



2020

Supporting Young Children's Risky Play

Why is Risky Play important?

Risky play helps children develop resilience, executive functioning skills, self-confidence, and risk-assessment abilities. Each time they engage in risky play they are engaging in their own science experiment: pushing themselves out of their comfort zone without knowing what the exact outcome will be. Risky play allows children to learn their own limits and find out what they feel comfortable with. This awareness helps reduce the risk of injury as children learn to identify the point when they might need to stop to reassess the situation.

As they continue to gain experience with risky play, children can help identify when certain situations may be unsafe, and brainstorm how to make something safer. For example, if there is a large rock they want to climb but there are thorn bushes at the bottom, you might ask your child what they could do about that - how they might solve the problem in order to keep their body safe. Of course, as an adult you know that the solution might be to move the thorny bushes out of the way, or to climb up from the other side of the rock - but engaging your child in the problem-solving process will provide a foundation for their future independent risk-assessment abilities.

What is Risky Play?

Risky play can be defined as any play that is thrilling or exciting and involves some risk of injury. There are six key factors of risky play:

1. Height and elevation
2. Speed and momentum
3. Use of risky or adult tools
4. Interaction with natural elements
5. Play with a chance of "getting lost" - *hiding in the bushes or wandering in the woods*
6. Rough-and-tumble play - *play fighting*

Don't Let Your Own Fears Get in the Way

Adults' and caregivers' own fears can often get in the way of children's ability to engage in risky play. However, the likelihood of injury is incredibly low. A recent study showed that children would have to spend three hours a day engaging in a risky play for 10 years before they were likely to get an injury that required medical attention (<https://outsideplay.ca/#/faq>). Experts suggest following the "17 second rule": if you are starting to feel uneasy about how your child is playing, step back and observe what they are doing for 17 seconds before intervening or reminding them to be careful. Often with a little bit of space, children are able to figure out how to safely engage in risky play without adult intervention, and might surprise you with what they are able to do independently.





Give Your Child Space to Learn and Explore!

It is important to make sure that your child knows that you are there to support them, and that you trust them to explore the world on their own. Many playgrounds in the United States are set up for structured play, but a typical playground doesn't always give children the space and freedom to use their imaginations, push their bodies, and grow their abilities. Removing or avoiding typical playground structures in favor of natural landscapes, organically designed play structures, or large and movable loose parts provides your child with far more opportunities to engage in physically and cognitively appropriate risky play. Playing with and among logs, mud, boulders, crates, sticks, ropes, hills, trees, and water can open a world of possibilities for your child.

Instead of “Be careful!” try these phrases:

Help your child **Foster Awareness** by saying:

Notice how...these rocks are slippery, the log is rotten, that branch is strong.

Do you see...the poison ivy, your friends nearby?

Try moving...your feet slowly, carefully, quickly, strongly.

Try using your...hands, feet, arms, legs.

Do you feel...stable on that rock, the heat from the fire?

Are you feeling...scared, excited, tired, safe?

Help your child **Problem Solve** by saying:

What's your plan...if you climb that boulder, cross that log?

What can you use...to get across, for your adventure?

Where will you...put that rock, climb that tree, dig that hole?

How will you...get down, go up, get across?

Who will... be with you, go with you, help you if...?

Sources:

[Outside Play](#)

[Canadian Broadcasting Corporation](#)

[Psychology Today](#)

[Backwoods Mama](#)

