, outdoor play include greater physical activity, less sedentary time, increased social health, and perceptual motor skills and spatial-orientation abilities (Stone et al., 2020).

# Parent Demographics

Social & Behavioral Qualitative Survey Study conducted on Texas A&M University Qualtrics site. 38 parents at Becky Gates participated in an online survey study. Participants received a \$10 dollar Amazon gift card.

The online survey questionnaire consisted of 130 questions that consisted of a variety of different response measures such as open-ended questions, Likert & scale responses, and short answers. The questionnaire took about an hour to complete. The following pages consist of demongraphics & findings from responses.

## Parent Gender

**Female, 24, (63.2%); Male, 14, (36.8%)**

## Household

**Two Parent Household, 36, (94.7%); Single Parent, 2, (5.3%)**

## Parent Income

**\$75,000-149,999, 18, (47.4%);  
\$35,000-74,999, 7, (18.4%);  
\$0-34,999, 6, (15.8%);  
\$150,000-249,999, 3, (7.9%);  
\$250,000-349,999, 4, (<4%)**

## Employment Status

**Employed, 23, (60.5%);  
Student, 8, (21.1%);  
Stay Home Parent, 5, (13.2%);  
Unemployed, 2, (5.3%)**

## Ethnicity

**White, 20, (52.6%); Asian, 11, (28.9%); Hispanic, 3, (7.9%); Black, 2, (5.3%); Middle Eastern, 1, (<4%)**





# Child Demographics

## Child Gender

Girl, 21, (60.5%); Boy, 17, (21.1%) = 38 total children

## Age of Child During Survey

Age 3, (31.6%); Age 2, (23.7%); Age 1, (21.1%); Age 4, (21.1%);  
Age 5, (2.6%)

## Birth Order

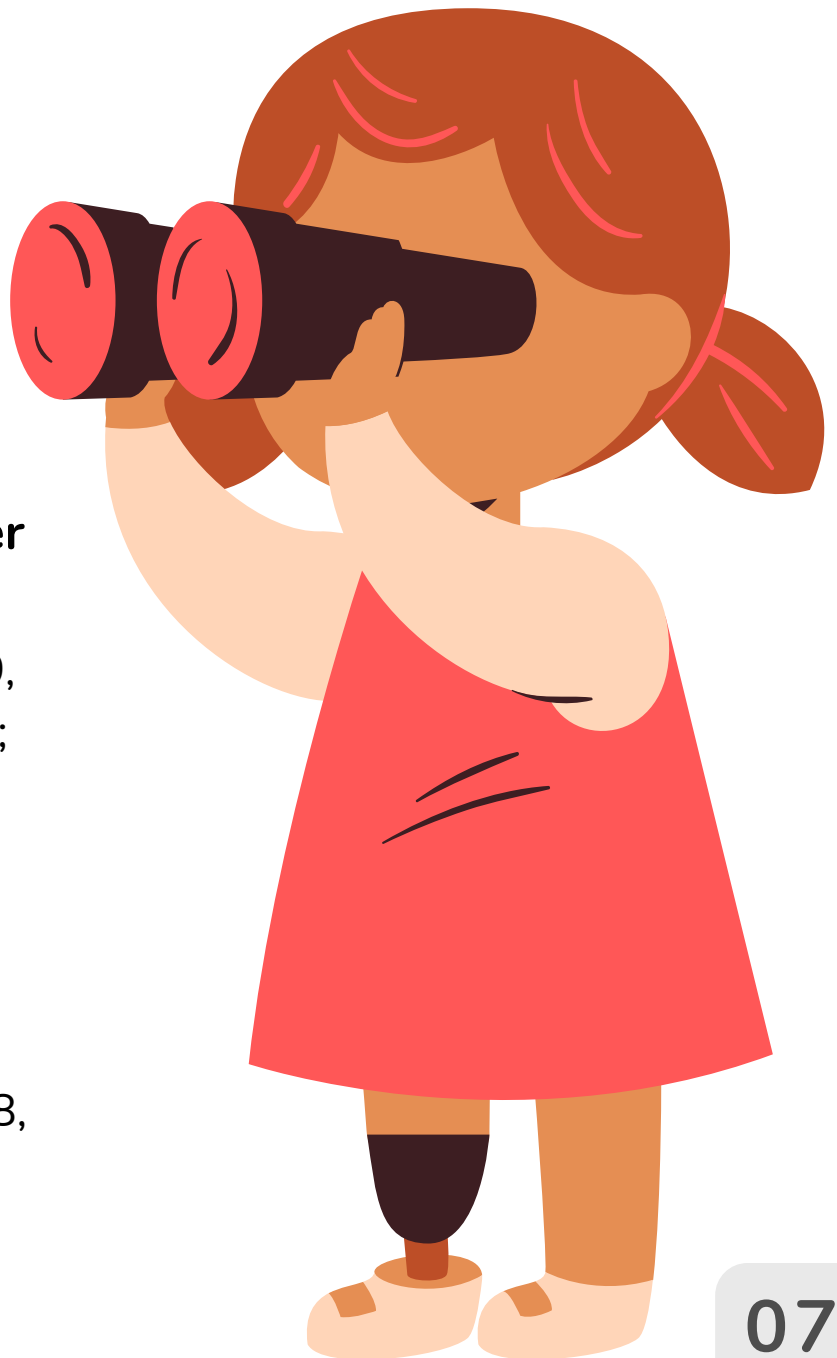
Only Child, 18, (47.4%)  
Firstborn, 11, (28.9%);  
Secondborn, 8, (21.1%);  
Thirdborn, 1, (2.6%);

## Where does your child prefer to play?

Backyard, 10, (26.3%); Home, 9, (23.7%);  
Playground, 9, (23.7%);  
Neighborhood Park, 9 (23.7%);  
Nature Woods, 1, (2.6%)

## Area kids grow up in

Suburban, 27, (71.1%); Urban, 8, (21.1%);  
Rural, 3, (7.9%)



# The Tolerance of Risk in Play Scale

The Tolerance of Risk in Play Scale-Revised (TRiPS-R) measures the degree to which parents allow their children to participate in risky play. TRiPS-R is a revised version of the original TRiPS (Hill & Bundy, 2014) which asks parents to indicate whether they will allow their child to participate in 31 of the risky play activities. TRiPS-R items are based on Sandester's (2007, 2009) six categories of risky play:

The description and examples of each category are as follows:

- Great heights: danger of injury from falling (e.g., climbing, jumping, balancing, hanging, and swinging).
- High speed: risk from uncontrolled speed and pace that may lead to a collision (e.g., swinging, sliding/sledding, or non-motorized vehicles, chasing).
- Dangerous elements: injury from falling into or from something or playing around in natural elements (e.g., trees, cliffs, water, fire).
- Dangerous tools/loose parts: danger of injury from sharp or heavy objects or use of dirty objects (e.g., sticks, tires, timber, "adult" tools).
- Rough-and-tumble play: risk from the possibility of children harming each other (e.g., play-fighting, wrestling, fencing with sticks).
- "Disappear"/ or get lost: children are unsupervised, alone, or lost for an extended period (e.g., roaming or exploring).



