

Roughhousing for Kids --- Questions for Chris Barbeau



Stunt Coordinator, martial artist and theater director Chris Barbeau leads classes called *Roughhousing for Kids 101*. His classes are offered by Indigo Forest: www.visitindigo.com

How many kids do you have? And what ages?

I've got two boys, Jianmarco almost 9 and Marcellin 6.

Were you a very physical kid? What stuff did you like to do --- sports, outdoor things, wrestling...?

I actually had allergy-induced asthma between 4 and about 9, so I had a little making up to do. I got into fencing and martial arts around 11, and I was active in sports, including tennis and track, during high school. Wrestling with my dad was the one physical activity that I could do no matter. He grew up a rough-and-tumble guy who could bench over 450 pounds. Didn't matter how hard I (and my younger sister) tried,

we would find ourselves tossed, flipped, spun and pinned like so many ragdolls, and because of the control his amazing strength allowed, I can't recall ever being injured.

I loved watching (fake) heavyweight wrestling on TV when I was young. In the northeast, in the 1960's, I could watch Haystacks Calhoun, Killer Kowalski, Gorilla Monsoon and Bruno Summartino. Did you watch it when you were a boy? Did you like it? If so, can you put into words why you liked it? If not, don't tell me why, since I already know it was fake and incredibly stupid. Still, I was a kid, and I liked it.

I rarely watched them even as a child; the conflicts between the fighters were very stilted and the moves seemed impractical and contrived. However, the lack of an interesting back-story for their fights was probably the main reason. The performers who put as much time in on their characters as on their choreography were the most interesting – to this day I enjoy telling my students about how Hulk Hogan built a saga around his comebacks and how that made the fighting much more engaging. I do, upon occasion, now watch them for professional reasons as the art has gotten incredibly acrobatic.

I love roughhousing with my six year old daughter, Leela, and she loves it more than I do. What was the seed of your idea to create classes and workshops on the topic?

In two words, video games! There are now almost two generations of men that have grown up with video games, which even with today's sophisticated, full body controllers, do *not* teach wrestling and roughhousing. As my younger friends and acquaintances started having children, I noticed how the fathers would toss the children without good attention to neck and back support or care for young joints that needed to be protected during wrestling. Video games actually encourage moves that are dangerous and I wasn't comfortable telling

them what they were doing wrong, especially since the moms were clearly on edge already.

Tell us about what you do in your roughhousing classes.

I teach a number of techniques that I've drawn from my study of Aikido to help fathers maximize their own strength. Awareness of certain biomechanical evolutions can allow them to move their children around with greater control and dexterity. Then we talk about children's joints, and how to preserve them from too much strain and we talk about neurological benefits to certain ways of moving children and of holding them. I've worked with a neurologist to identify benefits to spins, tosses and suspensions that help to make a child more comfortable in their body for the rest of their lives. My work is to provide a safe and exciting experience for one and all!

Are some parents hesitant to roughhouse?

At first there is some hesitation and uncertainty, but they quickly are able to employ the techniques, and their children's enjoyment quickly removes any unease.

With kids who naturally like to roughhouse and be physical, a class devoted to roughhousing would be pure fun. But I can see a situation where a child who is less inclined to be physically vigorous or to play hard (physically) might be intimidated or shy about participating fully in roughhousing. Talk about that, please.

Some kids love giant swings right off the bat and others prefer techniques that involve more comfortable body contact. We have nice thick pads and I teach enough different possibilities that the even the reticent child quickly finds a few that are comfortable and enjoyable.

What is most fun and satisfying about your roughhousing classes?

I get to spend time with my kids (who are my assistants) and the nods and smiles from moms who stay to watch as the fathers "get it" about how to handle their kids.

Does your wife ever tell you to "take it easy" on the kids? Or does she like to roughhouse, too?

She has masked her occasional unease with the extreme moves (giant swings with releases into catches) but since I haven't missed yet, she's comfortable with the results.

Is your family going to take a vacation away this summer. Where will you go, and what are you looking forward to doing?

Summer is my busy performance and summer camp season, so we're trying for a nice week up north right after school lets out with some swimming, hiking and a little off-roading in my '95 wrangler.

Where is the coolest, most remote, or most exotic place you've been to?

I've had the fortune to travel to lots of different places and one of the coolest locations I've ever found was an ancient temple under a graveyard in Italy. The energy of the place was amazing. However, from Bombay to Norway to Hawaii, the deep-rooted vibrancy and temple-like tranquility of the giant sequoias of northern California remains foremost in my mind.

What distant place would you most love to travel to?

Second star on the right and straight ahead till morn...

