
Reflections on Roughhousing and Living Playfully

An Interview with Anthony T. DeBenedet

Anthony T. DeBenedet, M.D. is a practicing physician in Ann Arbor, MI, and a behavioral-science enthusiast. His interviews and writings have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *TIME Ideas*, on the *Today* show, and elsewhere. He is the author of *Playful Intelligence: The Power of Living Lightly in a Serious World* (2018), a book about the surprising ways that playfulness affects adulthood; and he coauthored *The Art of Roughhousing: Good Old-Fashioned Horseplay and Why Every Kid Needs It* (2011), a book about the importance of parent-child physical play in parenting. DeBenedet has a B.S. in biomedical engineering from Duke University, an M.S. in health and health care research from the University of Michigan, and an M.D. from the University of Virginia. He completed his internal medicine residency and gastroenterology fellowship at the University of Michigan Health System. **Key words:** adult playfulness; emotional intelligence; playful intelligence; rough-and-tumble play; roughhousing; social play; Sasuke

American Journal of Play: How did you play as a child?

Anthony T. DeBenedet: I played outside all the time. I distinctly remember eating dinner as fast as possible so that I could get back outside and keep playing. Luckily, I grew up in a neighborhood with a lot of kids. We played all sorts of games. Kick-the-Can and Capture-the-Flag were our favorites. I keep in touch with some of my neighborhood chums. And, on occasion, I'll drive down the street where it all happened—just to remember the feelings.

AJP: Can you describe a typical game of Capture-the-Flag in your neighborhood? Why were these experiences so meaningful that you occasionally return to the place you once played?

DeBenedet: We would separate into two teams. If we had a small number of kids, our respective bases would be the front and backyards of one of our homes. With more kids, we would expand across multiple yards. We used

old, shredded towels as flags. We had make-believe dungeons for prisoners. Once the flags were hidden, the mayhem and fun started. I think I go back because being there takes me, if only for a brief moment, to a different time in my life. A time when there was definitely less worry and perhaps a little more joy.

AJP: What do you think you learned from these games?

DeBenedet: I learned a lot of social intelligence without, of course, knowing that's what I was learning. Whether it's a playground, a bedroom, a basement, or a backyard, whenever and wherever kids are playing together, they are most likely having fun, but they are also subconsciously conducting minisocial experiments in their minds. Social play in childhood is really our first exposure to the intricacies of human behavior.

AJP: You are a gastroenterologist. What led you to write about play?

DeBenedet: When my oldest daughter Ava was three years old, she went through an intense "Mommy only!" stage. Essentially, she wanted only my wife to parent her. I would come home from work, and she would run away from me screaming. I would try bedtime, and she'd go into a full-scale meltdown. One day I tried a different approach: I pretended I was a rocket ship and asked her to jump on my back. We blasted up the stairs together. Ava was giggling loudly. It became our ritual and, eventually, Ava and I really started connecting through physical play. This ignited my interest in the power of play and led to my first book, *The Art of Roughhousing*.

AJP: Why aren't parents encouraging rough-and-tumble play?

DeBenedet: I think we are encouraging it more than we did, say, a decade ago. That said, play—in all its forms—is still under siege. And I think there are some big forces working against play—screens, an obsession with safety, and a hyperfocus on academics and youth sports.

AJP: Why is it important that parents participate in roughhousing with their children?

DeBenedet: Roughhousing isn't a magic key for healthy child development, but it's the closest thing I've found to one. Healthy rough-and-tumble play between parent and child nurtures a child's intelligence—emotional and social—builds creativity, and strengthens the parent-child connection. My favorite of these benefits is emotional intelligence. When parents and children are roughhousing in a healthy way, the play follows a natural arc from low energy, to peak energy, and then back to low energy. As children experience this arc, they begin to understand what it feels like to have low

and high emotions and how to regulate and move forward. We want children to learn that emotions can be thought of as being on a dimmer light switch rather than an on-off switch.

AJP: Is it just as important for mothers to roughhouse as it is for fathers?

DeBenedet: Yes, I believe it is, and I have seen firsthand in my workshops and in my own home how a child lights up when mom joins in the fun. It's really amazing.

AJP: What are the benefits of this kind of active, physical play for children?

DeBenedet: The three main benefits are intelligence, creativity, and parent-child connection. The most important of these is parent-child connection. As parents and children roughhouse, they are building connections and bonds. This is happening neurohormonally through the release of oxytocin, but it's also happening through body language. Healthy roughhousing says (often nonverbally) to your child: "Your power is welcome here. This is a space where you can learn to be strong and confident. And we will be more connected than ever before."