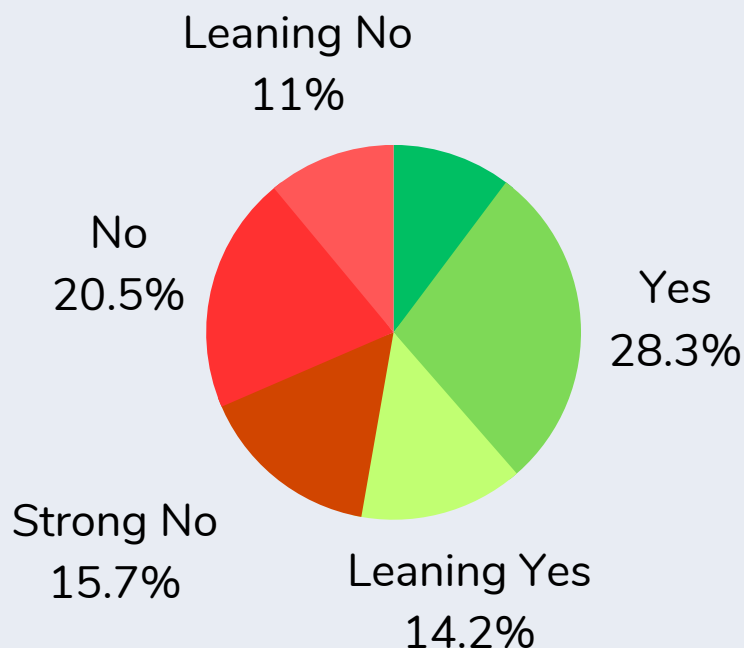


# Comfortable with [Heights] Girls and Boys

- TRiPS-R Great heights: Parents' comfortability with the danger of injury from falling (e.g., climbing, jumping, balancing, hanging, and swinging).
- Green color responses in pie graphs are (strong yes, yes, or leaning yes) and red are (strong no, no. or leaning no).
- \*'Note: Response categories left out were not endorsed (response less than <4%)

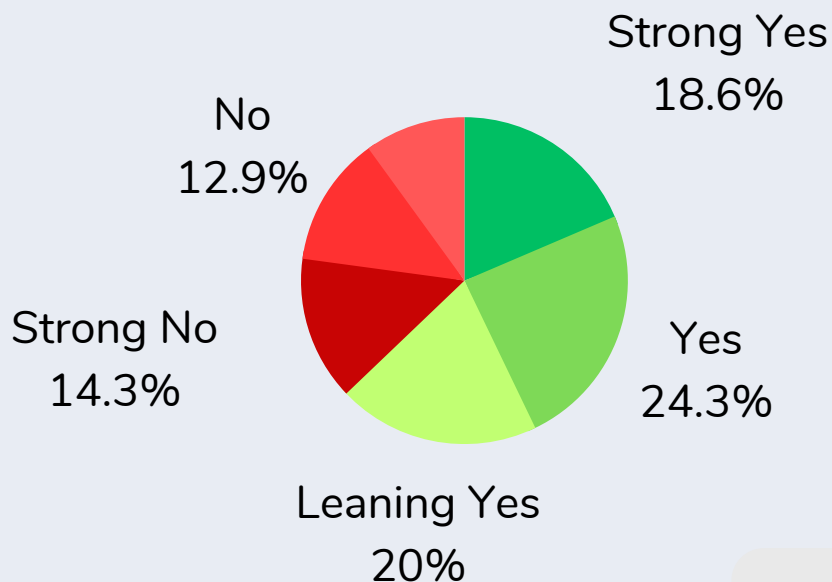
## Great Heights girls:

36 parents or 28.3% said yes to great heights with 18 parents or 14.2% marked leaning yes to letting the child climb a tree within their reach. 26 parents or 20.5% said no to great heights saying they would not let their child climb as high as she wanted in a tree.



## Great Heights boys:

17 parents or 24.3% said yes to great heights including letting a child balance on a fallen tree (3-4 feet) above the ground. Only 7 parents or 10% said leaning no to great heights for boys.

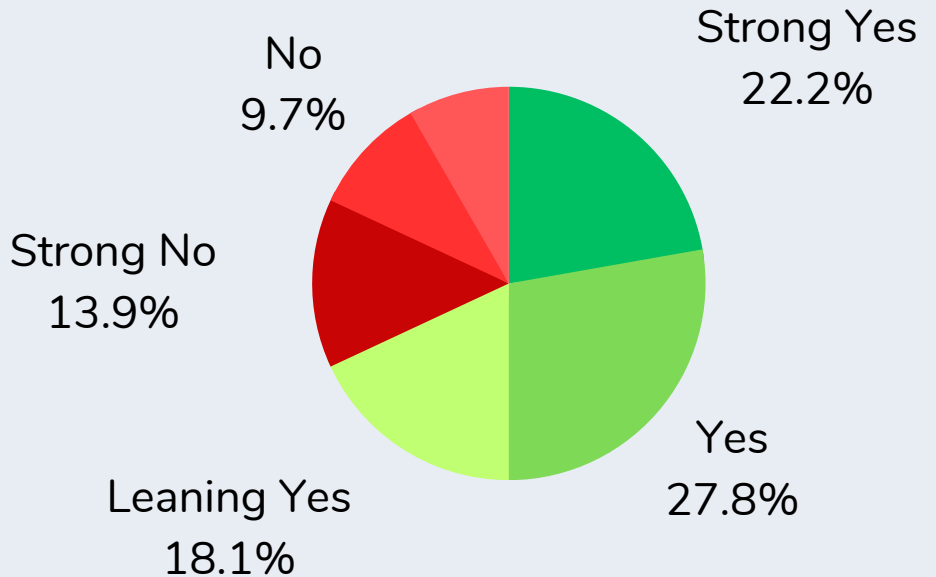


# Comfortable with [High Speed] Girls and Boys

- TRiPS-R High speed: Parents' comfortability with the risk from uncontrolled speed and pace that may lead to a collision (e.g., swinging, sliding/sledding, or non-motorized vehicles, chasing).

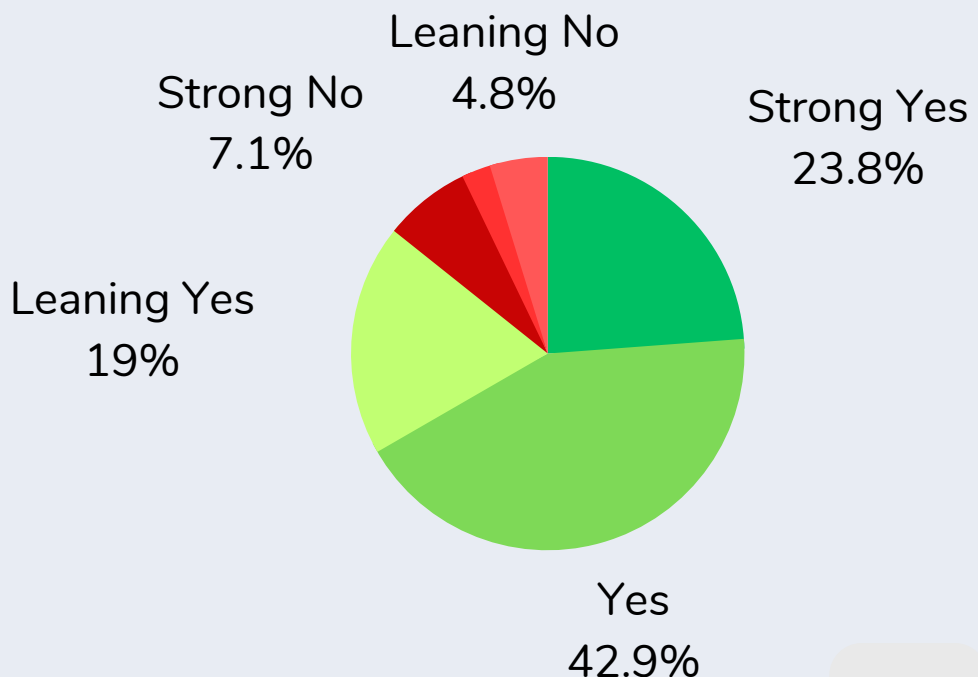
## High-speed girls:

20 parents or 27.8% said yes to high speed with 13 parents or 18.1% said leaning yes would allow their child to play chase with other children.



## High-speed boys:

18 parents or 42.9% mostly said yes to high speed with parents agreeing to let their child go down a slippery slope.

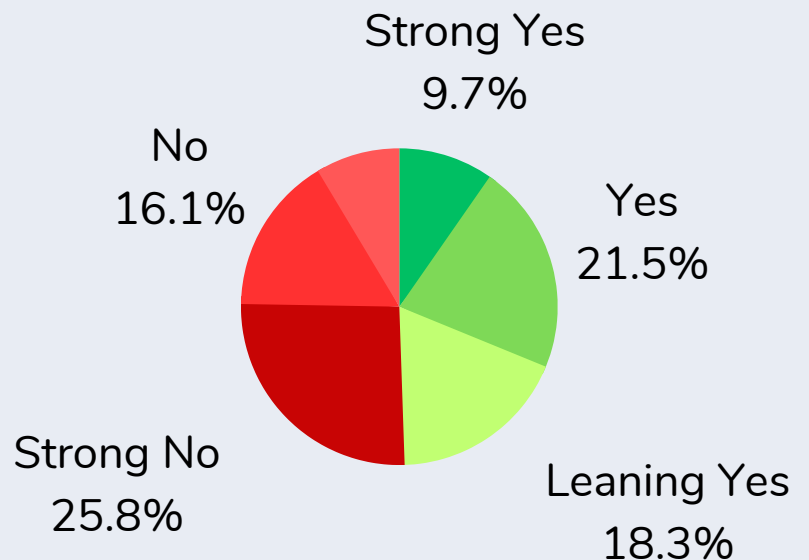


# Comfortable with [Elements] Girls and Boys

- TRiPS-R Dangerous elements: Parents' comfortability with the injury from falling into or from something or playing around in natural elements (e.g., trees, cliffs, water, fire).

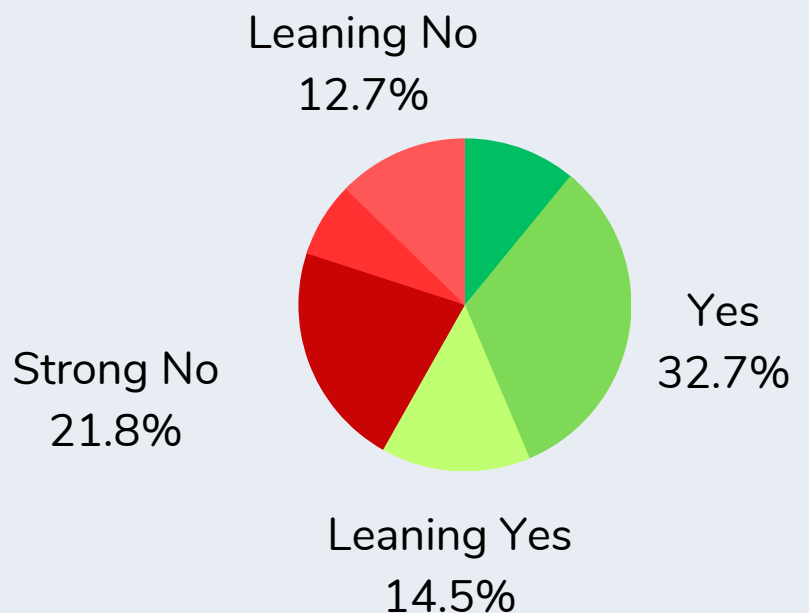
## Elements girls:

20 parents or 21.5% said yes to roasting marshmallows, and walking on a slippery surface. Playing on the beach near the water had similar yes and no results. 24 parents or 25.5% said strong no to letting the child light a fire independently.



## Elements boys:

18 parents or 32.7% said yes to roasting marshmallows, and walking on a slippery surface. 12 parents or 21.8% said strong no to playing by the beach alone and to letting the child light a fire independently.

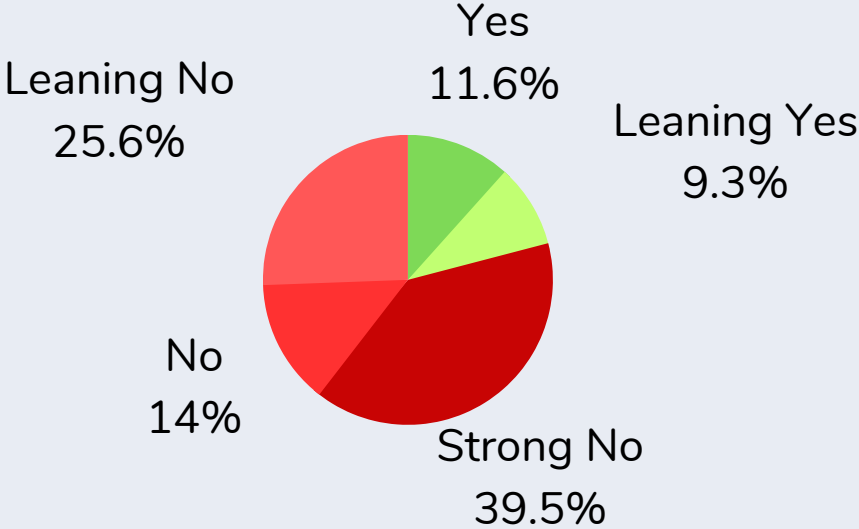


# Comfortable with [Tools] Girls and Boys

- TRiPS-R Dangerous tools/loose parts: Parents' comfort with the danger of injury from sharp or heavy objects or use of dirty things (e.g., sticks, tires, timber, "adult" tools).

