

# RISKY PLAY

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Play

# Definition of Risky Play

- A process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated.
  - Behaviors that provide the child with an exhilarating positive emotion and expose the child to the stimuli they previously have feared. As the child's coping skills improve, these situations and stimuli may be mastered and no longer be feared.
  - Play that is thrilling and exciting that involves physical, emotional, or social risk.
  - Play that provides opportunities for all children to encounter or create uncertainty, unpredictability, and potential hazards as part of their play.

# Risky Play

- When providing opportunities for risky play we distinguish between risk and hazard:
  - A risk is something the child can see and he/she can learn to assess
  - A hazard is a risk that children can not see.
- Putting children in danger of serious harm is **NOT** risky play
- Risky play that involves hazards should be reconsidered

# What are the benefits of risky play?

- Development of skills in negotiating the environment (including risks)
- Development of coordination and orientation skills
- Learn how to take acceptable risk
- Learn about consequences (positive/negative) of risk taking
- Pleasure
- Development of self-confidence and well-being
- Engagement with the natural environment and natural elements
- Learning through experience
- Increased physical activity and decreased sedentary activity
- Improved social health
- Improved coping skills/resilience
- Increased mental and physical growth

# What is involved in risky play?

Great heights - risk of falling, but the thrill of achievement and a new perspective

High speed - Uncontrolled speed and pace that can lead to collision with something (or someone), but could lead to a better spatial and body awareness

Rough and Tumble Play - learning social boundaries and building relationships of trust through physical contact

Play

# What is involved in risky play?

Dangerous tools or elements - the use of a tool or element that could cause and injury, but could also help the child gain better knowledge of motor skills and body mechanics

Disappear/Get lost - Where children can disappear from the sight of adults or have the perception of being lost or alone, while gaining self-confidence and independence





Picture by Suzanna Law



Picture by Suzanna Law



Picture by Suzanna Law



# How to manage risk?

- Distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable risks including:
  - The likelihood of coming to harm;
  - The severity of that harm; and
  - The benefits, rewards or outcomes of the activity.
- Observing the children and identifying those who need greater challenge or specific support
- Establishing and displaying expectations for behavior
- Actively encourage children to assess risks and possible consequences
- Establish a systematic maintenance program



# Balancing risk and benefit

- All parents and playworkers must balance risk and benefit as children engage in play
- Is the good the child will gain from the experience greater than the likelihood of serious harm?
  - Good=learning what they can manage, growing physically and mentally, learning skills, gaining a sense of achievement or confidence, feeling empowered and/or participating and making a contribution
  - Serious harm= dying, serious or permanent illness or injury, or long term mental trauma
- Know the children-be cautious until you know children's capabilities
- Know the setting you are in. Is it suitable for risky play? What are the limitations?

# How to incorporate incremental risk?

- Start small
- Use common sense
- Follow the children's lead, don't push
- Mitigate risk and remove hazards
- “Yes, if....”

Play

# For the non-risk taker

- Start small
- Be a play buddy
- Build confidence and trust
- Be an example or show an example
- Allow the child to do what they can, at their pace
- Encourage them to try
- Celebrate

# What about children who can't self-regulate?

- Be a play buddy
- Use the “Yes, if...”
- Don't provide the opportunity if you can not embrace the freedom that you may see

# Parental Fear

- Remember your childhood?
- Need appropriate information and procedures
- Educate them about benefits and risk/benefit assessments

# North Carolina Policies for the Outdoor Learning Environment

- Potentially hazardous items such as archery equipment, handheld power tools, are not permitted
- Swimming pools and other areas of water require a fence
- Stationary equipment over 18 inches must be installed over protective surfacing
- Swings, tot swings, and tire swing all need protective surfacing
- Maximum height of any elevated play platform will be no more than 32 inches



# Related Readings and Resources

- Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation Guide by David Ball, Tim Gill, and Bernard Spiegel
  - <http://www.playengland.org.uk/media/172644/managing-risk-in-play-provision.pdf>
- A playworkers guide to risk...do we dare risk risk? Play Wales
- Play Wales- Research and Resources on Risk
  - <http://www.playwales.org.uk/eng/riskresearch>
- Pop-Up Adventure Play
  - <http://popupadventureplay.org/>

# Sources

- Articles

- Brussoni, M., Gibbons, R. et al. (2015). What is the Relationship between Risky Play and Health in Children? A Systematic Review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 12, 6423-6454;doi:103390/ijerph120606423
- Sandester, E. and Kennair, L. (2011) Children's Risky Play from an Evolutionary Perspective: The Anti-Phobic Effects of Thrilling Experiences. *Evolutionary Psychology Journal*, 9(2): 257-284.

- Websites

- <http://www.kidsafensw.org/playground-safety/challenging-play-risky/>
- <http://theriskykids.com>
- <http://rethinkingchildhood.com>

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