AJP: What about intelligence and creativity?

DeBenedet: Reasonable theory and research suggests that roughhousing helps build a child's IQ, emotional intelligence, and social intelligence. The first part of *The Art of Roughhousing* goes into detail on this. Creativity develops in healthy rough-and-tumble play through the encouragement of divergent thinking. Essentially, when make-believe problems are infused into the physical game ("There's a herd of elephants coming toward our imaginary dune buggy! What should we do?"), kids' creative juices start flowing to solve the problems.

AJP: Do adults benefit as well?

DeBenedet: This hasn't been robustly studied. Adult benefits such as cognitive and cardiovascular, if present, likely stem from the physical activity itself, not roughhousing proper.

AJP: What play scholarship did you find useful in trying to understand better how humans and animals use roughhousing and why they need it?

DeBenedet: I have read a lot of Jaak Panksepp's and Anthony Pellegrini's works. But I would credit my *Art of Roughhousing* coauthor, Lawrence Cohen, for most helping me understand the tremendous impact roughhousing can have.

AJP: In *The Art of Roughhousing*, you provide parents with a kind of how-to guide to physical play while avoiding serious injury. How did you develop these different forms of roughhousing?

DeBenedet: Lots of trial and error! And bandaids! The different moves were derived from and inspired by personal experience, friends' experiences, and various other disciplines (yoga and parkour, for example).

AJP: What advice would you give to a parent who has never roughhoused and might be afraid to try? How does one start this kind of play? Is there a kind of beginner's roughhousing you'd recommend?

DeBenedet: Don't be afraid to make a fool of yourself. In fact, make a fool of yourself as much as possible! And start with very basic, easy movements. Maybe a gentle shoulder bump with your child or pushing against each other's hands, gradually increasing the intensity. And when in doubt, just fall over! Chapter 2—"Get Started with Instant Roughhousing"—has a lot of great tips in this regard.

AJP: What's your favorite way to roughhouse? What about your children? Did they prefer a particular form or move?

DeBenedet: I've always loved moves that involve a lot of physical contact and snuggling, like steamroller or body lock. When my kids were younger, they enjoyed physical-contact moves the most, too. But as they've grown older, they've gravitated toward wanting more physical challenges (How long can we balance together on this log in the woods?), which I consider a variation on rough-and-tumble play.

AJP: What is Sasuke and how does one do it?

DeBenedet: Named after the popular Japanese television game show in which competitors race through a grueling four-stage obstacle course, Sasuke is about building your own roughhousing version of an obstacle course. Outdoor courses are pretty easy to create. You can use equipment such as cones, nets, balls, and the like, and there's usually a lot of space to set up. Indoor courses are often more challenging because many people aren't sure where to start. Here are a few tips: The more furniture you incorporate, the better. I like big chairs (but not recliners), couches, and sturdy glass-free coffee tables. Use lots of masking tape! Apply long strips at different heights extending from wall to wall or between pieces of furniture. Pretend they're flesh-eating laser beams that can't be touched. Pick start and finish points to give your course a direction. To travel to the finish, jump between pieces of furniture using couch cushions as intermediary landing pads (the floor is molten lava!). Duck under or leap over the masking tape laser beams, and use teamwork to get through especially difficult laser beam spots. Make up stories along the way to explain why you're ducking and dodging.

AJP: You point out in your book that roughhousing shouldn't be thought of as just a boys' club? Why?

DeBenedet: I think a common misunderstanding is that roughhousing is usually reserved for dads and their sons. This couldn't be further from the truth. Moms and daughters can roughhouse just as hard and have just as much fun. What's more, the benefits of healthy rough-and-tumble play extend to both boys and girls.

AJP: Extreme roughhousing sounds dangerous. What is it? Why is it important for some children?

DeBenedet: Extreme roughhousing is for those, usually older kids, who want to take their roughhousing up a notch. It involves things like jumping off garages (something I did as a teenager) and learning how to land safely. The key is to remember that the motto shouldn't be Safety Only, rather Safety First. Learning how to roughhouse safely—whether extreme or basic—through knowledge and practice is what it's all about.

AJP: How have parents who've read the book responded to it?

DeBenedet: I think it has provided parents with another arrow in their quiver. Again, it's not a magic arrow. But it can work for many parents and children. I'm grateful for the positive response the book has had. Many parents will say to me something like this, "I have always felt that roughhousing was something I should be doing but felt awkward and nervous doing it. Now, with your book, I feel more confident with myself and my abilities, and I'm really starting to connect with my child."