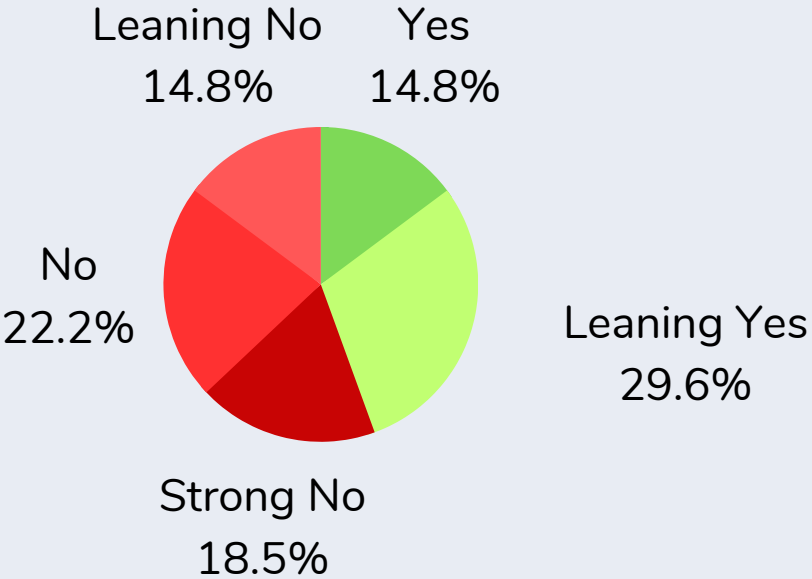
### Tools girls:

17 parents or 39.5% said strong no to using "adult tools" unsupervised and using equipment that can break a bone.



### Tools boys:

8 parents or 29.6% said leaning yes they would allow their child to play on equipment if they thought there was the potential he may break a bone. 6 parents or 22.2% said no to playing with adult tools unsupervised.

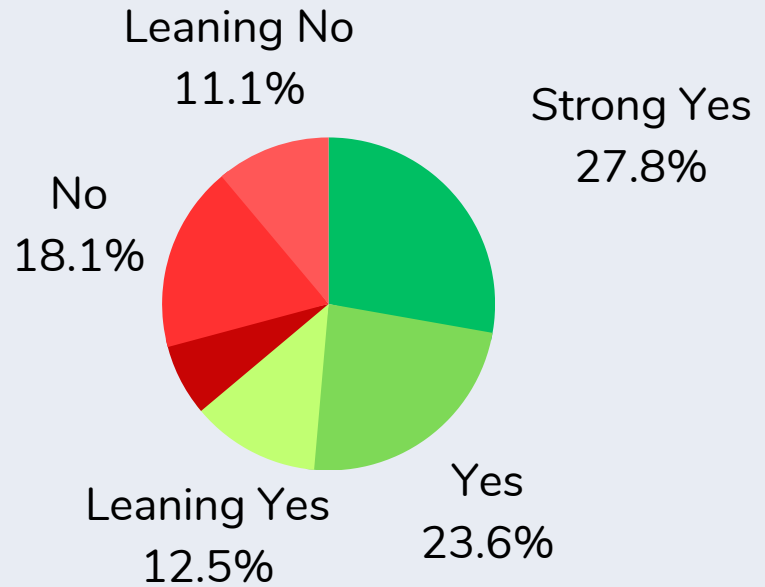


# Comfortable with [Rough and Tumble] Girls and Boys

- TRiPS-R Rough-and-tumble play: Parents' comfortability with the risk from the possibility of children harming each other (e.g., play-fighting, wrestling, fencing with sticks).

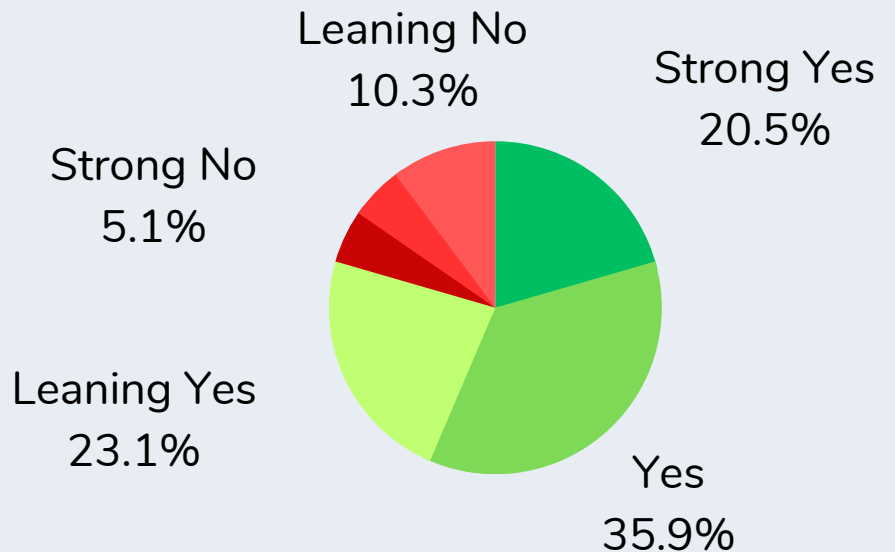
## Rough and Tumble Play girls:

20 parents or 27.8% said strong yes to RTP and playing with the scrape. 13 parents or 18.1% said no to play-fight.



## Rough and Tumble Play boys:

14 parents or 35.9% said yes to allowing their child to rough and tumble play and play with a scrape. Only 2 parents or 5.1% said strongly no to allowing their child to play-fight, testing who is strongest.

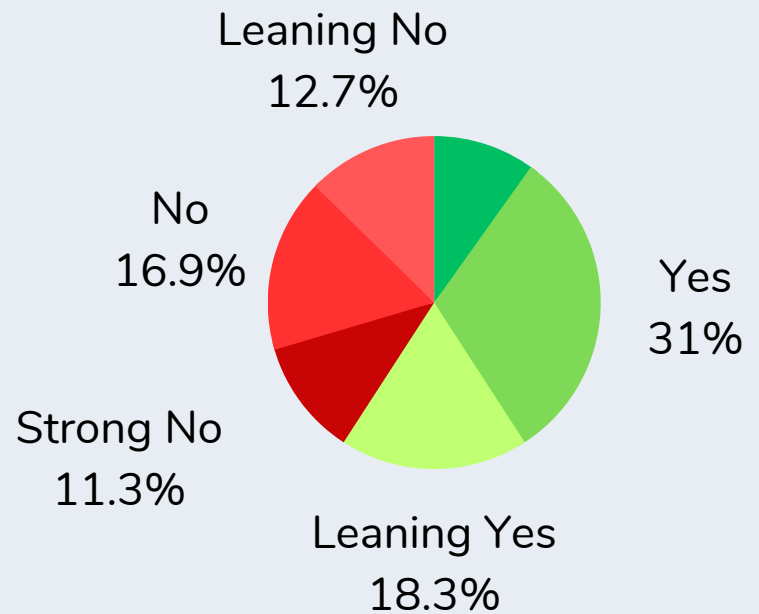


# Comfortable with [Disappear] Girls and Boys

- TRiPS-R “Disappear”/ or get lost: Parents' comfortability with their children unsupervised, alone, or lost for an extended period (e.g., roaming or exploring).

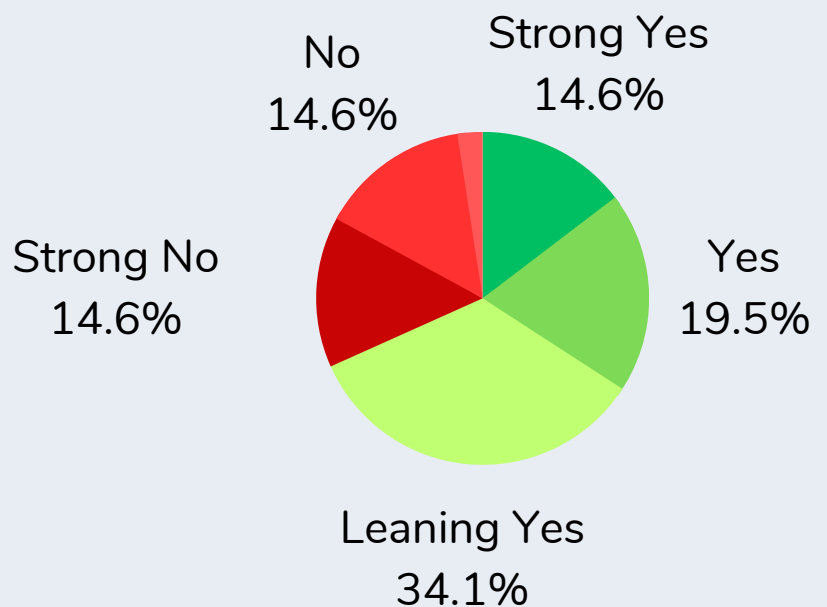
## Disappear girls:

22 parents or 31% said yes to allowing the child to play without constant supervision and afar but in view. 8 parents or 11.3% said strong no to allowing the child to play in the yard unsupervised.



## Disappear boys:

14 parents or 34.1% of parents said yes to allowing their child to play without constant supervision, yard unsupervised, and play in a new environment if can watch from afar. Only 6 parents or 14.6 said no to allowing child play unsupervised.





# Research Survey Findings

## The Rough-and-Tumble Play Quality (RTP-Q)

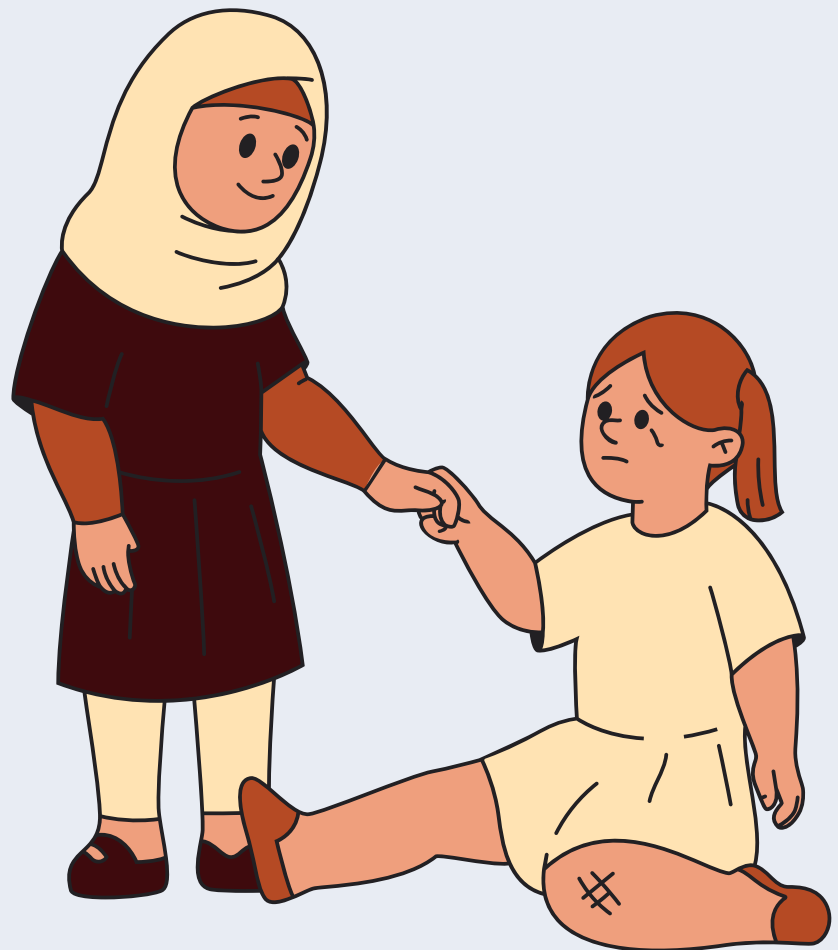
The measure was developed by constructing items related to the dimensions of warmth, control, sensitivity, winning and losing, physical engagement, and playfulness, captured as both individual and dyadic behaviors.

### RTP Scenario Subscales

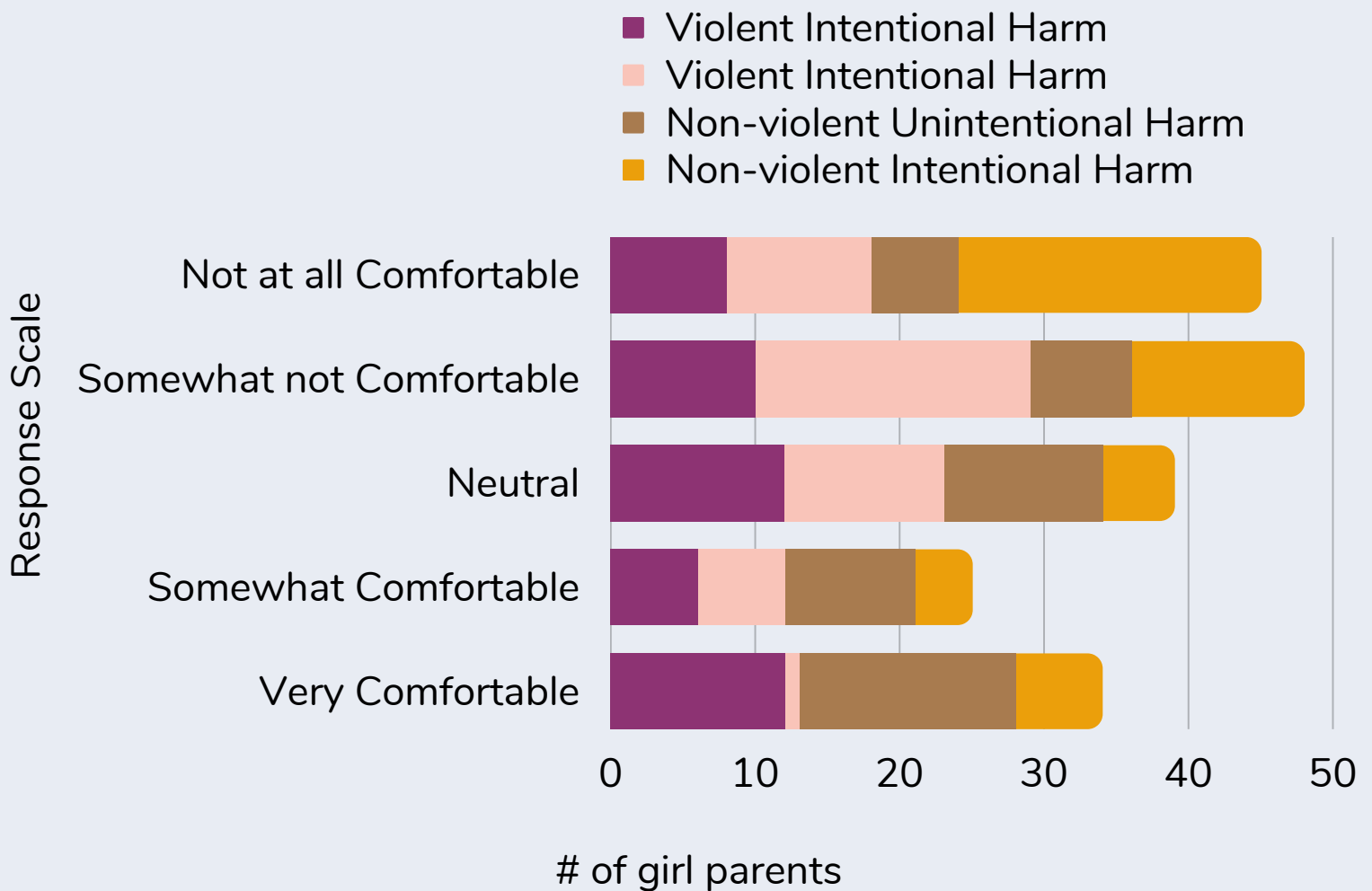
- Violent/Non-violent
- Intentional Action/Unintentional Action
- Negative Outcome/Neutral Outcome