AJP: In your next book, *Playful Intelligence*, you turned your attention to adult playfulness. What evidence is there that adults benefit from behaving playfully?

DeBenedet: Ironically, the evidence is somewhat hard to find, because adult playfulness just hasn't been extensively studied. But when you look at playfulness as a function of playful behaviors, that's when the science starts to come alive. In other words, if you want to know how playfulness actually benefits adult life, look at it through the lens of its parts. Each part contributes in unique ways to helping us live our best lives.

AJP: You identify five playful qualities that appear to be most influential. Why did these qualities rise above others?

DeBenedet: In my research, the five most influential playful qualities were imagination, sociability, humor, spontaneity, and wonder. My research method was qualitative, through direct interview and indirect observation. It's not

surprising that these qualities rose to the top because when you start uncovering how they actually affect our lives, it's remarkable. What's strange is that we often don't realize the work these qualities are doing behind the scenes to make our lives enjoyable and run smoothly.

AJP: How does playfulness encourage empathy?

DeBenedet: This is a good example of playfulness working for us sometimes without our knowing it. The playful quality of imagination is the root of empathy. We must imagine what another's life might be like to understand it, to walk alongside it, and to support that individual. Interestingly, when we are living a playfully intelligent life, our imagination is constantly exercised, strengthening it for when we need it most—like reframing a problem or empathizing with a family member, friend, or colleague.

AJP: You write about the importance of playfulness to sociability. Today many of us are in almost constant contact with friends, family, and neighbors through social media. How do these virtual connections and communities compare to face-to-face, physical ones?

DeBenedet: The jury is still out on whether virtual contact or connections affords similar mental and physical health benefits compared to healthy, face-to-face relationships. My guess is nothing will ever beat close, warm, and loving connections with others—connections that are nurtured primarily in the physical world (and perhaps, secondarily, in the virtual world). We are social beings. We cannot exist in isolation. When it comes to the playful quality of sociability, I found that playfully intelligent people seem to resist first impressions of others and use a great deal of humility in their social exchanges. I believe this is all part of their lighter take on themselves and the world.

AJP: What role does spontaneity play?

DeBenedet: The playful quality of spontaneity helps us be more mentally flexible when something doesn't go our way and it helps us live more generously.

AJP: What is wonder rehab? Why might adults need this?

DeBenedet: Just like we need rehabilitation when we have a physical injury, sometimes, as adults, I think we need to rehab our senses of wonder. The craziness of adulthood—with all of its pressures, intensity, and responsibilities—tends to make it harder for us to experience wonder in our daily lives. This is because our threshold for experiencing wonder becomes too high. The biggest thing I found with playfully intelligent people is they have low thresholds for wonder. It doesn't take the Grand Canyon, a breathtaking

piece of art, or a performance to elicit wonder in the playfully intelligent. It can be something as simple as a child giggling uncontrollably. Wonder rehab is the notion of doing things to lower your wonder threshold. For example, finding minimoments in your day when you're really paying attention to a positive interaction between individuals (an act of kindness, a genuine hug) or daydreaming about a positive childhood memory can help lower your threshold for experiencing wonder. Perhaps the most interesting thing about the playful behavior of wonder is its ability to keep us in the present moment. Wonder does this by stopping us and urging inaction rather than action. In this sense, it's different from most other behaviors and emotions that usually prompt us *to act*. It has been suggested that this inaction reduces inflammation in our bodies, which helps stave off cardiovascular disease and cancer. The science is soft here, but it's encouraging. Wonder also grants us time to regroup and reflect, as well as become inspired, more trusting, and more supportive.

AJP: One last question, how do you see your work on play affecting your career as a gastroenterologist?

DeBenedet: One American job sector that is particularly prone to high burnout rates is health care. Constant changes and uncertainty in our health care system, exhaustive demands for clinical documentation, high-stakes clinical decisions, and much more contribute to the beehive of stress that greets the American health care worker when he or she arrives at work. As a result, health care now carries the highest burnout rates of any job sector in the United States. Specifically, 50 percent of all physicians and 40 percent of all nurses are burned out, compared with 30 percent of the general working population. My hope is that the message of play and playfulness—that they are vital to our existence—ripples through me and through others who I work with, not to mention the patients I see. There are many morsels of strength and healing within the playful intelligence framework that can help all of our lives.