### Response scale:

- 1- Not at all Comfortable
- 2- Somewhat Not Comfortable
- 3- Neutral
- 4- Somewhat Comfortable
- 5- Very Comfortable



# Girl Data: Rough-and-tumble play (RTP-Q)



## Girl Data Violent/Non-violent

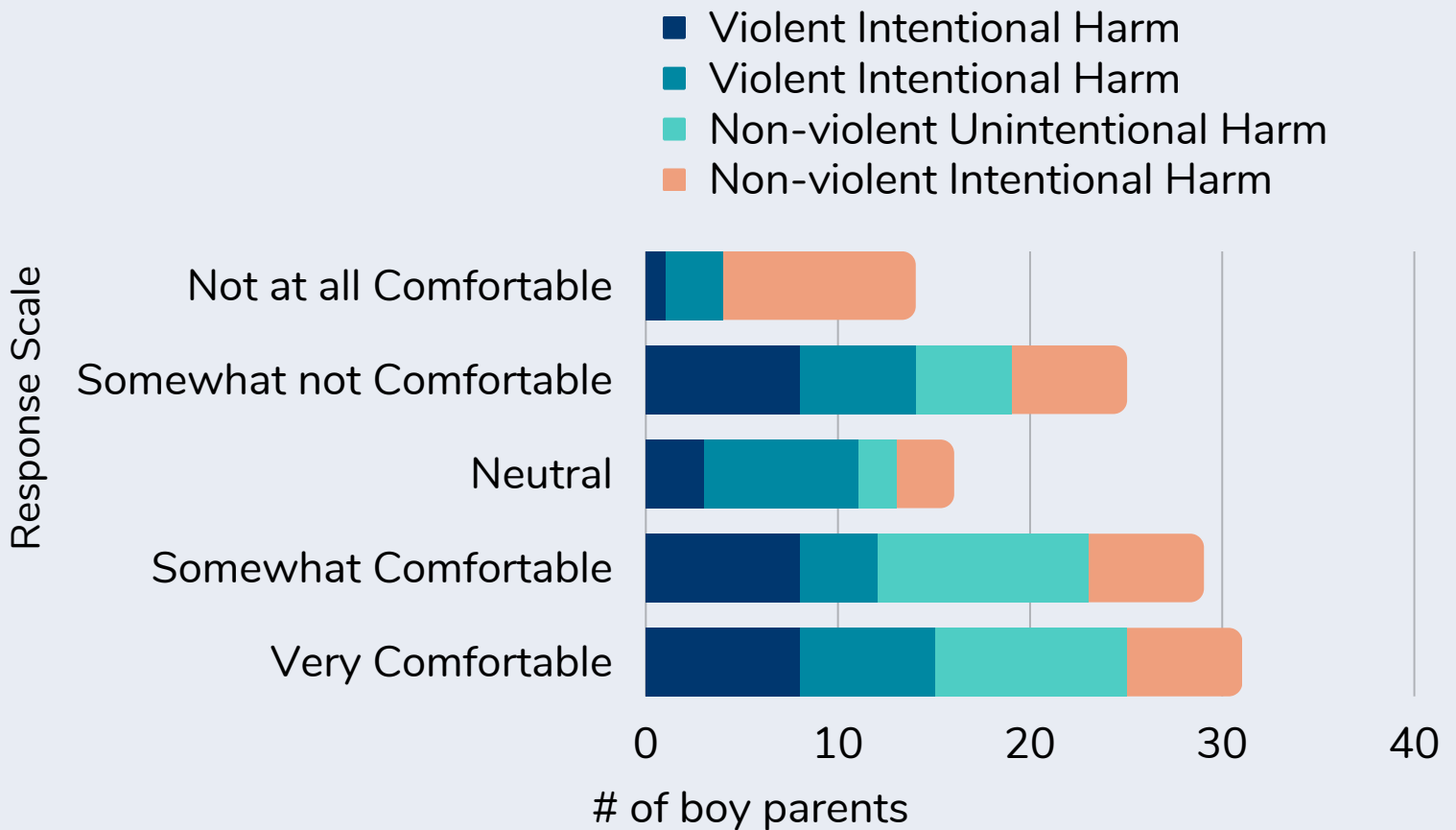
Violent Intentional harm (RTP Scenario) with rough playing tag on the ground and cops and robbers (12) parents noted neutral.

Violent Intentional harm (RTP Scenario) with slapping each other in the arm and the child trips another child then scrapes their knee (19) parents said they were somewhat not comfortable.

Non-Violent Unintentional harm (RTP Scenario) of dropping during piggyback rides and scratching during a tickle fight (19) parents said they were somewhat comfortable.

Non-Violent Intentional harm (RTP Scenario) with chasing and harshly bumping into each other and tossing 9-month-old baby brother on the bed. (21) Parents said they are not at all comfortable.

# Boy Data: Rough-and-tumble play (RTP-Q)



## Boy Data Violent/Non-violent

Violent Intentional harm (RTP Scenario) with rough playing tag on the ground and cops and robbers (8) parents split evenly into somewhat/very comfortable and somewhat not comfortable.

Violent Intentional harm (RTP Scenario) with slapping each other in the arm and the child trips another child then scrapes their knee (8) parents said they were neutral.

Non-Violent Unintentional harm (RTP Scenario) of dropping during piggyback rides and scratching during a tickle fight (11) parents said they were somewhat comfortable. None reported being not at all comfortable.

Non-Violent Intentional harm (RTP Scenario) with chasing and harshly bumping into each other and tossing 9-month-old baby brother on the bed. (10) Parents said they are not at all comfortable. 6 parents said somewhat comfortable.

# Research Survey Findings

## Benefits of Rough-and-Tumble Play Benefits

### \*Data from Both Boys and Girls

Do parents of both boys and girls understand/recognize or are in agreement with the developmental benefits of rough-and-tumble play?

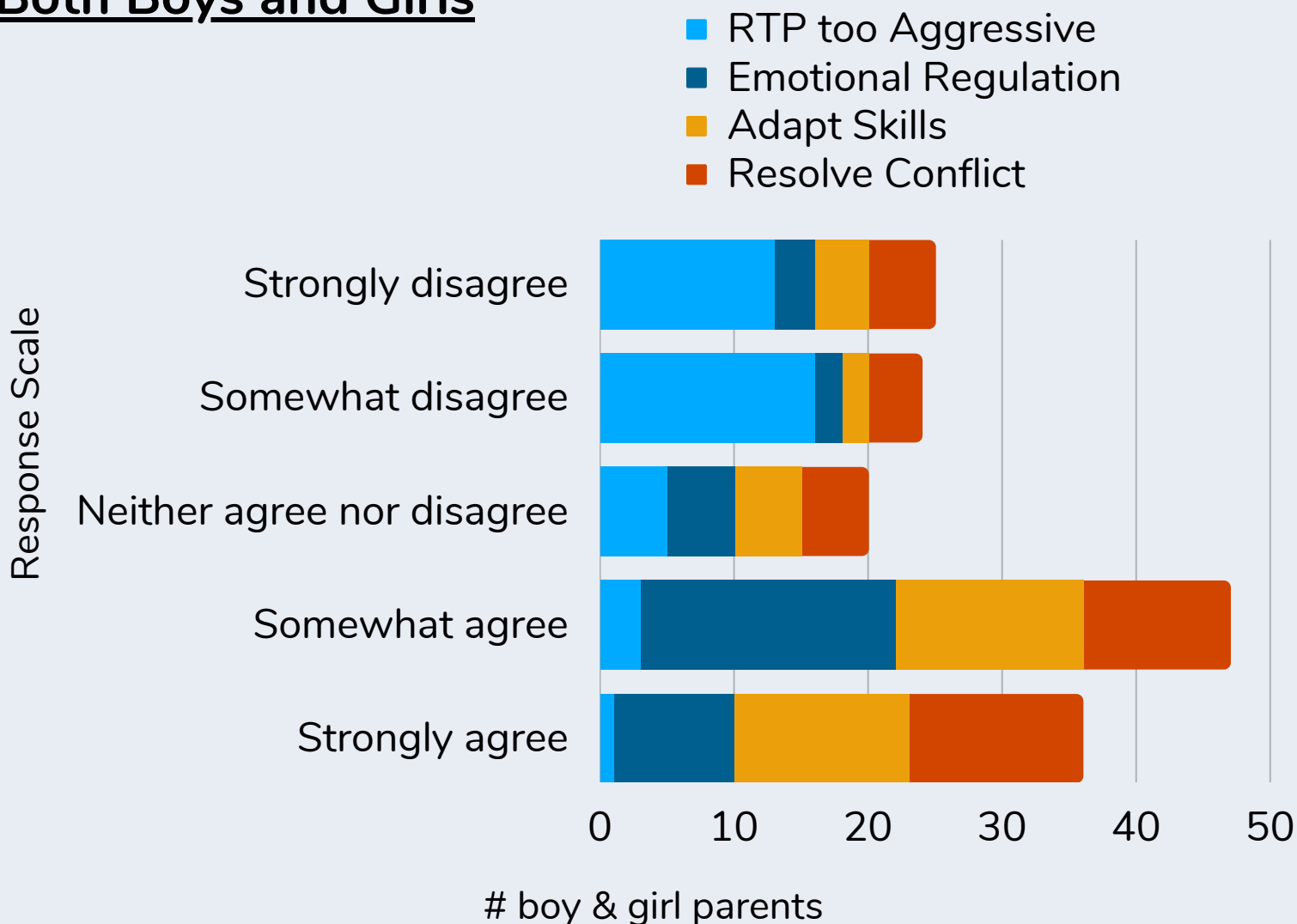
Response scale:

- 1- Strongly Disagree;
- 2- Somewhat Disagree;
- 3- Neither Agree nor Disagree
- 4- Somewhat Agree;
- 5- Strongly Agree



# Developmental Benefits of Rough-and-Tumble Play

## Both Boys and Girls



**Rough and Tumble Play is Too Aggressive:** 16/38 parents somewhat disagree and 13/38 parents disagree that RTP is too aggressive. Only 1/38 parent strongly agrees.

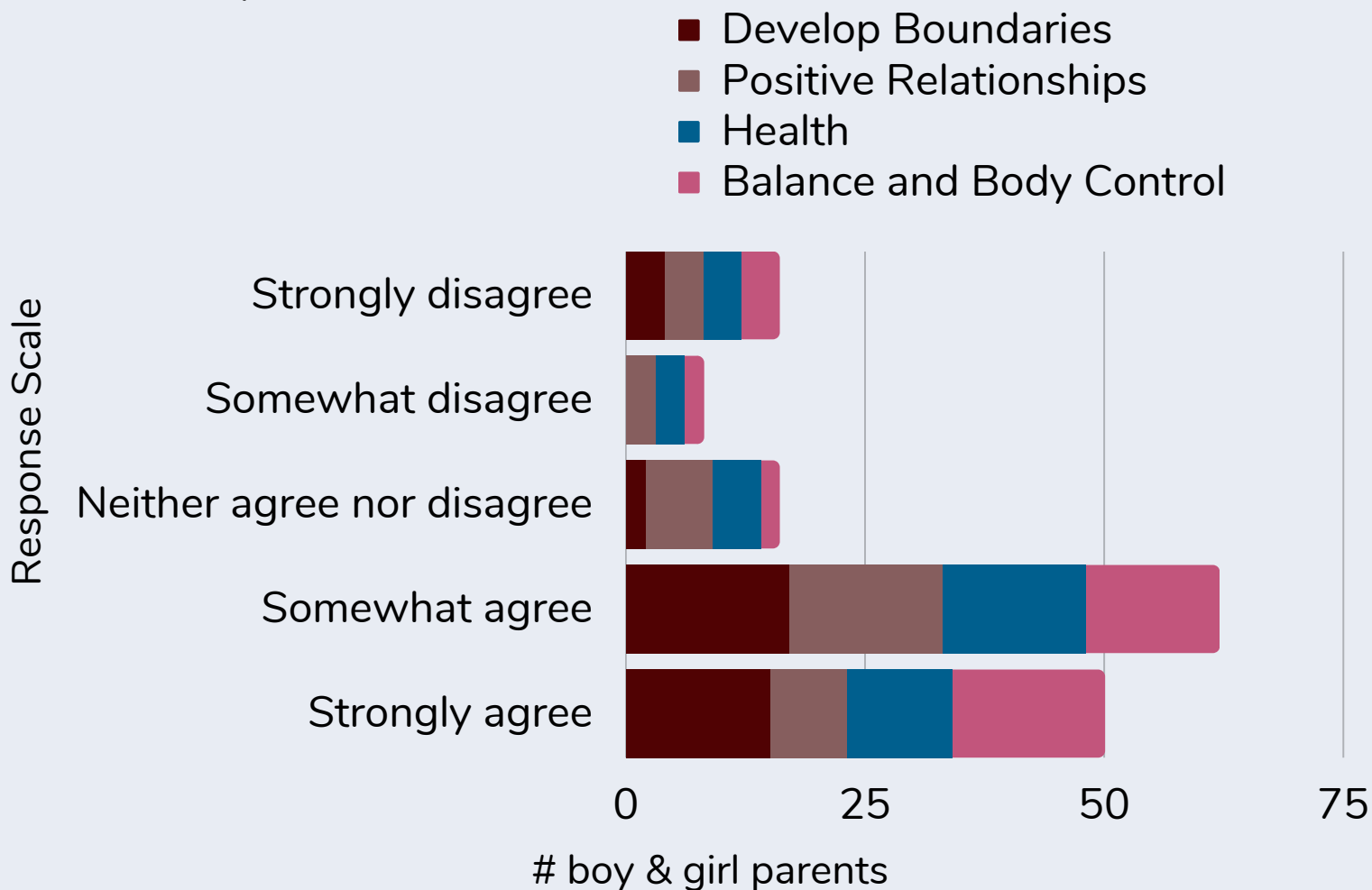
**Emotional Regulation:** 19/38 parents somewhat agree that Emotional Regulation is a benefit of RTP.

**Adapt skills:** 14/38 parents somewhat agree and 13/38 parents strongly agree that adaptive skills is a benefit of RTP.

**Resolve conflict:** 13/38 parents strongly agree that resolving conflict is a benefit of RTP.

# Developmental Benefits of Rough-and-Tumble Play

## Both Boys and Girls



**Develop Boundaries:** 17/38 parents somewhat agree and 15/38 parents strongly agree that RTP can help with developing skills with boundaries. Only 4/38 strongly disagree.

**Positive Relationships:** 16/38 parents somewhat agree that positive relationships are a benefit of RTP.

**Health:** 15/38 parents somewhat agree and 11/38 parents strongly agree that health is a benefit of RTP.

**Balance and Control:** 14/38 parents somewhat agree and 16/38 parents strongly agree that balance and control is a benefit of RTP.



# Survey Answer Responses

The following are selected short-answer responses from both girl and boy parents. We purposefully selected two hypothetical play interaction questions and one fear of risk perspective question. The examples of responses are categorized by positive, neutral, mixed, negative, and very negative themes. (All answers are anonymous)

**Question #1: Your child comes home with scratches from school and says another child hit her when playing. What is your reaction? (Common keywords: teacher, accident, purpose, question/ask the child)**

- Neutral: “If the wound is big, I will inform the teacher of the situation right away. I will ask the child about the situation in detail. I will help the child recover from her wound”. “I listen to the details first and tell my child what to do if a similar situation arises. If the same situation repeats, talk to your child's teacher.”
- Very Negative: “I would be upset and ask which child it was and then I would ask her teachers what happened. If they didn't know, I would ask them to separate my daughter from this other kid and keep an eye on them to make sure it doesn't happen again.”
- Negative: “Mild concern and I’d follow up with her to assess the injuries. If they seemed severe enough (including perhaps emotional distress) I’d follow up again with her teacher for more insight.” “Consult with my child and ask questions then inform the teacher about the incident to find out if he/she was aware of what happened. At the same time, before I leave, I examine my child so that I can then address the issue before leaving the school.” “My reaction is to talk to the teacher and find out what's going on so I can make sure they're playing in a safe way that's not hurting someone else or being hurt by someone else. I'll also ask how they feel about it and if the teacher did anything in response like talking to the other child or separating them.”
- Mixed response: “I would want to figure out if it was an accident or on purpose. Accidents happen when kids play rough with each other, but that shouldn't stop them from playing. If it was on purpose, then I would want to talk with the teacher and the kid/parents.”

# Survey Answer Responses

**Question #2: You go pick up your child from daycare and one of the workers says while your child was on the playground, he/she hurt her arm while wrestling with another kid. What is your reaction? Common keywords/ideas/themes: level of injury, asking questions about what happened, not really concerned, accident, speaking with the teacher, just playing. (All answers are anonymous)**

- Neutral: “Ask if they were playing or fighting and what the teacher did about the situation. If it was playing, I’m not too concerned.” “As long as her arm wasn’t seriously hurt and it wasn’t a result of bullying, I would be unconcerned.”
- Negative: “Was the other child disciplined, if not, then I would request that my child not interact with other children or if they are able to monitor them while they interact to prevent any further incidents.” “I would inquire about the details of the wrestling and if it were aggressive in any manner or just rolling around. If it were aggressive I might be slightly concerned about how aggressive it was.” “How rough was the wrestling and was it appropriate for their age? Did you treat the injury after it happened or did you ignore it?”

**Question #3: Describe what you fear most for this child when engaging in risky play and why? Common keywords: injury, getting hurt, permanent damage, seriously hurting, harmed, a broken bone, developing aggressiveness**

- Negative: “That he will get seriously hurt, break a bone, or have a serious physical impairment. If he gets in an accident and gets a bad booboo, he will be uncomfortable and will not be able to enjoy what he likes to do for a while.” “That she might not take me to the same comfort level or curiousness I had when I was a young boy. That may shelter her from experiencing even the most simple of outdoor activities other than a playground.”
- Neutral: “Currently, I hope she will not be too risk-averse. I believe engaging in rough and tumble/contact play helps us learn the limit of our body and strength and translates into respect for other risky activities over which we have less control. Driving a vehicle, understanding the differences in strength of individuals, etc.”

# Survey Answer Responses

**The two questions below are rank questions and are listed in order of importance of parent from survey:**

I would complain about a school if...?

Ranking Order:

1. There are signs my child may be bullied.
2. My child regularly comes home dirty and/or with bruises and scratches from rough play.
3. The school appears to have issues with cleanliness.
4. The teacher does not appear very nice or communicative towards you but they seem friendlier towards other parents.
5. My child doesn't seem to learn much about topics I care about (e.g., math, nature, etc...).
6. The teacher gives you very little updates on how your child is doing (no pics or funny stories).
7. The class sometimes seems chaotic and teachers seem to have difficulty maintaining order.
8. My child doesn't seem to have close friends.

What type of play does your child enjoy the most?

Ranking Order:

1. Physical play (e.g., playing ball, rough-and-tumble)
2. Constructive play (e.g., drawing, building)
3. Imaginary/Pretend play (e.g., dress up, the tooth fairy, Santa)
4. Rule-based play (e.g., puzzles, board games, hide-and-go-seek)

# Conclusion

The BGCC risky play research report is a review of the highlights from the survey responses of parent perceptions collected in 2022.



## Closing Remarks

We would like to thank our principal investigator Dr. Steven Woltering for guidance during project planning, data collection, and peer review. Special thanks to Amy Hinnant for connecting our team with Erica Ritter, BGCC, and for the opportunity to present our research topic at the first annual and second Texas Association for the Education of Young Children (TXAEYC) conference at Blinn College (2022 & 2023).

Lastly, we thank Erica Ritter and the BGCC family for collaborating with our project team. We hope information from this report will enlighten the staff at BGCC and provide awareness of the wonders of risky play.

# Citations

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